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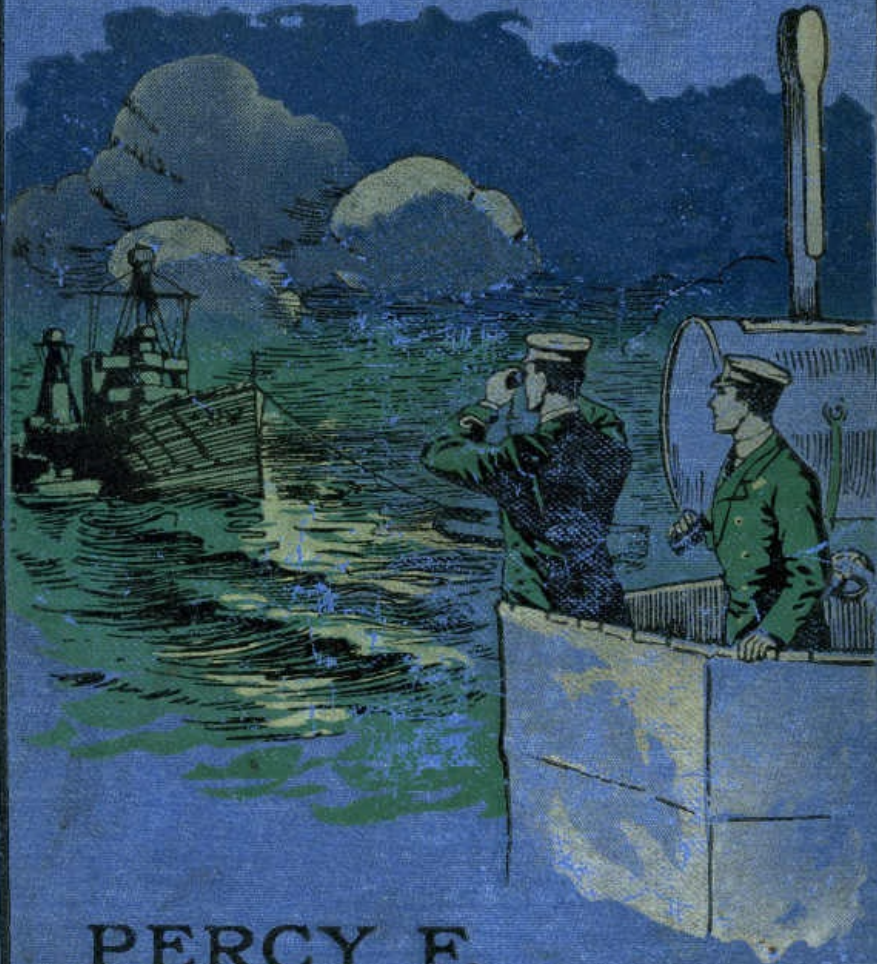
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STOLEN CRUISER ***

THE STOLEN CRUISER



PERCY F.
WESTERMAN

[Illustration: cover art]

THE STOLEN CRUISER



“CRASH! A SHELL STRIKING THE BASE OF THE FUNNEL REDUCING
IT TO ATOMS.”

Frontispiece.

[Page 261.]

[Illustration: "CRASH! A SHELL STRIKING THE BASE OF THE FUNNEL REDUCING IT TO ATOMS." *Frontispiece*]

THE STOLEN CRUISER

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

AUTHOR OF
"THE SEA MONARCH," "THE FLYING SUBMARINE" ETC.



ILLUSTRATED BY
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THE STOLEN CRUISER

CHAPTER I

THE "SCRAPPED" CRUISER

It was half-past eight on a May morning. The sun was obscured in a dense haze that the light south-westerly breeze failed to disperse.

Spithead lay enshrouded in the sea-fog, while from the deck of H.M. torpedo-boat destroyer *Frome* neither the low-lying land upon which Portsmouth is built nor the undulating downs of the Isle of Wight were visible.

"Boyne Buoy on the starboard bow, sir," reported the look-out.

"Thanks be!" ejaculated Lieutenant-Commander Douglas Drake to his companion, Sub-Lieutenant Paul Fielding. "I shan't be sorry to turn in."

The *Frome* had been out for night-firing off the Medmery Bank, but ill-luck in the guise of a fog accompanied her. For hours she cruised up and down, waiting for the bank of impenetrable haze to lift, while her consort, the *Calder*, was standing by ready to take the canvas target in tow.

It was a nerve-racking job, forging slowly ahead in the fog. In a heavy sea, provided the weather be sufficiently clear to enable the officer of the watch to pick up the various lights, the discomfort, even when battened down, is nothing compared with the blindworm tactics of keeping steerage way in a shut-in sky of dark grey clammy vapour.

"By George! It is clearing," exclaimed Fielding. "Surely that is Southsea Castle ahead."

"You're right. I only hope the admiral won't order us out to-morrow night."

"By the mark ten!" shouted the leadsman in the monotonous drawl that seamen affect when engaged in sounding.

"Fairly in the channel, thank goodness. How's that for navigation, Mr. Cardyke?" asked the lieutenant, turning to a midshipman who stood beside him on the diminutive bridge.

"Ripping, sir," replied the lad. "I suppose we'll be able to play on Friday?"

"I hope so," rejoined Drake. "We must bear a hand in licking the Sixth Division if it's humanly possible."

Lieutenant Douglas Drake was well under thirty years of age. Although "frightfully keen" on his duties, and a stickler for naval etiquette, he was at times almost boyish in manner. His chief fault—if fault it might be termed—was excessive self-confidence. That quality was undoubtedly an asset in the old lay-alongside-and-board-'em days; but in modern naval tactics, based upon hard and fast scientific lines, a blind reliance upon one's personal qualifications is apt to lead a man into trouble. There are occasions, of course, when self-confidence has its advantages. But woe-betide the unfortunate individual who, through blind "cocksureness," jeopardised his command and failed to achieve his object.

Drake had influence behind him, and with influence behind him a hare-brained young officer might do certain things with impunity that would soon bring him under the ban of official displeasure had he not someone of importance to back him. On the other hand, influence tends to make a man unpopular with his brother officers. Drake realised this, and acted accordingly; but although he succeeded to a certain extent in winning the regard of his comrades, he was often the victim of a harmless practical joke whenever the opportunity arose.

Sub-Lieutenant Paul Fielding was, on the other hand, a cautious man. He had need to be, since he had nothing in the shape of influence at his back. He was a strict disciplinarian, somewhat inclined to be off-handish at times, yet a true comrade and a loyal supporter of his superior officer. Fired by Drake's enthusiasm he began to acquire the belief that when an opportunity did occur the little *Frome* would acquit herself in a style worthy of the best traditions of the Service—and the time was at hand when his capacity was to be tried to the uttermost.

Arnold Cardyke, the midshipman "lent" to the destroyer, was a dark-featured, athletic-looking youth of sixteen. He was slightly above middle height, broad-shouldered and deep-chested, and was as hard as the proverbial nail. He was the son of an admiral, who himself was one of a long line of naval officers—for Cardykes were to be found in the Royal Navy in a continuous, and often multifold, line from the reign of King William III.

The young midshipman was doubly anxious for the *Frome* to be detained in harbour in order to effect the long outstanding periodical refit. One reason was that he wanted to go on leave to meet his brother, who was "paying off" after a two years' commission on the Pacific Station; the other was that he was exceedingly keen on cricket, and, with the reputation of being one of the best bats in the First Dartmouth Team, he was regarded as a pillar of strength in the forthcoming match between the officers of the Fifth and Sixth Torpedo-boat Destroyer Flotillas.

Of course, had there been any special duty to perform on board the *Frome* Cardyke would have cheerfully foregone both of the anticipated pleasures but, with the exception of the night-firing practice—which could be performed any time during the forthcoming six weeks—there was nothing likely to occur.

Arnold Cardyke was very proud of the honour of being "lent" to the *Frome*, which was one of the very latest "New River" class. She was 120 ft. over all, with a turtle-back deck fore and aft, a strikingly fine entry, and a pointed, cutaway stern. Funnels she had none, being propelled by the most up-to-date Diesel motors. At the after end of the fore turtle-deck was the gun platform, mounting two eleven-pounder automatic weapons, so arranged that they could command an arc of 210 degs. of the horizon, and could be trained to fire skywards up to within 10 degs. of a vertical line.

Underneath this platform, with the observation holes barely six inches above the back of the curved deck, was the conning-tower. Above was the "navigating bridge," which could be removed if going into action. Here was the slight shelter, called by courtesy the chart-room, and two powerful searchlights.

Immediately abaft the bridge was a light telescopic mast for signalling purposes. Wireless "aerials"—always the bugbear of naval officers while overhead gear was in vogue—had been consigned to the limbo of the past, and receivers in the wireless room "picked up" the messages with unerring fidelity.

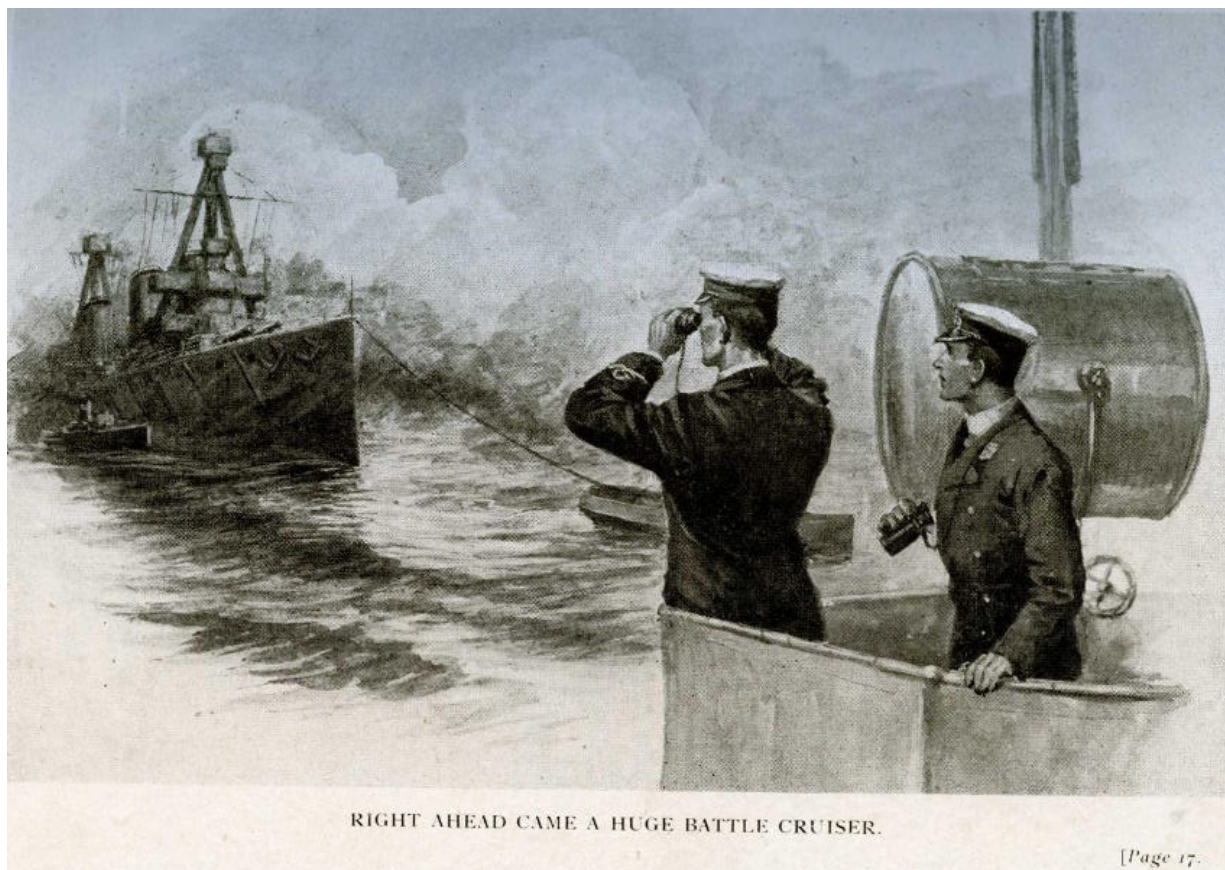
Abreast the mast were two seven-pounder automatic guns, protected from Maxim fire by light steel shields forming a complete turret. Abaft the mast, and twenty feet from the guns, were the two 21 in. torpedo tubes, taking an improved Whitehead with an effective range of five miles. From this point was a clear run of deck-space—save for the ventilating cowls and hatchways, that could be respectively unshipped or battened down should occasion arise—to the aft torpedo-tubes.

On the poop turtle-back was the supplementary conning-tower, and another eleven-pounder gun.

"All out" the *Frome* could do forty-three knots. With her, speed was the primary consideration. To minimise windage every object that it was possible to construct in that fashion was wedge-shaped—even the shafting of the ventilators, while with her after turtle-back deck the destroyer could go astern at twenty-one knots without fear of being swept by the waves. She carried a complement of ninety men, of whom only fifteen were "engine-room ratings."

Gradually the fog lifted, till the outlines of Southsea Beach could be followed almost as far as the mouth of Portsmouth Harbour; and now, with her speed increased to a modest ten knots, the destroyer slipped up the fairway against the surging ebb tide.

Just as the *Frome* was within a quarter of a mile from the Round Tower, where the entrance of Portsmouth Harbour is barely 250 yds. wide, a burst of sunshine dispersed the last vestige of the fog within the sheltered waters, though at Spithead the haze was as thick as ever.



RIGHT AHEAD CAME A HUGE BATTLE CRUISER.

[Page 17.]

[Illustration: RIGHT AHEAD CAME A HUGE BATTLE CRUISER.]

"That's awkward, sir," remarked Fielding. Lieutenant Drake did not reply, but motioning the quartermaster to put the helm over to port, and telegraphing to the engine-room for fifteen knots, nodded significantly to his subordinate.

It was indeed awkward. Flying from the yard-arm of the naval station of Fort Blockhouse was the signal burgee letter S—a triangular blue and yellow flag—denoting that submarines were either entering or leaving Haslar Lake. From the Semaphore Tower, and from the foremast heads of all the ships in harbour, the Pilot Jack was flying, showing that one of H.M. ships was under way, and a glance astern showed that the second-class cruiser *Vindictive* was entering.

Right ahead came a huge battle-cruiser, with a Government tug lashed on either side, and a gaudily painted tug panting ahead with an enormous hawser, and a sister tender puffing decorously astern of the leviathan.

"That's a bungled bit of work," commented Drake. "She can't go back with this tide under her; and the *Vindictive* following us up, too. Pass the word for a warning signal to be sent to the cruiser, Mr. Cardyke. These fellows must be as mad as March hares."

The increased speed just saved the *Frome* from being in a very tight corner, for, hugging the eastern side of the entrance, she gained the broad expanse of the harbour just as the towed

vessel came abeam.

Still Drake had to keep his full attention on his course; but the sub. and midshipman could devote themselves to the melancholy spectacle—for the *Impregnable* was on her way to the marine knacker's yard. Her days as an effective unit were judged to be over, and, sold out of the Service, she was on her way to a Dutch port to be broken up.

The *Impregnable* was one of the earlier "Dreadnought cruisers," and in her time held the palm for speed. She was of eighteen thousand tons displacement, and had attained a speed of twenty-six knots. Her armament consisted of eight 12 in. guns—one pair for'ard, another pair aft, and the others *en échelon* amidships—as well as a secondary battery of twenty-five 4 in. quick-firers. She had two tripod masts and three huge funnels.

Very different the vessel looked from when, a few months previously, she had taken her place in the fleet at Spithead as an effective unit of the British Navy. Her topmasts were "housed," her boats and secondary armament removed, and her regulation coat of grey paint was streaked with rust and dirt. In her barbets the 12 in. guns still grinned menacingly, but their teeth were drawn, their breech-blocks having been removed previous to sale.

"Seems like parting with an old friend," remarked the sub to Cardyke, for Fielding had served a commission on board of her. "To my mind, it's a mistake scrapping the older vessels so promptly. It's not my business to say so, of course; but still, that's my opinion."

"She'd do her little bit even yet," observed Cardyke. "She never has fired a shot in anger yet, has she?"

"No," replied the sub. "And she never will. We've seen the last of the old *Impregnable*, Cardyke."

But Sub-Lieutenant Paul Fielding was, for once, at least, hopelessly out of his bearings.

CHAPTER II

THE INTERRUPTED MATCH

THE *Frome* came alongside the Fountain Lake Jetty, and her commander repaired to the commander-in-chief's office to make his report as to why the night gunnery exercises had not been carried out. To the relief of everyone on board the destroyer it was decided that the night-firing was to be postponed until after the little craft's refit, and in the interval the *Frome* was to lie alongside the jetty until her consort, the *Blackadder*, came out of No. 3 Dock.

"That's good!" ejaculated Fielding, as the officers went to dinner in the diminutive, cosy wardroom. "We'll have time to put in a few hours' practice at the nets. Have you seen the list of our team yet, Cardyke?"

"Thompson's sending out the names tomorrow. I know that we are in the team; Simpson gave me the cue," replied the midshipman. "The practice-nets will be available at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I suppose we may go, sir?"

"Of course," assented Drake, good-naturedly. "The gunner will be in charge up to eight bells."

The four officers—for the engineer-lieutenant formed one of the party—fell to discussing everyday topics. "Shop" was rigidly tabooed in the *Frome's* wardroom unless absolutely necessary for Service reasons.

The following day, Thursday, passed almost without incident. Fielding and Cardyke put in a good morning's work at the practice-nets in the United Services ground; while Drake went ashore in the afternoon for a motor-drive.

Friday dawned bright and clear, with every prospect of a blazing hot day. Shortly after breakfast a newsboy brought off the daily papers to the ship, and for the next half-hour the officers "stood easy."

"By Jove! They think that something's happened to the old *Impregnable*," exclaimed Paul Fielding. "She ought to have turned up at the mouth of the Scheldt yesterday morning, and nothing has been seen or heard of her."

"Delayed by fog possibly," remarked the lieutenant-commander. "Still, it's no affair of the Admiralty's since the ship is sold."

"The paper hints at something mysterious."

"Naturally. There's been a dearth of news for the last month or more, and this is a good opportunity of arousing public interest. She'll turn up all right, with two tugs looking after her. Well, what's this?"

Drake turned to receive a message from a signalman.

"I say, you fellows," he exclaimed. "The *Frome* will be well represented in the Fifth Division Team. Thompson's sent a signal from the depot-ship asking me to play. They must be fearfully hard up for players, because I am awfully out of practice."

"Of course you'll play?" asked Fielding, eagerly, for Drake had a reputation as a hard slogger at no very distant date.

"I'll do my best, rest assured," replied Drake, modestly, as he deliberately folded his newspaper, and placed it in the rack. "But business first and pleasure afterwards—it's time for divisions."

The morning passed only too quickly, for there was much to be done in the way of routine, and at 2 p.m. Drake, Fielding, and Cardyke, all in mufti, went ashore. A taxi quickly bore them to the officers' Recreation Ground, where most of the rival teams had already gathered.

Matches between the officers of the various ships and torpedo destroyer divisions were a favourite amusement in the Portsmouth command, the game usually being followed by an informal dinner, the losing side having to pay all expenses.

Confident in the batting capabilities of the Fifth Division team, Drake expressed his willingness to eat his hat should they fail to win.

"Eating his hat" was the lieutenant's favourite figure of speech; but, somewhat to his surprise, Lieutenant Player, the skipper of the Sixth Division team, promptly made a note of his rival's promise in his pocketbook, amid the laughter of his companions.

Possibly this action unsettled Drake, for, instead of coming up to his average, he was clean bowled before the end of the first over. The wickets fell in quick succession, and in spite of the determined stand of young Cardyke, the Fifth closed with a miserable forty-three. As for the Sixth, they soon piled on runs till the scoring-board stood at 108.

"Now then, Drake," exclaimed Player, boisterously. "Where's your hat?"

Drake began to glare at his tormentor; then, realising the absurdity of "getting his rag out": "See what I'll do to-night," he replied. "A Drake always keeps his word."

Just at that moment a marine orderly, mounted on a bicycle, rode at a high speed over the turf, threw himself out of the saddle abreast of the pavilion, and, with a salute, handed Drake an envelope.

Without a word the lieutenant-commander opened the buff covering, read the contents, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

At length Drake dismissed the messenger, thrust the missive into his pocket, and strolled casually out of the pavilion. The news was important, but it was almost as important that none of his companions save his subordinates should know its import.

Outside the pavilion Drake beckoned to Fielding, and the two strolled a few yards away from the others.

"Looks like business, sir," commented Fielding, as he read the momentous news. "I thought there was something fishy when the papers hinted at it this morning."

"It's a rattling good chance, Fielding, my boy—a rattling good chance. If we don't score I'll eat my——"

But recollecting that he had already promised to masticate more than he wished for, Drake checked himself in time.

"Mr. Cardyke," he exclaimed, as the midshipman passed on his way to the pavilion. "Not a word to the others, mind. A message has just come from the commander-in-chief ordering us to put to sea with the utmost promptitude on particular service."

"Anything startling, sir?"

"Only that news has been received that the *Impregnable* has been seized on the high seas. How, when, or where we have to find out. Our instructions are to investigate, and take action if necessary."

"I hope, sir, there will be plenty of 'if necessary' about it."

"So do I," agreed Drake, grimly. "We've the chance of a lifetime—and I mean to make the most

of it."

CHAPTER III

THE DESTROYER'S QUEST

WITHIN a quarter of an hour of the termination of the match Fielding and Cardyke were on board the destroyer, Drake having gone post-haste to the commander-in-chief to receive definite instructions as to the course of action.

Already the water police were busily engaged in hunting up the absentees of the crew. Those who were gone away from the port on leave could not conveniently be recalled, and other men were drafted in to fill up the complement. Stores were being hastily dumped on board, the usual "red tape" formalities having perforce to be dispensed with. Fresh water was being supplied to the tanks by one set of hoses, while another pipe was in use filling up the double bottom petrol tanks with liquid fuel. Fortunately, owing to the fact that the night-firing had not taken place, the magazines were filled with quick-firing ammunition, and the delay occasioned by having to "ship powder" at one of the buoys in harbour was obviated. It was primarily on this account that the *Frome* was selected for the purpose of investigating the mystery enshrouding the *Impregnable*.

"I wonder if there will be a scrap?" asked the mid. "It's about time we had something exciting. What do you suppose is the matter?"

"Goodness only knows. You heard what Drake said," replied Fielding, as he struggled into his uniform with more haste than he usually displayed, for the sub. had the reputation of being a careful, deliberate man in the matter of dress, and gold lace won't stand rough usage.

"He said 'seized on the high seas,'" continued Cardyke. "By whom?"

"County Court officials, probably. Don't take it for granted that there's anything serious, Cardyke. We may be sent on a fool's errand. Ah! Here's Drake coming aboard!"

"A rummy affair, by George!" exclaimed the lieutenant-commander as he entered the wardroom, and threw a bundle of papers on the table. "The news came from the ss. *Wontwash*, an American tramp that put into Dover this morning. Her master reports that he was somewhere between the Owers and the Royal Sovereign lightships, the weather being thick. A temporary lifting showed him the *Impregnable* lying a quarter of a mile or so on his port bow, with a large cargo vessel, name and nationality unknown, lashed alongside with a considerable list to port. Two hundred yards astern of the *Impregnable* was a tug with red and yellow bands on her funnel—that's one of the Dutchmen, you'll remember. The tug was sinking by the head, apparently deserted. There was no mention of the second tug.

"Captain Emory, the master of the *Wontwash*, thinking that a collision had occurred, hailed to know whether he could be of any assistance, but to his surprise he was peremptorily ordered, in broken English, to sheer off.

"He complied slowly, he says, and before the fog shut out the *Impregnable* and the vessel alongside her he saw what he believed to be a number of small quick-firers being hoisted out of the latter into the cruiser, whose decks were swarming with men.

"Being without wireless Emory could not communicate with the shore until he came within signalling distance of the Royal Sovereign light. The lightship forwarded the report by wireless, and, allowing for errors in transmission, the story seems remarkably mysterious.

"The Admiralty is in a bit of a hole. Nominally the *Impregnable*, sold to a Dutch private firm, is beyond their control. The Dutch Government has been communicated with, and they are sending a destroyer to make inquiries. But since, by virtue of the conditions of sale, the cruiser is to be broken up, and not to be used as a vessel, we still hold a certain amount of authority over her, and my orders are to see that the terms of sale are complied with. Now, gentlemen, you know as much as I do about the business. We must find the *Impregnable*, take possession of her—by force, if necessary—and bring her back to port pending Admiralty investigation. All ready, Mr. Spanner?" he added, addressing the engineer-lieutenant.

"All ready, sir," repeated Spanner. "The whole of the petrol-tanks are filled."

The officers went on deck. Men were busily engaged in easing off the steel hawsers by which the destroyer was secured to the jetty. The signal for "permission to part company" was fluttering from her mast. head. Aft the awnings had been unrigged, and were being handed down for stowage below.

Presently a hoist of signal flags was run up to the yard-arm of the semaphore tower.

"Permission, sir," reported the signalman of the destroyer, laconically.

The engine-room telegraph bell clanged, the water churned under the destroyer's stern as her propellers began to revolve. The last "spring" that held her to the shore was cast off, and the *Frome* started on her mission of investigation.

Three hours later she was off Beachy Head, but, although keeping in touch with Portsmouth Dockyard by means of wireless, and communicating with every vessel that passed up and down that busy highway—the English Channel—the *Impregnable* seemed to have vanished, leaving no trace behind her.

"Wreckage, sir," reported the look-out.

Heading towards the spot, and ordering the propellers to be stopped, Drake got his glasses to bear upon the spot. There were a number of oars, some gratings, a large hatch, and a yellow-painted lifebuoy, bearing the name "*Hekla*, Rotterdam."

"That's the name of one of the tugs, sir," said Fielding. "So the master of the *Wontwash* has not been telling a mere fairy tale."

"That's so," assented the lieutenant-commander. "I suppose we ought to secure that lifebuoy as evidence. Stand by with a boathook there."

Slowly the *Frome* forged ahead, but with little way on she was scarcely under control. The lifebuoy was passed ten yards to leeward.

"Be careful of the propellers, sir," cautioned Fielding. "There's a lot of wreckage about. Shall we pipe away the collapsible?"

Drake assented, but as Cardyke went aft to take charge of the Berthon one of the starboard propellers became entangled in a length of floating grass-rope. In a second the fibre was wound round the tail shafting as hard as a steel band.

"Hang it!" muttered Drake. "That's done it. I wish to goodness I'd sent away the boat instead of drifting into the middle of this stuff."

In four minutes the Berthon was slung outboard by means of the quadrant davits, and her crew rowed towards the derelict lifebuoy.

"Here you are, sir," said the bow-man to Cardyke, as he dexterously whisked the salvaged object into the boat. "There's some scrawl on it."

Scored deeply into the canvas were some words written in pencil. The midshipman examined the writing, but it was beyond him to decipher its meaning. It was in Dutch, a language that Cardyke was not familiar with, although it bore a slight resemblance to German.

On returning to the *Frome* the mid. produced his prize; but his superior was too intent upon the damage to the propeller to take very much notice of it. Nor was it till Cardyke pointed out that there was writing upon the buoy that Drake gave his attention to it.

"Scuttled. Finder please notify V. der Coote,
Rotterdam.—Stalkart, master, tug *Vulkan*."

"We've some good evidence here, by Jove!" exclaimed Drake. "Now comes the task of running down the miscreants."

"But the propeller?"

"Let it rip. We'll run her on three."

"That ought to give her twenty-three knots at the very least, sir," suggested Spanner, who had come up from the engine-room to report.

"Not with the helm slightly over to counteract the unequal drive," observed Drake. "She'll do seventeen comfortably, and I doubt whether the *Impregnable* in tow will be making more than seven. I'll carry on, even if there's only one propeller left."

Communicating his find by wireless Drake received instructions to cruise eastward, in order to effect a junction with two destroyers sent out from Dover, unless she picked up definite information from passing vessels that might enable her to follow in the track of the filibustered battle-cruiser.

"It won't do to fall in with the Dover t.b.d.'s," remarked Fielding. "They'll know we are crippled, and our chances of gaining kudos will be knocked on the head."

"I don't mean to if I can avoid it," agreed Drake. "We'll shape a course S.S.E. for a couple of hours, and then N.N.E. for another two hours, and so on. We'll still be carrying out instructions, you see, but it will be a precious long time before we get in touch with the Dover destroyers."

Fielding and Cardyke smiled. They knew Drake well enough by now to know that if there were a way of gaining his end he would generally do it successfully and diplomatically.

"It's my private opinion," continued the lieutenant, "that the *Impregnable* is not heading up-Channel at all, but rather towards the Atlantic. I don't know why, but that's my firm conviction; so the longer we take before we hear any news the sooner we'll be able to retrace our course. I only hope that the other destroyers sent from Portsmouth and Portland won't snap her up."

"So do I, sir," agreed Fielding.

"Sail-ho, on the starboard bow," sung out the look-out man.

"A tramp, judging by the smoke," remarked the sub. after the lapse of a few minutes.

Soon the vessel was observed to be steaming eastwards, so slowly that the following wind drove her smoke in a dense, trailing cloud over her bows.

Directly the *Frome* was within signalling distance the tramp made her number.

"SS. *Steephill Castle* of Hull," announced Fielding, after consulting the register. "She's light, by George! One blade of her propeller is quite clear of the water."

"Yes; I shouldn't care to be caught out in dirty weather in a craft so high in ballast as that," added Drake. "We'll close, and ask her if she has any information to give."

Drake made known his request by megaphone, and in reply the master of the tramp shouted from the bridge—

"Cruiser, two masts and three funnels, in tow. Passed her three and a half hours ago. Thought she had broken down."

"On what course?" asked Drake, eagerly.

"Due west, I should think, sir," replied the "old man." "Anything amiss?"

"We hardly know till we find her," replied the lieutenant, guardedly.

The *Steephill Castle* dipped her ensign in farewell, and the *Frome* returned the compliment; then, describing a quarter-circle, the destroyer headed due west on her quest for the filibustered *Impregnable*.

CHAPTER IV

THE OUTRAGE ON THE HIGH SEAS

It will now be necessary to follow up the events relating to the object of the torpedo-boat destroyer *Frome's* search.

The scrapped Dreadnought-cruiser *Impregnable* had been sold by public auction, the purchaser being Mynheer Van der Coote, shipbreaker, of Rotterdam. According to the usual terms of sale the purchaser was bound to complete the breaking-up of the ship within six months. The machinery could be utilised again, and, in consequence, was in fair order. Owing to the fact that it would be necessary to employ a large engine-room and stokehold staff to take the ship across to Holland under her own steam, Mynheer Van der Coote took the far more economical course of sending two powerful tugs to Portsmouth to tow the *Impregnable* to her last port.

Directly the cruiser gained Spithead the two dockyard tugs cast off and returned. The last link with Great Britain had been severed; the purchase money had been paid, and the obsolete craft was now private property.

Before the Warner Lightship was abeam the fog enveloped the ship, so that her tugs were quite invisible. Captain Stalkart, the master of the leading tug, therefore eased down to half speed, reduced the scope of hawser by one half, and steered a compass course towards the English Channel. The tugs' syrens kept up a continuous and discordant bellow—one prolonged blast followed by two short blasts, signifying that they had a vessel in tow—for the appalling risks of a collision in a fog were more than doubled by reason of the fact that the unwieldy craft lumbering astern was almost incapable of being manoeuvred with any degree of celerity.

At 4.45 the master of the tug heard the characteristic blast of the reed-horn of the Owers Light vessel, and deeming that the warning came from a bearing well on his port bow, altered his course a couple of points to starboard.

Suddenly a black shape, distorted out of its proportion by the watery atmosphere, loomed up dead ahead. There was no attempt made by the vessel—for such it was—to give warning of her presence. She was simply forging ahead with bare steerage way.

Signalling to the rearmost tug to go full speed astern, the master of the leading tender promptly gave orders for the engines to be stopped. He dared not go astern, otherwise the momentum of the *Impregnable* would cause the giant vessel to overrun her diminutive escort. As it was the cruiser forged ahead till the tug was swept alongside.

Just then the mysterious vessel, that had made no attempt to get out of the way, went astern, and, describing a graceful curve, ran alongside the *Impregnable*. There was a rending of steel as the ex-cruiser's torpedonet-booms were shorn from their securing-lashings by the wall-sided vessel. The next instant fifty men poured upon the *Impregnable's* upper deck; hawsers were passed out and the two ships were soon locked in a close embrace.

Captain Stalkart, knowing that something was amiss, but ignorant of what had actually occurred, shouted through his megaphone for the other tug to come alongside. She promptly complied, making fast on the port side of the *Impregnable*, and slightly astern of the first tug.

Under the impression that a serious collision had occurred, and wishing to do his best to save the huge vessel he was towing, Stalkart gave orders for the powerful centrifugal pumps to be manned, and the suction-pipes to be led aboard the *Impregnable*; but ere the hoses could be coupled up a score of men armed with revolvers and automatic pistols lowered themselves over the cruiser's side, and on to the two tugs.

The phlegmatic Dutchmen, finding it useless to resist, promptly ran below, their retreat being hastened by a few pistol-shots fired over their heads. To do the crews of the tugs personal injury was evidently not the intention of the assailants.

As for Captain Stalkart, the minute he saw how things were turning out, he ran into the chart-room and seized a revolver. Fortunately for his own sake he did not attempt to fire, nor did the aggressors find him for some considerable time. During that interval he wrote a hurried message on one of the lifebuoys, and heaved it over the side.

Meanwhile, in addition to the work of pillaging both tugs of everything that might be of service, the modern buccaneers were busily engaged in transshipping stores, arms, and ammunition from the tramp to the *Impregnable*.

It was soon evident that they had laid their plans carefully beforehand, and that the capture of the *Impregnable* was not an act on the spur of the moment. From the hold of the steamer twenty-five seven-pounder quick-firers with their mountings were soon hauled up, and placed in position on the captured cruiser. Tons of oil were pumped into her double bottoms; water and provisions were stowed away in the usual tanks and store-rooms.

Down in the *Impregnable's* engine-room men—experienced mechanics—were overhauling the machinery. Only a few weeks before the cruiser had been in commission with a nucleus crew, and, as is usually the case, her engines had lacked proper attention, but in less than a couple of hours the filibusters had succeeded in firing the oil-fuel burners and raising steam.

This done the Dutchmen were ordered to come up from below, and were placed in one of the store-rooms of the after-flats of the cruiser. The *Vulkan* had been scuttled and was sinking fast, but ere she dropped beneath the waves her master, the taciturn Stalkart, rushed from the chart-room, where he had been concealed, on to the bridge. Volubly cursing and shaking his fist at the rascally crowd who had sunk his ship, the captain remained bravely at his post, scorning the gestures that indicated that he should save himself.

The *Vulkan's* bows rose high in the air as her stern slipped beneath the surging cauldron of foam. In another instant the loyal skipper would have gone to his doom, when a lariat whizzed through the air. The noose tightened round Stalkart's portly waist, and, amid a round of jeers and ironical laughter, the Dutchman was hauled ignominiously but effectively on board the *Impregnable*.

The second tug suffered a similar fate; but just then a lifting of the fog revealed the presence of the ss. *Wontwash*.

For a few moments all was confusion, the crowd of men on the *Impregnable's* deck running below to hide themselves from the inquisitive gaze of the undesirable steamer. The Dutchmen, thinking that assistance was at hand, began to clamour for aid, till quieted by the silent threat of a revolver being pointed at them.

Seizing a megaphone the leader of the pirates—for that they were to all intents and purposes—sprang upon the fore-bridge.

"You vill clear out of dis!" he shouted. "No vant 'elp; go 'way."

The *Wontwash's* skipper was completely taken aback. Naturally he was at first under the impression that the tramp alongside the *Impregnable* was engaged in salvage work, and did not

want outside interference that might lead to reduction of the salvage court's award; but when he saw that the steamer alongside bore no name, and that the men were far in excess of the number of an ordinary crew, and, in addition, armed, he decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and promptly did as he had been peremptorily told—he sheered off.

Directly the *Wontwash* was lost to view in the still thick haze men were lowered over the taffrail of the vessel that had effected the seizure of the battle-cruiser, and the words "*Steephill Castle, Hull*," were prominently painted on her stern. Ere this was completed the final stages of transferring the stores were finished, and the *Impregnable's* propellers began to revolve slowly.

The vessels then parted company, the pseudo *Steephill Castle* proceeding up Channel, while the *Impregnable*, steaming at a steady fifteen knots, headed due south.

Forty miles from the Sussex shore she eased down. The word *Impregnable* was erased from her stern and *Independencia* substituted. Her crew were mustered aft, divided into port and starboard watches, and told off to their respective quarters. The men were literally the scum of the Mediterranean ports—Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, Algerines, and Egyptians, with a renegade Englishman (formerly a naval petty officer) as bo'sun. The officers were mostly Spaniards, the captain being a native of Barcelona, and a member of a formidable Anarchist society.

All hands knew that theirs was a desperate and unlawful enterprise—piracy. The stake was a high one, the inducements great. In a few days all hands would either be wealthy or doomed to an ignominious end.

Juan Cervillo, the leader of the rascally crew, was a Spaniard of good family. He had served as an officer in the Spanish Navy; but, imbued with revolutionary sentiments, he became mixed up in an anti-monarchist plot. Exposed, he was arrested, brought to trial; and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment.

Before he had done twelve months of his sentence he contrived, with the assistance of his revolutionary associates, to effect his escape from the prison-fortress of Saragossa. For some months he lay hidden in Barcelona, when his daring, undoubted courage, and vehement denunciations of all authority, gained him a prominent position amongst the anarchist community of that city.

As a delegate he attended the secret revolutionary conferences in Paris, and London, and the Mediterranean seaports; and in the course of his wanderings contrived to gather together a band of seafaring rascals in whom the piratical instincts of their forefathers lay dormant.

It wanted but a leader, bold, determined, and unscrupulous, to bind them together into a formidable band—and that leader was forthcoming in Juan Cervillo.

A daring raid upon one of the leading banks in Rome, and an equally successful coup in the commercial quarter of Marseilles, provided Juan Cervillo with ample funds. He could have retired into some remote South American town, and lived a life of luxury; but the desire for adventure and the lust for gold were too great.

With the money at his disposal he proposed to buy a swift cruiser, prey upon the world's sea-borne commerce, and recoup his outlay tenfold.

Then it was that the possibility of securing a discarded British warship occurred to him. Careful and guarded inquiries revealed the information that the *Impregnable* was leaving Portsmouth for Holland. He resolved to intercept her—and succeeded.

The next few days were to be spent in wholesale depredations; then, as soon as the high seas became too unsafe to continue his nefarious exploits, he meant to convey his booty to some out-of-the-way port, and, temporarily satisfied with his war upon civilisation, he would lie low till a favourable opportunity again occurred.

Thus, while the *Frome*, lured on a false scent, was running westward, the *Independencia ex-Impregnable* was steaming southward, ready like a beast of prey to pounce down upon the first unsuspecting merchant ship that came across Cervillo's course.

CHAPTER V

OVERHAULED

"I BELIEVE we're on a fool's errand," remarked Fielding to the midshipman.

They were on the bridge; Drake had turned in. It was now two bells of the middle watch (1 a.m.), and the *Frome* was still heading westward as fast as her motors could impart power to the

three undamaged propellers. Beyond the rhythmical purr of the engines, the "swish" of the water as the destroyer's knife-like bow cleft the waves, and the mournful slatting of the signal halliards against the mast, hardly a sound was audible.

"Why, sir?" asked Cardyke, lowering his night-glasses, and stepping behind the shelter of the "storm-dodgers."

"Why—because I think we are. We ought to have overhauled our quarry hours ago—certainly before sunset. With lights out, they might easily alter course, and let us run by them like a blind man past a notice to trespassers. What's more, we're right out of the beaten track. All up-Channel traffic will be heading for St. Catherine's light, and we're well to the south'ard of the Start by now.

"It's a cool bit of work, snapping up a ship almost in sight of Portsmouth, and in the English Channel, too," remarked Cardyke.

"Yes, and it's the audacity of it all that gives the beggars a chance of success. But what can be the object of a tramp lumbering along with a disabled cruiser in tow? She'll be spotted at sunrise, mark my words; but I'm afraid the *Frome* won't have a look in. Well?"

The monosyllable was addressed to a seaman who had scaled the bridge-ladder.

"Message, sir; wireless," replied the man, laconically.

"H'm!" grumbled Fielding, taking the slip of paper. "The admiral wants to know our position, I suppose. That will mean a recall, and a wiggling for not carrying out orders. I wish we'd crippled the wireless for a few hours. Take this, Cardyke, and see what it's all about."

The midshipman took the paper, and entered the little chart-room. The next instant he was by the sub.'s side.

"She's at it again," he exclaimed. "Here's an urgent call for assistance from ss. *Yosen Maru*, lat. 50-2-14 N., long. 3-45-9 W., steaming NNE.¹/₄E. Requires urgent assistance. Pursued and fired upon by large unknown vessel. How's that?"

"Forty miles off, and a general call will bring a dozen vessels to her assistance," replied Fielding, gloomily. "Cut below and inform Drake."

Cardyke bounded down the steep ladder, and made his way to the wardroom. The lieutenant was awake in a moment.

"We've been tricked," he exclaimed. "But we'll be in time yet. Pass the word for Mr. Black."

Drake was soon on the bridge, and the *Frome's* course was altered towards the position given by the *Yosen Maru*. As soon as Black, the gunner, came on deck, orders were given to clear for action.

The wireless operator repeatedly called up the vessel in distress, which was known to be a Japanese liner bound for London. But beyond the first call for aid no message came from the threatened vessel. The ominous silence told its own tale.

With the spray flying in cascades right over the fore-bridge, for the wind was now dead ahead, the *Frome* thrashed her way through the darkness. An hour and a half passed, then—

"Rocket, throwing blue and red stars, sir," announced one of the men stationed on the bridge.

"Whither away?"

"Dead ahead, sir. There's another."

"That's the *Yosen Maru*, sure enough," exclaimed Drake. "We'll be in time, after all."

The grey dawn was paling in the eastern sky as the *Frome* eased down within a cable's length of the huge Japanese liner, and a couple of the destroyer's boats were promptly lowered and manned, Fielding being in charge of one, and Cardyke of the other.

It was soon evident that the *Yosen Maru* was helpless and drifting broadside on to the fairly stiff breeze. Her rudder had been shot away, and a gaping hole under her counter, a few feet above the waterline, showed that a shot had been fired with disastrous result. Her accommodation ladder had been lowered, and no attempt had been made to haul it up again, so towards this means of entry the destroyer's boats gave way.

Fielding was the first to board, and at the head of the ladder was met by a group of calm, imperturbable Oriental officers.

"We have been boarded by pirates, sir," announced one of the Japanese, in excellent English. "A large cruiser intercepted us and ordered us to heave-to. We asked the reason, and in reply a shot was fired across our bows, and another shattered our rudder. Under the circumstances we could

do nothing more than ease down. We were boarded by a boat's crew, and the villain in charge demanded to see our papers, pointing revolvers at the passengers and crew to keep them intimidated. Our purser was compelled to hand over the whole of the bullion in the strong-room, to the value of three hundred thousand yen, some of our stores and provisions were stolen, and ten of our first-class passengers, including General Oki, who is on a mission to the British Court, and Mr. Hokosuka, the eminent financier of Nagasaki, were taken out of the ship. Finally having done considerable damage in our engine-room by means of a charge of dynamite, the rascals returned to their ship, and steamed off."

"Was the pirate ship alone?" asked Fielding. "And did she clear off under her own steam?"

"Certainly," replied the Japanese officer. "She headed S.S.W., going about twenty knots, as far as I could judge."

"I told you we'd been fooled," exclaimed the sub. to Cardyke. "The *Impregnable* was not towed away—she managed to raise steam, and apparently did very well. I'd like to have a few moments with the skipper of the *Steephill Castle*. The lying rogue is more than likely in league with these up-to-date pirates."

"Well, gentlemen," continued Fielding, turning to the officers of the *Yosen Maru*, "we had better be off, and try to overhaul the pirate vessel. We can do very little by way of assistance to your ship, I fear."

"Quite true," replied the spokesman. "The weather is moderate, and we have plenty of sea-room. Before they put our wireless out of gear we heard that the British cruiser *Dionysius* was coming to our aid, as well as the Red Star liner *Scandinavia*."

"Then you'll be well looked after," said the sub. And saluting the Japanese officers, he descended the accommodation ladder.

"Those rascals are not wanting in cool cheek,—holding the passengers as hostages, I suppose," commented Drake, when Fielding had made his report. "Well, I suppose we must call up Portsmouth, and inform the admiral of what has occurred. But there's nothing to prevent us overhauling the *Impregnable*. At all events I'll have a shot at it."

This was Drake's chief fault: he was overanxious to make an individual score. The glory of capturing the *Impregnable* was to be the *Frome's*, if possible. The idea of co-operation with the other British destroyers was distasteful to him. "Alone I did it" was to be his motto, the "I" including the officers and crew of the little craft under his command.

As fast as her three undamaged propellers could drive her the *Frome* tore in the direction the pirate cruiser was supposed to have taken. Eagerly glasses were brought to bear upon the horizon, in the hope of discerning a cloud of smoke—the oil-laden vapour from the *Impregnable's* liquid fuel.

At eight bells Fielding and Cardyke turned in for a well-earned rest but their sleep was soon to be rudely disturbed. Just before noon the slumbering officers were aroused by a messenger with the news that the *Impregnable* had been sighted.

"No mistake this time, I hope, sir?" asked the sub., as he swung himself up the bridge-ladder three steps at a time.

"That's the old *Impregnable*," asserted the lieutenant-commander, confidently. "The question is how the dickens are we to do the trick? We can't very well use the quick-firers, or we may bowl over some of the Japanese hostages. For the same reason we dare not let loose a torpedo."

"We can hail her, sir, and demand her surrender. If she refuses we must hang on, call up the other destroyers to our assistance, and take forcible possession of her."

"Do you think they'll open fire, sir?" asked Cardyke, eagerly.

"Hardly likely, you young fire-eater," replied Drake, with a grim smile. "They won't risk going so far. They know we have wireless; but if they thought they could do the trick without witnesses they wouldn't hesitate to try and sink us."

"They didn't sink the *Yosen Maru*."

"No; that strengthens my opinion that they won't go to extreme measures. There was none of the cut-throat, walk-the-plank style of the eighteenth-century pirate about them. No, I don't anticipate much difficulty but we'll be prepared."

An hour later the *Frome* was only a mile astern from her chase. The *Impregnable's* speed was visibly diminishing.

"They've a cool cheek, by Jove!" ejaculated Fielding. "They've actually painted another name on her."

"Yes," agreed Drake, who, like his subordinate, was making good use of his binoculars. "It's

Independencia. That's Spanish, I believe."

"They're hoisting their colours," continued the sub. "A Brazilian ensign. Won't do, my hearties. You can't bluff us."

"She's slowed down, sir," exclaimed Cardyke. "Her propellers are going astern."

"What ship is that?" shouted Drake through a megaphone, as the *Frome* slowed down at cable's length on the *Independencia's* starboard quarter.

"Brazilian cruiser *Independencia*, from Cherbourg for Bahia Blanca," was the reply.

"A bit out of your course, old man," muttered Drake. "Stand by, we are sending a boat."

"For why? We want no communication."

"Then you'll have to want. If you give us any trouble we'll blow you out of the water," and the lieutenant pointed significantly towards the foremost torpedo-tube, around which its crew were standing ready to launch home the deadly weapon.

It was mere bluff on Drake's part. He dared not, as he had said, let loose a torpedo, and the weapon was only a practice one, its war-head being stowed away below. But to Drake's satisfaction the captain of the pirate-cruiser agreed to receive the boat.

"That's good!" ejaculated Drake. "Now, Fielding, off you go. Round up their gold-braided gentry and lock them up in the chart-room. Take possession of the bridge, and make them follow in our wake. They are only milk and water pirates, after all."

"Am I to take away the whaler, sir?" asked Cardyke.

"Very good. But when Mr. Fielding has taken the necessary steps to secure control over the prize, you will return—you understand? Good—now look alive, or we'll have someone else's finger in the pie." And Drake gave a hasty, comprehensive glance astern, heaving a sigh of relief that the horizon was unobscured. Here was the *Frome's* chance, he meant to make good use of it.

The mid. was wearing his dirk—the practically useless emblem of authority—and in addition he buckled on a holster containing a Service revolver. Both boats' crews, armed with rifles and bayonets—for the old British cutlass that worked such doughty deeds in days gone by is now a thing of the past—tumbled into the little craft as they lay alongside.

"Give way!" ordered Fielding, and the order was repeated by Cardyke in the whaler.

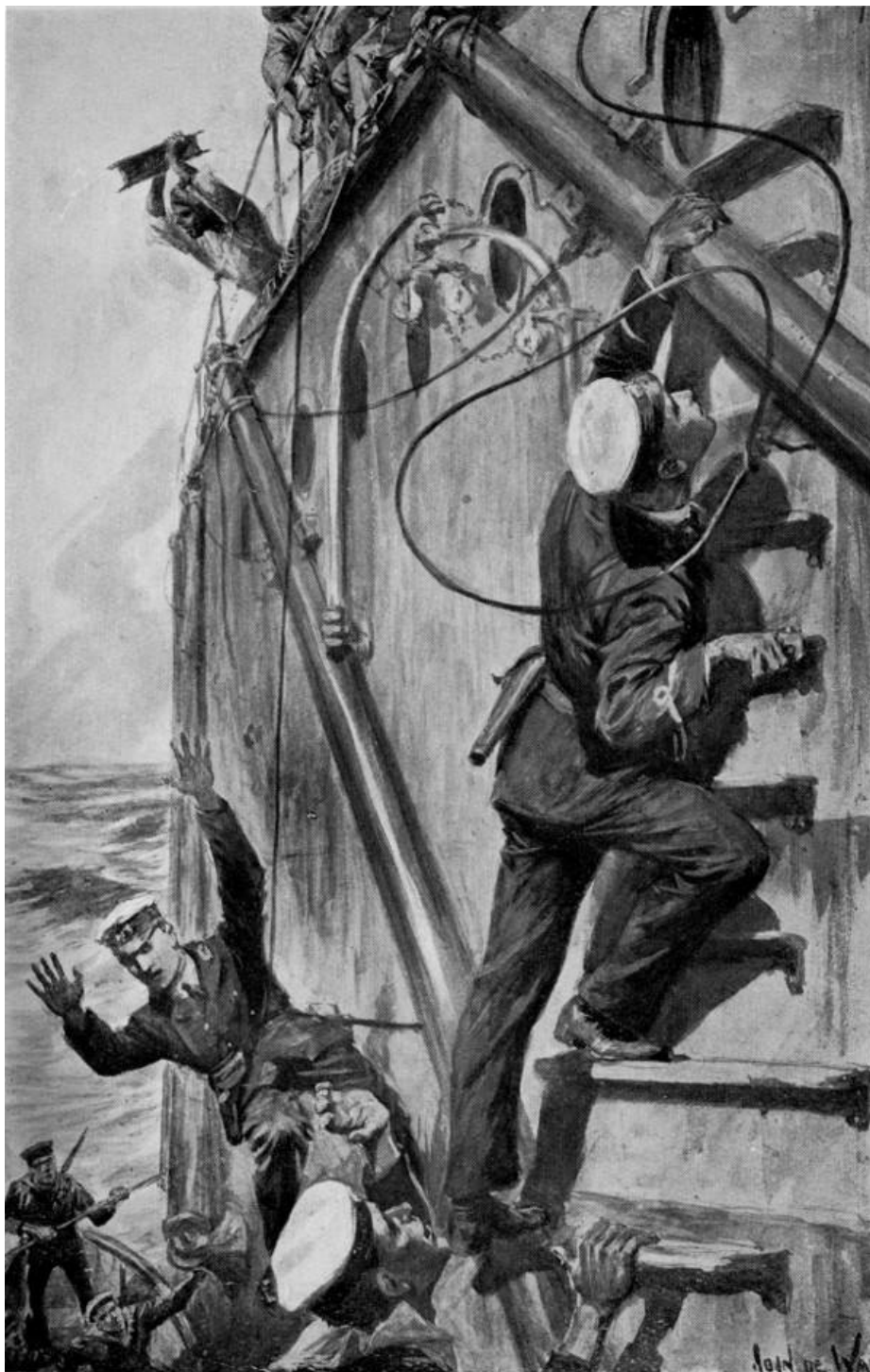
With less than a dozen yards separating the two boats the boarders pulled lustily towards the gigantic cruiser as she lay rising and falling slightly to the Channel rollers.

There was no accommodation ladder, that article having been unshipped before the vessel was put up for sale, so Fielding's boat ran alongside the starboard quarter, where a number of "chocks" afforded a rough and ready sort of ladder. The bow-man laid hold of a torpedo-boom bracket with his boathook, and the sub. prepared to ascend, Cardyke's craft lying just astern.

On the *Independencia's* deck no one was visible save a quartermaster who was leaning over the stanchion-rails. Having no man-ropes to assist him, Fielding's task was an awkward, not to say dangerous, one. He was half-way up the thirty-odd feet of freeboard, with a couple of bluejackets at his heels, when a noose rope was adroitly thrown over his shoulders, and jerked tight. Simultaneously a lariat descended into the whaler, caught Cardyke round the waist, and before any of his men could prevent it, the mid. was jerked up into the air.

With a crash two pieces of iron were dropped into the boats, staving out their garboards.

The pirate cruiser's propellers began to churn the water, and the *Independencia* gathered way. The bow-man of each boat endeavoured to secure a hold, but the drag of the water-logged craft was too great.



A NOOSE WAS ADROITLY THROWN OVER HIS SHOULDERS
AND JERKED TIGHT.

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[Illustration: A NOOSE WAS ADROITLY THROWN OVER HIS SHOULDERS AND JERKED TIGHT.]

The predicament was an ignominious one. The boats' crews were swimming around their swamped boats, their officers were prisoners in the hands of the men they had hoped to capture, and the *Frome*, ere she could give chase, had to pick up the immersed bluejackets.

Meanwhile, the *Independencia*, steaming at twenty knots, was rapidly leaving the destroyer astern, while Drake could only shake his fist in impotent rage.

CHAPTER VI

TRAPPED

MIDSHIPMAN CARDYKE was soon hauled upon the quarter-deck of the pirate cruiser, and, in spite of his struggles, was secured by half-a-dozen ruffians. His revolver and dirk were taken from him, then he was lashed to one of the quarter davits, and left in that ignominious position to reflect upon the circumstances under which he had been snared.

He knew that his captors had a definite object in securing him to the davit. He was in full view of the *Frome*, and his late comrades could easily distinguish him through their binoculars. A hasty glance over his shoulder revealed the fact that there were several of the passengers of the *Yosen Maru*, and some of the crew of the Dutch tugs, in equally exposed positions. It was obviously intended that they were placed there in order to prevent the British destroyer from opening fire upon her gigantic antagonist.

In the meantime Fielding was causing his captors a good deal of trouble. He had contrived to take a turn round a projection on the ship's side with the line that had caught him; and although his assailants hauled on the rope till it was on the point of breaking, they could not succeed in landing their bag. Neither could the sub. disengage himself from the toils of the running bowline, for his idea was to slip out of the noose and cast himself into the sea, trusting to be picked up by his own craft.

As for the two men who had followed him, one had leapt back into the swamped whaler. The other stuck gamely to his superior, and Fielding, looking down, recognised the man as Tom Hardy, the coxswain of his boat.

"Get out of this, Hardy," exclaimed the sub., breathlessly. "Strike out for it. The *Frome* will pick you up."

"Orders is orders, sir," replied Hardy. "You said as how I was to follow you, and here I am. Besides, I'm not much of a hand at swimming, sir."

"All right!" said Fielding, grimly. "But you'll find yourself in a bit of a fix."

The sub. appreciated the coxswain's devotion; for Hardy was an excellent swimmer in spite of his statement to the contrary, and was willingly surrendering his chance of escaping from the doubtful hospitality of the pirate crew.

All the while there was an incessant jabbering going on above, the Dagoes shouting and dancing about on deck, enraged at the stubbornness of their principal captive.

"Can you get at my revolver, Hardy?" asked the sub., who had been vainly attempting to free his arms sufficiently to reach the weapon in his holster.

"I'll try, sir; but what for? They'll plug you, sir, sure as fate."

"We'll put a bullet through this line, and swim for it."

"What about Mr. Cardyke, sir?"

"Cardyke? Has he been caught too? That alters the case. Where is he?"

"Hauled aboard."

"I hope the villains haven't hurt him. Look here, Hardy, I'm going to make a dash up and over the side. Follow me as smartly as you can. Good heavens! What have they done to young Cardyke?"

For, happening to look up, Fielding saw the mid. lashed to the davit. Thinking that the pirates were about to drop the lad, bound as he was, over the side, the sub. was seized with a sudden and desperate resolution.

The men on deck had desisted hauling upon the rope. With a smart jerk Fielding unhitched it from the eyebolt that had proved such a stumbling block to his captors, then scrambled swiftly and agilely up the remaining distance of freeboard.

In a trice he was over the stanchions, and before the olive-coloured mob could realise it, the sub. was in the midst of them, hitting out with his fists with terrific force. In this he was ably seconded by the coxswain, and for a few moments it seemed as if the two Britishers would clear the quarter-deck.

The Dagoes rallied, and, unfortunately for Fielding, although he had freed his arms from the bowline, the noose had slipped as far as his ankles. A lithe and muscular Algerine seized the end of the rope, and Fielding, his legs literally jerked from under him, fell heavily on the deck.

For another fifteen seconds Hardy stood over the prostrate body of his officer, holding out like a bersark. Luckily the sub. had not used his revolver, nor had Hardy drawn his bayonet. The pirates seemed unwilling to do injury to the officer, but their consideration was not extended towards the gallant and devoted bluejacket. A Spaniard, advancing stealthily from behind, dealt

the coxswain a heavy blow across the head with a hand-spike, and Hardy fell to the deck.

"You no play fool wid me. Me Juan Cervillo, capitan ob dis ship," announced the head of the lawless mob, standing in a tragedian's attitude, with arms folded and chest expanded, before the overpowered sub. "You jus' behave. No hurt."

Fielding did not reply. He was humiliated. One thing he regretted in particular was that in his headlong rush his iron knuckles had not come in contact with Cervillo's sleek, oily features.

At a word from the pirate captain the sub. was carried up to the after-bridge, and ignominiously secured to a semaphore post. Here he was left to enjoy his surroundings as best he might, and reflect upon his undignified position.

Meanwhile some of the crew were holding a consultation as to what was to be done with the still unconscious Hardy. Some advocated dropping him overboard, others, judging the British bluejacket by the low standard set up by the renegade petty officer who acted as quartermaster, were of the opinion that if the coxswain recovered from the crack over the head he might become a useful member of the crew. So Hardy was lifted and unceremoniously carried for'ard.

With anxious gaze Cardyke watched the rapidly receding destroyer. He could see her manoeuvring slowly through the water, her two remaining boats being engaged in the work of picking up the swimmers. Drake was paying dearly for his disinclination for co-operation: two officers and the coxswain missing, two boats and the men's rifles hopelessly lost, and his reputation very much at stake.

"I wish the *Frome* would blow this vessel out of the water," thought the mid., but instantly it occurred to him to wonder what would happen to Fielding and the rest of the captives if the destroyer did open fire. Beyond doing damage to the unarmoured portion of the pirate ship, the *Frome's* comparatively light ordnance would make little or no impression upon her gigantic antagonist.

"She's following us, by Jove!" exclaimed the mid. "I wish I had a pair of binoculars, and was able to use them. I wonder what Drake is going to do?"

Yes, the *Frome* was tearing along, yet gaining slowly, for the stokers of the *Independencia* were toiling their hardest, pumping crude petroleum into the complex array of burners. Columns of black smoke, tinged with flame, shot from the tall funnels of the cruiser. Every possible inch that could be got out of her was made use of. Her neglected engines were beginning to run more smoothly. She might hold her own, or might even shake off the pursuing destroyer.

The midshipman could not help noticing the lack of discipline amongst the motley crew. Seamen, with a couple of revolvers stuck in their belts, and cigars in their mouths, would stroll aimlessly along the quarter-deck, give a glance at the British destroyer, and curtly question their officers as to the position of affairs. Some of the latter were not above accepting cigars and cigarettes from the men. The officers were decked out in gaudy uniforms, while the men wore coarse canvas jumpers and trousers. Some wore canvas shoes, others rope-soled boots, but the majority went bare-footed. The only person who seemed to be able to exercise any real authority was Juan Cervillo.

Nearer and nearer drew the *Frome* till she was but a couple of miles astern, steering a course well on the *Independencia's* port quarter, and studiously avoiding her wake. The destroyer did not court further trouble by running over a grass hawser or other obstruction purposely thrown over by the chased ship.

Cardyke felt much easier in his mind when he saw that the *Frome* was gaining. He had such a supreme faith in his comrades that he felt certain that rescue was merely the question of a few hours at the very outside. Of what was to be done to effect this desirable business he had no idea; but it would be managed all right. Before sunset he would be having dinner in the destroyer's wardroom.

Presently Cervillo climbed up to the after-bridge, and, taking his stand close to where Fielding was secured, watched the destroyer through a telescope. After a lengthy examination he called to one of his officers, who in turn gave voluminous directions to a party of seamen. In a leisurely manner they began to bring up ammunition for some of the quick-firers mounted amidships on the starboard side of the ship.

Cardyke could see that the muzzles were depressed and trained slightly abaft the beam; but unless the cruiser ported her helm it would be a matter of impossibility to fire upon her pursuer.

Bang! A sharp report, followed by a shrill screech of the projectile, announced that the *Frome* had opened fire with one of her foremost guns. The missile struck the water at less than two hundred yards to starboard, threw up a column of water thirty feet in the air, and ricocheted thrice ere it dipped for the last time.

It was purposely aimed wide of the chase, but it showed that the destroyer meant business.

Unswervingly the *Independencia* kept her course; the *Frome* settled down to the same rate,

and kept her station at less than eight hundred yards on the cruiser's quarter. Four more shots came from the British destroyer, then she ceased firing, holding doggedly on to the chase. The prominent positions occupied by the pirates' hostages rendered shell fire upon the *Independencia* out of the question, and Juan Cervillo knew that for the time being he held the whip hand.

But the tenacious dogging of his vessel by the British destroyer was a serious business. Unless pursuit could be shaken off, the *Frome*, by the aid of the wireless, would bring a cordon round the modern buccaneer long before she had done anything like the damage she wished to do. Already, no doubt, other warships were steaming under forced draught to settle accounts with the filibustered battle-cruiser. The *Frome* must be put out of the running.

It was now half-an-hour after sunset. The horizon was quite uninterrupted, grey sea met grey sky in an unbroken line, and the outlook promised dirty weather on the morrow.

Having satisfied himself that no other vessel was in sight, Cervillo descended from the after-bridge and entered the conning-tower. An order to the quartermaster made that worthy put the steam steering-gear hard over, and as the *Independencia* swung round at right angles to her former course, one of the quick-firers let fly a plugged shell.

Cervillo's idea was merely to cripple the destroyer by sending a non-explosive shell through her engine-room. He was very chary of going to extreme measures, not that he was averse to committing murder, but he had a wholesome respect for the British Navy. The partial disablement of the *Frome* would give him another start in his piratical career. But unfortunately Cervillo's action had far more disastrous effect than he had anticipated.

The missile sheared its way through the thin steel plating of the destroyer like an arrow fired through a sheet of brown paper. It struck one of the cylinders of the motors, fracturing it into fifty pieces. The petrol caught fire, and, leaping in a cascade of flame, ignited the main tanks in the double bottom.

The motors stopped spasmodically. The engineer-lieutenant and his staff had barely time to rush through the small manhole and gain the deck ere the 'midships section of the ill-fated *Frome* was a mass of flames. With the utmost discipline the crew lowered the remaining boats, and, deeply laden, they pushed off, leaving Drake, the gunner, and about a score of the crew clustered for'ard. Luckily the destroyer kept head to wind, which, in a manner, preserved those on the fo'c'sle from being slowly roasted to death.

Horror-stricken, Cardyke watched the enactment of the tragedy. By the glare of the burning petrol, that shot skywards to a height of over one hundred feet, he could see the boats, deeply laden, lying on their oars, and the knot of brave men gathered around their rash but intrepid commander.

Suddenly there was an explosion as the sea burst through the heated plating. The pillar of flame died out, stifled in the cloud of smoke and steam, but the burning petrol floating on the water, spread in all directions, spurts of fire rising and falling intermittently till darkness and the increased distance hid the awful scene from the midshipman's view.

CHAPTER VII

HOLDING THE CONNING-TOWER

JUAN CERVILLO was completely taken aback at the result of the one shot. It had put him absolutely beyond the pale. Piracy without bloodshed was serious enough in all conscience, but to have gone to this extent meant that capture would, without doubt, end in ignominious death at the hands of the executioner. Not that he would allow himself to be captured if it could possibly be avoided. He had been so far successful. Could he but carry out his plans for the next few days there was a probability that the *Independencia* might be able to slip away from her pursuers, and land his crew with their ill-gotten booty in some unfrequented place, where they might make their way in individual parties to one of the lawless South American republics.

All need for keeping the hostages on deck was for the time being at an end. The Dutchmen were marched off down below, in a secure place of confinement on the orlop-deck, while Fielding and Cardyke found themselves in a cabin on the half-deck in company with General Oki, Mr. Hokosuka, and a Japanese scientist named Mukyima. The cabin was wretchedly furnished, having been the quarters of a former watch-keeper while the ship was awaiting sale. There was a cracked looking-glass, iron wash-basin and stand, a folding-table fixed to the bulkhead, and a few camp-chairs.

The three Japanese were already in the cabin when Fielding and the mid. were unceremoniously thrust in and the door locked behind them. The former rose and saluted the

new arrivals courteously, but by no expression did they depart from the characteristic imperturbability of the Asiatic.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" exclaimed Fielding, thinking this manner of salutation was the best way to ascertain whether the Japanese hostages spoke English.

"Good evening," replied General Oki. "We are sorry we cannot exchange our honourable salutations in an atmosphere more auspicious."

"We're glad you speak English," said the sub. "We do not understand Japanese—I have never been in the Far East."

"I am the only one of three who can speak the tongue of our illustrious allies and instructors in naval science and warfare," continued the Japanese general. "Mr. Hokosuka here does, it is a veracity, speak few English words. Mr. Mukyima, to the sorrow of his ancestors, has taken no stride to overpower your tongue."

"We are all in a bit of a hole," remarked the sub., gravely. "Our destroyer, the *Frome*, boarded the *Yosen Maru* a few hours ago and learnt of your predicament. Unfortunately in attempting to capture this pirate vessel, and incidentally to effect your rescue, we fell into the hands of these rascals."

"My sympathies with your deplorable misfortune," remarked Oki.

"An' me, too," added Hokosuka.

"Thanks," replied Fielding, briefly; then after a pause he continued, "What are these rascals going to do with us, I wonder?"

"Pirate hold us to ransom for sum of one million yen," said the Japanese, as calmly as an Englishman would announce how much an ounce he paid for his tobacco. "I pay not—Hokosuka he pay not—Mukyima he pay not."

"I suppose this rascal Cervillo will try and squeeze a tidy sum out of our relations on our account," said the sub., turning to Cardyke. "He'll be very much mistaken concerning me, for I doubt whether my people could raise ten thousand, and even then I feel sure they wouldn't on principle."

"Same here," agreed the mid. "But the question is: Are we to stick here without making an effort to break ship?"

"What do you suggest?" asked Fielding, with a slight tinge of asperity. "Swim a few hundred miles to the nearest land?"

"No; but if we could manage to get out of this dog-hole we might seize a part of the ship and hold our own."

"Till starved out, eh? And for what purpose?"

"It seems to me that if we could reach the chart-room, or the conning-tower, we could properly play the dickens with the villains."

"H'm!" ejaculated Fielding, who was beginning to realise that action was preferable to a prolonged confinement in a wretchedly furnished cabin. "The conning-tower? But how? And if we did how could we hold it? We've no weapons."

"We might manage to squeeze through that scuttle," suggested Cardyke, warming up to his point.

Fielding gave a dubious glance at the Japanese. General Oki was getting on in years, Mukyima was a big fellow—one of the Samurai—and both might experience difficulty in effecting their escape.

"No fear; we can do," exclaimed Oki, "Hokosuka, he take pistols from men without knowing it." And turning to his companions the Japanese general explained that plans were being formed to make a stand against the piratical crew.

Fielding opened the scuttle. Although broad of shoulder he could, by holding one arm above his head, and the other against his side, pass the widest part of his massive form through the circular aperture. Mukyima then tried, and by a wonderful contraction of his muscular body, squeezed his shoulders through without any apparent difficulty.

"The scuttle is only four feet below the upper deck," said Fielding. "I'll go first; there's the boat-boom lashed just beneath us. We can stand on that, use the rise of the scupper as a foothold, and raise ourselves up over the side. If all is quiet we can creep cautiously for'ard. If not we must wait till we are all ready to make a rush, then run for the conning-tower as fast as we know how."

Oki expressed himself satisfied with the arrangements, and shortly after midnight Fielding was

assisted through the narrow opening. Cardyke and Hokosuka gripped his ankles, and for a short space of time he hung head downwards till his hands came in contact with the boom.

"All right—let go," he whispered, as the *Independencia* listed to port, and as agile as a cat he landed on the rounded spar. Ere the vessel heeled in the other direction the sub. had secured a firm hold upon the rim of the scuttle, his feet planted upon the boom. Then cautiously he climbed till his head was just above the level of the deck.

It was almost pitch dark. A screened light was burning in the chart-room, and the glow of a dozen cigarettes showed that some of the crew whose watch on deck it was, were taking things as agreeably as they possibly could, shielding from the keen wind behind the starboard 'midship barbette.

"All clear," he said, in a low voice. "You are the youngest and most active, Cardyke. Hang on till the last, and I will give you a leg-up."

With an agility that was remarkable for his years the veteran Oki made his way through the exaggerated needle's-eye, and was soon lying flat on the edge of the deck. Mukyima and Hokosuka followed, and were soon snugly ensconced by the side of their compatriots. Fielding then lowered himself to assist the midshipman, but Cardyke had forestalled him, and was crouching upon the boom.

His intimate knowledge of the ship gave Fielding the place of honour in making their way forward. In Indian file, and as silently as they possibly could, the four daring spirits followed the sub., crawling on their hands and knees, expecting every minute to be challenged by a more vigilant member of the pirate crew.

Unseen and unheard they passed the danger zone in the vicinity of the barbette, and from thence to the foot of the monkey ladder the deck was clear. Fielding was within twenty feet of the ladder when a French seaman came lurching aft.

Without a moment's hesitation the sub. lay down upon the deck, curling himself up in a natural attitude as if asleep, and his companions with promptitude followed his example.

As the seaman stumbled past, his right foot came in violent contact with Cardyke's forehead. The mid., although the blow well-nigh stunned him, did not utter a sound, and the seaman continued his erratic course.

Before the fellow had passed the barbette an officer appeared from behind the foremost funnel casing. Seeing the five men apparently deep in slumber on the deck he mildly remonstrated. Receiving no reply he stooped, and touched Cardyke on the shoulder. As he did so he caught sight of the distinctive "piping" on the mid.'s sleeve, and as if he had picked up a live coal he jumped backwards, shouting for assistance.

"Bowl him over," shouted the mid., all necessity for silence being now out of the question. His strong hands grasped the Spaniard's ankles, Fielding's heavy fist caught the pirate on the point of his jaw, and with a gurgled exclamation the astonished man measured his length on the deck.

In a trice the sub. was running up the ladder to the spar deck, Oki and Mukyima at his heels, and Cardyke following in the rear. Two signalmen attempted to bar their path, but went down like ninepins, and, breathless but unharmed, the adventurers gained the conning-tower to find that Hokosuka was not with them.

"No fear; him come all right," said Oki, reassuringly.

The words were hardly out of his mouth ere Hokosuka rejoined them, and silently handed Fielding and the general a revolver apiece. A third he retained himself. How he gained possession of the weapons none of his companions knew, nor did the Japanese think fit to enlighten them on the matter. The main thing was that three of them were armed with loaded revolvers, each holding six cartridges. There was no spare ammunition, but Fielding remarked that they ought to be thankful for small mercies, and trust that there would be no need to have to expend all the cartridges.

Meanwhile a regular pandemonium had broken out on the pirate cruiser. Alarmed by the uproar, men poured from below, not knowing whether they were attacked by a retributive cruiser. In the darkness the confusion was increased tenfold, and Fielding profited by the chaotic state of things to put the steering hard to port, steadying the helm while the *Independencia* pointed in exactly the opposite direction to her previous course. The quartermasters at the steering-gear on the bridge had abandoned their posts at the first alarm, and consequently the sudden alteration of her course was not corrected. As the cruiser was travelling at a high speed the change of helm gave an alarming list away from the centre of rotation, and, unaware of what had caused the "heel," the crew began to shout that the vessel was capsizing.

"If we had a boat's crew at our backs we could sweep the rascals down below in a brace of shakes," exclaimed the sub., as he proceeded to close the slits in the armoured walls. "As we haven't we must make the best of things. When they've calmed down a bit they'll try and rout us out. In the interval we must take steps to prepare our defences."

Hitherto the *Independencia* had been steaming without navigation lights, and all lamps 'tween decks were screened, but in order to reassure his cowardly crew, Cervillo, who had hastily left his cabin, ordered the lights to be switched on.

Standing on the bridge the pirate captain swore, implored, and threatened as fast as he could shout. The conviction that the cruiser was in danger was too firmly rooted in the minds of the seamen to be removed by a torrent of almost incomprehensible words. Men began to make a rush for the boats that had been transferred from the pseudo *Steephill Castle*, two of which hung in the davits on either quarter. The first boat was stove in against the ship's side, the second, crowded with men, was so heavy that directly the falls were manned the laden craft took charge. The ropes slipped from the grasp of the men who held them, and the boat with its living freight fell into the sea.

This disaster quieted the panic-stricken crew to a certain extent, and the officers, with the assistance of a few pistol-shots, succeeded in driving the mob forward. Then it was that the discovery was made that the *Independencia* was as far out of her course as she could possibly be.

By dint of threats and a few lusty strokes with the flat of his sword Cervillo compelled the quartermasters to return to their posts, only to discover that as fast as they put the helm up some mysterious agency promptly put it hard down.

Presently the excited officer who had been capsized by Fielding in the rush for the conning-tower was able to make a coherent explanation of what had occurred. Cervillo, fuming with rage, sent a couple of men down to the cabins where the prisoners had been confined. The Dutchmen were safely under lock and key, but the British officers and the three Japanese had escaped.

While the search was in progress a Greek sailor took it into his head to have a look in the conning-tower. The result was somewhat surprising as far as he was concerned; for directly his features appeared in the narrow entrance Hokusuka's lithe fingers clutched him by the throat. Unable to utter a sound the Greek was choked into insensibility, relieved of his knife and pistol, and gently dropped between an empty signal-locker and the stanchion rails. The respite thus gained was small, but the five occupants of the armoured box made good use of it. The electric circuits communicating with the different parts of the ship—most of which had been restored to a fairly efficient state—were ruthlessly crippled, only the engine-room telegraph and the steam steering-gear left intact. These Fielding resolved to destroy at the last moment.

The daring five were not left long undisturbed. Two petty officers, one of whom carried a hand-lantern, discovered the insensible Greek seaman.

Uttering a shout that brought others running to the spot, the two men advanced cautiously towards the conning-tower. The one with the lantern found himself flying backwards from the effect of a well-delivered blow from Cardyke's fist. The second, whipping out a revolver, fired twice in quick succession, the bullets flattening themselves against the massive steel plates just above the mid.'s head.

"That's done it," muttered Fielding. Then aloud he exclaimed, "Don't fire a shot till I give the word. Keep close."

A hail of bullets rattled against the outside of the conning-tower, followed by an intermittent patter as the leaden hail beat against the formidable walls.

Receiving no reply, and not knowing that the defenders possessed firearms, three or four men made a deliberate rush towards the gap that gave access to the "brain of the ship." The foremost man Fielding brought down with a bullet through his thigh. The others fell in a heap over their comrade's prostrate body, lying still in deadly fear till they mustered sufficient courage to crawl back to their friends. Again the firing broke out, but without effect.

After a while one of the attackers placed his cap on the end of the capstan bar, and, bearing it well in front of him, crept softly up to the entrance, another man, armed with a keen knife lashed, to the end of a pole, standing ready with his crude yet formidable weapon to slash at any of the occupants who might be enticed to make a cut at the decoy.

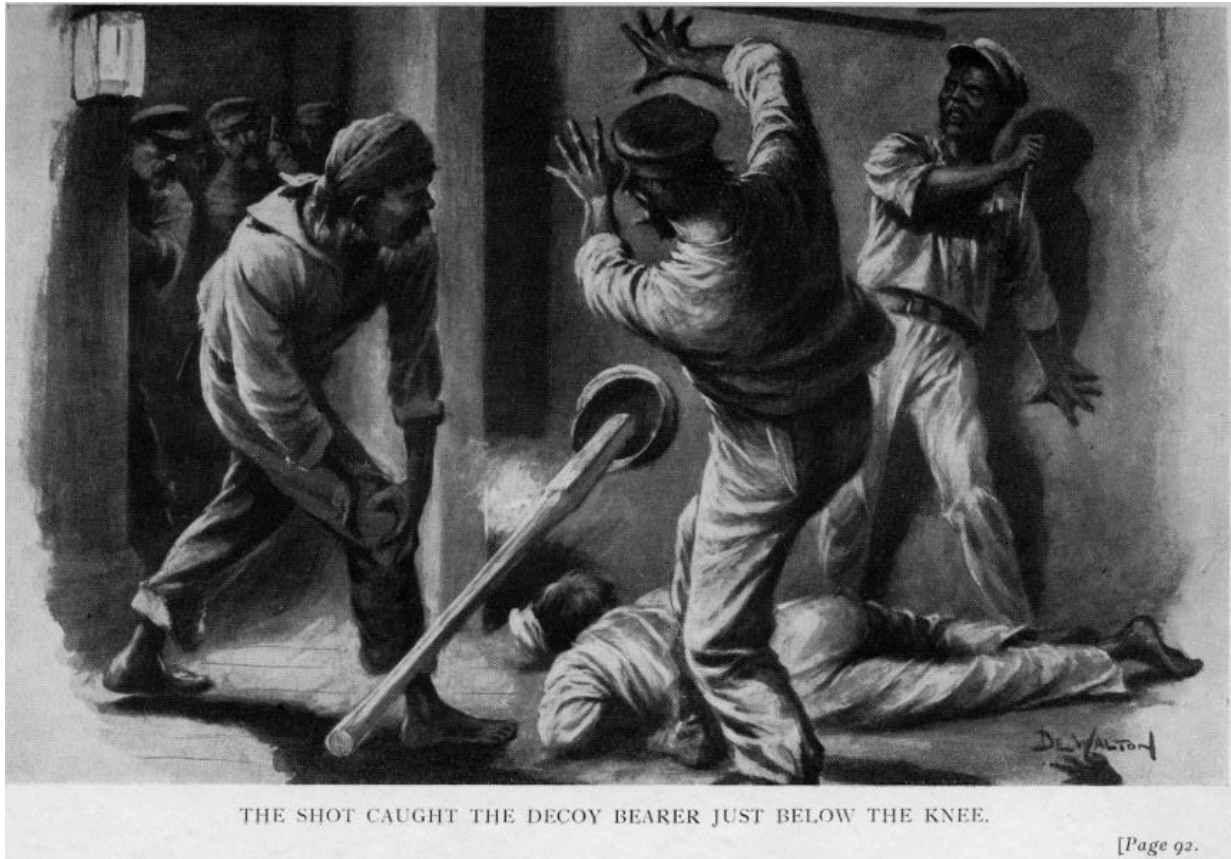
In the semi-gloom, for outside a few lanterns had been brought up and placed in position where they might be of service to the attackers, the defenders caught sight of a white object carefully advancing inside the entrance of the conning-tower. It was the seaman's cap.

Unguardedly Cardyke was on the point of dealing the intruder a heavy blow with a brass bar, which he had detached from some mechanism, when Oki, with characteristic shrewdness, noticed that the forward motion of the object was jerky and undecided. The Japanese general's hand clutched the midshipman's wrist, warning him to be on his guard. Closer and closer came the decoy, till almost the whole of the cap was in view.

Suddenly falling flat upon the floor Oki extended his right arm and fired. The shot, aimed slightly upwards, caught the decoy-bearer just below the knee, and brought him to the deck, while his companion, letting his weapon clatter from his nerveless grasp, ran shrieking from the spot.

Realising that they had a hard nut to crack the pirates hesitated to close, but an intermittent fire was kept up, with the idea of preventing any of the defenders from leaving their well-nigh impregnable fortress.

This state of affairs continued till dawn. Then there was a lull in the firing, and Juan Cervillo's voice was heard demanding instant surrender, otherwise a dynamite fuse would be thrown into the conning-tower and blow its defenders to atoms.



[Illustration: THE SHOT CAUGHT THE DECOY BEARER JUST BELOW THE KNEE.]

CHAPTER VIII

THE PERIL OF THE VOICE-TUBE

FIELDING glanced significantly at his comrades. He was a young man, brave and resolute, and full of life; but the prospect of being mangled in a steel tomb was enough to quail the stoutest heart. Cardyke was deadly pale. He, too, was willing to face ordinary dangers, but the threatened mode of extermination was too horrible to contemplate. Hokosuka and Mukyima, who were ignorant of the nature of the threat, turned and asked General Oki to explain the pirate leader's words. The Japanese officer did so, but whether the three Asiatics felt uneasy or otherwise their stolid features betrayed no sign of their emotions.

Quite five minutes passed. The occupants of the conning-tower did not reply to Cervillo's demand, and the pirate captain began to show signs of impatience.

"Again I say—you vill surrender?"

"No," replied the sub., resolutely. His confidence was beginning to return. Perhaps after all the Spaniard might be only bluffing. Cervillo, although he would not scruple to use the most deadly measures at his command to carry out his ends, quite realised that his hostages were worth more to him alive than dead. He meant to make them his tools to achieve his purpose.

Finding threats were of no avail, he altered his tone and adopted a conciliatory attitude, but to all his advances the men at bay turned a deaf ear—they ignored him absolutely.

Presently Fielding and Cardyke were somewhat astonished to hear an English voice exclaim, "Don't shoot, sir. I've got to say a few words with you."

In reply Fielding opened one of the lids to the observation-holes in the conning-tower, and saw a broad-shouldered, black-browed man with a close torpedo beard that characterises the British tar who neglects to shave. The fellow looked sheepish and thoroughly ashamed of his position.

"Who are you?" demanded the sub.

"I was a petty officer in the navy, sir."

"Then you ought to be downright ashamed of yourself."

"I ain't here to talk about myself," replied the man, sullenly. "The cap'n wants me to explain, in a manner o' speakin', 'ow the land lies. We're out to make a bit, an' up to now we ain't done so badly. 'Respect life' is our motto, an' you are doin' your level best to capsize us. So come out an' lay down your arms. You'll be treated decently so long as things go all shipshape. An' when the cruise is over, and we're paid off, you'll be set ashore safe an' sound."

"You realise that your presence in the conning-tower somewhat upsets your arrangements?"

"Not exactly," replied the man, with a cunning leer. "But, you see, it isn't 'conducive to efficiency,' as our 'first luff' aboard the old *Belleisle* told me 'cause I wore the second 'L' on my cap-ribbon over my left eye, instead of over my nose. But that ain't 'ere or there; so make the best of a bad job and don't give no trouble."

"I'll give you trouble, my man, if ever I get you on board a King's ship," replied the sub., with asperity. "Tell that scoundrel of a pirate that if he wants the conning-tower he'll have to turn us out—and he'll have a fine old job."

With that Fielding reclosed the shutter and a tense silence fell upon both parties, broken only by the hiss of the foam as the battle-cruiser pounded against a head sea.

Cervillo was furious. He knew that every moment was precious. By the aid of wireless not only were vengeful cruisers hastening in his track, but the transatlantic liners, from whom he hoped to take a heavy toll, would be warned, and take precautions accordingly.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, then Juan Cervillo's voice was heard.

"Señor Englishman!" he exclaimed.

Fielding did not trouble to reply.

"For your own sake, señor, put your eye this way."

Out of sheer curiosity the sub. raised the metal flap and looked out, then a muttered ejaculation brought Cardyke to one of the slits in the wall of the conning-tower.

Guarded by two armed seamen was Tom Hardy the coxswain. He was securely bound hand and foot, but so weak did he seem from the effects of the blow he had received that this precaution seemed unnecessary. Cervillo, stepping a few paces in front of the crowd of pirates, pointed to his prisoner in a manner that was diabolical in the extreme.

"Now, Englishmen, you will come out an' surrendah, or we put your man ober de side—say, walk ze plank. Yes, señor, I mean as I say. Juan Cervillo has spoken. One minute I give to decide, or—" And the villain pointed meaningly over the side.

"Think he'll do it?" asked Cardyke, anxiously. "Couldn't we prevent him?"

"There is only one way, as far as I can see. To submit is out of the question. We can stay here till they starve us out, but by that time I hope a cruiser will overhaul this floating nest of rascals."

"What is the plan?" asked the mid.

Fielding hurriedly unfolded his scheme, and Oki explained it to his companions. The Japanese nodded significantly. There was no time to lose, for the minute was nearly up, and Fielding was practically certain that Cervillo would keep his word. The life of a lower-deck man was not worth considering as far as he was concerned.

Revolver in hand, General Oki and Mukyima took their places at the slits nearest the entrance to the conning-tower. The sub. uttered the sharp subdued word "Now!" The next instant Fielding, Cardyke, and Hokosuka darted from their place of shelter.

Before Cervillo could recover from his astonishment he was floored by a well-directed blow from the athletic sub., who, stooping, grasped the half-stunned pirate by the shoulders. Simultaneously the mid. caught hold of Cervillo's legs. Nor was the Japanese idle. With a bound he reached the spot where Tom Hardy was standing between the two armed men. One fell by a sharp blow in the throat; the other, thrown completely over Hokosuka's shoulders, landed in the midst of a crowd of his comrades, scattering them right and left.



BEFORE CERVILLO COULD RECOVER FROM HIS ASTONISHMENT
HE WAS FLOORED BY THE ATHLETIC SUB.

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[Illustration: BEFORE CERVILLO COULD RECOVER FROM HIS ASTONISHMENT HE WAS FLOORED BY THE ATHLETIC SUB.]

Taken aback, the pirates were either too dumbfounded to use their pistols or else were afraid of hitting their leader. One or two attempted a rush, but half-a-dozen shots from the conning-tower checked all attempts at rescue.

Within fifteen seconds from the time the sub. uttered the word "Now!" the three daring men were safe within the conning-tower once more, with Tom Hardy and the pirate captain to add to the number of the steel citadel.

"Now we can have a little understanding with Señor Juan Cervillo," exclaimed Fielding as he proceeded to secure the rascally Spaniard with the bonds that had been removed from the coxswain's limbs. "I don't fancy he'll be quite so keen about chucking lumps of dynamite into the conning-tower."

Without, the pandemonium was redoubled. The British officers and their Japanese comrades paid scant attention to the noise. They had scored heavily up to the present, and they realised the fact.

"I begin to feel fairly peckish," remarked Cardyke, at length.

"So we all do, I fancy, except perhaps this rascal. We've given him twelve hours' start in the fasting competition, but I bet he'll be mighty hungry before we're done with him," said the sub., grimly. "How about you, Hardy; did they feed you at all?"

"At first, sir," replied the coxswain. "Then because I wouldn't join up with them they tried to starve me into submission. If it hadn't been for this crack across my figurehead I'd have taken on the whole mess with my fists and wiped the deck with the lot of them."

"I believe you would, Hardy," remarked Cardyke, admiringly, for the coxswain held the belt in the Inter-Port Boxing Competition. "Are you very hungry?"

"Only once afore like it in my life, as far as I can remember. That was when I was in Haslar Hospital. Low diet the 'poultice-slappers' called it. Couldn't have been much lower. An' the bloke in the next cot to me was being fed with chicken, an' 'ad port wine to drink."

"We'll have to be chewing our belts soon," remarked the sub. "But I don't know about you fellows—I feel mighty tired."

It was now about two bells—9 a.m. Beyond a party of men who had been left to watch the conning-tower, the rest of the pirates had taken themselves off to their various duties or recreations—mostly the latter. The *Independencia* was still heading S.S.W. according to the compass in the conning-tower. It was not one of the standard compasses belonging to the ship—these had been removed prior to sale—but had been brought on board from the pseudo *Steephill Castle*. Since the cruiser had not been swung to adjust compasses it was obvious that the course might be points out, since the deviation was unknown.

"We'll set watches, and the rest of us can have a snooze," continued Fielding. "We'll toss for it. I believe the rascals left a few coins in my pocket, although they bagged my purse and my gold watch. Here goes."

The coin spun in the air. The mid., Oki, and Hokosuka found that theirs was the first "watch below," while Fielding and Mukyima had to keep the first two hours' watch. Owing to his condition Tom Hardy was not called upon for this duty.

Utterly worn out, Cardyke and the two Japanese threw themselves on the hard floor, and were soon sound asleep. The sub. and the general, too fatigued even to talk, stood with their backs against the steel wall, and their faces towards the entrance to the circular metal compartment.

The day was hot, and in spite of the ship's speed through the water, the air within the conning-tower was exceedingly sultry. Once or twice Fielding found himself nodding, only to be aroused by the vigilant Oki.

An hour went by. Even the Japanese watcher was becoming drowsy. Fielding's head fell forward. This time Oki did not rouse his companion; and even when the sub. slid inertly to the ground the Japanese had not the energy to realise that anything was amiss. He saw, as in a vision, the Englishman drop—then utter oblivion.

A quarter of an hour later a squad of men entered the conning-tower without opposition. Six of the occupants were secured, and, like logs, were unceremoniously bundled into the open air, whilst Cervillo was carried upon the forebridge, where he soon recovered from his stupor. The dauntless six, able to hold their own in fair fight, had fallen victims to the insidious methods of their assailants. For fumes of chloroform had been forced through one of the voice-tubes that led into the conning-tower, and it had rendered the brave defenders absolutely helpless.

CHAPTER IX

HOLDING UP "L'ÉGALITÉ"

ARNOLD CARDYKE was the first to recover from the effect of the noxious vapour. He had been sleeping nearest to the entrance to the conning-tower, and had thus more air than his companions. For some moments he lay wondering where he was. He tried to call out, but no sound came from his parched lips. Then, between him and the reddish light that seemed to encircle him, came a huge dark object that presently resolved itself into the shape of a man—one of the pirate officers. Good heavens! The partial truth swept across his mind. Desperately he struggled to rise and arouse his comrades, but realising that he was bound and weak, he rolled

helplessly across the body of Hokosuka.

The weight of the mid.'s frame expelled a quantity of the chloroform fumes from the Japanese's chest, and with a grunt Hokosuka opened his eyes. In his effort to dislodge Cardyke the Asiatic prodded Fielding on the back, and the sub., already well on the road to consciousness, also began to realise his position.

"What's wrong, Cardyke?" he asked. "Why, I——" Then the truth was revealed in all its unpleasantness. He and his comrades were once more in the power of Juan Cervillo and his piratical crew.

"We've made a mess of it, sir," said Cardyke, who contrived to raise himself into a sitting posture.

"And all my fault," groaned the sub. "I fell asleep at my post. I ought to be——"

"We were drugged, or something like that," interrupted the mid. "I can't see that any blame can be attached to you. What's done cannot be helped, although it may be undone, in spite of the proverb."

Fielding sat up, and found that his ankles and wrists were secured by leather straps. His head seemed to spin round like a top for a few moments, but gradually the sensation of nausea left him. It did not take him long to discover that the *Independencia* had altered her course. By the position of the sun the sub. concluded that the direction in which she was heading was approximately N.W. by N. As far as he could command the horizon there were no other ships in sight—only a vast expanse of Atlantic rollers.

"Here comes that scoundrel," exclaimed Cardyke, and turning his head Fielding saw Juan Cervillo approaching.

The Spaniard, who never could boast of good looks, had his appearance somewhat disfigured from the result of the blow he had received in the sortie from the conning-tower, while his greasy features were sallow from the effects of the chloroform which he had inhaled.

With a supercilious grin Juan Cervillo stood in front of his prostrate captives, gloating over their plight. He could, he imagined, subject them to indignity with impunity now, but he had yet to learn caution.

Mukyima was stealthily regarding the Spaniard out of the corners of his narrow eyes. Slowly the lithe body and limbs of the Japanese contracted. Then like a stone from a catapult, Mukyima, bound as he was, hurled himself upon his foe.

Juan Cervillo saw the human thunderbolt flying towards him just in the nick of time. He gave a hurried leap aside, caught his foot in a ring-bolt, and subsided in a most undignified manner upon a particularly aggressive fairlead. As for the Japanese, he had taken the precaution of tucking his head well forward. His shoulders came in contact with a canvas "storm-dodger," and, rebounding, he, too, flopped on the deck.

Juan Cervillo did not wait for a second spring from the wiry Jap, but regaining his feet rushed away shouting for assistance. Half-a-dozen of the strongest of the pirate crew had a tough struggle ere they overpowered Mukyima; but they did it at length, lashing the Asiatic to a capstan-bar so that he was as helpless as a log.

"Me teach you!" hissed the pirate captain. "You dogs!—when I done, den ober de side I put you!"

Turning to his men he gave a lengthy order. Mukyima was borne away for'ard, the other captives, including the coxswain, were unceremoniously bundled below, and placed in the same cabin from which they had before escaped.

It did not take the sub. and his comrades long to free themselves of the straps that bound them. Fielding's first act, in recovering the use of his limbs, was to hasten to the scuttle. The pirates had taken due precautions this time. The glass had been removed, and a massive iron bar, placed across the frame of the scuttle, was secured by means of the lock-nut, the thread of which had been bent and burred so that it was impossible, without the aid of a file or hack-saw, to remove the bar from its position.

"Well, we can look out, and see what's going on; that's one comfort," exclaimed Fielding, optimistically. "What have you found, Cardyke?" For the midshipman, rummaging in a locker, had discovered a loaf of bread, some ship's biscuits, a jar of water, and a tin pannikin.

"We won't starve just yet, in any case," observed the mid.

The pangs of hunger had rounded off the unappetising appearance of the stale loaf and the "hard tack," and the water, though not particularly fresh, tasted sweet to the parched mouths of the hostages.

"Poison?" asked Oki, interrogatively.

"I think not," replied Fielding. "If they wanted to choke us off they would have done so before now; besides, the food doesn't look tempting enough. A sumptuous repast would be more suspicious."

About four o'clock the cruiser eased down. Knowing that something was about to happen, the captives took turns at looking through the scuttle. For some time nothing beyond sky and sea was visible, but when the *Independencia* described a half circle Cardyke announced that she had compelled a huge liner to heave-to.

"A Frenchman, by Jove!" exclaimed Fielding. "Now what's the game—more scuttling?"

The transatlantic liner's decks were crowded with passengers, who were regarding the cruiser with the greatest interest, for the *Independencia* had hoisted the white ensign, and with their faith in the *entente cordiale*, the Frenchmen never for one moment harboured any suspicion.

Suddenly a four-pounder boomed out, and a shell hissed betwixt the huge funnels of *L'Égalité*. Like a crowd of startled rabbits, the passengers rushed pell-mell for the companion ladders. Had war suddenly broken out between Great Britain and France? They were not long left in doubt. As soon as the liner came to a standstill, two boats were lowered from the cruiser. Into them tumbled fifty men, all armed to the teeth.

"*Ciel!*" gasped the astounded French captain. "They are not John Bull's bluejackets. They are pirates."

His worst suspicions were confirmed when the white ensign was struck and a red flag hoisted in its place, while slowly the 'midships barbette on the starboard side, actuated by manual power, was turned till its pair of 12 in. guns were trained upon the luckless liner.

The French captain did not know that the huge weapons were without breech-blocks, but the frowning muzzles were far more terrifying to him than the quick-firers. Unresistingly he allowed the boats to come alongside, and the lawless mob to swarm over the liner's lofty sides.

The pirates went about their work in a systematic manner. Four of them went straight to the wireless-room, and interrupting an urgent call for aid, drove out the operators, and put the delicate mechanism out of action. Others, making the captain prisoner, and driving the rest of the officers into the smoking-room, compelled the former to send for the ship's papers. The whole of the specie and bullion was transferred to the boats, together with the wealthiest and most influential of the passengers. This done the terrified first and second-class passengers were made to hand over their money and jewellery, the steerage being left unmolested.

Very little resistance was shown by the passengers. An American millionaire who had made a pile in Nevada, promptly whipped out a six-shooter, vowing he'd send the cowardly Dagoes to blazes. He was quick and deadly with his pistol, and four of the pirates pitched forward on the floor of the saloon; but one man against a score was too long odds, and the tough old backwoodsman fell riddled with bullets.

Having taken all the bullion and specie, together with the hostages, to the *Independencia*, the pirates proceeded to cripple the engines, leaving the liner helpless in the Atlantic. But they had not done with their prize, for directly the two boats returned to the cruiser Juan Cervillo ordered *L'Égalité* to hoist out her own boats, fill them with provisions and stores, and bring them alongside the *Independencia*. Under a threat that the liner would be sunk if the demand were not complied with, the captain of *L'Égalité* hastened to carry out Cervillo's order.

Two hours later, with her store-rooms filled to their utmost capacity, and nearly a million and a quarter pounds' worth of additional booty in her strong-room, the *Independencia* bade an ironical farewell to the helpless liner.

From their place of confinement Fielding and his companions had watched the work of plunder and wanton destruction. They had seen the easy way by which the cruiser had replenished her stores, and the continuation of the policy of bringing off hostages to the ship in order to prevent any punitive vessel from firing at the modern buccaneer.

Cardyke turned to the sub.

"This can't go on for long," he remarked. "What will the end be?"

"Goodness only knows," rejoined Fielding; "but we've a tough time before us!"

CHAPTER X

THE HYDRO-AEROPLANES

MEANWHILE, what had happened to Lieutenant Drake and the rest of the *Frome's* crew, after the destruction of that little craft? Directly the boats pushed off Drake and those of the men who remained with him gathered on the fo'c'sle and turtle-back deck. Then, as the water came into contact with the red-hot plates, the destroyer's deck buckled amidships. Her motors went crashing through the flaming petrol in the double-bottoms as the vessel tilted and slipped stern foremost beneath the flaming surface of the sea.

All on board imagined that the end had come, when suddenly that part of the ship between the for'ard engine-room bulkhead and the bows shook itself clear of the remainder of the shattered hull and floated on the surface. The destroyer had literally been torn in twain, and the watertight bulkhead kept the forepart afloat. True, there was a perceptible list, but on investigation there was found hardly any water in the forehold.

As soon as the petrol blazing on the water had burned itself out, the boats returned to find that Drake and his companions were alive, though scorched by the terrific heat. Deeming it inexpedient to allow the boats' complement on board the stumpy vessel, Drake ordered them to stand off and lay on their oars. Fortunately there was little wind, although the sea ran high, but guided by an anchor-lamp shown from the bridge, the boats could keep within hail of the lieutenant-commander. At frequent intervals rockets were sent up, for the *Frome* was not so very far from the regular steamer track, while it was known that other destroyers and one or two cruisers were heading in their direction.

Just after dawn H.M.S. *Indus*, a powerful cruiser of 22,000 tons, bore down. The lieutenant and his men were taken off the wrecked forepart, and a wireless message was sent to Devonport announcing the details of the outrage on the high seas, and asking for instructions.

To the surprise of everyone on board, the reply came—"Tow remains to Devonport." Not a word was said about continuing the chase, so, to the disappointment of all ranks, the *Indus* took the sorry remnants of the *Frome* in tow, and at an easy ten knots headed towards Plymouth Sound.

Thousands of people assembled to see the shattered forepart of the destroyer pass up Drake's Passage. Hundreds of cameras were levelled at her, shoals of boats accompanied the *Indus* and her tow, till the latter was docked, safe from public observation, in the basin at Keyham.

Then followed several days of irritating official inquiries, which, while the *Independencia* still roved the high seas, was an utter waste of time. Drake wanted to be off again. His one desire was to retrieve his reputation by capturing the pirate vessel, and rescuing his brother officers.

Cruisers, scouts, and destroyers were despatched, and, spreading fanwise, scoured the Atlantic from Rockall to the Azores; but somehow or other the filibustered ship escaped detection. Then came the news of the holding up of *L'Égalité*, which, according to the French captain's report, had taken place within twenty miles of the British cruiser *Khartoum*.

The immediate result of this affair was that a squadron of fast cruisers and a flotilla of destroyers left Brest to join in the hounding-down of the *Independencia*. The Spanish Government, eager to lay hands upon the notorious anarchist, also despatched two cruisers and four destroyers; so that there was the keenest rivalry between the various nations engaged in the enterprise as to who should have the honour of laying the running and desperate Juan Cervillo by the heels.

All concerned realised that the business must of necessity be a peculiar one, for Drake had reported how the hostages from the *Yosen Maru*, as well as his own officers who had been trapped, were utilised as screens to prevent the *Independencia* from being sunk by gun fire. There were three alternatives: either to overhaul and board the pirate vessel, a feat that could only be accomplished on a calm day, and with the *Independencia* compelled to heave-to; or to sink the offender by torpedoes, trusting that the pirates would cut their hostages adrift ere the ship sunk; or else to dog her so tenaciously that, unable to capture any more liners or tramps, she would be compelled to haul down the red flag through sheer starvation.

The British Admiralty decided to adopt the last alternative, and orders were given that once the *Independencia* was sighted, all cruisers and destroyers within a certain radius were to be summoned by wireless, and form a close cordon around the modern buccaneer.

All merchant ships fitted with wireless were informed of this new terror of the seas, and requested to "speak" with other vessels not so equipped, as well as to transmit news of the appearance of any suspicious craft answering to the *Independencia's* description, so that aid could be quickly forthcoming from the nearest warships. Yet in spite of these precautions the officers of the trans-atlantic liners and tramps had an anxious time. Never had the deck officers kept such a keen look-out, especially at night, when the pirate, steaming without navigation lights, might at any moment loom through the darkness and peremptorily order her prey to heave-to.

At Lloyd's the insurance rates went up 60 per cent. The "Atlantic ferry" paid heavily, for would-be passengers, as a matter of precaution, deferred their journey until the time when the danger ceased to exist. Grain-laden tramps from the States and Canada either remained in port or else sailed under convoy, as in the days of the Napoleonic war. The price of food, in consequence,

rose tremendously, and coming as it did after a succession of disastrous strikes, the effects of the modern pirate-ship's depredations began to be felt by all classes of the community.

Two days after the receipt of the wireless message from the French cruiser *Desaix*, announcing the outrage upon *L'Égalité*, the liner arrived at Cherbourg in tow of the armoured cruiser *Chanzy*. Then followed the customary Press interviews with the passengers and crew, with the stock of conflicting and of ten misleading reports. Some of the eye-witnesses, partly through a love of exaggeration, and partly through the result of a highly strung temperament, told ghastly tales of butchery, some even going to the length of asserting that they had seen the passengers who had been removed from the liner being made to walk the plank. No satisfactory explanation could be given as to why, if the pirates were so bloodthirsty as they had been made out to be, the liner had not been scuttled with all hands, until someone explained that Juan Cervillo had spared the ship on account of the third-class passengers.

Then it was that a Socialist Parisian newspaper appeared with a eulogistic three columns and a half on Cervillo's record and aims, and calling upon the Anarchists to give him their moral and active support. The offices of the paper were raided by the gendarmes, and before night the military and the canaille were engaged in hand-to-hand fighting in the streets of Paris. Similar disturbances took place in Madrid, Barcelona, and Naples, and the French, Spanish, and Italian Governments had good cause to wish that the notorious Juan Cervillo was at the bottom of the sea.

At Barcelona the news spread that the *Independencia* had appeared off that port. The authorities knew that such was impossible, partly on account of the distance from British waters, and also that the Straits of Gibraltar were too well guarded by a strong flotilla cruising betwixt Tarifa and Ceuta. But amongst the ignorant population it was accepted that Cervillo had appeared to proclaim the anarchist rule in Spain, and that night the town was at the mercy of the mob.

It was not until it was found that the ship was the British cruiser *Indefatigable*—the sea-going instructional vessel for naval cadets, and which bore a striking resemblance to the *Independencia*—that the disorder ceased. Even then it required four regiments of Spanish infantry to quell the insurrection.

As soon as the new scout *Cerberus*, could be passed out of dockyard hands, she was commissioned in order to participate in the search for the pirate-cruiser, and to Drake's unbounded satisfaction he was appointed to her for duties in the hydro-aeroplanes, of which the scout carried four.

Vast strides had been made in the construction and efficiency of the hydro-aeroplanes since their demonstration before the King in Portland Roads in 1912. Instead of being, like the first of this class, clumsy aeroplanes fitted with floats, those of the later pattern were swift motor-boats, provided with folding air-planes and propellers, so that they could either keep the sea in fairly heavy weather, or they could soar into the air and perform a thousand-mile flight. Each hydro-aeroplane consisted of an aluminium hull, 35 ft. in length, 6 ft. in breadth, and of a draught when at rest of 9 ins. These were completely decked in, with the exception of a small, open well, which could, if necessity arose, be covered with a water-tight hatch. At one-third the distance from its bows was a small observation turret, the top of which served as one of the bearings, or the shafting of the aerial propeller. The planes, when not in use, folded into recesses in the sides of the hull, the actuation of a pair of tension wires serving to extend and keep them in position for flight. Whereas the original hydro-aeroplanes could not descend to rest upon the surface of a choppy sea, those carried by the *Cerberus* could not only be relied upon to descend or ascend from the water, but could by reason of their strength and rigid construction safely withstand the impact of a fall from a considerable height. For armament they carried a one-pounder automatic gun, and gear for dropping small bombs charged with high explosives.

On board the *Cerberus* these four hydro-aeroplanes were carried on the space hitherto occupied by the funnel-casings, for the scout had internal combustion engines, and, save for a small exhaust pipe, was without funnels. Each tender could be hoisted in less than half-a-minute by means of a single-purchase wire rope passing through a block at the end of a derrick, and wound round a motor-capstan. Constructed at one-twentieth of the cost of a submarine, the hydro-aeroplane had already virtually superseded those craft. Save at night, the crews of the hydro-aeroplanes could from a height easily locate the presence of a submarine, and by means of her bombs could destroy it with ease. Before long it was recognised that the era of the submarine, as a destructive means of offence, was past.

Lieutenant Douglas Drake lost no time in reporting himself on board the *Cerberus*, and within twenty hours of being passed out of dockyard hands the scout left Portsmouth Harbour to join in the search for the pirate-cruiser.

But before the ship had passed through the Needles Channel she was, to the disgust of all on board, ordered to return. That morning the owners of the ss. *Duke of Negropont* had received a wireless message from the captain of that vessel. It was brief and to the point:—

"*Independencia* in collision with unknown vessel, 4.45 a.m. Lat. 40-22-10 N., Long. 22-9-16 W. Both sank; no survivors."

CHAPTER XI

HOKOSUKA'S SLEIGHT-OF-HAND

AFTER leaving the French liner *L'Égalité* helpless in the distance, the *Independencia* steamed in a south-easterly direction till out of sight; then altering helm, she plugged away at an easy eighteen knots in the direction of the West Indies. Here Juan Cervillo knew that for a time he would be fairly safe. There were no British warships capable of doing him much damage, and amid the cays of the Bahamas there was little chance of meeting with Uncle Sam's battleships or cruisers. On the other hand, he could rely on being able to intercept some of the traders in and out of Galveston and New Orleans while, if things became too hot for him, there would be a more than possible chance of slipping off to the coast of Venezuela or Columbia, where the ship could be run ashore, and her rascally crew, with their ill-gotten booty, could disperse.

Many plans were suggested by Fielding and his companions whereby they might regain their liberty, but none seemed at present feasible. Whenever their meals were brought into the cabin armed men stood without; while, in order to prevent a repetition of their escape through the scuttle, a sentry was stationed on the poop; orders to examine the bar across the scuttle every hour were also given to a petty officer, who was lowered over the side in order that he might test the condition of the metalwork.

"Couldn't we signal in Morse, sir?" asked Cardyke: "We can easily rig up a shutter from the scuttle. It might attract the notice of some passing vessel, and we could give her warning to clear out?"

"A good idea," replied the sub. "But unfortunately, unless the other vessel approaches without steaming lights, the probability is that she will be discovered long before we can call her up. Besides, unless a ship is well abeam, or on our starboard quarter, all the signalling possible from this cabin won't be seen."

"Still, it will be something to do," continued the mid. "Something to pass the time."

"Carry on, then," replied Fielding. "But I honestly think it won't help us much—or anyone else."

During the afternoon the two British officers dozed for a couple of hours. As Fielding remarked, it was advisable to sleep all you can, for you never know when you might have to do without it. Besides, it cured the terrible *ennui*—the tedious waiting for something to turn up to break the deadly monotony.

Cardyke woke to find Hokosuka sitting on the floor, and carefully nursing a large revolver. There was a very faint suspicion of satisfaction in the Jap's eyes, but his immobile face gave no sign of elation or otherwise. The mid. could not help wondering how the man gained possession of such a powerful weapon, and his curiosity urged him to appeal to General Oki.

"The English say they love the sea," observed the Jap. "Britannia, she rule waves with eel-spear. That what you say. Me think ninety-nine of all one hundred Englishmen know how to love the sea by come to sit on seaside and throw stones in water. That English holiday; but put ninety-nine Englishmen in boat they no know how to sail."

"That's quite true," thought Cardyke; "but what on earth has that to do with the question how Hokosuka got hold of that revolver? They are trying to bamboozle me for some reason. I'll mention the matter to Fielding when he wakes up. In the meantime I'll keep a watch on Mr. Hokosuka."

Accordingly the mid. turned on his bunk, and was soon to all appearances sound asleep, but out of the corners of his almost closed eyelids he followed the movements of the mysterious Japanese.

Hokosuka had removed the cartridges from the weapon, and was carefully examining its mechanism. Placing the corner of his coat under the hammer in order to deaden the sound, he tried the trigger in a most methodical fashion, so as to get the correct "pull." Then, replacing the cartridges, he handed the weapon over to his compatriot.

Oki took the revolver in his hand, and to all appearances it vanished. Cardyke could swear that from the time the general's fingers closed over the butt his arm never moved, but where could a bulky object like that go to?

Neither of the Japs seemed to treat the occurrence otherwise than as an ordinary transaction; one might have been handing the other a cigarette-case. The mid.'s curiosity was increasing rapidly.

Having rid himself of the weapon, Hokosuka rose from the floor, crossed the cabin, and took his stand just below the scuttle. There he waited as motionless as a statue.

Presently the light that poured through the opening became obscured. The man detailed to attend to the iron bar was being lowered to make his hourly examination. As far as Cardyke could see the pirate was seated in a bos'un's chair, which was let down till the man's shoulders were level with the scuttle. Steadying himself with his left hand, the seaman tried the bar with his right; then, satisfied that it had not been tampered with, he called to his comrades to haul up.

Instantly, with a rapid, gliding, noiseless motion, Hokosuka's left hand shot through the aperture. When his arm was withdrawn the Jap had another revolver in his grasp. He had dexterously removed the weapon from the seaman's holster, as he had done to the man who had previously been doing the duty.

Just then Fielding awoke. Oki pointed to the revolver that his compatriot held.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the sub., in astonishment. "However did you get hold of that?"

"We have two," replied Oki, calmly. "One you have, other we will keep. Now put out of way—hide. Lil boy"—and to Cardyke's disgust he heard himself referred to in that strain—"lil boy, him ask where you get. I no tell; you no must tell. If he no know, then he no can tell."



HALF A DOZEN SEAMEN HEADED BY THE RENEGADE ENGLISHMAN BURST INTO THE ROOM.

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[Illustration: HALF A DOZEN SEAMEN HEADED BY THE RENEGADE ENGLISHMAN BURST INTO THE ROOM.]

"I see," agreed Fielding. "But these rascals will ransack the place when they miss these revolvers."

"Let look everywhere," replied General Oki; "revolver all gone."

And Fielding's astonishment was no less than his junior's when the weapon seemed to disappear from sight.

Barely a quarter of an hour later the cabin door was thrown open, and half-a-dozen seamen, headed by the renegade Englishman, burst into the room.

"No hanky-panky tricks, sir!" exclaimed the bo'sun. "You've sneaked a couple of revolvers. We missed one, and didn't know where it had gone; but the fellow who was lowered over the side made sure he had his when he went down, and when he came up it had gone. And I saw that his holster was fastened when he started. So no beating about the bush. Hand them pistols over, and

save yourself a sight of trouble. You can't get the weather side of me, sir."

"I have no revolvers," replied Fielding. "I wish I had. I'd make sure of your losing the number of your mess."

"None of your cheek!" replied the man, fiercely. "Get over there."

Hustling the five occupants of the cabin into one corner the bo'sun directed his men to search the room, and soon all the scanty furniture was turned over and over again, but without result. This done the British officers, the coxswain, and the other two Japs were subjected to a search, their coats being removed for that purpose.

"Confound it, we're on the wrong tack!" grumbled the pirate bo'sun. And, ordering his men to clear out, he went to make his report to Juan Cervillo that a systematic search convinced him that no weapons were to be found in the prisoners' cabin.

Hokosuka waited to make sure that none of the unwelcome visitors were returning, then produced a couple of revolvers and a large sheath-knife.

"Not same 'volvers," explained General Oki. "These toll. Hokosuka make pirates pay for coming here."

"Not the same revolvers?" asked Fielding, in astonishment. "Where are the first two you had?" For it seemed incredible that after the systematic search not only were the looked-for articles not found, but two more pistols, to say nothing of the sheath-knife, were added to the defensive armoury of the occupants of the cabin.

"Me show you," replied the general, and turning to his compatriot he spoke a few words in his native tongue. Simultaneously both Japs pulled up the legs of their trousers, and revealed the weapons with their muzzles stuck between their feet and their shoes, the chambers fitting into the hollow just behind their ankles.

"I'm hanged if I saw you put yours there!" exclaimed the sub.

Oki merely shrugged his shoulders. He did not think it necessary to explain how the trick was done; but like most Japanese, he was an adept at sleight-of-hand.

"Where are we making for, I wonder?" asked Cardyke.

"If we go on at this rate and in the same direction a week will find us in West Indian waters, unless I'm very much mistaken," replied Fielding. "It's a mystery to me why this ship hasn't been headed off and captured long ago."

"Long ago!" echoed the mid. "Why, it's only a matter of a few days!"

"Yes, yes, I know; but one would naturally think that with modern scientific instruments at one's command it would be an utter impossibility to play hide and seek in the North Atlantic."

"Were you navy officer man in 1907?" asked General Oki, who, although his English was somewhat quaint, could follow ordinary conversation with comparative ease.

"In that year I was completing my last term at Dartmouth," replied Fielding.

"Then you have no heard of manoeuvres that year—how one English fleet sailed in North Sea for over sixty hour, looking for another English fleet, and no can find?"

"By Jove! I believe I heard something of the kind," replied the sub. "But you seem to know a lot about our naval matters, sir?"

"My business," replied Oki, calmly.

The British and the Japanese officers were entering into an animated discussion on the possibilities of wireless in war when they were interrupted by the crash of a quick-firer, followed by the slowing down of the cruiser's engines.

There was a rush to the scuttle, but the field of visible horizon was limited, and nothing could be seen that could give the reason for the discharge of the gun. The firing from the cruiser and the slowing-down showed that the *Independencia* had overhauled another craft and was not the pursued craft.

"It's another liner being nabbed!" exclaimed Cardyke.

CHAPTER XII

THE "DUKE OF NEGROPONT"

BANG! went another quickfirer, and the accompanying screech denoted the fact that the pirates had let loose a shell. Another and another, followed by a couple of detonations and the rending of steel as the powerful missile burst.

Then the *Independencia* turned 45 degs. to port, and the object of her unwelcome attentions came into the view of the prisoners in the cabin.

"You're right, Cardyke," exclaimed the sub. "It's a West Indian liner; I can see by her funnels."

"British," announced the mid., as a waft of air partially cleared the smoke that was issuing from her steerage, revealing the red ensign fluttering from her ensign-staff. "They've blown her bridge and chart-house to smithereens."

"And planked a couple of shells through her quarters," added Fielding. "I wonder she doesn't make a dash for it, instead of slowing down."

Did the sub. but know it he might have realised the cause of the British vessel's apparent lack of enterprise. The ship was the *Duke of Negropont*, four days out from New Orleans. Lured by the display of distress signals from the *Independencia*, the liner had altered helm, and borne down upon the seemingly crippled cruiser. Then a shot was fired across the liner's bows, while the white ensign fluttered down from the cruiser's stern, and was replaced by the red flag of anarchy.

The skipper of the *Duke of Negropont* had received due warning of the depredations of the *Independencia*, but since it was reported that the pirate was seen in the vicinity of the Straits of Gibraltar he never for one moment associated the vessel flying the white ensign with the modern buccaneer. But directly the first shell whizzed across the *Duke of Negropont's* bows the captain of the liner ordered full speed ahead, at the same time starboarding his helm.

The next two shots, fired in deadly earnest, completely demolished the navigating bridge and chart-house, and wiped the skipper and the chief officer out of existence. The concussion and the sweeping away of the bridge brought the engine-room telegraph back to "stop," and the liner, losing way, brought up within a hundred yards of her aggressor.

Still covered by the *Independencia's* guns, the prize was boarded by two boats' crews, and the method of despoiling the liner was almost identical with that of the two previous captures.

There was, however, one departure. The second officer of the *Independencia*, a Spaniard who spoke English fairly well, gave orders for the *Duke of Negropont's* wireless operators to be brought before him. The senior, a man of twenty-three years of age, resolutely refused to transmit the message his captor dictated. Twice Gonzales, the second officer, ordered him, using threats of instant death should he refuse.

"No tricks," exclaimed Gonzales, menacingly. "I understand what you telegraph, so do as I say."

Then it was that the owners of the *Duke of Negropont* received the message:—

"Independencia in collision with unknown vessel, 4.45 a.m. Lat. 40-22-10 N., Long. 22-9-16 W. Both sank; no survivors."

Directly this decoy message was sent, the wireless gear was destroyed, and the pirates proceeded to loot the ship. But they had reckoned without the British engineers and firemen, and some of the junior officers and deck-hands who had taken refuge below.

Ignoring the indicator pointing to stop, the chief engineer restarted the engines to full speed ahead, and simultaneously a swarm of men, armed with cross-bars, shovels, and rakes, and led by their officers with revolvers in their hands, rushed on deck. Taken by surprise, and alarmed by the hitherto apparently motionless vessel gathering way, the two boatloads of pirates were borne back. Men fell on both sides, but British valour prevailed, and in less than five minutes the survivors of the boarding-party were swimming for their lives in the wake of the *Duke of Negropont*.

Through the scuttle Fielding and his companions watched with mingled feelings the boarding and subsequent repulse of the pirates, and as the liner forged ahead the two British officers gave vent to a cheer. But their exultation was nipped in the bud, for Juan Cervillo, wild with fury, ordered the quick-firers to hull the *Duke of Negropont* between wind and water.

Three shots were sufficient. With an ever-growing list to port the liner sank lower and lower by the stern, her speed grew less and less, till a column of steam issuing amidships showed that the water had entered her engine-room.

Suddenly Cervillo's attention was directed towards a large vessel nearly hull down on the

horizon. The look-out aloft reported that it was a four-funnelled craft, with white hull and yellow superstructure. Then the Spaniard realised that he was in a tight corner, for the oncoming vessel was a United States cruiser.

Without waiting to pick up the survivors of the boarding party, he ordered the *Independencia* to be driven at full speed ahead, and was soon in full flight in a southerly direction.

The cruiser flying the stars and stripes was the *West Virginia*, whose captain had been warned to keep a look-out for a possible encounter with the pirate cruiser *Independencia*, of a supposed speed of twenty-two knots, but in reality doing a bare twenty. Pelting along as hard as her 23,000 horse-power engines could drive her, she was just in time to rescue the survivors of the *Duke of Negropont's* passengers and crew who had taken to the boats. Ten men of the pirate cruiser were also picked up.

The delay in performing the work of rescue saved the *Independencia* from capture, and although the *West Virginia* hung on doggedly in pursuit, and sent off wireless calls for assistance, daylight found the American cruiser alone in a waste of waters, with never so much as a trail of oil from the fugitive ship to indicate her position.

It was a near shave for Juan Cervillo. Not for one instant did he expect to fall in with a cruiser so far from the shores of Florida, and had it not been for a seaman giving a casual glance round, the *West Virginia* might have approached within range of her 8 in. guns before being discovered. The last venture had failed disastrously. The prize had slipped through his fingers without so much as one ounce of bullion being taken from her. Forty of his men were lost—a serious item—although, as their comrades remarked with callous indifference, there were fewer left to share the booty. Worst of all the United States cruiser would proclaim it far and wide that the pirate ship was on the fringe of West India waters.

The management of the *Independencia* was practically in Juan Cervillo's hands. It was he who decided what was to be done, and in which direction the course was to be. He rarely consulted with his subordinates as to the plan of action. In this case he acted independently. He resolved to steer eastward for twelve hours, then head northward to the Arctic Circle, where he would be comparatively secure till the vigilant watch was relaxed. If he could cross the steamship tracks betwixt the Old and New Worlds without being discovered, well and good. If tackled by a man-of-war he must exercise trickery in order to escape. If he should fall in with a liner he would capture her, taking good care that she left no trace behind her.

Having laid his plans Cervillo retired to his cabin, and touched a bell. In response to the summons a petty officer appeared.

"Take a guard with you, and bring the English officer here," he ordered. "See that he is properly secured, and that the fellow does not have the least chance to do mischief."

Five minutes later Fielding, with his hands securely fastened behind his back, was led into the Spaniard's presence. For a few moments neither man spoke, but stood looking at each other as if to detect a weak spot in their respective armour.

"Señor officer," began Cervillo, languidly resting himself and lighting a cigar, "the time is for explanation. I hold you prisoner—you and the other I took from the captured ships. If men-of-war come, then I place you on deck so they no can fire—see? Good! Now I tell you fair, we go north to sea of ice. P'r'aps we fall in with English or American warship. If not, den no necessity for you to stop—unless you 'gree to pay ransom."

"Precious little ransom you'll get out of me, you rogue!" interrupted the sub.

"Precious little?" repeated Cervillo, arching his eyebrows. "We see soon. No can keep without pay; no pay, den we put you and your comrades ashore. Cold, señor; no food—all ice and snow—die miserably. That I swear."

"Carry on, then," remarked Fielding, coolly.

"What you mean—carry on?" demanded Cervillo.

"Do your worst, you white-livered sweep. There's a hangman's rope waiting for you, sure enough. Already you're a doomed man.

"*Quien sabe?*" said the Spaniard. "But be assured, señor, you will not be there to see the spectacle. I say no more. Tink over my words, and if you no write promise to pay thirty hundred English pounds—an' your companions, they, too, will pay—then I will do what they call maroon—eh?"

The interview was at an end. The guard closed around the young sub-lieutenant, and walking as firmly as he could—for Fielding was somewhat hampered by the muzzle of a revolver being jammed into his boot—he passed disdainfully out of Cervillo's cabin.

The Spaniard meant to keep his word this time. Although he realised that an order on a British banker might in all probability be difficult to convert into ready money, there was a chance that

his agents might be able to realise on the draft. Should the order be forthcoming, Cervillo would be willing to spare the lives of his hostages, although, once in the almost deserted Arctic, they would be of no use as deterrents to gun-fire. On the other hand Cervillo knew that he had already been guilty, not merely of piracy, but of murder on the high seas, and one or two more crimes would make very little difference. He would either bend or break the Englishman's stubborn character.

But there were more important matters for the pirate captain's attention. Within the next forty-eight hours the *Independencia* would be in the thick of the liner-track across the Atlantic. Without doubt a chain of cruisers would by this time be stationed at comparatively close intervals between Cape Clear and Cape Race. The risks of detection were great; but should the gauntlet be run in safety the wily Spaniard would have plenty of opportunity of devising a means whereby he could save himself and the rich booty at the expense of his rascally crew.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HOSTAGES ARE MADE USE OF

ON returning to his prison cabin, Fielding communicated the details of his interview with the pirate captain to his companions. One and all agreed that the outlook, unless a warship intervened, looked gloomy, but the news was borne with surprising fortitude.

"I suppose he's bound for the east coast of Greenland," said the sub. "There are hundreds of creeks and inlets where a vessel of this size could lay without fear of discovery; and, beyond a few whalers, there are not many ships in those waters."

"What is the object in going to the Arctic?" asked Cardyke.

"To lie low, and also to economise the oil-fuel," replied Fielding. "To keep the sea means a heavy consumption of stores, and those taken from *L'Égalité* won't last much more than a month. That's one reason why we are to be marooned. Thirty or forty hostages who won't pay for their keep are bound to make a hole in the commissariat."

"So he means to set us ashore and let us starve to death, or perish with cold?"

"Seems like it; but I'll have a few words to say to the greasy Dago," replied the sub., tapping the revolver with the heel of his right foot. "It's a pity we haven't more cartridges."

"We could hold the cabin for a good while," remarked the mid., tentatively.

"And get starved out in forty-eight hours. Won't do, Cardyke. If things come to the worst, we must sally out, try and release the other unfortunate beings who have fallen into Cervillo's clutches, and sell our lives as dearly as possible. What say you, general?"

"I tink we might capture ship," replied Oki. "Clear dis end, take pistols from arms-rack, and turn this part into castle."

"We'll have a shot at it, at all events," exclaimed Fielding, enthusiastically. "If only we had more ammunition, I'd tackle the job to-night."

"Better wait till we're within the Arctic circle," observed Cardyke.

"Why?"

"Those Spaniards and Italians, to say nothing of the Algerines and the blacks, won't be able to stand the cold as well as we can. They'll be torpid."

"Something in that," agreed Fielding. "But at present it's hot enough for my liking. I vote we turn in."

Shortly after midnight Cardyke awoke to find the two Japs up and about. Hocosuka was kneeling in front of the door with one ear close against the lock, while Oki was standing with a lighted lamp in his hand. Seeing the mid. stir, Oki placed a finger on his lips to enjoin silence and pointed towards Fielding's bunk, indicating that the sub. was to be aroused.

One touch of Cardyke's hand was enough. Fielding opened his eyes, and without uttering a sound, sprang to his feet.

"Mukyima outside!" explained the general.

The two British officers listened. There was a faint scraping in the lock, like a rat gnawing

wood. Then Hokosuka whispered a few words, and his compatriot instantly placed the lantern behind a curtain. In the semi-gloom Cardyke saw the door open, a lithe figure glided in, and the door closed gently after him. Then Oki uncovered the lamp, and Mukyima stood revealed to the occupants of the cabin.

The Jap wore nothing but a loin-cloth. From head to foot he was covered with a mixture of oil and soot. In his hands he carried a rifle and two revolvers, while across his shoulder hung a canvas bag filled with cartridges.

The three Japanese conversed in low tones, then Oki turned to his English friends.

"Mukyima has come back not to stop," he explained. "Give sentry-man outside the long sleep, leave cartridges and guns, then go back. Him also lock door again, then no can tell pirates that door was opened."

Fielding and Cardyke nodded approval at Oki's words. Mukyima had contrived to slip away from his prison on the orlop-deck, and, laying hold of the arms and ammunition, made his way aft. On the half-deck all was quiet; the sentry over the cabin door where the prisoners were confined was dozing at his post. The Jap gripped the sentry by the throat, and choked him into insensibility in less than fifteen seconds. This done, he scratched in a peculiar manner on the cabin bulkhead, and Hokosuka, recognising the signal, replied. The lock of the cabin door was picked, and Mukyima rejoined his companions.

It was not his intention to remain. His absence from the orlop-deck would soon be discovered, and the pirates would naturally search the cabin occupied by the Jap's compatriots. So, in less than five minutes from his arrival Mukyima left, the wards of the locks were shot back again, and nothing remained to give rise to suspicion on the part of the pirates with the exception of the body of the luckless sentry. This discovery caused some consternation, but finding the cabin door apparently intact the pirates concluded that their comrade had died from natural causes.

Nevertheless, although Hokosuka sat up all the following night there was no indication of his fellow-countryman's presence without. Mukyima did make a second attempt, but finding two sentries on the half-deck, realised that discretion was the better part of valour, and returned to his place of detention on the orlop-deck.

Fielding and his companions had good cause to be satisfied with the progress made. They had acquired more than enough firearms for each man and a good store of ammunition. Prudence compelled them to refrain from relieving the petty officer who was periodically lowered to inspect the iron bar over the scuttle of another weapon; but, if the worst came to the worst, the courage and resolution of a few well-armed men might achieve wonders against the ill-disciplined mob of international scoundrels who manned the *Independencia*.

At daybreak on the morning of the third day following the capture of the *Duke of Negropont* a body of armed men burst into the cabin, and unceremoniously hauled the live prisoners from their berths. Fortunately the hostages made a point of sleeping in their clothes—even their boots—and in consequence their revolvers were safe from observation. The rifles and spare ammunition had been cleverly concealed in a blank recess behind one of the lowermost bunks, and nothing short of another systematic search would result in the discovery of these precious articles. Without a word of explanation Fielding and his companions were marched out and taken up the half-deck accommodation ladder. Expecting that Juan Cervillo had taken it into his head to either coerce the hostages to accept his terms or else to carry out his threat earlier than he had decided to do, Fielding made a sign to his comrades to be on the alert. Should the Spaniard give the word to murder his prisoners, the five were to stoop, draw their revolvers, and open a sudden and unexpected fire upon their captors, Cervillo being especially marked down as a target.

But as soon as the captives reached the upper deck they could see at once the reason for their removal. Less than two miles away, and slightly on the starboard bow, was a United States cruiser. Although considerably smaller than the *Independencia*, she was by no means daunted by the appearance of her gigantic antagonist. This was to a certain extent to be accounted for by the fact that it was now a matter of general knowledge that the eight 12 in. guns that formed the pirate-cruiser's principal armament were perfectly useless as weapons; but, being heavily armoured, the *Independencia* had a great advantage over the American vessel, which was of the type known as "protected," or, in other words, having armour over only the most vital parts.

Already the cool, business-like determination of the American cruiser, which Fielding recognised as the almost obsolete *Denver*, had begun to tell upon the "jumpy" assortment of cosmopolitans who formed the crew of the pirate vessel. Most of the *Independencia's* quick-firers were manned, but many of the officers and men were running aimlessly hither and thither; some dived below to avoid, if possible, the bursting shells that might at any moment hurtle from the *Denver*; others besought Juan Cervillo to put the ship about, and seek safety in flight.

But the Spanish captain had set his mind on going northward. He was not wholly without courage, and the presence of an insignificant cruiser would not deter him from his course. The hostages would be exposed on deck. Should the accursed Americans open fire they would blow their compatriots and representatives of Great Britain, France, Holland, and Japan to atoms.

There was no attempt made to clear the *Independencia's* decks for action. Her fo'c'sle stanchion rails were lined with human beings, each prisoner being secured by the simple device of a cord passing through the links of a chain and the ends fastened to the prisoners thumbs. A few of the hostages, Fielding and Cardyke amongst the number, resisted, but were soon overpowered; while so dubious was Cervillo as to whether this means of securing the Japanese was quite efficient, that he ordered Oki and Hokosuka to be additionally pinioned by means of handcuffs. Luckily no attempt was made to bind the prisoners' legs, otherwise the concealed revolvers might have been discovered.

Cardyke made good use of the occasion by confiding to his nearest companion in misfortune—an American iron merchant and colonel of Kentucky militia—the news of their probable fate should Cervillo succeed in reaching the Arctic Ocean, and the steps that he and his companions had decided upon at the critical moment. The American stoutly asserted his determination to take advantage of any opportunity of joining forces with the British and Japanese captives in a desperate bid for life and freedom.

Nearer and nearer steamed the *Independencia* at a steady ten knots. The hostages, torn by hopes and fears, could do nothing but keep their attention on the American cruiser, alternately hoping that the *Denver* would not open fire, or that she would take drastic steps to effect the capture of the modern buccaneer.

On board the *Denver* all was ready for opening fire. Five of her ten 5 in. guns were trained upon the oncoming pirate, while her six-pounders, working smoothly and easily on the mountings, turned their muzzles to and fro, up and down, as if looking for a vital spot where a shell might burst without injury to the luckless hostages; for by the aid of their glasses the officers of the United States cruiser could easily determine the nature of the callous artifice that Juan Cervillo had adopted.

It was an anxious, nerve-racking time; the men at the pirate vessel's quick-firers kept every available gun trained upon one particular place in the side of the *Denver*, ready at the order to deliver a simultaneous volley that would in all probability deal the protected cruiser a mortal blow. In return the American cruiser's 5 in. guns would be able to deal a devastating blow at comparatively short range, but she hesitated to begin the conflict owing to the hostages upon the pirate's deck.

Nearer and nearer; now the *Independencia* was crossing the *Denver's* bows, barely three hundred yards separating the two vessels. Slowly the guns of both vessels were trained as their relative positions altered, till the pirate-cruiser was almost stern on to the baffled American. Hard-a-starboard went the *Denver's* helm as she swung round in pursuit of her enemy. Even should she be unable to have her by gun-fire she could at least hang on doggedly in pursuit, calling for assistance till the pirate was hemmed in on every side.

Now that the *Independencia* was leading, it was a question of flight, not fight. Telegraphing for full speed Cervillo stood upon the after-bridge and made a disdainful gesture towards the ship astern, then at twenty-two knots the pirate-cruiser simply walked away from her antagonist, whose speed, even in her prime, was seven and a half knots less than that of the *Independencia*.

"Take those men below," ordered the Spanish captain. "It is well I had them on board. They will be more useful still to us very shortly."

CHAPTER XIV

THE FORTUNE OF WAR

SEVENTY-TWO hours after the receipt of the misleading intelligence from the hapless *Duke of Negropont* the scout *Cerberus* again put to sea. This time there was no doubt that the news concerning the *Independencia* was genuine. The United States cruiser *Denver* had seen, and had stood in pursuit of the pirate. According to the American captain's report the pirate was heading north, apparently with the intention of preying upon the liners running between New York and Montreal, and Liverpool and Southampton.

Once more Lieutenant Douglas Drake's hopes rose high. He felt confident that to him would fall the honour of effecting the pirate's capture. He knew full well that more than a score of cruisers, to say nothing of ocean-going destroyers, were keenly on the alert; but in spite of this knowledge the presentiment was uppermost in his mind that the aero-hydroplanes of the *Cerberus*, under his command, would score the honour of the day.

The lieutenant spent most of his watch on deck in attending to his four pets. There was no time to test their capabilities in the air, for the scout could not slacken speed to allow the boat to be hoisted out. True they could be sent up from the deck, a specially constructed line of rails being

laid down to admit of them so doing. They could, if necessity arose, return to their parent by alighting on the poop; but there was always the risk of damage to their hulls—a catastrophe that would be eliminated if the aero-hydroplanes came to rest upon the sea. Thus, although Drake had had experience in craft of a very similar type, he was totally unacquainted with their peculiarities; but in spite of this handicap he had no fears as to his ability to make a successful flight, and, what was more, a successful attack upon the daring pirate.

His plan of operation was somewhat upset by the intelligence received of the despicable ruse whereby Juan Cervillo had been able to keep his vessel immune from shell fire. If the same precaution were adopted on all occasions it seemed pretty obvious that the aero-hydroplane could not drop explosives upon the cruiser's deck without doing harm to friend as well as foe.

At one time he thought of dropping bombs containing charges of noxious gases upon the *Independencia's* decks, but realising that the speed of the ship creating a current of air would speedily disperse the vapours, he decided such a scheme was impracticable. At another the chances of dropping a charge of dynamite down one of the huge funnels of the cruiser, and thus putting the boilers out of action, suggested themselves. Then a capital idea suddenly struck him. The more he thought of it, the more he felt confident of success. On unfolding his plan to Captain Dexter of the *Cerberus* his superior expressed his satisfaction, and promised to let Drake have a free hand in the enterprise.

At 2 a.m. on the morning of the fourth day out the look-out reported that there was heavy firing away to the north-west. Instantly the crew were called to general quarters, all lights were screened, and a course shaped towards that quarter of the horizon that was illuminated by flashes resembling distant lightning. All on board the scout were bewailing the fate that had snatched the laurels from their grasp, for no other reason could be assigned to the firing beyond the fact that the *Independencia* was being engaged by some other man-of-war. In vain the *Cerberus* sent out calls with her wireless on the off-chance of picking up information as to who the lucky vessel might be; only a chaotic series of electrical waves came to the wireless room. On and on at full speed the little British vessel tore. With luck she might come in at the death, and be able to fire a shot or two in real earnest, when suddenly the glare of the distant flashes died away.

"Too late, by George!" exclaimed Drake, slamming his binoculars into their case.

"They've settled her hash, and we're out of it."

For another half-hour the *Cerberus* carried on. All need for screened lights was now done away with, and from her masthead her signalling lamp blinked incessantly, calling up the victorious vessel in Morse. Still no reply came through the darkness.

"Surely to goodness they haven't sunk each other?" asked one of the lieutenants.

"Rot!" replied another, vehemently. But at the same time the idea that such was the case began to grow upon the group of anxious and despondent officers.

Suddenly a rocket soared skywards, barely a mile on the scout's brow.

"Acknowledge," ordered the captain, shortly; and from the *Cerberus* an answering rocket was sent up.

Then the searchlights were flashed in the direction of the signal, and to everyone's surprise two huge cruisers, both well-nigh battered out of recognition, were discovered lying less than half-a-mile apart. Masts, funnels, boats, most of the unarmoured superstructure—all had been swept away, while the heavily protected sides of both craft showed ominous dents and cavities where armour-piercing shells had found a billet.

"Great Scott!" muttered the gunnery lieutenant. "Which one is the *Impregnable* that was?"

"Neither," replied Drake, grimly. "There's been a horrible mistake without a doubt. Goodness knows what ships these are, or to what nation they belong; but it is obvious that each has mistaken the other for the pirate."

"What ship is that?" shouted Captain Dexter through a megaphone, as the *Cerberus* eased down, and glided a cable's length to lee'ard of one of the erstwhile combatants.

"His Majesty's ship *Trincomalee*," was the reply. "Stand by till daylight; we're badly hulled. Can you send a boat?"

Ten minutes later a pale-faced lieutenant, with his hair and eyebrows singed, his clothing rent and reeking with powder, came over the side of the *Cerberus*. His story confirmed Drake's surmise. The *Trincomalee*, steaming with lights screened, had fallen in with an unknown vessel which was also running without navigation lights. Before the British vessel could hail, a shot was fired into her at less than four hundred yards range. The *Trincomalee* instantly replied with all the quick-firers she could bring to bear upon her antagonist. Then the 6 in. and 9 in. guns joined in the deafening roar, and for forty minutes the two vessels were hotly engaged, till a searchlight directed from the only projector that had escaped destruction revealed the hideous truth. The

Trincomalee had engaged and had nearly annihilated a French cruiser, the *Tréhouart*, of 19,000 tons. Orders were immediately given to cease fire; but it was quite five minutes ere the Frenchmen ceased to pound away with her undamaged ordnance at her unresisting antagonist.

The *Cerberus* stood by till daylight revealed the shattered ships. Both were leaking badly, but the inrush of water was being kept under by means of the ships' pumps. Their respective captains exchanged visits and expressed mutual regrets at the unfortunate occurrence; then slowly, under their own steam, both vessels headed towards the Nova Scotian coast, the *Cerberus* escorting them in case immediate assistance was required. Sixteen hours later the two badly mauled vessels crept into Halifax Harbour, and the *Cerberus* was free to resume her quest.

Did she but know it, the *Independencia* crossed her wake, unseen and unsuspected, at the time she was steaming at full speed to ascertain the cause of the firing. The pirate cruiser had run the gauntlet of the chain of cruisers and, with an open sea before her, was tearing at her utmost speed towards the desolate Arctic Ocean.

This incident naturally increased the attention already devoted to the quest of the modern buccaneer, and gave occasion for much discussion. On the one side experts and armchair critics boldly asserted that this regrettable incident was owing simply and solely to the blundering way in which the operations were conducted, and that had more caution been exercised there would have been no desperate encounter between vessels of friendly nations, and the accompanying loss of life; while on the other hand there were people who maintained that it was but the fortune of war, and mistakes of that sort were bound to occur. To harass naval captains with regulations that would tend to curb the natural ardour of their crews would be opposed to the best traditions of the service. Even in the House a member blandly suggested that it should be submitted to an international conference that hostile ships should hail each other before opening fire, and quoted instances from frigate actions during the Napoleonic wars. But he did not suggest a way whereby a destroyer on a dark night that was about to loose a torpedo at an enemy's ship a mile away, or a submarine stealing beneath the waves with a like purpose, could carry out the order.

It was also found that the use of wireless was not an unmitigated blessing, for what with deliberately false reports sent by tramp steamers—paid by Juan Cervillo for the purpose—the panic-stricken messages from some nervous skipper, and the practical jokes of not a few amateur operators, the search for the *Independencia* was hindered more than furthered, till the cruisers patrolling the liners' route had good cause to heartily malign the name of wireless telegraphy.

Day after day passed, and though columns in the daily papers were devoted to the all-important topic, the pirate-cruiser seemed to have mysteriously disappeared off the face of the waters.

CHAPTER XV

RAMMING AN ICEBERG

UNSEEN, the *Independencia* crossed athwart the great Atlantic highway without incident. No liner, or even a tramp, fell into her clutches, and for forty-eight hours after witnessing from afar the encounter betwixt the British and French cruisers, she pursued her way without let or hindrance, with ne'er a vessel to chase or to be chased by.

At length she approached the southern limit of Arctic ice, where the cold current from off the west coast of Greenland, bringing down with it the mighty output of inexhaustible glaciers, meets the warmer waters of the Atlantic. Here it was that the pirate-cruiser ran into a belt of fog, so dense that from the fore-bridge the fo'c'sle appeared to terminate at the foremost turret, while the temperature was so low that the moisture-laden atmosphere froze and hung from all parts of the masts and deck like gigantic stalactites.

Speed was reduced to seven and a half knots, and for the time being the keenest look-out was kept by the unacclimatised seamen. But, as Fielding had surmised, the numbing cold made their energies dormant, and before many hours had passed the majority of the pirates were perfectly indifferent to the dangers that threatened them.

As far as the chart showed, the *Independencia* was in open water, and well out of the track of steamers plying between Canada and Great Britain, and as the hours slowly passed without anything untoward happening, Cervillo, anxious to get clear of the fog-bank, ordered speed to be increased to twelve knots. The sooner he drew clear of the blinding atmosphere of frozen mist the better it would be.

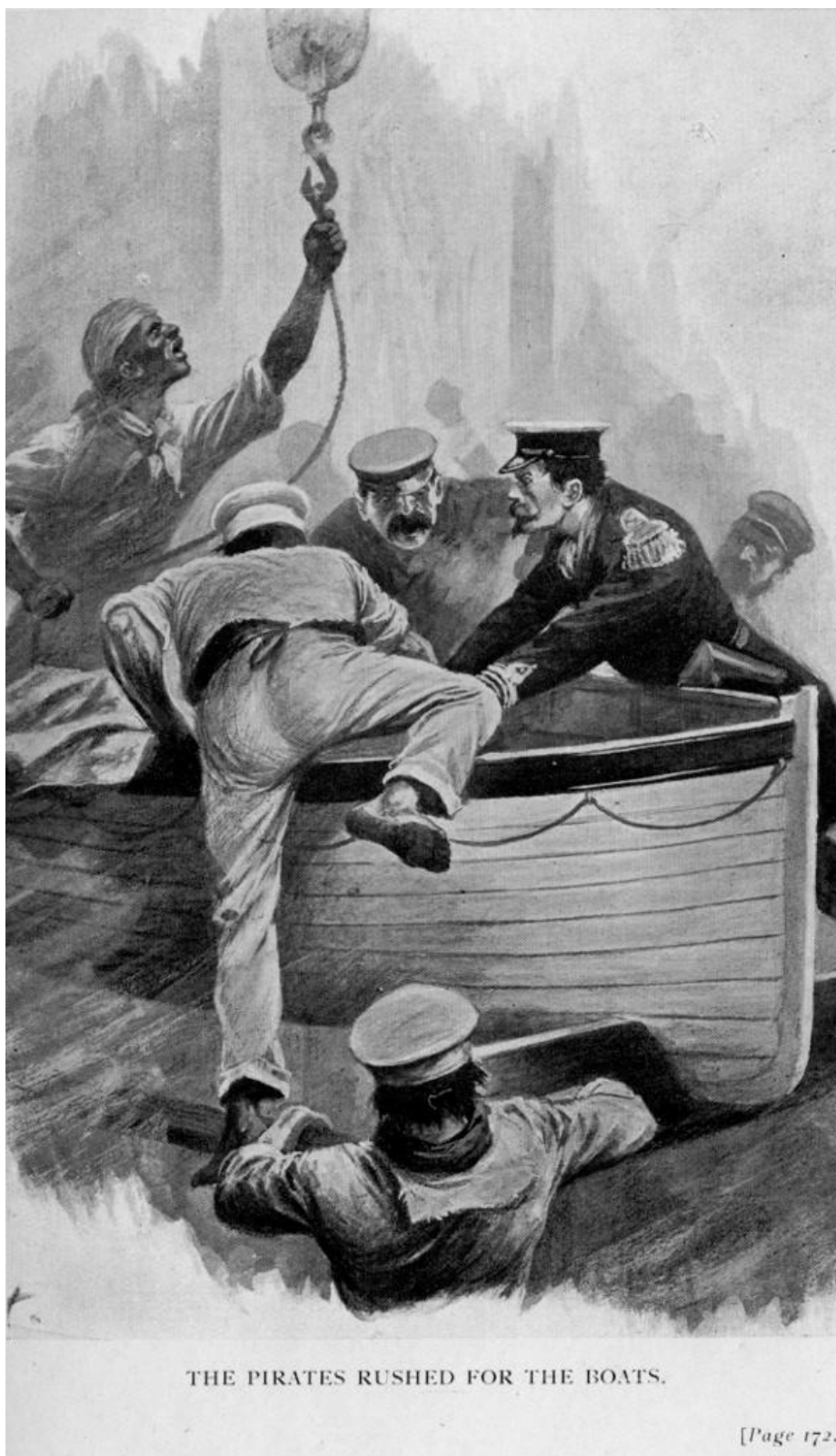
Not one of the look-outs noticed a large "growler," or mass of almost submerged ice, which the cruiser passed at a distance of less than fifty feet to starboard; not one of them heard the breaking of the vessel's "wash" upon the fringe of the ice-field. Blindly unconscious to their danger the pirates drove ahead with the primary object of getting out of the fog as soon as

possible.

Suddenly one of the look-out men stationed right in the bows gave vent to a shriek of horror, rather than a shout of warning. Looming distortedly through the fog, its summit lost in the murk, was a huge iceberg, already on the point of capsizing. Vicious little waves, caused by the rocking of the mass of unstable ice, lapped the visible base of the floating mountain. A practised seaman would have known by the agitation of the hitherto calm water and by the sudden drop in the temperature that an iceberg was nigh, and would have taken precautions accordingly; but the warning passed unheeded, and the *Independencia* crashed bows on upon the rampart of ice.

The impact threw nearly everyone on board. For a few seconds all were quiet, stunned by the calamity; then pandemonium broke loose. Yelling, shouting, and crying, the pirates rushed for the boats, their officers leading the way. There was no one to give orders to the engine-room, and the propellers were still driving ahead, pushing the shattered bows of the cruiser deeper into the fissure caused by the impact in the side of the berg. Those of the engineers and stokers who had been not rendered insensible by the concussion deserted their post, rushed on deck, and, heedless of the sudden change from the heated engine-room and stokeholds to the freezing, fog-laden air, joined their comrades in their mad skelter for the boats.

Even in their frenzy the pirates were cowed by the angry waters that were visible to their limited range of vision. Between the sides of the cruiser and the gulf of ice into which she had thrown herself was a vast cauldron of surging foam mingled with masses of ice that had slipped from the dizzy heights above. No boat could live in such a sea; it would either be swamped or crushed betwixt the heavy lumps of ice that, rising and falling, outrivalled the dreaded Scylla and Charybdis a thousand-fold.



THE PIRATES RUSHED FOR THE BOATS.

[Illustration: THE PIRATES RUSHED FOR THE BOATS.]

The shock of the collision threw Fielding and his companions violently against the fore-bulkhead of their cabin; but, beyond a few bruises, no one sustained any injury.

The sub. realised what was amiss as soon as any of them.

"They've run her full tilt into an iceberg," he exclaimed.

The gravity of the situation required immediate action, for the confused shouts on deck mingled with the crushing of the ice and the turmoil of the agitated waters naturally led the prisoners to conclude that the cruiser was doomed.

"We're like rats in a trap," exclaimed Fielding. "Now what's to be done?"

"Get out," replied Cardyke promptly, "We can blow off the lock."

Seizing his revolver the mid. made his way to the door, when Oki laid a detaining hand upon his shoulder.

"No sink yet," said he. "P'r'aps pirates abandon ship. Then we take her. Wait; we can so easy get out when we want."

"Yes, Cardyke, it's folly to go on deck with a terrified mob like that," agreed the sub. "The five of us couldn't do much. I'll tell you what I will do." And levelling his revolver, Fielding sent a shot through the stout partition separating the cabin from the one in which the hostages of *L'Égalité* were kept, taking good care to fire high enough not to harm the inmates. Amidst the deafening roar and confusion without, the sharp crack of the pistol passed unnoticed.

"Ahoy!" shouted Fielding through the hole. "We're prisoners on board this vessel like yourselves. We're English. I believe there is a citizen of the United States here?"

"Three, sonny," replied a man, with a typical Yankee twang. "I was lashed up beside you, I guess, when the skipper of this hooker threw dust into the eyes of the Yew Hess Hess *Denver*."

"Not alongside of me," replied the sub. "You were next to my brother officer, Mr. Cardyke. But that's neither here nor there. We're going to burst open the doors of the cabins. We've half-a-dozen firearms. How many men are there with you?"

"Nine," replied the American. "And a durned sight more in the next one."

"We ought to be able to make a show on deck. Those fellows are off their heads already. It won't take much to get the upper hand of them."

"Bully for you," replied the other. "Guess we'll do our whack."

"Stand by, then," said Fielding, warningly.

Before he could cross the limited space of the cabin there was a deafening crash, like the simultaneous discharge of a battleship's 14 in. guns. The *Independencia* rolled till Fielding and his companions found themselves lying wedged in between the angle formed by the sloping floor and the longitudinal bulkhead. There they lay, pinned down by the scanty furniture that had been thrown bodily across the room. Cardyke's fingers closed involuntarily upon the revolver he was holding, and the heavy weapon went off, sending a bullet against the steel deck beam, while the blast singed Hokosuka's hair. All the while the vessel remained in this position there was a sickening grinding noise, caused by the huge fabric sliding over the ice. Then came another tremendous crash. The cruiser, hurled thirty feet above the water by the capsizing berg, had toppled over the ledge. Down she plunged, like a toy boat dropped from a height into a pool of water. Then, dipping obliquely, she plunged beneath the agitated sea till the waves reached the base of her after-funnel.

"Great heavens—she's going!" gasped Cardyke.

For some minutes it seemed as if the vessel were making her last plunge. On all sides arose shouts and cries of terror, as the imprisoned men, struggling in the semi-gloom, sought to regain their footing. Then, like a sorely stricken whale the *Independencia's* submerged upper works rose above the surface, water and fragments of ice pouring over her decks. There she lay, wallowing heavily in the trough of a furious sea. Her still revolving propellers made her gather way, but her course carried her clear of the berg she had previously rammed, and, unguided, she tore once more through the fog.

Her escape from total destruction was indeed providential. When she rammed the mountainous mass of ice the berg was on the point of toppling over. The engines driving ahead kept her from slipping backwards off the long, shelving ledge that projected three hundred yards from the base of the visible part of the berg. The impact hastened the toppling process until the submerged ledge touched the cruiser's keel. The retention was only temporary; the vessel, till her water-line was several feet above the sea, acted as a gigantic lever, till the shelf of ice, already weakened by the fracture, broke off, causing the *Independencia* to slide, and then plunge back into the sea. Released of the retarding mass, the main portion of the berg toppled over, fortunately away from the ship, otherwise the huge vessel would have been literally buried beneath a mountain of steel-like ice.

Directly the *Independencia* regained an even keel Fielding and his companions struggled to their feet.

"She's afloat," gasped the sub. "Come along, there's no time to lose. We'll rush the rascals while they're off their heads."

Crash!—went the young officer's revolver. The lock was shattered, and the door flew open. Fielding and his companions gained the passage betwixt the cabin on the half-deck. The place was deserted. Even the sentries on the prisoners' quarters had left their posts.

"Stand clear of the door!" shouted Fielding to the occupants of the next cabin. And, having given them time to carry out his request, the sub. sent a shot through the lock.

While Cardyke was serving out the spare revolvers and ammunition to the released hostages of *L'Égalité*, Fielding liberated the occupants of the adjoining cabin—the remainder of the prisoners taken from the French liner and the *Yosen Maru*. A fourth cabin was found to contain the officers of the Dutch tugs that had been scuttled when the *Impregnable* was seized. Aft of that, and separating it from the captain's quarters, was another cabin, which, though containing no prisoners, was found to be used as a small-arms store. In five minutes the little band of adventurers were armed and ready for the desperate venture.

'Tween decks the fog was so thick, that from one end of the passage the armoured bulkhead of the foremost end was invisible. Fielding knew that the only means of communicating with the quarter-deck was by the foremost and steerage ladders. The transverse bulkhead, one of several extending from the upper deck to the double bottoms, was unprovided with doors, so that, for instance, it was impossible to go from the bow to the stern of the ship 'tween decks without having to ascend to the upper deck. During her commission as a unit of the British Navy the cruiser had been provided with lifts to save the inconvenience of having to pass up and down so many ladders; but these lifts were out of order, and had not been repaired by her unlawful owners.

Marshalling his forces into some semblance of order, Fielding led them to the foot of the foremost ladder. The hatchway was closed and securely battened down. Twenty men would have been powerless to burst open the massive steel covering. The after ladder was similarly secured. The surprise attack was a failure.

"Now what's to be done?" asked the midshipman.

Fielding did not reply. He was busy racking his brains over the new conditions of the problem he had to tackle.

"Sit tight, sonny," replied the American. "I've been in a few tough sets-to in my time; but take the word of Hiram B. Rutter—that's me—that you can't beat sitting tight."

"That's it," assented Fielding. "We must sit tight. Luckily we're in comfortable quarters; the captain's cabin, as well as those of the other officers, are at our disposal, and I think we have access to the after bread-room, so we won't exactly starve. But they're calming down, I fancy. They'll be a bit surprised when they find we are in possession of the after part of the ship. Look here, Mr. Rutter, would you mind taking these men with you, and keeping your eyes on the after ladder? I'll watch this one pretty carefully. Directly they open the hatches wide fire a volley and rush on deck. Be sharp; they're coming!"

CHAPTER XVI

CARDYKE TO THE RESCUE

THE collision with the iceberg had, as Fielding anticipated, completely unnerved the Dago crew. Even Juan Cervillo realised that there were great difficulties and perils in his path that were as formidable as the retributive warships he had hitherto escaped. As the *Independencia* steamed off on her aimless course the Spanish captain contrived to induce some of the engineers to go below and shut off steam, and, gradually losing way, the cruiser came to a standstill. Cervillo would wait till the fog lifted rather than risk another collision. It might be for days, but there were enough provisions and water to last for nearly a month.

As soon as the vessel had slowed down an examination of the damage caused by the collision was made. The principal injury was to the bows, where the massive steel plating had been fractured and buckled for a distance of twenty feet from the stem. The whole of the fore-peak was flooded; but the inrush of water was prevented from making its way aft by the water-tight bulkheads. Even the foremost of these was strained to such an extent that the doors let in a considerable quantity of water. As the cruiser slipped off the berg the torrent of ice-laden sea that broke over her decks literally swept everything removable as far as the base of the after tripod mast, while of the boats taken from the *Steephill Castle* only three remained. The aftermost funnel, struck by a huge fragment of ice, had been carried away, leaving a jagged ridge of steel projecting five or six feet above the casings. This accounted for the loss of ten of the crew; another thirty or forty had been swept away when the *Independencia* had dipped beneath the waves, while several more were severely injured by the first concussion and the subsequent violent motion of the stricken craft.

No wonder, then, that Juan Cervillo was almost at his wits' end. He realised that he had made a mistake in seeking refuge in northern waters. The irresistible craving to increase the amount of his booty, instead of retiring to a South American port with the proceeds of his successful captures, had caused his present plight. In a partially crippled ship, incapable of making more than ten knots, and separated from his ultimate port of refuge by thousands of miles of carefully

patrolled ocean, his position was hazardous in the extreme. Further captures by the *Independencia* were almost impossible, since the usual speed of tramp steamers considerably exceeded that of the damaged cruiser.

In the midst of these calamities Cervillo's thoughts were not for the safety of his rascally crew, but how he could effect his own escape with the riches that the pirates had so unlawfully acquired. The question of fellow-feeling for his comrades in distress troubled him not one moment; they could shift for themselves as best they might, provided he was safely off the disabled ship with the booty. How could this be done? he asked himself. It was more than the task of a single man; but did the crew know of his plans his life would not be worth a moment's purchase. Plan after plan flashed across his mind, only to be condemned as impracticable, till his cunning brain evolved a scheme that seemed capable of being put into execution.

"Da Silva," he exclaimed, addressing one of his officers, a Spaniard like himself. "I want to speak to you in my cabin."

Side by side the two men walked aft till they reached the after hatchway. It was closed, the bo'sun, in anticipation of bad weather, having given orders for this to be done. In obedience to a hail a dozen seamen came running through the fog-laden atmosphere, and tackles were rove to the heavy steel plates covering the means of communicating with the half-deck and the officers' cabins.

Slowly the metal slab rose till there was a space of nearly three feet between the lid and the coaming. One of the seamen slipped through with the intention of clearing away a chain slung on the underside. As he did so a report rang out. The man clapped his hands to his head and toppled across the framework of the hatchway. Simultaneously the other seamen, alarmed at the noise, hurriedly let go the tackles, and the hatch-cover fell back with a resounding clang.

"*Caramba!* The prisoners are loose!" exclaimed Cervillo.

By a prematurely fired shot all chances of "rushing" the pirates were thrown away. One of the Frenchmen, with the mercurial excitability of his race, seeing the pirate enter the hatch, had foolishly discharged one chamber of his revolver. Before the men under Hiram B. Rutter's command could rush up the companion ladder the falling of the armoured slab had rendered their attempt absolutely impossible.

"Hang it, man!" exclaimed Fielding, who had hastened to the base of the after ladder on hearing the shot and the clang of the cover. "We've made a hopeless mess of things this time."

Recriminations would have been a mere waste of time. Fielding blamed no one. He knew, however, that an attempt to storm the quarter-deck when the hatch was again removed would be useless, as the pirates would by that time have taken elaborate precautions. As a matter of fact Cervillo had ordered twenty armed men to come aft, while a quick-firing gun was temporarily mounted so that its muzzle gaped menacingly over the aperture leading to the half-deck.

"Yes, Mr. Rutter," continued the sub. "We must sit tight. They can't very well turn us out, neither can we turn them out, so we must make ourselves comfortable as best we can. Luckily our quarters are not so cramped as hitherto, and our circle of acquaintances has widened considerably."

"That's about right, I guess," agreed the American. "We've only to keep our eyes skinned and allow no low-down pirate to get down here, and I reckon we'll come out on top."

Accordingly ten men were stationed at each ladder, ready to pour in a destructive fire should the crew of the cruiser attempt to descend from the quarter-deck. This done, the rest of the involuntary guests were sent to explore the steerage and orlop-decks.

In the captain's and officers' cabins the electric light was still in working order, although in the quarters previously occupied by the hostages lamps and candles were the only means of artificial illumination allowed. There was enough good fare to allow all the new masters of the after part of the ship to partake of a sumptuous meal, which, after the meagre fare they had been compelled to subsist upon, was appreciated with great gusto.

"I wonder how Cervillo will get on without the use of his cabin?" asked Cardyke.

"He can jolly well go on short commons, as we had to do," growled Fielding. "Finished, Cardyke? Good! Now cut below, take Hardy with you, and make an examination of the bread-room, and the compartments in the flats. Be sure to find out whether there is any fresh water. Either the wardroom pump is out of order or the supply is getting low."

Accompanied by the faithful coxswain the mid. descended the several flights of iron ladders till he reached the flats. An examination of the fresh-water tank showed that there was barely enough to last over another day. The bread and spirit rooms were comparatively well stocked.

"We'll do the rascals out of their grog, sir, if we don't do anything more," observed Hardy, pointing to the open spirit-room.

"They've plenty for'ard, I don't doubt," replied Cardyke. "Those fellows don't follow service routine. They've most likely a pannikin of rum at their fingers' ends or a few puncheons of wine ready broached. But what's in this place, I wonder?"

The mid. pointed to a store-room adjoining the after submerged torpedo compartment, which, unlike the spirit-room, was securely padlocked.

"Can't say, sir," replied Hardy. "Used to be the store for warheads of torpedoes; but they can't very well have got hold of any o' they."

"We'll jolly soon find out," asserted Cardyke. "It's something of importance, for there's been a sentry stationed here; look at the cigarette-ends. He must have bolted up on deck at the time of the collision."

"Then he won't return to his post just yet awhile," rejoined Hardy. "D'ye want me to prise the door open, sir? I suppose there ain't dynamite or stuff of that sort stowed away here?" And the coxswain drew his revolver.

"Better be careful," said the mid., warningly. "Don't blow the lock off. See if you can lay hold of a crowbar."

Hardy departed on his quest, and presently returned with a hack-saw.

"This'll do a mighty lot better'n a crowbar, sir," said he. "Would you mind steadying the padlock while I set to work?"

Five minutes sufficed to saw through the heavy brass framework, and Cardyke threw open the door. Within the room were piles of iron-clamped boxes, reaching almost to the ceiling. One or two had been wrenched open, but it took the united efforts of the midshipman and the burly coxswain to set one of the chests upon the floor. It was full of gold ingots.

"Lawks!" ejaculated Hardy, at a loss to say anything else, for the sight of untold wealth almost capsized his equilibrium.

"We've done the pirates very nicely," said Cardyke. "They'll be wild with fury to think that we've recaptured the booty."

"Strikes me this is mighty queer. We can't hand the stuff back to its rightful owners, sir; and the bloomin' pirates can't make use of it now they've got it on board."

"There's one consolation—it's one in the eye for the rascals," added the mid. "I'll go and report matters to Mr. Fielding."

"Yes, it's some satisfaction to know we've scored," observed the sub. when Cardyke made his report. "Sooner than let the rascals lay their hands on the stuff I'd have the whole lot pitched overboard. But that's a serious business, the shortage of water. I don't know what we can do."

"I have it," announced Cardyke. "There's plenty of ice floating about; we can get a lot of it on board, and melt it down."

"Don't quite see how," objected Fielding.

"The ship's not moving through the water. We can lower a bucket from one of the ports in the captain's cabin. I don't think it will attract attention."

"Much more good this," interrupted General Oki, who had overheard the conversation. "Let man down by rope; pick up ice, and put in sack. Sack full above top in no time."

"A man would stand a good chance of being frozen to death in five minutes," objected the sub. "Besides, it would mean a bullet through his head if the pirates discovered what he was up to."

"Me speak to Mr. Hokosuka," said the general; and turning to his compatriot he explained the state of affairs.

"Hokosuka he go to-night," announced Oki. "Heap plenty of fresh water tomorrow."

The rest of the day passed without interruption. The fog showed no signs of lifting, while at intervals came the thunderous crashes as the icebergs in the vicinity of the cruiser toppled over or split asunder. As Cardyke had said, there was plenty of fresh water in a solid form close at hand. Some of the fragments of ice were so large that the noise they made as they scraped the ship's sides could be distinctly heard.

Shortly after dark, for the sun did not set till half-past ten, Hokosuka was ready for his enterprise. The Jap had stripped off his clothing and had smeared himself from head to foot with a mixture of mineral oil and animal fat. This done, he re clothed himself in some old yet thick garments, so that he would be better able to withstand the numbing effects of the water. Three large canvas sacks were prepared ready to be lowered out of the port to the water's edge. These Hokosuka proposed to fill with lumps of ice before he was hauled back to his comrades.

Noiselessly the deadlight covering the port was unscrewed; Hokosuka fastened a rope round his waist, and was preparing to clamber through the port when he was struck in the face by a man's toes that mysteriously appeared from without. Before he could recover from his astonishment the owner of the toes slid feet foremost through the port, and to the surprise of all who recognised him, the wily Mukyima gravely saluted his compatriots and the two Englishmen.

The man had contrived to understand the position of affairs, and, taking advantage of his marvellous agility, dropped over the side, and crawling aft by means of the torpedo-net shelves, gained the open port. Luckily for him it was open, for all the other ports and scuttles were secured by deadlights. But what surprised Fielding and Cardyke more than the feat the Jap had successfully performed was the matter-of-fact way in which the Japanese took the reunion. Hokosuka was astonished—not at seeing his friend once more, but by the sudden blow in the face. Beyond that there were no visible expressions of welcome or delight upon the visages of the unfathomable Asiatics.

Without further delay Hokosuka departed on his perilous errand. In five minutes the first sack was hauled up. Another eight minutes passed before the second consignment arrived; then there was an ominous delay.

"The man is frozen to death," exclaimed Fielding. "Haul away as fast as you can."

The sub., Cardyke, Rutter, and four or five more tugged at the rope—it broke.

Thrusting his head out of the port Fielding tried to peer through the darkness. No call for aid came from the surface of the night-enshrouded sea. He placed his hand upon the rope holding the third. It was heavy—far too heavy for a bag filled with ice only.

"He's hanging on to this rope," announced the sub. in a low tone. "It's not stout enough to haul him up."

A hand touched his shoulder. He withdrew from the port-hole, and, turning, saw Cardyke, clad in a pilot-coat and with a rope made fast round his waist.

"I'll see what I can do," said the mid., quietly. "I'll take another length of rope with me. There's no time to waste."

The next instant he had vanished. Scraping down the rusty-streaked grey side of the ship, guiding his descent by means of the rope attached to the weighted sack, Cardyke proceeded on his errand of rescue. For full thirty feet he was lowered before he touched the mouth of the ice-filled bag. By giving two tugs upon the supplementary line the mid. signalled to his friends to stop lowering, and, fumbling with his hands, he strove to find the hapless Jap. But still success did not reward his efforts. He realised that the piercing cold was beginning to make itself known in a most unpleasant fashion. His hands were already numbed, the keenness of the air stung his face like repeated blows of a whip.

Three tugs—lower still. The mid.'s feet were in the water. Again he groped. His fingers touched Hokosuka's grease-covered face. The man gave no sign of life. Perhaps he was already dead with exposure. Labouringly Cardyke passed the end of the second rope under the Jap's shoulders, and with a painful effort succeeded in tying a running knot. This done he tugged frantically at the rope. It was a last effort—the cold had completely paralysed his muscles.

Limply Cardyke was hauled up, and as willing hands assisted him through the port, he had barely strength to utter "Haul away on the other line" ere he fainted.

Half a minute later Hokosuka, bound to the third sack with the severed portion of the rope by which he had been lowered, was dragged into the cabin. Mukyima bent over him, and placed his hand on the unconscious man's heart. It still beat feebly.

While the Japanese were attending to their courageous comrade Rutter approached.

"Can you come this way?" he asked, addressing Fielding. "I guess they're trying to break in. The hatch-cover is all a-shake."

CHAPTER XVII

TOUCH AND GO

SNATCHING up a revolver Fielding left the cabin and made his way along the half-deck till he reached the foremost ladder. Here were standing nearly a dozen men ready to repel the threatened attack. The American had spoken truly. Already there was a strain upon the tackles, and the metal covering was just rising from the coamings. The pirates were evidently trying to

uncover the hatchway without alarming their foes.

Jumping on the ladder Fielding waited till there was sufficient room to thrust the muzzle of his revolver under the rising metal plate. He fired, but whether the shot found a billet or otherwise he knew not, for the men hauling at the tackles instantly let go, and the ponderous mass of metal fell with a clang. Simultaneously all the electric light in the after part of the ship went out; the pirates had cut the wiring. Lamps and candles were hastily procured, and as there were plenty in the store-room there was no cause for economy in this respect; while with the ice that Hokosuka had gathered almost at the cost of his life there was sufficient water to last nearly a fortnight.

Finding the partially liberated captives were on the alert the pirates desisted from making attempts upon the hatchway that night, and in consequence Fielding was able to divide his command into two watches, one of which could turn in while the other stood by ready for any emergency.

The pirate captain undoubtedly meant to attempt all artifices to recapture the prisoners solely on account of the bulk of the booty that was stored on the orlop-deck. Were it not for that important factor Cervillo would not hesitate to seize the first vessel he came across, transfer the remainder of the booty and crew to her, and scuttle the *Independencia*, without thought of mercy towards the men who had balked him. But his greatest desire was to recover, by stratagem or force, the precious metal stored in the after part of the cruiser. Just before dark the voice of the pirate was heard speaking to them.

"Señor Englishman," he began. "We are in difficulty. The ship is in danger of sinking."

"Is she?" asked the sub. with well-affected surprise. He knew perfectly well that had the *Independencia* really been on the point of foundering the pirates would be in a panic.

"To save your lives, señor, is the wish of me, Juan Cervillo. So if you come up we put you away in boats."

"I've no doubt you'd be most pleased to put us away," replied Fielding. "Where are your boats? Have you enough for the crew? And do you think boats would stand much chance of being picked up in these seas?"

"Me find a ship."

"Then we'll wait till you do, especially if the ship is a British cruiser."

"You refuse?"

"Absolutely."

"Den I pour petrol into cabins, and set fire. You dogs will burn to death."

"Very considerate of you to provide us with heat in this cold atmosphere," replied Fielding, coolly. "Now, listen, Señor Cervillo: you will not dare to use so much as a litre of petrol. I'll tell you why. We know that most of the gold you precious scoundrels have collared lies on the orlop-deck."

Fielding paused to let his words sink in. Cervillo gasped with fury. He had vainly consoled himself that the treasure had escaped the notice of the men whom he hoped to use to further his ends.

"And so," continued the young British officer, "we've made up our minds that if you attempt any of your dirty, underhand tricks we will open the cover of the submerged torpedo-tubes and sink the ship. Then where will you be? And what good will the stolen treasure do you?"

"Señor, I swear to you——"

"Don't waste your breath, you scoundrel!"

"Señor, hear me. Give up the gold, and you will be on shore placed, with not one hair of your head——"

"Scalped, eh? Now look here, you rascal: At the first sign of treachery down goes the *Independencia* to the bottom of the sea."

Juan Cervillo, balked, and powerless to gain his end, made his way for'ard to his temporary quarters, that, contrasting unfavourably with his cabin, served to increase his discomfiture. During the rest of that short night the pirate captain racked his brains to devise some scheme to save himself and secure the treasure. He realised that Fielding and his associates held the whiphand. He knew enough of Englishmen in general to feel sure that the sub. would keep his word, and scuttle the ship should things go badly with them.

Day dawned, but still the fog held. The *Independencia* was still floating idly on the ocean. All her boilers were allowed to cool down save two. The reserve of oil fuel was running short, and only by the strictest economy could another four hundred miles be got out of the ship.

Like a caged tiger Juan Cervillo paced his limited quarters. The Englishman was the source of all the difficulty, he assured himself again and again. But for that obstacle that stood in his path, the villain would make good his escape, and leave his companions in infamy to their fate.

Yes, the first step was to regain possession of the bullion in the after store-room. Then he could form his plans to get the stuff safely ashore at the expense of his companions.

Presently Cervillo opened the door and looked out. The upper deck was almost deserted. Few of the crew could stand the numbing effects of the Arctic weather. Pacing up and down on the lee side of the quarter-deck was a muffled figure that Cervillo recognised as his minion Da Silva. The pirate captain beckoned, and his lieutenant hastened towards him. Both men entered the cabin that Cervillo had been obliged to occupy, and the door was shut and bolted.

"I've been striving to find a means of recapturing those insolent dogs," began Cervillo, jerking his thumb in the direction of the after end of the ship. "*Caramba!* It must be done! But how? Can you suggest anything, Da Silva? You were ever a man of resource.

"We managed it before with chloroform," began the lieutenant.

"That will not do. They are too astute to be caught twice that way. No, Da Silva. They warned me that if I used my usual methods they would scuttle the ship—and, think, the gold goes with it!"

"Will they dare do it—don't they value their lives?"

"I cannot take the risks. I would not give that much for the whole lot of them"—and Cervillo snapped his fingers contemptuously—"but they have the wealth that is ours by right of conquest. They are desperate men. If they should sink the ship what chance have we in our shattered boats in this fearful sea of fog and ice?"

"I would suggest that we bring forty or fifty men aft, and hold them ready to open fire; warn our men first, so that no more panic may take place—they were quite out of hand yesterday—then raise an alarm that the ship is sinking, and every man is to save himself. Those Englishmen and their companions will bolt from below like startled rabbits, and we can mow them down as soon as they are all clear of the hatchway."

"But if we fail?" asked Cervillo, dubiously. "If only one man survives and runs below again he would open the valves before we could stop him."

"Then why not drop a charge of dynamite through the ventilator? The damage would be great, but not enough to sink the ship, and you would have the whole crowd of them removed without any trouble at all. We settled thrice that number in the Plaza of Barcelona."

"No," replied the Spanish captain. "That also will not do. Could I be sure of wiping out this nest of hornets with one blow I would not hesitate. But without doubt they would not be all close together. Some would be down in the after-hold. I should be greatly surprised if that English officer has not given every man instructions as to what is to be done should anything happen to him. It's the gold that keeps our hands behind our backs; but for that——"

"Then why not offer them a share of the gold, and a passage in the first ship we fall across? There are whalers to be met with in these seas, I believe. The rest would be simple. Once you had them off the ship there is no reason why you should abide by your promise—dead men tell no tales." And Da Silva grinned sardonically.

Cervillo shook his head.

"These men seem different to others I have met," he remarked. "They stoutly refuse to discuss terms. No, Da Silva, that will not do. Your plan of raising a false alarm seems to be the most likely. As soon as this accursed fog lifts we'll try it. It is worth the risk."

"The fog is lifting now," said the lieutenant, opening the scuttle and looking out.

Da Silva spoke truly. The belt of fog was dispersing, and already the sea was visible for a distance of nearly four hundred yards—a greyish, sluggishly heaving expanse dotted here and there with masses of floating ice of various shapes and sizes.

"Then we'll make our preparations, Da Silva. Please warn the crew that a false alarm is to be raised, and order them to muster aft with rifles and revolvers."

While the lieutenant was carrying out his chief's instructions Juan Cervillo made his way to the fore-bridge. It was now sufficiently clear to see a considerable distance. The *Independencia* was floating idly in an almost circular basin of mountainous masses of ice, some of the jagged peaks rising four hundred feet or more in the air. Had she been steaming she would have rammed the floating ice-barrier again. The only way of escape was to turn and run southward, between the horns of the almost encircling field of ice. To Cervillo's heated imagination it seemed as if the surrounding bergs were already converging to imprison the partially crippled cruiser.

Apart from the peril the grandeur of the scene was almost beyond description. The sun, that

even at midday was low in the heavens, was still hidden behind the pinnacles of the berg, its feeble rays gilding the minaret-like projections, and causing them to scintillate gorgeous shafts of light. At frequent intervals masses of ice, slipping from the gradually melting mountain, would descend with a rumble resembling thunder, crash into the sea amid a cauldron of foam, or splash into fragments against a lower projection on the face of these stupendous precipices. A vessel coming within reach of these Titanic missiles would be instantly pulverised.

Cervillo realised the danger. All thought of carrying out his plans for the capture of Fielding and his companions must, for the time being, be set aside. The escape of the cruiser from the ice prison that threatened her must be the first consideration.

With great difficulty the engineers and stokers performed their tasks, and at a leisurely five knots the *Independencia* headed for the open sea. Every now and again one of her propellers would drive its blades into a mass of ice, the jar sending a quiver through the ship, till Cervillo, fearing that the two outside propellers might be irreparably damaged, ordered steam to be shut off from the cylinders actuating them, keeping the two inside "screws," which were partially protected by a twin rudder, revolving at a comparatively low rate barely sufficient to give the vessel steerage way.

Nearer and nearer the *Independencia* approached the gap in the almost encircling walls of ice—a channel less than a quarter of a mile in width, and flanked by lofty, overhanging precipices. It seemed from a distance that the gap was even less than it actually was, so high were the glacial cliffs on either hand.

Suddenly the cruiser struck; not violently, but sufficient to make the fact known to all on board. Her forward part, drawing 7 ft. of water more than her normal draught owing to the flooding of her fore compartments, had struck a ridge of submerged ice.

This time there was hardly any panic amongst the polyglot crew. The men were almost too apathetic to care for anything short of sudden, real danger. The engines were reversed, and almost without an effort the *Independencia* glided stern foremost off the reef. Soundings were taken, revealing a depth of only eight fathoms. Then the truth became apparent.

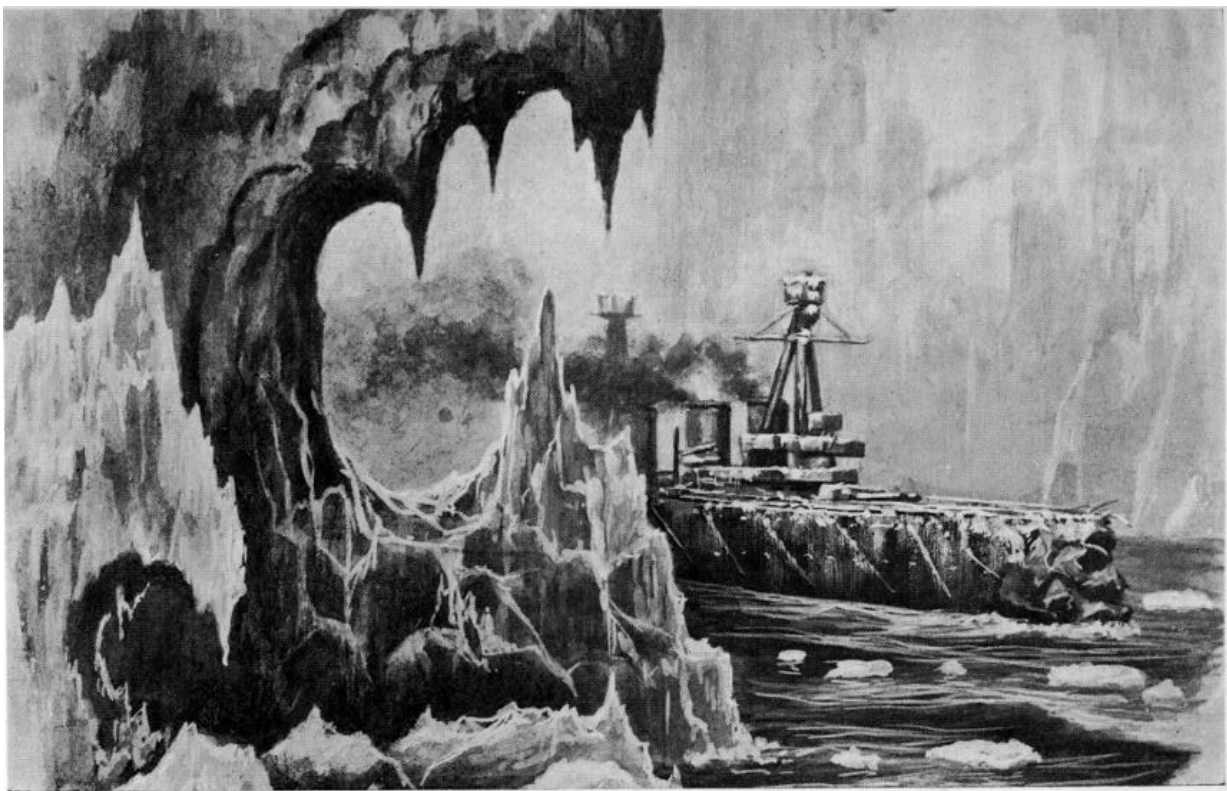
The *Independencia* was barely floating in a vast depression in the ice-field. The Bergs were really part of one extensive sheet of ice, twenty, thirty, or perhaps even more miles in length, and less than a dozen feet under her keel was a bed of ice possibly a thousand feet thick between her and the floor of the ocean.

It was indeed a strange freak of fortune that had guided the cruiser betwixt those icy portals in the fog. Now came the question: Had the bed of the glacial lagoon risen and decreased the depth, and did a barrier of shallow water lie between her and the open sea?

Three times the cruiser essayed to pass the shoal, each time bumping slightly. The fourth time, by keeping 300 yds. to starboard of the point where the vessel had touched the first time, Cervillo contrived to clear the danger, only to be confronted by another; for so close was the *Independencia* to the berg that one tremendous mass of ice fell within a hundred yards of her starboard side.

It was touch and go. On the one hand the risk of grounding badly on the shoal of ice, on the other the danger of being smashed by the sudden fall of the overhanging face of the glistening mass of congealed water. But Cervillo kept his head, and standing by the quartermaster compelled him to steer as close to the cliffs as possible, and after a quarter of an hour's suspense the *Independencia* gained the open sea.

The ship was in a bad state, for she was leaking badly, the inrush being barely kept under control by the powerful centrifugal pumps. She was down by the head; her fuel was running short, and the provisions, except those stored aft, were sufficient only for another ten days. No wonder, then, that the pirate captain was anxious to recover the booty, and save himself as best he might.



AFTER A QUARTER OF AN HOUR'S SUSPENSE THE "INDEPENDENCIA" GAINED THE OPEN SEA.

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[Illustration: AFTER A QUARTER OF AN HOUR'S SUSPENSE THE "INDEPENDENCIA" GAINED THE OPEN SEA.]

Not until the cruiser had left the ice-field a good twenty miles astern did Juan Cervillo proceed to put into operation the plan that Da Silva had suggested. The men detailed to form the firing-party were ordered on the quarter-deck, but to the captain's surprise all the seamen and many of the engine-room staff came tumbling aft, all armed to the teeth.

"What is the meaning of this, men?" shouted Cervillo, as he faced the mob of olive and black-featured seamen.

The question was almost unnecessary. He realised that it was a case of mutiny.

CHAPTER XVIII

MUTINY AND A RUSE THAT FAILED

"WE wish to know why we are freezing to death in this fearful climate, instead of capturing rich prizes, as we were led to believe, and for which we signed on?" said the spokesman, a Greek who spoke four Latin languages fluently.

"And if I refuse to give you the information?" asked Cervillo.

"We'll have the ordering of things in our own hands——"

"And a fine mess you'll make of it," added the captain. He knew that once he showed the white feather it would be all up with him. The only way to treat a polyglot crowd was to put a bold face on the matter, and let them see that the man whom they served was a worthy leader of such a pack of ruffianly scoundrels. "All those men who speak or understand Spanish will cross over to the starboard side. If I don't treat you fairly then on my head be it."

Slowly, almost reluctantly, about forty of the men walked across to the side indicated, their comrades regarding the act with suspicion until they were assured by the Greek that their Iberian comrades were "solid" in their determination to see the matter through.

"Now, lads," continued Cervillo, "you ask an explanation; I will give it. It can be repeated to the others as soon as I have finished. When I brought the ship north I did it with the best intentions, to lie low until the strict watch maintained by those accursed English and American cruisers was

relaxed, and we could still further increase our booty ere disbanding at Caracas or Monte Video. Unfortunately I did not take into consideration the chances of meeting with ice at this time of the year. We did so, with consequences extremely awkward both to the ship and ourselves. We must get out of the difficulty somehow; and the remedy I suggest is this: That we capture the first vessel we meet that is large enough to take us all; remove the treasure, and scuttle the *Independencia*. Then, without exciting suspicion, we can go south once more, and land quietly on South American soil. Your share of the booty will, I regret to say, fall short of the sum anticipated had all gone well with us; but there will be quite enough to keep you all in ease for the rest of your lives. Those are my intentions, mainly for your benefit. If you can suggest a better plan I am only too willing to lend my ear."

Cervillo paused. To his unbounded satisfaction he observed his bold front was making a favourable impression upon the handful of men he addressed. There was one exception amongst the Spanish-speaking audience. That was the Greek spokesman. It was in his mind that the mutiny should go its whole course; that Cervillo should be made prisoner, and that he should be the new captain. But he had given his fellow mutineers no plan of what he should do to save himself and them from the hangman's rope, and on that point Cervillo scored.

A few exclamations of approval warmed the captain to his task, and in an easy, confidential manner he continued.

"You are, I know, aware that there is a source of danger already in the ship. I refer to that English dog and his comrades who have contrived to seize the after part of the ship. I do not wish to make a secret about it, but the greater portion of the treasure lies in their hands. Yes, men, it is enough to make you have long faces; but the worst is not yet told. They refuse to give up the gold. How can we compel them to do so? If we use force they threaten to sink the ship. As you know, we have only three boats left, and they have been considerably damaged. This is the situation. More than that, I see you men are standing before me armed, and with every appearance of being mutineers. Is not that so?"

"We mean to have our rights," interrupted the Greek, surlily. "If we don't look after ourselves, who else will?"

"I'm the person to do that," retorted Juan Cervillo, with a fierceness that made the Greek—although he was standing twenty feet from the pirate captain—recoil and seek refuge behind his comrades. "And, what is more, I mean to get you all out of this business in the best possible manner. Could you dislodge the Englishman and his companions from the half-deck? I think not. I have a plan; but before I divulge it I must have your promise of complete obedience. Now go and explain to your comrades on the port side the state of affairs. I will wait here and receive your answer."

Those of the crew who did not understand Spanish were regarding their captain with hostile eyes until their fellows on the starboard side raised their shouts of approbation. They could not understand the sudden change of opinion; but very easily led, they soon agreed to accept Cervillo's terms as explained by the Spanish-speaking portion of the crew, who were, for the most part, capable of making themselves understood by every member of the polyglot assembly. Only the Greek held out, striving to influence his compatriots against the captain's authority; but, failing miserably, he subsided, and tried to retire into oblivion by diving into the crowd of reconciled mutineers.

"Now," exclaimed Cervillo, after a while, "are you willing to submit to my authority once again? For my part I will overlook this affair knowing that you have erred in thinking that I had no desire to study the interest of my crew."

"We are with you, señor capitán!" shouted the men.

"Excellent! Now this is my plan: Señor Da Silva will muster forty men armed with rifles upon the quarter-deck. The rest of you will go for'ard, and on the signal being given, commence to shout 'All hands on deck!' and 'Everyone for himself—the ship's sinking!' Make as much noise as you can. The prisoners will at once bolt from below, and as soon as the last man is up through the hatchway Señor Da Silva will give the word for them to be shot down. No one must be allowed to escape below. We can then recover the gold, and on the first available opportunity we will tranship the booty and ourselves to another vessel. Have I made myself clear?"

The mutineers expressed themselves satisfied, and at once went for'ard to carry out the proposed stratagem.

Meanwhile Fielding and his companions kept well on the alert, maintaining regular watches, and leaving nothing to chance. Through the ports they had witnessed the cruiser's mishaps in the submerged bed of ice, and her perilous passage betwixt the horns of the berg. They knew that the *Independencia* was heading southwards, but for what purpose they were in ignorance. Certain it was that for the time being Cervillo's idea of sheltering on the east coast of Greenland had been knocked on the head.

"They're pretty well at the end of their tether," remarked the sub. "Something's gone wrong with the engines, I fancy; and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if she's leaking badly. They've been

pumping continuously for the last few hours."

"There's one blessing, they won't be able to do any more damage to shipping," added Cardyke. "But I can't say that I appreciate being cooped up here. Couldn't we make a rush for it and drive them below?"

"Too early," objected his superior. "They must be lulled into a sense of security first. No, Cardyke, we must sit tight and await our opportunity. It's bound to come. You see, if we attempted to capture the ship, and failed—we cannot rely upon success—our position might be infinitely worse. We cannot come to much harm here. The gold acts as an invisible breastplate to shield us all."

Just then there was a heavy crash somewhere amidships, followed by a babel of yells that roused the sleeping watch from their berths.

"What's happening now?" asked Fielding. "Can you make out what they are shouting about, Mr. Rutter?"

The American, who was a fairly good Spanish linguist, understood the nature of the yells. For a few seconds he stood chewing the end of a huge cigar.

"I guess they're celebrating someone's nameday," he remarked, calmly. "Let 'em yell. Maybe they'll want their wasted breath before long." Then, taking Fielding aside, he said, in an undertone, "They're trying to lure us out, I reckon. Say the ship's sinking. Guess she's been going down some these twenty-four hours past, and she hasn't gone yet; so sit tight."

Thus, by the coolness of Hiram B. Rutter, the knavish plot of Da Silva fizzled out like a damp squib. Finger on trigger the platoon waited to mow down the hostages as they issued pell-mell through the hatchway; but they waited in vain.

"Ten thousand fiends take them!" exclaimed the pirate captain in his wrath when he saw that treachery failed to accomplish his ends. "There must be a traitor amongst the crew."

Disgusted and foiled, Cervillo retired to his quarters, and spent the rest of the day in sulky isolation. Meanwhile Da Silva, to whom the care of the vessel had been entrusted, kept the cruiser pointing due south at a modest ten knots. He, too, began to realise that, with her diminished speed and rapidly burning oil supply, it was only a question of hours before the *Independencia* floated idly at the mercy of wind and wave. With the exhaustion of the oil fuel the auxiliary engines would be useless, and the centrifugal pumps would be powerless to check the inrush of water. The pumps worked by manual labour might keep the vessel afloat for twenty-four hours, but Da Silva, who had been mate of a Levant trader, knew only too well how quickly men will tire at the arduous task of manning the pumps.

Another day had almost passed. The sun was on the point of dipping for a few short hours beneath the horizon when the look-out announced, "Sail on the port quarter."

Cervillo and most of the officers made their way up to the bridge. Glasses were brought to bear upon the distant vessel, whose topmasts only were as yet visible from where the pirate captain stood. Was it a British cruiser that by some unfortunate freak of circumstance had penetrated the almost deserted northern ocean?

"What do you make of her?" shouted Cervillo to the man in the fire-control platform, which, useless for its primary purpose, had been used as a spacious and well-sheltered "crow's-nest."

"There are two vessels, señor capitan. One is in tow of the other."

"Are they cruisers?"

"I think not, señor capitan. One of them is square-rigged."

Unable to conceal his anxiety, Cervillo entered the narrow door in the base of one of the tripods, and climbed inside the hollow mast till he stood beside the look-out in the fire-control platform.

For quite a minute Cervillo kept the two vessels under observation, then with a gesture of relief he returned the telescope to the seaman. Regaining the bridge he gave orders for the helm to be starboarded, so as to bring the *Independencia* on a converging course to that of the strange vessel and her tow.

This done he called Da Silva to his side.

"Now is our chance," he said, in an undertone. "Yonder ships are a disabled whaler and a steam yacht. We must capture both, place the crew of the yacht on board the whaler, and cut them adrift. Since these obstinate dogs will not let us have the gold we must be content with what is stored amidships."

"But we shall be very poorly off," objected the lieutenant.

"If we had to share with the whole of our crew," replied Juan Cervillo. "Listen, Da Silva; we must find a means of getting the booty that is still in our possession on board the yacht with all the officers and some of the men who are Spaniards by birth. The rest must shift for themselves."

Even Da Silva, hardened villain that he was, looked astounded at the calculated heartlessness of his superior.

"But how?" he whispered.

Cervillo placed his finger on his lips.

"Leave that to me," he replied. "Only see that my orders are properly carried out, and all will be plain sailing."

"Gaspar!" he shouted, addressing the man who had superseded the English renegade as *bo'sun*. "Send up signals of distress!"

CHAPTER XIX

CERVILLO DESERTS HIS CREW

MIDSHIPMAN CARDYKE was restless under restraint, and during the long periods of inaction was fond of looking out of the port and listening to the swish of the waves against the ship's side. The noise soothed him. To a youngster descended from a long line of naval men the sting of the salt-laden breeze was an alluring quality that would attract him throughout the whole of his career.

While at the open port he happened to look as far astern as the frame of the port permitted. To his surprise he saw a column of smoke just above the horizon.

It was a ship. He instantly awoke Fielding, who was having his "watch below," and informed him of the momentous news. The sub. was out of his bunk in a trice.

"You're right, Cardyke," he said, after a hasty glance in the direction of the vessel. "It's a ship. But what is she—a cruiser?"

"She's heading this way, I think," observed the mid. "And what is more, we are altering our course. See, the relative position of the ship is more on the beam."

"Then it's not a cruiser, worse luck," muttered Fielding, "or the pirate would attempt to sheer off. They're up to some fiendish business, I'll wager. Don't say a word to any of the others just yet. We'll keep on the look-out a little while longer."

The two young officers waited and watched till twilight gave place to night. Presently Hiram B. Rutter strolled up to the open port.

"Having a breath of fresh air?" he inquired, affably.

"Ssh!" exclaimed Fielding, warningly. "There's a vessel over there. You can just see her starboard and masthead lights."

"Strikes me forcibly there are two red lights," said the American.

"So there are. By Jove! The villains are sending up rockets."

High above the *Independencia* the red glare of an exploded rocket transformed the surface of the surrounding sea into a blaze of dazzling light. Then, vanishing suddenly, the glare left the sub. and his companions blinking in the darkness.

"I know what they are doing," exclaimed Cardyke, excitedly. "They're sending up false signals of distress to lure yonder vessel within their power."

"That's it," assented Fielding. "And now's your chance to make use of your improvised flashing-lamp."

By this time the rest of the hostages were aware of the approach of another vessel, and the ports were literally jammed with human heads. But Mukyima was not content with watching. The active Jap crawled through the narrow port, balanced himself on the sill, then with a like motion drew himself up to the deck. Lying prone behind the casing of a skylight he waited till another rocket had been fired, then, mingling boldly with the pirate crew, made good use of his eyes. Unobserved, he regained the half-deck and told General Oki of what he had seen.

"Pirates get guns ready," explained Oki to Fielding. "Men are ready to capture other ship."

Cardyke had not been idle. All the ports were screened with the exception of one in which he set a lamp. Then using a heavy cabin curtain as a screen, he proceeded to "call-up" the approaching vessel.

"There's the acknowledgment," exclaimed Fielding, as a succession of short, rapid flashes came from the Morse signalling-lamp on the steamer's bridge.

"Stand off; you are——" began the middy, using his improvised shutter as quickly as he was able; but before he had flashed half-a-dozen words a heavy tarpaulin was dropped over the port from above, completely obscuring the light from seaward.

"Where's your knife?" asked the mid. "Lash it to the end of a pole or something and jab a hole through the canvas."

Before the obstructing tarpaulin could be cut through, the *Independencia's* course was altered till she pointed bows on to the oncoming yacht. Thus the ports on her quarters no longer commanded a view of the strange vessel.

"They've done us," muttered Fielding.

"Perhaps the captain of the vessel will smell a rat, and sheer off," remarked Cardyke.

"I don't know about that. He may think we are only asking him to keep off till daylight, or something of that sort. He would never ignore signals of distress."

"Couldn't we make an attempt to rush the ship and drive those rascals below?"

"I'm afraid not. They've secured the hatches. But we'll get all hands to man the ports and fire their revolvers. That might make the skipper of that packet keep out of danger."

Before the warning could be given a quick-firer was discharged from the cruiser, and with a vicious spurt of flame a shell passed between the steam yacht and the disabled whaler she had in tow, and Juan Cervillo commanded the astonished captain of the steam yacht to heave-to instantly.

The tricked vessel was the *Serena*, a 300-ton pleasure craft owned by a wealthy Canadian named Rignold. She had fallen in with a whaler *Hetty* of Boston that had broken her shafting in a gale, and had sustained considerable damage to her spars and rigging, and the owner of the *Serena* offered to tow the *Hetty* into St. John's, Newfoundland. The offer had been gratefully accepted; and now both vessels were under the guns of the pirate cruiser *Independencia*.

Rignold and his captain, officers, and crew were completely astounded. During their cruise in the Arctic they had had no opportunities of receiving the general warning of the presence of the formidable pirate in the North Atlantic. The *Serena's* skipper, a man of courage and resource, did not lose his head. Imagining that the cruiser was a Government vessel of fishery protection duties, and had compelled his vessel to heave-to for the purpose of making an examination, he promptly ordered the engines to be reversed, at the same time shouting to the *Hetty's* mate to mind her helm. The whaler, carrying considerable way, over-ran the yacht till brought up by the hawser, eventually swinging round between the *Serena* and her captor.

"What ship that?" shouted Cervillo,

"Great snakes, that is not a British hail!" ejaculated the *Serena's* captain; then in reply he bawled, "Steam yacht *Serena*, of Quebec, with the whaler *Hetty* in tow. Why are we ordered to heave-to?"

Before Cervillo could reply Fielding shouted in stentorian tones through the port:—

"Clear off at full speed. This vessel is a pirate. Save yourself while there's time."

Had he been given a free hand the yacht skipper would not have hesitated to run the gauntlet of the cruiser's guns, trusting in the darkness to avoid a shot that would send the vessel to the bottom. But there were other considerations. Mr. Rignold, the owner, had a large party of guests on board, and on that account he was anxious not to be under fire. Moreover, he was too staunch a man to abandon the disabled whaler. He would stand by and take his chance with the *Hetty*.

"You have to heave-to—that good enough?" bawled the Spanish captain.

"Ay, ay!" was the reply. "But you'll be real sorry for this piece of work."

"We see later," chuckled Cervillo, for the double capture could not have better served his purpose. "Keep where you are till day come. No tricks, or I sink you."

Two hours later it was light enough to make out what the prizes were like. The *Serena* was a graceful-looking craft with a clipper stern and long, tapering counter. She had two light masts and a single funnel, and was one of many of a type of sea-going yachts that are to be found in every port of the civilised world. The whaler was also of a very ordinary though fast-disappearing type; bluff-bowed, wall-sided, and broad-sterned, and rigged as a brigantine with heavy, well-

shrouded masts. Just before the mainmast was a small, black funnel—the only visible sign of the vessel's now useless auxiliary power.

Before taking possession of the two ships Juan Cervillo mustered his men aft.

"You must know, my lads," he began, "what I propose to do. The *Independencia* is no longer serviceable; her days are nearly finished. Yonder craft are the last prizes she will take. It only remains for us to save ourselves, and as much of the booty as we possibly can. The gold stowed away aft is, I am sorry to say, lost to us. We can only take revenge upon those who have cheated us out of our hard-earned riches. I therefore propose that we place the crew of the yacht on board the whaler. If they manage to fetch port, well and good, if not—that's not our concern. We will then tranship the amount of treasure that is left to us, scuttle the *Independencia*, and the English officer and his companions can keep guard over the gold at the bottom of the sea. With a nice little yacht like the one yonder we ought to steam southwards without exciting suspicion. Your shares in the spoil will not be as much as we hoped for, but enough to let you live a merry life for some time to come."

The pirates, although regretting the loss of the gold, were not sorry to see the way clear to escape the perils that awaited them, and for the next ten minutes the utmost activity prevailed. The three boats were hauled out, and Da Silva proceeded to board the *Serena*. It was significant that every man in the boats was a Spaniard, and that nearly all the officers formed part of the boarding-party.

Unceremoniously Mr. Rignold, his guests, and the crew of the yacht were dumped on board the *Hetty*, and the work of transporting the remainder of the booty from the cruiser to the yacht was put in hand, Cervillo personally superintending the operations. This done, enough provisions to keep the pirates in plenty for another month were added to the *Serena's* stores. In the midst of the activity some of the crew found time to taunt the captives on the half-deck, telling them gleefully that they were destined for a swift plunge to the bed of the ocean. Three of the Spaniards who had returned in one of the boats also found time for a little diversion. Under Da Silva's orders they moved unostentatiously from gun to gun, removing portions of the delicate mechanism so as to render the weapons harmless.

Everything was now ready for Juan Cervillo's coup.

Ordering a dozen men to maintain a watch over the closed hatchways above the half-deck, he bade the rest of the pirates go below and pack up their belongings.

"Have all your bags ready to lower into the boats by the time I return," he concluded. "I mean to tow the whaler a mile or so to leeward, so that she will not be able to give assistance to the prisoners below. Her boats have been stove in, so there is no chance of her putting off to the rescue of these obstinate dogs."

The men hastened to obey. The engineers, mostly Italians, were told off to get ready to open the sea-cocks and sink the cruiser. Cervillo went over the side, entered the waiting boat, and pulled off to the yacht.

Instead of towing the *Hetty* clear of the doomed cruiser he promptly gave orders for the hawser to be cut, and at fifteen knots the *Serena* steamed off, leaving the remainder of the pirates to their fate.

It was the guard on the quarter-deck of the *Independencia* who first noticed the yacht's apparently erratic behaviour. For a time the men watched the rapidly receding *Serena*, till the thought flashed through their minds that there was something suspicious. The petty officer in charge, an Italian named Tito, bawled down the nearest hatchway the astonishing news. Quickly the intelligence that the yacht was steaming away spread the length of the lower deck, and seamen and stokers rushed up pell-mell from below.

"We're betrayed!" howled Tito. "Man the guns, and cripple her before she gets out of range."

Hurriedly the guns' crew ran to the quick-firers. The murmur of subdued astonishment rose to a roar of anger and baffled fury when the pirates discovered that the mechanism had been tampered with and the weapons rendered useless. Some of the exasperated seamen, snatching up their rifles, and elevating the back-sights to the utmost capacity, fired an irregular volley at the vessel that was bearing away their treacherous captain and his Spanish *confrères*. It was a useless act; the yacht was already out of range, and the rattle of the rifles was only suggestive of the last nail driven into the coffin of their dead hopes.

CHAPTER XX

THE RECAPTURE OF THE "INDEPENDENCIA"

"THEY'RE about to abandon ship!" exclaimed Cardyke, when the first boat-load of treasure was taken off to the yacht. "It's no idle threat this time. They'll scuttle the cruiser."

"Guess you're about right, sonny," said Hiram B. Rutter. "We must look to ourselves, and Old Nick take the hindmost."

"Sh!" admonished Fielding. "There's no necessity to alarm the others just yet. As soon as we find the ship is actually sinking we'll get the others through the ports without any fuss. She won't sink in a minute."

"We can't stop her from sinking, so what's the use of going on deck," objected the American.

"No, we can't stop her from sinking," admitted the sub. "But if we can jump clear before the suction is too great we stand a fighting chance of swimming to the brigantine."

"Not a ghost of a chance. I guess the water's a sight too cold. We'd be frozen before we covered a quarter of the way," said Rutter, pessimistically.

"Don't meet trouble half-way," replied Fielding, stoutly. "I'll tell Oki the state of affairs, and you, Mr. Rutter, can let the Dutchmen and your fellow passengers on *L'Égalité* know. I would suggest that every man smother himself with oil and grease. Mukyima knew the value of oil when he went over the side."

When the news that the ship was about to be scuttled was told to the others there was very little excitement. Some of the Frenchmen proposed that an attempt should be made to take possession of the ship; but to this Fielding objected. The hatches were secured, and it would be better, under existing circumstances, not to offer any form of resistance to the pirates.

"If we did they would shoot us while we were in the water," concluded Fielding. "I don't think they would otherwise deny us a chance of swimming to yonder whaler."

Without any undue haste or excitement the imprisoned men made their preparations; then, taking up their positions at the ports, awaited Fielding's signal to throw themselves into the sea.

"There's the villain Cervillo putting off," exclaimed Rutter. "I'd just like to try this rifle, and put a bullet through his head."

"Don't, for your own sake," said Fielding. "Our opportunity to get even with him will come in due time, I feel certain."

"There's no time like the present," objected the American.

"Look!" ejaculated Cardyke. "They're sinking the boats."

The three boats belonging to the *Independencia*, having completed their work of transferring the men and stores from the cruiser to the yacht, were promptly stove in, pigs of ballast being dropped into them to send them to the bottom.

"They've found the yacht's boats are better than their own," said Fielding. "They'll be——"

"They're off—by Jove!"

"So they are; and there are nearly eighty men of the pirate crew still on board, I should imagine. What's the game?"

"Cervillo's done a bunk with the rest of the oof," said the mid.

"Guess you've hit it, sonny," exclaimed Hiram B. Rutter. "Reckon we may as well get rid of this grease; 't isn't necessary."

"He's off," said Fielding. "The yacht's gathering way. Won't there be a rumpus when the others find it out? I wonder where their eyes are."

For fully ten minutes the English officers and their companions watched the disappearing vessel. Then a chorus of shouts and curses on deck announced that the abandoned pirates had discovered they were tricked.

Not until the *Serena* disappeared beneath the horizon did the excited crew calm down. The majority drowned their woes in drink, while a few, realising the importance of fuel supply, brought the cruiser alongside the *Hetty* and emptied her cargo of oil into the *Independencia's* tanks. There was now sufficient fuel to take the crippled cruiser a thousand miles. Tito, who had been chosen captain by his shipmates, resolved to stand south, fall in with another vessel, and save the remainder of the crew in a similar manner to that adopted by the recreant Cervillo.

Just before midnight the *Independencia* raised steam, and at a bare ten knots plugged laboriously through the water. The *Hetty* was left astern. The last Fielding saw of her was that the crew were engaged in setting the canvas that the gale had spared. It was not much of a spread, but with the wind in its present quarter there was every prospect of the whaler fetching

the Gulf of St. Lawrence or one of the harbours on the Newfoundland coast.

The young officers realised that now was the opportunity to recapture the cruiser. Numerically the pirates were stronger, but by the noise on deck the Englishmen knew that they were for the most part indulging in a drunken orgy.

Just before dawn Mukyima and Hokosuka crept through the ports and hoisted themselves on deck. They were able to discern that most of the men were below, a few being on watch on the quarter-deck, two being stationed at the half-deck ladder; but so lax was their vigilance that the two Japs made a careful examination of the mode of securing the hatches. The only thing that prevented the steel hatches from being opened from the inside was an iron bar lashed at each end to massive ring-bolts in the deck. Lying prone by the side of the hatchway coamings the Japs quietly severed the ropes, then retraced their course, and, through General Oki's interpretation, announced that the hatches were ready to be forced open from the inside.

But Fielding hesitated to commence the attack by means of the companion ladders. The noise occasioned by the raising of the steel slabs would arouse their antagonists, and before a sufficient number of the attackers could emerge there was a strong possibility that the superior numbers of the crew would gain the day.

Accordingly he selected ten men, including the two Japs, who had just returned from their tour of investigation. These he was to lead out by the ports on to the deck, where they were to take cover until the main body of the attackers removed the hatches. The rest of the hostages were divided into two parties; one, under Cardyke, was to take the fore-ladder for the half-deck; the other, under Hiram B. Rutter, was detailed to the after-ladder. Both sections were to rush on deck simultaneously, Fielding and his men covering their advance by a rapid revolver fire.

Unseen and unheard Fielding's little band crept one by one through the port-hole and gained the deck. Aft the rearmost turret the deck was deserted, the men detailed to guard the hatchways having strolled for'ard to smoke. A continuous roar of ribald laughter announced that the majority of the pirates still on board were trying to forget their desperate plight in grog.

Taking shelter behind cowls and coamings, the sub.'s division waited while their leader gave the pre-arranged signal—three slight taps upon the deck. Instantly the steel cover of the fore-companion was heaved back, and Cardyke at the head of his party dashed through the opening. The after-hatch was opened a bare quarter of a minute later; then with a united shout the whole band rushed forward.

Taken entirely by surprise the men on watch made but a feeble resistance. A few shots were fired without effect; two of the pirates were felled by successful blows of Fielding's hammer-like fists, and the rest broke and fled.

Disturbed at the carouse, the crew for'ard bolted, for the most part, like terrified sheep, with the victorious crowd at their heels.

Suddenly one of the fugitives wheeled, and, levelling a revolver, fired at the pursuers. Fielding pitched forward and lay writhing.

Cardyke was by his friend's side in an instant.

"All right, old man," exclaimed the sub., feebly. "Leave me alone. I'm done for, I fear."

"Don't say that, Fielding."

"It doesn't very much matter now; we've retaken the ship. You're in command now, Cardyke, so cut off and see that the hatchways are secured. Keep the stokers down below, and make them work. Don't wait, time's precious."

With a groan Fielding became unconscious.

The midshipman was torn by the call of duty to his companions and devotion to his brother officer; but duty came first.

As soon as the pirate seamen were secured under hatches Cardyke posted a strong guard over the engine-room and stokehold ladders. This done, the mid. led another party to the fore-bridge, fully anticipating resistance from the officer of the watch and his subordinates. But Tito, who happened to be on the bridge at the time of the attack, seeing things were faring badly, promptly jumped overboard to avoid an ignominious fate. The quartermasters bolted up the tripod mast, and sought refuge in the fire-control platform. Here, had they been armed, they might have been a source of danger, but being without weapons they kept quiet until hunger compelled them to give themselves up.

CHAPTER XXI

DRAKE MEETS THE YACHT "SERENA"

CARDYKE'S first step in the navigation of the vessel was to get her on her proper course. When the quartermasters deserted their posts the vessel, left to her own devices, slowly headed to starboard, and by the time Cardyke could give his attention to the helm, she was pointing almost due north.

By this time twilight enabled the midshipman to see the state of affairs on deck. The *Impregnable*—she was the *Independencia* no longer—was driving her crumpled bows against the waves, the jagged mass of steel offering a tremendous resistance to the water.

Instead of turning the ship back till she pointed due south Cardyke rang down for half-speed astern. The order was obeyed with comparative celerity, and the cruiser, gathering sternway, made quite two knots an hour more than she had done when steaming ahead. The pressure upon the collision bulkhead was, in consequence, considerably reduced, and the leakage, instead of gaining, began to show signs of diminishing in volume.

Stalkart, the master of the Dutch tug, was placed in charge of the bridge, with two of his men to act as quartermasters. The rest of the Dutchmen were told off to various professional duties, while the passengers taken from *L'Égalité*, under Rutter's orders, were placed to guard the engine-room and stokehold hatchways. Implicitly the men obeyed Cardyke's orders.

As soon as the midshipman had completed the preliminary arrangements he hastened to the cabin where his wounded comrade was lying. Fielding had overrated the magnitude of his wound, which, though painful, and even dangerous, was by no means likely to prove mortal unless complications ensued. Mukyima had extracted the bullet and dressed the wound, and Fielding was sleeping comfortably. The Jap raised his fore-finger warningly as Cardyke entered. The mid. understood that absolute quietude was essential for his comrade's recovery; and, softly withdrawing, made his way towards the place where Hiram B. Rutter was keeping guard over the engine-room hatchways.

In a very short time the engineers and stokers, who were ignorant of the change of masters, would expect to be relieved.

Great was the surprise of one of them on gaining the head of the steel ladder to find himself confronted by a couple of armed men who he knew were not members of the pirate crew. Before he could utter a warning cry he was seized, and handed over to the others to be bound.

The man had come on deck to find out the reason why the watch below had not been relieved, and failing to return, another of the engine-room staff clambered up the ladder.

The two Frenchmen who were awaiting him showed themselves a fraction of a minute too soon. The pirate, guessing that something was amiss, ran down the ladder and informed his companions. Armed with knives, revolvers, spanners, and crowbars, the motley throng made a dash on deck.

The struggle at the hatchway was brief but desperate. The engineers and stokers were driven below. Then, as a protest, the engines were stopped.

"Awfully awkward," commented Cardyke, as Rutter sent for him and explained the situation. "We can't drift about here for another week or more."

"There are at least forty of the skunks below, but that don't signify," observed the American. "With a dozen men to back me up I guess I'd put the fear of Old Nick into their black hearts. Shall I whip up a crowd, and tackle the reptiles?"

Cardyke shook his head.

"It's too risky," he replied.

"Too risky, eh?" exclaimed the American. "I thought you chaps didn't count risks. But I'm willing to go, and I guess I stand the racket if I make a mess of this business."

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Rutter. I quite realise that you are capable of tackling these rascals. You might succeed; on the other hand, you might fail. By failing it is quite possible that you might be compelled to leave prisoners in their hands, and then, you see, they would have a hold over us."

"Didn't think of that," replied Hiram B. Rutter. "Of course they would. But what are we to do?"

"Summon them to surrender; if they don't, well, we'll starve them out. You speak their lingo, so you might let them know what we intend to do."

Accordingly Rutter shouted to the men that he wanted to say a few words. He told them what Cardyke had threatened to do, adding on his own responsibility the threat that should any man

tamper with the machinery he would be treated to a liberal dose of the cat as soon as his capture was effected.

The men debated amongst themselves, and eventually promised to surrender. They were, they asserted, in a very different position from the rest of the pirate crew. For the most part Italians, they had been "signed on" in ignorance of the *rôle* the captured cruiser was to play; they had taken no active part in the deeds of violence, and were under compulsion to a certain extent. Cardyke promised that their plea would be given careful consideration at the trial that must inevitably ensue should the vessel reach port. He also agreed to segregate them from the rest of the pirates, lest the latter should intimidate or offer violence to their former comrades.

The terms were accepted, and the engineers and stokers were marched aft and confined on the orlop-deck, stringent precautions being taken to prevent treachery. Thus all resistance was at an end. The Dutch engineers and firemen from the *Vulkan* and her consort were sent below in watches, and although short-handed and unused to the turbine engines and the oil-fed furnaces, stuck bravely to their task. Then, at a speed of twelve knots, the *Impregnable* steamed stern-foremost towards the port of Halifax.

* * * * *

Although nothing had been heard of the pirate-cruiser for several days, the British vessels engaged in patrolling the Atlantic did not relax their vigilance.

The captain of the scout *Cerberus* was of opinion that the quarry had gone north, and Drake was also of the same mind. Accordingly, having obtained permission from the commander of the cruiser squadron to take an independent course, the *Cerberus* pelted northwards.

Every day the four aero-hydroplanes were exercised, the little craft often making extended passages and ascending to a great height. Being fitted with wireless and taking different directions, they were able to keep observation over a wide area, returning every night to their parent ship.

Flight after flight was made, but nothing to break the vast circle of open sea was visible. Nevertheless Drake, always optimistic, felt confident of success. He had a presentiment that he was destined to bring the pirate cruiser to book.

"If that's not a vessel, I'm a Dutchman!" he exclaimed, lapsing into his favourite expression. He pointed to a faint blur on the horizon fully forty miles off. The atmosphere was exceptionally clear, and at the elevation of 1,000 ft. at which the *Mosquito* flew, the cloud of distant vapour was bound to attract the crew's attention.

"Yes, sir, it's a craft of some sorts," replied the chief petty officer who was responsible for the working of the planes and rudders. "But 'tisin't to say it's the pirate."

"We'll soon see," said Drake, cheerfully, and at a speed of fifty knots the aero-hydroplane dashed on her errand of investigation.

Drake had definite orders not to attack—he was merely to locate the much-looked-for cruiser and summon the *Cerberus* by wireless. This done the scout was to take possession of the pirate-cruiser by a plan that had been carefully worked out beforehand.

But in less than a quarter of an hour the lieutenant's hopes were dashed to the ground, for instead of the *Impregnable* the stranger proved to be a steam yacht.

"May as well hail her; she might give us some information," muttered Drake, and turning to the chief petty officer he ordered the *Mosquito* to descend to within 50 ft. of the surface of the sea.

Gracefully the aerial craft swept towards the approaching yacht. Drake kept the latter well under observation with his glasses, looking so intently that the petty officer wondered what possessed him to take such an interest in a craft that certainly was not the pirate cruiser.

"By Jove!" thought the lieutenant. "I don't think I'm mistaken. That's the *Serena*."

During a previous commission on the North American station Drake had made the acquaintance of Mr. Rignold, and had frequently been his guest upon the yacht.

"If it is the *Serena* I'll have a yarn with Rignold for the sake of old times," he continued, then aloud he gave the order to bring the *Mosquito* down to the surface of the water.

The aero-hydroplane rested on the sea at a distance of about three hundred yards from the yacht's port bow. The *Serena* made no attempt to slow down, but her bulwarks were lined with men, who regarded the marine novelty with considerable interest. Drake noticed that in spite of the cold atmosphere the men were rigged out in canvas suits and red jersey caps, but by the aid of his glasses he discovered that the crew had donned the white suits over their thick clothing.

"Distinctly funny. Rignold never used to rig his men out like that," commented the lieutenant, "and he's got a pretty large crew on board. But perhaps the yacht's changed hands. I'll soon find out."

Meanwhile the *Mosquito's* aerial planes had been folded, and gliding rapidly through the water the little craft overhauled and gradually converged upon the stately yacht.

"Yacht ahoy!" bawled Drake. "Is that the *Serena*?"

"Yes," was the reply. "What do you want?"

"Is Mr. Charles Rignold on board?"

"Yes; do you want him? We'll slow down and you can come alongside."

This reply added to Drake's perplexity. The accent of the speaker was not British, and the "Yes" instead of the nautical "Ay, ay, sir!" was somewhat suspicious.

Cervillo, on sighting the aero-hydroplane, was thrown into a state of terror. He was afraid that the little craft would immediately call upon its parent ship for assistance; but when the *Mosquito*—which was evidently operating unsupported by her consorts—descended to the surface of the sea, he took courage. If he could but lure the *Mosquito* alongside, he might be able to repeat his tactics by having hostages on board. To his surprise and delight the little craft was coming unsuspectingly under his lee, like a bird to the fowler's net.

Under the *Serena's* bulwarks crouched half-a-dozen men with pigs of ballast ready to drop into the frail craft, and ropes to rescue the English officer and his crew.

CHAPTER XXII

JUAN CERVILLO KEEPS HIS VOW

SUDDENLY Drake whispered to the artificer-engineer to drive full speed ahead, and, springing aft, he thrust the helm hard over. Heeling outwards till her coamings were awash, the *Mosquito* swung round, then, steadying herself, "planed" swiftly through the water with quite two-thirds of her keel in the air. Not till the little craft had put a mile betwixt her and the dumbfounded Cervillo did the lieutenant order speed to be reduced.

"Lads," he exclaimed, "we're in luck! We may not find the *Impregnable*, but yonder is the pirate Cervillo. I had my suspicions, but I managed to get a peep at his lovely features just in time."

"Then they've scuttled the cruiser, sir?"

"Goodness knows. If they've played any dirty tricks with my comrades it will go pretty badly with them. Call up the *Cerberus*, Stevens, and tell them to pile on speed. We'll keep the yacht under observation until the ship arrives."

"Officer commanding acknowledges, sir," replied the wireless man. "Asks for course."

"Tell him nor'-nor'-east, roughly ninety miles; that's good enough," replied Drake. "The *Gnat* will pick us up before long, and give the *Cerberus* our position. By Jove! The *Serena* is actually trying to run away. All right, my hearties, you're only provoking the fun. Rig out the planes, Blake. We'll dance round her a bit."

Rising obliquely, the *Mosquito* attained an attitude of 500 ft., and, circling swiftly over the doomed yacht, soon showed the pirates the sheer uselessness of seeking safety in flight. Four or five rifle-shots came from the *Serena's* decks, but unaccustomed to firing at a swiftly moving object immediately overhead, and at an unknown height, the men's aim was erratic. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, Drake gave orders for the aero-hydroplane to ascend another thousand feet.

If ever a man was tempted to use the potential weapons at his command Lieutenant Drake was. He knew that the pirates fully now expected an attack from the sky, and since they had not reverted to their former tactics of displaying their prisoners as a human screen, he naturally and rightly concluded that Fielding, Cardyke, and Coxswain Hardy were no longer in the hands of the desperate ruffians. But although the desire to drop a charge of explosives upon the yacht's deck, and blow the miscreants to a quick and horrible fate, was well-nigh irresistible, Drake could not go against his definite orders. He could only wait, hoping that he might be able to take an active part in the attack upon the pirate yacht as soon as the *Cerberus* arrived upon the scene.

"*Gnat* coming up, sir," announced one of the men.

Flying at a tremendous speed and at a great height came the *Mosquito's* consort, but as soon as she spotted Drake's command she turned and flew southwards in order to get into visible communication with the scout. Meanwhile the *Serena*, her funnel emitting dense columns of flame-tinted smoke, was steaming north-eastwards as hard as she could pelt.

It was a forlorn business, for within forty or fifty miles of her the avenging *Cerberus* was tearing in her direction at at least fifteen knots more than this yacht; while overhead, like a gigantic hawk, the *Mosquito* was turning in ever-varying circles above her, so that nothing short of a dense fog could save the pirates at this juncture.

Cervillo's luck was out. The atmosphere still remained perfectly clear; night was a long way off. Within another three hours the pirates must either fight to the last, or submit themselves prisoners.

"There's the *Cerberus*, sir," reported the look-out. "Dead astern."

"Good," ejaculated Drake. "Now the fun will commence in earnest. Tell her that there are no signs of any prisoners, so the sooner she gets the range the better."

Two hours later the scout came within firing distance. Overhead her four tenders—for the remaining two aero-hydroplanes had arrived on the scene—were manoeuvring at a safe altitude in order to observe the effect of the gunfire.

"There she goes!" shouted Drake, as a bright flash came from the fo'c'sle of the scout. With a peculiar screech the twelve-pounder shell tore through the air, passed within fifty yards of the fugitive yacht, as a stern reminder to heave-to, then, ricocheting three or four times, finally disappeared half a mile ahead of the pursued vessel.

Doggedly the *Serena* held on her course. The primeval instinct to flee until actually caught still lingered in the minds of the pirates, but on certain points their opinions were divided. Cervillo, with several of his men, was resolved to die rather than submit to capture; while Da Silva and the rest of the pirates, still hoping against hope, were inclined to give themselves up and trust that mercy might yet be shown them.

The second shell struck the yacht's fore-mast just below the cross-trees, and with a rending crash the top hamper came tumbling down. Held by the steel shrouds the shattered timber trailed over the side, the drag in the water causing the yacht to slew round.

Thinking that the pirates had given in and were easing down, the *Cerberus* withheld her fire. But Cervillo had no intention of surrendering. Calling half-a-dozen men to his aid he ran forward and began to hack through the lanyards of the shrouds. Desperately the men worked till the obstruction was cast off, and the doomed yacht resumed her flight.

It was not the intention of the *Cerberus* to sink her prey. Capture at all costs was the order of the captain. There might be prisoners, and more than likely rich booty stowed underneath her hatches. Could the *Serena* be deprived of the means of propulsion the boats of the scout would soon settle matters.

Crash! A shell striking the base of the funnel reduced it to atoms, and, tearing away a portion of the deck and bulwarks, sent a dozen of the pirates to their last account. Volumes of smoke poured through the aperture where the funnel casings had been. The yacht reeled violently, then a cloud of steam rushed upwards from her engine-room. One of the cylinders had burst, and the engines were completely disabled.

The *Serena* swung sound, and floated motionless on the calm sea. As far as could be seen there was no sign of her sinking. Some of the men rushed for the boats, only to be driven back by Cervillo and his officers, who, revolver in hand, did not hesitate to check the rush by the strongest measures. Finding that escape was impossible, the pirates were goaded into active resistance, and, with rifles and pistols, they took refuge behind the shattered bulwarks to await the approach of the scout's boats.

The *Cerberus* had lost way, and was lying barely half a mile on the *Serena's* starboard quarter. Into her boats swarmed the active bluejackets, eager to add to the traditions of the Service by capturing the pirates in the good old-fashioned style.

Secretly regretting that he was not taking an active part in the boarding of the *Serena*, Drake decided not to miss a close view of the operations. So the *Mosquito*, her speed reduced until it was only just sufficient to enable her planes to resist the action of gravity, descended to a height of about two hundred feet above the sea, and hovered in circles above the crippled vessel.

So intent were the pirates upon the approach of the boats that the presence of the aerial craft was entirely forgotten. Drake could see that Cervillo was pacing the deck in an irresolute fashion. At one moment he would speak to some of the men and point to their antagonists, at another he would halt hesitatingly at the top of the companion.

Nearer and nearer came the British seamen. Now they were within effective range of the revolvers. One or two of the pirates stood up ready to fire, but Cervillo restrained them, gave one

swift, comprehensive glance over the side, and dived down the ladder.

In an instant Drake realised the pirate Captain's intention.

"Back oars all!" he shouted to the boarders. "Back for your lives!" And ordering the planes to be tilted, he placed a safe distance between the *Mosquito* and the *Serena*.

He was barely in time. With a roar and a fierce blast of flame the yacht's magazine exploded. A dense, black cloud of smoke, mingled with fragments of charred and splintered wood, was hurled high into the air.

Instinctively Drake thrust over the lever actuating the elevating planes, and the aerial craft leapt upwards. The next instant the little vessel was enveloped in an eddying vapour, so opaque that from where the lieutenant stood the bow was lost to view. For a few seconds the *Mosquito* oscillated violently. Fragments of charred timbers came perilously near the fragile planes. Well-nigh blinded and choked by the dust-laden fumes that, caught by the swiftly whirling propeller, were dashed into the lieutenant's face, Drake lost all idea of what the *Mosquito* was doing—whether the vessel was soaring or plunging disabled towards the sea.

Then it was like a train emerging from a tunnel; the blackness began to give place to subdued light, till with a whirr the aero-hydroplane cleft the edge of the cloud of smoke, and gained the pure air beyond.

The *Mosquito* was still ascending, but in her rear, and towering many feet above her, rose the dense pillar of vapour that formed the funeral pyre of the ill-fated *Serena*.

Describing a sharp downward curve, the *Mosquito* descended till she floated on the surface of the agitated water. Just beyond the fringe of the smoke were the boats of the *Cerberus*, tossing aimlessly upon the angry waves, the oars either trailing listlessly over the side, or else projecting at different angles over the gunwales. Their crew, although unharmed by the explosion, had literally been beaten to the bottom of their respective craft, and were still too dazed to realise what had happened. But of the *Serena* and her lawless gang no trace was to be seen, save a few pieces of timber floating on the surface. Juan Cervillo and his piratical companions had avoided capture, but no more would the modern buccaneer take toll on the high seas. He had vowed that he would never be taken alive. Unscrupulous though he was, this vow he had faithfully performed.

CHAPTER XXIII

FORESTALLED

"STEADY on your helm!" exclaimed Drake. "There's a man in the water—two, by Jove!"

The *Mosquito* was moving slowly under the action of her aerial propeller towards the scene of the catastrophe. The lieutenant decided to make a search for any possible survivors, then take the boats of the *Cerberus* back to their parent. Should there be any members of the pirate crew still alive they might be able to give valuable information respecting the fate of Fielding and Cardyke—and here they were: two scorched and blackened men, clinging in a half-dazed manner to a fragment of wreckage.

"Steady on your helm," repeated Drake. "Stand by with a boathook, there. Well done, Jenkins!"



HE STRUGGLED DESPERATELY TO THROW HIMSELF
ONCE MORE INTO THE SEA.

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[Illustration: HE STRUGGLED DESPERATELY TO THROW HIMSELF ONCE MORE INTO THE SEA.]

Jenkins by a dexterous movement succeeded in lifting one of the survivors on board—a man almost destitute of clothing, and without hair left on his head. It was Da Silva.

The Spaniard was just able to realise that he was in the hands of his foes. He struggled desperately to throw himself once more into the sea. The effort was too much for his weakened energies, and, uttering a malediction, he expired in the arms of his rescuer.

The second pirate was one of the ordinary seamen, a massive-framed Catalonian, who, having an inkling of Cervillo's desperate resolve, had jumped overboard a few seconds before the explosion took place. Ere he regained the surface the worst of the disaster was past, but the concussion temporarily deprived him of his senses. At length, practically blind and deaf, he struck out feebly until his hands encountered the piece of floating wreckage. Here he clung till rescued by the crew of the *Mosquito*.

In vain Drake cruised over the fatal scene in search of more survivors. There were none. "Easy

ahead," he ordered, and the little craft headed towards the boats, whose crews, now recovering from the effects of the terrible detonation, were proceeding to pull back to the *Cerberus*.

"Any casualties?" asked Drake, anxiously.

"None, thank Heaven," replied Lieutenant Thompson, who was in charge of the expedition. "All pretty well shaken up though, by Jove!"

"Stand by for a tow," continued Drake, and a minute later the boats were sedately following the *Mosquito*.

"One survivor, sir," replied Drake as he came alongside the scout. "He's pretty bad; but we can question him later. He's only fit for the sick-bay at present."

"That rascal Cervillo has saved us a nasty job," remarked the captain. "But what's become of the *Impregnable*, I wonder?"

"We'll find out later, sir," replied Drake, confidently. "This rascal will be glad to save his hide."

The *Mosquito* was soon hoisted on board. Signals of recall were sent to the other aero-hydroplanes, and within half-an-hour the little craft were snugly housed on the deck of their parent ship. For the present there was nothing to be done; everything depended upon the information that might be forthcoming from the rescued pirate. Until this was obtained the captain of the *Cerberus* refrained from announcing by wireless the destruction of Cervillo and his rascally companions, otherwise there might be an unwelcome order to rejoin the commodore, or else return to port.

At length the pirate recovered sufficiently to be questioned. For some time he stubbornly refused to speak, until it was pointed out to him that it would be a decided point in his favour at the trial that was bound to ensue should he give all the information in his power. Then it was that he related the circumstances of the abandoning of the pirate-cruiser with the greater portion of the crew and the hostages still on board.

The Spaniard was quite unable to give the position of the cruiser when the *Serena* steamed away. All he could give was the number of days that had elapsed and the yacht's rate of speed.

Promptly the *Cerberus* headed northwards on the look-out for the stolen cruiser, and Drake obtained his commanding officer's permission to take out the four aero-hydroplanes for reconnoitring purposes at day break on the following morning.

"I've had permission, Thompson!" he exclaimed, gleefully. "I feel confident that I'll pick up Fielding and young Cardyke before another twelve hours are up. If I don't capture the old *Impregnable* I'll eat my——"

"Steady, old man," remonstrated Thompson. "Remember you're already pledged to eat one. Don't forget the cricket match."

Long before the bos'un's mate's whistle piped "Clear lower deck" the four aerial craft were spreading fanwise in a northerly direction in search of the elusive *Impregnable*; but although a wide "field" was kept under the closest observation, and constant messages were exchanged between the *Mosquito* and her consorts, the operations were futile. Shortly after midday the aero-hydroplanes were recalled in order to recharge accumulators and replenish petrol tanks, and also to give the wearied though enthusiastic men a well-earned rest.

But Drake and slumber were not good messmates when work was to be done. Something kept on prompting him to persevere with his quest; the self-confidence that was so characteristic of his personality urged him on—to him was to be the honour of solving the mystery of the missing cruiser.

In answer to Drake's earnest representations the captain of the *Cerberus* consented to another flight with the aero-hydroplanes that evening, on the understanding that volunteers only should be taken to comprise the crews of the aerial scouts.

"I can rely upon enough men to make one crew at least, sir," replied Drake; but to his astonishment and immense satisfaction not only did every member of the complements of the four aero-hydroplanes signify their willingness to forgo their "stand-easy," but every seaman on board qualified as airmen literally clamoured to take part in the search.

Just before three bells in the second dog-watch (7.30 p.m.) the *Mosquito* was hoisted out; the *Gnat*, *Tse-tse*, and *Flea* followed in quick succession, and, rising gracefully from the surface, glided on their renewed quest.

Anxiously Drake scanned the horizon. Nothing except a waste of grey water, flicked here and there by white foam, was to be seen. The sun, low in the heavens, shone from a cloudless sky. There was every indication of a spell of fine but cold weather.

Five miles on the *Mosquito's* port hand the *Gnat* was flying steadily at an immense height, the other two aerial craft being a considerable distance on the *Mosquito's* starboard quarter. If

anything, Drake's craft was well in advance of the rest of the little flotilla. With monotonous regularity the wireless reported "Nothing in sight" till the sun was on the point of setting.

"There she is, by Jove!" exclaimed Drake suddenly, pointing to a mere dot on the horizon.

"You're right, sir," replied the chief petty officer. "Leastways 'tis a lump of a ship, and we don't look to see big craft in these parts." Ordering the rest of the flotilla to concentrate and follow the *Mosquito*, Drake headed "all out" towards the distant vessel, and before another quarter of an hour had passed he was able to announce that it was the *Impregnable*, and that she was steaming slowly stern foremost, evidently badly damaged.

In obedience to signals the three aero-hydroplanes followed the movements of their leader, and came to rest on the surface of the sea. Bearings were taken of the position of the oncoming cruiser, and the four amphibians lay close till darkness set in.

Under ordinary circumstances Drake ought to have immediately reported the discovery of the *Impregnable* to his commanding officer, and wait till the *Cerberus* came up to take possession of the pirate-cruiser. But Drake had confidence in his ability to achieve his object. Each of the aero-hydroplanes carried ten men. Allowing two to remain on board there were thirty-two available for the task of capturing the much-sought-after prize. Drake realised that the business would be a comparatively simple matter, since only a small percentage of the original crew of the cruiser remained, and that they were without officers and greatly demoralised by the hardships and perils they had undergone.

As soon as darkness set in, the four vessels, with their air-planes securely folded alongside, formed up in line-ahead, and stole cautiously towards the oncoming ship. To Drake's surprise, the *Impregnable* was showing steaming-lights, a circumstance quite contrary to the procedure hitherto followed by the modern buccaneer.

Turning hard-a-port the flotilla eased down, and waited for the giant cruiser to pass.

"Looks like a bloomin' ghost, sir," remarked Jenkins to his superior. "Not doin' more'n six knots at the very outside, and as quiet as a corpse."

"We'll liven her up in due course," replied Drake. "Now, lads, no cheering or unnecessary noise. No shot to be fired till I give the word. Then a good old British cheer, and drive the rascals down below. Easy ahead, there!"

Without a sound, save the muffled pulsations of the motors and the rhythmical swish of the waves against the vessel's knife-like sterns, the four craft followed the huge cruiser, like a shoal of threshers after a whale. Not a light was visible on the *Impregnable*, not a sound of a human voice came from her decks. It was like a mountain of floating steel ploughing its way aimlessly through the waste of night-enshrouded sea.

Satisfied that there was no watch kept in the foremost part of the vessel, Drake ordered speed to be increased till the *Mosquito* lay alongside the cruiser's port bow, with the *Tse-tse* just astern. The *Flea* and the *Gnat* made fast to the *Impregnable's* starboard bow. There was just enough of the *Tse-tse's* and the *Gnat's* after ends projecting beyond the cruiser's stem to establish communication between the different aero-hydroplanes, while the cruiser's "overhang" for'ard prevented any possibility of their being seen from the *Impregnable's* fo'c'sle.

Drake gave the signal, and, revolver ready for instant use, led the way, clambering agilely up the steep steel sides by means of one of the torpedo-net booms. Unseen and unheard he gained the deck, followed by the rest of the boarders, till the thirty-two men formed up silently under the lee of the foremost barrette.

Going aft to reconnoitre Drake discovered a light on the after-bridge, for, since the cruiser was going stern foremost, she was being navigated from that position instead of from the fore-bridge.

A hasty examination of the fo'c'sle revealed two men stationed over the hatchway. These were sternly summoned to surrender, but not complying with sufficient alacrity to satisfy Drake, they were promptly thrown to the deck, gagged and secured.

This done, the lieutenant led his men aft. Twenty were detailed to secure the hatchways and companions; the rest, headed by Drake himself, made a sudden rush for the after-bridge.

There was now no need for silence. With a lusty cheer the British bluejackets tore up the steep ladder. The commotion brought two or three muffled figures from the shelter of the wheel-house.

"Surrender in the King's name!" shouted Drake.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" replied Cardyke's well-known voice.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COCKED HAT

To say that Lieutenant Douglas Drake was flabbergasted would not do justice to the state of his mind. In the very hour of his triumph, when the credit of recapturing the stolen cruiser seemed absolutely assured, the fruits of victory were snatched from his grasp by a midshipman. It was humiliating, but Drake was a true sportsman, and, stifling his feelings of disappointment, was genuinely hearty in his congratulations to his junior.

"Where's Fielding?" he asked, as soon as Cardyke had briefly explained the situation.

"Down below. He's had a nasty time of it, sir; but he's doing wonderfully well."

"I'll go and see him. By the bye, we knocked over a couple of fellows just now. Who were they?"

"A couple of watchmen from the tug *Hekla*," replied the mid. "It's rough luck on them. I stationed them to keep an eye on the prisoners. They can't speak English, so they're wondering what has happened?"

"I'll see that they are released," replied Drake. "Now I'll go below and pay Fielding a visit. I mustn't stop long, or the *Cerberus* will be getting anxious. We'll report you by wireless, and stand by till daybreak, if you wish."

"Aren't you taking command, sir?" asked Cardyke.

"Taking command? Why, no, my boy; you've done excellently up to the present. This is your business, and you rightly deserve the credit. I envy you, Cardyke; 'pon my word I do."

"Better take command, sir," replied the midshipman, wearily. "I've only had three hours' sleep the last forty-eight hours, and there's only enough fuel to last a day and a half. If it weren't for you turning up we'd soon have been in an awkward fix."

"All right, then, Mr. Cardyke," assented Drake. "I'll relieve you at your request. Mr. Domer," he continued, addressing the senior, "will you please take sufficient hands to man the boats, and return to the *Cerberus*? I am keeping the rest of the men on board the *Impregnable*. I will hand you a written report for Captain Dexter before we part company."

* * * * *

When Cardyke turned out after a solid sixteen hours' sleep he found that the *Impregnable*, once more under the White Ensign, was in tow of the *Cerberus*, en route for Halifax. The trials and tribulations of Juan Cervillo's hostages were over. Already the momentous news of the fate of the notorious pirate and the recapture of the terror of the Atlantic had been flashed abroad, and once again peaceful merchantmen might pursue their way without an ever-present fear of capture by a daring and unscrupulous modern buccaneer.

* * * * *

Two months later the long-postponed dinner given by the Fifth Division to their successful rivals of the Sixth took place at a popular Portsmouth hotel.

Lieutenant Player was amongst the first to arrive.

"Well, you fellows," he exclaimed, as he laid a cocked-hat case on a chair. "Drake's not turned up yet?"

"No," replied Cosham, of the Kestrel. "Going on with the business, Player? It's rubbing it in a bit thick, isn't it?"

"I don't know about that," replied Player. "This has nothing to do with Drake's disappointment. If it had I for one would not take a rise out of him."

"He's taking it very well," remarked Cosham. "Blessed if I can quite understand it—and a fellow with influence behind him, too."

"He deserves promotion in any case, influence or no influence," added Peel. "Fielding's promoted—lucky beggar—and has been specially commended for gallantry. Young Cardyke is made sub., and Drake gets nothing. I really don't think we ought to——"

"Good evening!" exclaimed Thompson, putting his head inside the door. "Heard the news? Of course you haven't."

"Fire away!" replied the group of officers.

"Drake's away on leave. Coming in by motor for this little function. He told me to open any wires, and forward any letters that might be sent to him. Acting under instructions I opened a telegram, and what do you think it was?"

"Can't say," replied Player. "Has he scratched for to-night?"

"No. A wire from young Tregarthen—he's at the Admiralty, you know. The secretary told him that Drake is appointed commander, and receives the D.S.O."

"Good luck to him!"

"Now you can carry on with your little joke, Player," said Thompson.

"I will. But, I say, Drake will see his promotion in the evening paper. Can't we prevent him, and spring it as a surprise?"

"You'll have to look pretty sharp. Let the others know, and give them the tip. Here's Fielding."

Lieutenant Fielding, who had practically recovered from his wound, came up at this moment, followed by his shipmate, Sub-Lieutenant Cardyke. Both were cordially greeted, for this was the first opportunity the majority of the officers present had to welcome their comrades on their return to England.

"I am glad to hear the news about Drake—I thought he was being treated a bit shabbily. If it hadn't been for him we shouldn't have had a leg-up," said Fielding, when Thompson informed him of his chief's promotion.

"Stand by, here's Drake," exclaimed someone.

Drake was low-spirited. The iron of disappointment had eaten into his soul. But with praiseworthy self-restraint he concealed his feelings. It seemed hard that with the opportunities offered him he should have failed to make his mark, and doubly hard that his subordinates should be signalled out for promotion, while he, as far as he knew, was slightly passed over. Nevertheless he offered his sincere congratulations to Fielding and Cardyke. He was not a man to repine when others deserved and received advancement.

At length the company sat down. Amongst the guests were General Oki, and Hokosuka, and Mukyima, who had purposely journeyed down from London for the festive occasion; and the Japanese, who had played such a prominent part in the unlawful commission of the *Impregnable*, came in for no small share of attention.

After the customary toasts had been duly honoured, the head waiter appeared bearing a covered silver dish. A tense silence fell upon the jovial company. Those who knew what was about to happen seemed to exercise a magnetic influence over those who did not.

Then the string band burst forth into the strains of an old popular refrain, "Where did you get that hat?"

Simultaneously the waiter whisked off the cover, and on the dish reposed a naval officer's cocked hat.

A roar of hearty laughter greeted its appearance. Thompson, Fielding, Cardyke, and one or two others looked grave, wondering how Drake would take it; but to their relief the victim of the practical joke, flushing slightly under his bronzed skin, rose to his feet, and, with a reassuring smile, raised his hand to command silence.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I will not attempt a speech. If I did I should say what I didn't mean to say, and leave unsaid what I meant to say. But I see you have not forgotten to remind me of that little failing of mine on the occasion of the match which this gathering is celebrating in its customary manner. It will not be said that a Drake is not a man of his word. I promised to eat my hat; I will do so. Will you kindly pass the article round to show that there is no deception?"

The practical jokers began to look unduly anxious. They never expected Drake would have taken the matter so calmly. Perhaps he had been warned, and had prepared a counter-plot? He had. Producing a small parcel, Drake cut the string, and unwrapped the paper. Within was a small replica of a lieutenant's cocked hat, faithfully executed in confectionery. Inside were written the words, "My hat!"

Having passed the edible model round for inspection, Drake, amid the applause of his comrades, gravely proceeded to eat it.

As soon as Drake had completed his meal, Thompson stood up.

"Gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "I think it only right that we should signify our satisfaction at the way in which a Drake keeps his word, by giving him a little certificate of his—er—his conduct. Allow me, sir, to present you with this."

And leaning over the table Thompson handed the newly appointed commander the momentous telegram.

Drake took it, hesitatingly, as if suspecting another joke at his expense, looked at it casually, then again intently.

He tried to speak, but no words came from his agitated lips. He sat down.

"Gentlemen!" shouted Thompson, in stentorian tones. "A toast: Commander Douglas Drake, D.S.O., and the heroes of 'The Stolen Cruiser.'"

THE END

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{Transcriber's Notes:

The following misprint has been corrected:

{The shock of the collison} -> {The shock of the collision}

Obvious punctuation/spelling errors were corrected without note.

}

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STOLEN CRUISER ***

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