

Salvage

by Roy Norton, 1869-1942

Published: 1928
in »The Popular Magazine«



Captain Drake again proves, and this time most brilliantly, his right to the title: "The Opportunist." With remarkable sagacity he scents an opportunity on the wind.

Piræus, that historical port of Greece, lay drenched and sweltering in sunshine. Its great water front, whence galleys had sailed bravely forth in ancient days, was packed with shipping, most of it idle; for trade was in the doldrums. Docked between two big "smoke boats" lay the very trim and neat steam schooner, MALABART, Captain Eli Drake, owner and commander; and there was nothing in the MALABART's physical appearance to indicate that she, too, was yawning for a cargo of any sort, or to any port, though the charter rate might be so low as to barely pay expenses. Captain Drake, whose sobriquet of "The Old Hyena" had survived the days of sail, was ashore, harassed by cares.

He had been eating into capital to keep his ship in commission, and his crew, which he had gathered in the course of many years, from being disbanded. He prized his crew and, after his ship, they came first in his affections. In quest of cargo—any cargo—he had scoured the port, made daily trips over the short drive to Athens, and spent liberal sums on cablegrams to many agents, without avail. He felt like cursing the big steamship companies, which, with their army of organized runners, were rapidly driving the independent owners and tramps off the seas.

In a mood of sullen obstinacy he had tramped almost the length of the docks when, unexpectedly, he heard the clatter of a cargo winch; and the sound was so unusual that, like a magnet, it drew him in its direction. He found a rusty tramp that was lading.

“Now what—how did I miss getting that cargo?” he reflected. “The RHODIALIM, eh?” And after a moment’s thought he muttered: “Oh, yes. Belongs to that firm of Hakim & Letin. Got her and one other schooner, doing mostly Levantine and East African coast trade. Wish I could have got that cargo. My luck’s out.”

Without thinking, or observing that at the dock gates there was a watchman, who, at the moment, had his back turned and was in voluble altercation with one of his countrymen, Captain Eli strolled inward. He finally halted, and with hands in pockets stared, suddenly discovering something else that made him curious.

“That’s blamed funny!” he thought. “Big cases marked *Mining machinery*, but a couple of stevedores chuck ’em into the slings as if they were empty. Also cases of merchandise put up like heavy prints that seem just as light, and as—Good Lord! Up there on the bridge! If that ain’t Bill Morris, I’m dotty. So he’s got a ship out here, eh, after it got too hot for him about everywhere else on salt water! Lost two ships in the Pacific trade, under mighty suspicious circumstances, and had his ticket taken away, last I heard of him. Ummh! Ten or twelve years ago, that was. So he’s skipperin’ this craft, eh? If him and me hadn’t locked spars two or three times, I’d go over and rile him up with a leetle light, airy banter. I guess he’s—”

“Hey you! Got any business here? How’d you get past me at the gate?” a voice disturbed him. And although the fellow spoke bastard Greek, Drake, who, with a sailor’s facility, had picked up considerable of the tongue, understood, and turned to see the watchman glowering at him.

“Why?” he asked. “Can’t anybody come onto your dock? Nothing secret about it, is there?”

The watchman sputtered something about none without a pass from Hakim & Letin being allowed in, and somewhat peremptorily ordered Drake to clear out. Not being accustomed to such treatment, disgruntled, affronted, but recognizing the weakness of his position and the futility of retort, Drake turned and, swearing under his breath, obeyed.

It is possible that the episode might have passed from his mind entirely, but for an encounter that followed some hours later, when, just as he was turning toward the MALABART, a man whose face bore the almost indelible stamp of the engine rooms of ships, with grease worked deeply into the pores of the skin, respectfully touched his cap peak and accosted him in fairly good, though accented, English.

“Captain Drake,” he said. “Excuse me, sir, for stopping you, but I am a good man out of work, and want a job on your ship, sir.”

“Sorry, my man, but we’re full up,” Captain Eli replied. “Too full,” he added, and would have proceeded on his way, had not the applicant insisted.

“I am good man, sir. First-class engineer; but I would take anything in your engine room. Because me, I have big family, and ships are all full now, it seems to me, sir. I lose job when not my fault. Not at all. When I took engines of ship RHODIALIM anybody tell you they scrap heap. I make ’em good. And now, without word, since that Captain Bill Morris come, I am fired. He say have his own engineer and—”

“Huh? What’s that?” Captain Eli, who had been slowly moving forward with the insistent one at his side, stopped and stared at the man. “Do you happen to know the name of the new engineer?”

“It is Simmons, or Simons, or something like that.”

Drake’s mouth pursed itself as if to whistle an exclamation, and for a moment he stood absent-mindedly staring at the stones beneath his feet. But his thought ran: “Simmons! Simmons! That was the engineer of the ship that Bill lost last, and he was one of the chief witnesses at the insurance investigation. Something funny about this business!”

He abruptly started away, saying as he did so: “You come on board with me, and I’ll learn if there’s anything can be done. Let me see your ticket.” And then, a moment later: “Beltramo—Giuseppe Beltramo is your name, eh? And your ticket shows a long, clean record. No wonder they didn’t want you on that boat. Never mind the questions, now. I’ll ask all the questions myself.”

As a rule the relations between Captain Eli Drake and his chief mate, William Catlin, were of two separate characters, inasmuch as afloat they observed the distinctions in station and Drake brooked no interference; but it was well known that ashore they were more intimate than brothers usually are, and confidants in nearly everything. Hence, when the commander sent for Catlin upon his arrival aboard, and on his entry into the cabin addressed him as “Bill,” Catlin thought: “Something’s turned up.” Aloud he said:

“Landed something, skipper?”

“Landed enough to set me to a heap of thinking, Bill,” Drake said. And then he bent forward and in a confidential tone told of his experiences, ending with: “It seems to me there’s some sort of a job being put up by Hakim & Letin; and—well, there might be some way for us to make something out of it.”

“Sort of an opportunity, eh?” Catlin grinned, remembering that the Cape Cod man had earned the reputation of being an opportunist. “Maybe you can see one, but I can’t. Don’t mind my thick-headedness. I can get anything when it’s explained, all right.”

But Drake seemed to have become absorbed in some thought of his own. He stared absently through the cloud of pipe smoke; and finally chuckled, as if he had reached a solution of some problem.

“I think I sort of grab an idea,” he said at last, getting to his feet. “You’re a hell of a good friend, Bill, but as a helper in working out a puzzle you don’t amount to much. Never mind. Think I got it, myself. So just talking it over with you did have some use, after all. You go down and keep that feller I brought aboard interested, while I slip below and see the chief. Most likely be in his cabin, I expect.”

They went out together and Drake sought the engineer.

“Forbes,” he said to that gray-haired veteran. “Can you find something for an engineer out of a job to do for a few days?”

“Can’t find enough to do myself, let alone make work for a new man. If this keeps up—Hold on. While I think of it, that chap Flint, my third, asked me to-day if I thought there was a chance for him in the navy. Now if he got a month off to go to the nearest place he could pass his examinations and file his application—”

“The sure-enough right thing! Let him take a month, and put this feller on until Flint comes back. Come on up topside and talk to him.”

The result of the conversation was that two men, at least, were made happy that evening—Flint, who had got unexpected leave for a month, and Beltramo, who had got a temporary billet.

But Drake was not on the ship when the shift was made. In the roughest suit of clothes he could muster he had gone ashore and made his way to a not too-clean bar, where he knew that pilots were wont to gather. There he patiently waited for the arrival of one he knew. The man came at last, and Captain Eli drew him into a little private room at the rear.

“Christophe,” Captain Eli said, “I have done you a favor once or twice, and you’re the kind of man that likes to repay. Well, the time has come when you may be of use. Now first, you’ve got to keep your mouth shut—not one word—not one word to anybody, not even your wife, of what we say here in this room.”

The pilot, whose face was seamed with years and sea service, promptly lifted his hand and swore an oath that would have satisfied any band of conspirators that ever existed.

“First, you know this sea as well as any one, I take it?”

“By Heaven! Better than all save one or two. Was I not a fisherman in these waters when old enough to float? I know every foot of it and every reef, and every island and—”

“Good!” Captain Eli interrupted. He leaned across the little table between them and lowered his voice. “Christophe, if you were going to sink a ship that was supposed to be bound eastward—say for Jaffa—where would you do it?”

For a moment the pilot’s mouth hung open and his eyes were wide, as if he feared for Drake’s sanity.

“But, sir, captain—you—you are not going to sink—You don’t mean that—”

“No, of course not! I sink nothing. But you think it over carefully and answer my questions,” Drake continued. And the pilot, still wondering, slowly lowered his eyes, shut them as if to ponder such a case, and then asked: “What time of year, captain?”

“This time of year,” Drake replied.

And again the weather-beaten old pilot shut his eyes and thought.

“Listen, sir,” he said in his quaint but adequate English. “Many things one must think of. If mens want to sink ship, but not drown anybody, they must be not too far from land for open boat, eh? Must be some place where not too much danger big seas for small boats, eh? Must also be some place where nobody see—away from fishermen’s boats, or cargo boats, or bigger ships—some place lonely this time year. Plenty places man could scuttle ship, but few where get all these things what want, eh? Well, about now most fishin’ boats work”—he got up and walked to a rough map that was tacked on the wall and that was almost solidly smeared

with the trails of many fingers across its surface—"works up about here mostly. In some months, here; some months, there; but now, about here. So no good up there." His finger moved as he talked. "No good through here, because big ships go there. No good there, because small ships what do island trade work in and out. So, here best place for all things. Almost only place which fit all I speak between here and Island of Rhodes. Not too far out of the way. Very good place. Deep water—plenty water and not much chance boat ever drift when hit bottom. Yes, captain, sir, that best place anybody can think of—right about there."

His gnarled finger ceased to move—pointed at open water off Nauplia.

They sat down again and, while Christophe eyed him with perplexed looks, the captain reflected.

"That, you think, is a place a man who knew these waters well would select?" he said. "But a man who didn't know them?"

"God knows where!" the pilot exclaimed, lifting his hands and letting them fall to the table again. "It is the place—the place I say—where one who knew would choose in, say—seven times out of ten. As you, sir, know, there are some thousands of islands."

For half an hour Drake continued to catechize, but without stirring the old pilot from his conclusions.

"Well, Christophe," he said at last, arising to go, "I'm going to hire you for a cruise that may never take place; but I'm taking a little gamble on certain things. You begin work to-morrow, always with your mouth shut. Here's what you are to find out: First, when the RHODIALIM sails. Second, if she's taking a pilot aboard, and if so, who and what he is. And third, you're to report to me aboard the MALABART each evening just after dark. I don't care to have too many notice that you come there. Is it understood? Going wages, of course," he concluded, with Yankee thrift.

"Yes, sir, captain. Very well I understood it, and do what you ask. Maybe some time you tell me why all this, eh?"

"Maybe," said Drake laconically, as he thumped upon the table to pay for his bill. And he left behind him one who was still wondering a little if a certain Captain Drake was all there.

Catlin had a surprise on the following morning, when told that they were going to take on some supplies. And he was still more astonished when Drake asked him to muster the crew and learn whether there was any man aboard who had ever had any experience in diving. Catlin found a stoker who admitted that years before he had worked for a salvage company. Drake told the man to get on shore-going clothes and come with him, and the twain disappeared. The man returned that afternoon accompanied by a truck, which duly unloaded and brought aboard a collection of stuff that made even Catlin scratch his head, and caused conjectures for'ard as to whether The Old Hyena was going into the wrecking business. It consisted of a complete diving outfit—air pumps and all—as well as huge collision mats and handling gear. Drake did not appear until evening, and seemed unusually speechless, and he dined and waited for Christophe.

The latter came at last, grinning with self-satisfaction, and was at once closeted with Drake, who asked: "Well, what did you learn?"

“That RHODIALIM, she sail day after to-morrow. She got most her cargo aboard now. But it’s funny, captain, sir, she got one man who knew this sea same as me. Long time ago he fisherman, then go away, and been down Smyrna where not got too good name. Good man, when sober, but too much drink, so never get good job. That man I see in saloon. He most full and—You owe me thirty drachmas, I spend on him get him fuller, so he talk. Bymeby he borrow fifty drachmas from me, which also you owes me. He brag some and say pretty soon he pay back. Pretty soon, maybe two weeks, he come back with plenty money in pockets. But he shut up like oyster when I ask how make this so much money, and he say nobody but him ever goin’ know that. Now what you wish me make?”

“You go home and keep on keeping your mouth shut. Come aboard at noon to-morrow. We sail to-morrow afternoon.” Drake was suddenly decided in his movements.

“How long be gone from my old woman?” Christophe asked.

“Can’t tell. Maybe one week, maybe two. Not likely to be longer, I think. But all you’ve got to do is to come aboard and I’ll tell you then where we’re bound. I’m going to clear for Smyrna. There will be no secret about that.”

On the following morning when Captain Eli went ashore he took with him the chief engineer. The latter returned with two big machine cases and armored, high-pressure hose, together with a case of fittings. Late that afternoon the MALABART slipped out and away, so palpably light that other sea captains who observed her shook their heads with understanding. A ship putting to sea in ballast in dull times evokes the sympathy of the seawise. Aboard the MALABART there was an air of gloom among the crew.

The captain and owner, walking the bridge, said to Catlin:

“Well, Bill, I’m taking a gamble—thousand to one shot, that’s all.”

When dusk fell the island of Thermia lay close in to starboard, and the man at the wheel stood ready to port his helm and bring her over from the sou’-east-by-east to an easterly course to round the island, that being the route toward Smyrna; but old Christophe, standing behind him, took the wheel, rang for slow speed and groped in toward the island. It loomed up about them, a rocky point, before he said over his shoulder to Captain Eli:

“Here’s where we can lay to, sir. Good anchorage here in this cove, and no risk of wind.”

All that night she rocked there, gently; on a sea that was almost without a swell. And when morning came, to the crew’s further curiosity, she brought in her hook, swung about, and headed due west, plodding along at slow speed and apparently purposeless. A liner came out of the north and gave her a passing hoot. Christophe, eyeing the other boat, said to Captain Eli:

“She be for Messina way, and now not likely be another ship along here for ten days. That’s what those mens know. If I make good guess, that’s why they clear Pirzeus to-day, after big ship go, sir.”

“And when will we make that Island of Hydra?” Drake asked, staring to the westward.

“Just about sunset, captain, sir. Then we slip round it and there are small islands between it and mainland, and entrance into Nauplia which so long and so

big it is like long gulf. We lay behind them islands, sir, and—see what shall see about midnight, I think, sir.”

Drake caught his dry, knowing grin, but did not entirely share his confidence as to the outcome of their strange voyage.

The pilot’s prediction as to progress was fulfilled; just as a hazy sunset colored the tips of the high, bleak mountains behind which the day disappeared, they passed the isle with its abandoned and obsolete fortifications, and hove to in waters that seemed to have been deserted since the time of ancient wars. Night fell with a thin, low-lying fog that seemed to sweep down from the great bastions of Nauplia and rest on the still waters. The stars were obscured and a new depression engulfed Drake.

“The weather’s against us,” he said gloomily, to the storm-beaten old pilot. “They could pass us at a couple of cable lengths and we’d never know it.”

“Not if we were out in a small boat, listening,” Christophe said. “In small boat hear everything. On ship, no—not so quite well. We must put out boat and get out maybe two three miles and wait. Yes, maybe fog too bad, one way, but very good, other. When they pass we get course then slip quiet, very quiet, same way, with MALABART, eh?”

Drake pondered. There seemed no other method. He cursed the fog, but ordered a boat away with Catlin and the pilot aboard, the latter assuring him that he could find his way back to the ship if the night were as black as the pits of Satan. A long wait followed after the boat had disappeared. The gloom of the darkened MALABART, the lack of the bell striking the hour, the absolute stillness of the ship, were all upsetting. The very lifelessness of the protected water where she lay was annoying, for there was not the slightest lapping whisper of a wave against her hull. Down in the engine room even the stokers who kept up steam had been cautioned against the clanging of a furnace door or the ring of a shovel. Had one passed the MALABART within ten yards he might have thought her the ghost of some long-abandoned ship. Drake listened from the outer wing of the bridge, bending over, sometimes with a hand cupped to his ear, until he was tired. He had about decided that his voyage and expenditure had been born of folly, when he heard a faint creak, followed a minute later by another. Then Catlin’s voice below hailed softly, and the boat pulled around to the side ladder, which had been lowered and swung barely above the water.

“All right, sir. She passed so close that she almost ran us down. She had doused her lights and was not doing more than five or six knots. Christophe says there could be no mistake. She was the RHODIALIM, all right.”

The pilot joined in with: “About a mile and a half out. Long row back.”

“It won’t do for us to follow too closely on their heels, anyway,” Captain Eli said. “But are you certain that you can pick her up again, Christophe, in all this murk?”

“I know the course she will take. I think so, with luck,” the pilot said. “They not alter course again. Too much else business think of, I expect. Just keep straight on about five, six miles; then stop. They not want go much farther. Might meet small fishin’ boats out of Nauplia. Not take chance of that, eh?”

Captain Eli stood blockily, a dim figure in the darkness, and seemed making mental calculations.

"I don't think we'd best be in too much of a hurry," he said at last. "We've got to take the chances of being too late. If the crew are in on it with the commander, mate and engineer, there'll be no time wasted. If they're not, the boats won't be ready to lower, and besides he'll have to put up a bluff at saving the ship, to fool the crew. We'd best give them at least an hour and a half."

"That crew, captain, sir, are the scum of the water front," Christophe put in.

"But just the same, we don't know that they're in on it," Drake replied. "Bill Morris don't like to cut too many in on his crooked work. Seems to me more likely that he'll try to stampede 'em into the boats after putting up a great show to save the ship. He'll call on his engineer for steam and announce that they must beach her. The engineer will either pretend to start the engines, or swear that he can't turn 'em over. That would stampede the crew, if they're the sort one picks up in these parts. I think we've got to risk it, and give 'em an hour and a half, certain. After that it depends on how quickly we can pick her up. Beltramo tells me that she's fitted with two sea cocks only into her main hold, because her engines are set well aft. So she's not likely to fill within some hours after they're opened, and I've got it doped out from what I know of Morris' work that's the way he'll put her under, if that's what he intends to do; but it's only little things that are queer which makes me think that's what he's up to. Big gamble, but—"

"Must be. If not, why he not go on to east'ard?" the pilot asked. "I'm sure of it, captain, sir."

But Drake was still doubtful when, still in blackness and running at slow speed, the MALABART nosed out into the sea with the pilot himself at the wheel and keeping an eye on both time and compass as he took up the trail. To the commander's ears it seemed that with the ship so light that her blades were barely under water the thrash of the slow-turning screw must be audible for miles. He saw the wheel slowly revolving under Christophe's hands and sensed that the pilot was now where he thought they might find the sinking ship.

Captain Eli knew that both Catlin, and the second mate, Giles, and nearly all the crew were forward peering into the dimness ahead, but it seemed impossible to see anything on such a night. It was a matter of luck, and he felt a dawning apprehension that his luck was out. Watching the compass over the pilot's shoulder he saw that the ship had made one complete circle and was now holding dead ahead. The wheel again whirled, and they began another circle, a mile deeper in that huge bay surrounded by high and forbidding mountains, when there came a soft whistle from forward and a pattering of bare feet. Catlin's muffled voice came from below:

"Hold her, sir, hold her. I think we've sighted the RHODIALIM about two points off the port quarter."

Drake jumped to the engine tube—it having been arranged that a man was to stand by to obviate the use of bells, inasmuch as the sound of an engine bell might carry far in such stillness—and now the MALABART lost way and came to a stop. The boat, which was swinging barely above the water, was lowered, and Drake, Catlin, and two men tumbled in and fell to the oars. They rowed quietly.

"There she is, sir," Catlin whispered.

Exercising still more caution, they drew down on the dim shape that lay inert and heavy on the water. They came alongside and listened for voices, but caught

no sound. They found the boat davits hanging idly over the water, and went up the falls noiselessly, and stood on the deck. Together they ran here and there, making a search for any human being. Not until then were they confident that she had been abandoned. Listening down the main cargo hatch they could hear the swirling and gurgling of water and the soft bumping of empty cases and crates.

“Get back to the ship, Bill, and rush across all the men that can be spared; so that if that gang are standing by waiting for the RHODIALIM to sink, we can knock ’em overboard. Tell Christophe to bring the MALABART alongside twenty minutes after you’ve gone. That’ll give you time to be back here ahead of her; so if we have to repel boarders, we’ll have the men to do it. Be as quiet as you can and get a move on.”

Catlin slipped away and over the side like a ghost. After he had gone Drake listened attentively for a few minutes, then went back and again bent over the open hatch. Afterward he tried, by leaning far over the rail, to estimate how deeply the scuttled ship had already sunk. It seemed to him that she couldn’t last very much longer. Taking an electric torch from his pocket, he went below. She was a fairly deep ship, of good draft, and he was pleased to observe that the cabin floors were not yet damp. He decided that if the sea cocks were of the diameter given by Giuseppe, the former engineer, she had at least an hour and a half longer to float. He knew that her fires must have been drawn, because Morris would not run the risk of the sound of a boiler explosion drawing attention to the spot, if there chanced to be any boat within hearing.

“He knows this business of scuttling ships better than any one I ever heard of,” Drake soliloquized. “But if he cleared off this time, without waiting to see her under, he made one hell of a mistake.”

He looked at his watch in the light of his torch and meditated: “If Bill moves lively and doesn’t lose his way, he should be back here in half an hour from now. If he loses his way in this blamed fog—I’m afraid we cut it pretty short!”

He climbed back to the deck, went to the port side, from which the boat had put off, and listened, prepared to answer a hail, if Catlin returned groping and had to shout to learn his bearings. Then from the opposite side of the ship, he heard a single telltale thump, as if an oar in clumsy hands had slipped from an oarlock and brought up with a bang.

Drake ran across to the starboard rail just in time to hear a muttered imprecation, in colloquial Greek:

“Quiet there, you lubber! If the skipper and those two pets of his are hanging around, we’ve a fine chance of getting away with anything.”

Drake pursed his lips into a silent whistle, and through his mind ran the thought: “It’s the crew of this craft come back. Probably suspected something and are trying somehow to double-cross Morris, Simmons and whoever they’ve let in on it with ’em. I’m a fool. Should have kept at least one man with me for such an emergency.”

Quick as was his thought, his action was quicker. He jerked off his boots and threw off his jacket. He ran aft in the direction that he was certain the boat must take to board, and leaned over the rail just as a man started to climb upward.

“Get back into that boat and sheer off,” he called down. “This ship is abandoned and is salvage.”

The man hesitated, and a voice from below ordered:

“Go on up! We’ll talk this over on deck.”

“Like hell you will!” Captain Eli declared. “And if any man tries to come on this ship, he’s looking for trouble. Sheer off, if you want a talk. If you want a fight, come ahead.”

The man holding the boat fall climbed up and got a foothold on the strake. He threw a hand inward and caught a rail stanchion and swung upward, encouraged by muttered comments.

“All right! If you will have it—” Drake growled.

And leaned far over, and struck. In the gloom and darkness he had not struck well, and instead of knocking his man overboard into the boat below, he merely shifted him outward just beyond reach of a second blow. Drake threw himself over the rail and hanging by one hand struck again with the other. It was a body blow, but the man was tenacious, clung to the rope, swayed like a pendulum, and, as he swung back, kicked at Drake with his heavy sea boot. But this time Drake’s fist smashed home, and the boarder grunted, loosened his grip on the boat fall, and went slithering down among his companions. Drake climbed back over the rail just in time to feel a stunning smash on the back of his head, and was not until then aware that while he had engaged one assailant, another had climbed up the opposite boat fall with a monkey-like agility, and had come behind him.

Infuriated by the attack, he whirled, seized the man, lifted him as if he were a bundle of waste, and, with a giant’s heave, threw him far outward. The man shouted as he fell, but Drake did not hear the splash; for now he found himself fighting desperately with two other dark shapes who charged silently. Even as Drake fought, he recalled what he had overheard, which convinced him that these men also had no wish to recall Morris and his fellow conspirators. Drake grinned at the humor of that situation—a scalawag crew trying to steal aboard the ship they had abandoned, Morris and his fellows somewhere out there in the dark, himself battling for the salvage like a dog for a bone, and all the time, down there in the hold, the sea cocks flooding the sinking ship.

The number of his assailants increased. They were urged on by the leader in a hoarse mutter:

“He’s alone. He must be alone, because no one else comes. Down him! Down him, because he’s probably got a boat coming!”

Drake fought desperately. Two of his assailants went to the deck and lay there struggling, as they tried to recover their senses. Veteran fighter that he was, the participator in events which had earned for him the sobriquet of The Old Hyena, he used his head coolly, his fists heavily, and as he moved here and there slipped out of the dangers of being cornered and fought for time.

Then came the accident. Retreating, his heels caught over a coil of rope that had been carelessly left on the deck. He struggled vainly to recover his balance, but they were on him like a pack of wolves. And in a fighting, struggling group came to the deck, where they twisted and turned as he tried to regain his feet, was pulled down, tried again, was struck heavily over his eyes, saw stars, shook his head like an enraged bull, and felt himself pinioned to the deck while one of the men he had previously knocked down arrived in time to kick him in the ribs. He was now roaring with fury, heedless of all alarms and thinking of nothing but revenge. He

did not hear the angry shout of Catlin and his men coming on deck. The hold on him suddenly relaxed. He sat up, rubbing his bruised side and clearing the blood from his eyes, heard Bill Catlin's fighting oaths and got to his feet. Both forward and aft shadowy forms of men in flight flitted across the decks. He heard Catlin's shout:

"Don't let 'em get back to their boat! Knock 'em out and hold 'em. They've probably killed the skipper. If Drake is dead, we'll drown the whole damn lot!"

"Yes, don't let 'em get away, Bill," Drake shouted, climbing to his feet and regaining his full senses. "I want 'em. Particularly that fleabitten rat who gave me the boots. Lash 'em up and get 'em together. Quick! The ship may sink under us at any time."

Both he and Catlin ran here and there to bring matters to a conclusion, and within a few minutes there were seven somewhat bruised and battered ruffians thrown into the nearest cabins and, despite their protestations and appeals, locked in. Their leader, who time and again shouted that he was the second mate of the Rhodialim, was the first to whine for mercy. He cried, in comprehensible English:

"You hell of an Ingleeshmans tie us up and put us here to drown. You let us go we make no more of the fights. We go quiet. But capitano, please, sir, not drown us."

"Drown nothing!" Drake growled. "If we see that we can't save the ship, we'll bring you up and turn you loose in your boat, you damn pirates! And listen here! You keep quiet now. We've got no more time to waste on you." He turned to Catlin and said: "Lock 'em in. We've got to fall to, if we want to keep this craft afloat."

They hastily ran out to the deck just in time to hear Giles, the second mate, calling:

"Ship's coming, sir. Shall I flash a light for 'em, or hail?"

Drake himself cupped his hands and called: "MALABART, ahoy! This way!" When he got a response, he ran back to where he had fallen, struck a match, found his electric torch that had fallen from his pocket, and with it as a beacon, directed the MALABART to come alongside.

He called for Beltramo to come aboard to point out the location of the sea cocks, and for the collision mats to be put across. He set lookouts to guard against the possibility of other boarders, and himself took a hand at the work.

"If the others haven't heard the row, it's not likely they'll come back," he said. "But we'll take no chances; we'll keep as quiet as possible, just to avoid any more risks of interference. Move lively now!"

The men of the MALABART ran here and there, their bare feet pattering, and pulled and hauled a huge, unwieldy mat to the outward side. Then they ran its looped lines forward and under the ship's hull. The MALABART sheered off to give play, and the men fell to the lines, heaving and tugging, as the mat went over the side and submerged itself at the point indicated by Beltramo. Throughout their work, running, and pulling, and hauling, that same air of noiselessness, of low-spoken orders, was maintained. In the same muffled silence, filled only with sounds of movement, the other mat was fixed on the starboard side and drawn taut, and the officers, listening intently down the hatchway, were encouraged when the sounds of swirling and gurgling were no longer audible.

A huge cable was brought across from the MALABART, fixed through the for'ard bits. The MALABART's screw turned, and she slowly moved ahead until she took the strain of the tow and headed back for the shelter of the islands where she had lain in wait. Down on the engine-room steps Captain Eli held his torchlight against a water mark and slowly his face lost its grimness. His eyes twinkled when he saw the ship was no longer taking in an appreciable or dangerous quantity of water. He mentally estimated the time, and muttered: "We'll make it, sure, unless she springs another leak, or the mats fail!"

Neither accident came, and in the dawn the MALABART towed her salvage into the sheltered waters, slacked off and came alongside as the RHODIALIM's anchors splashed into the sea. Drake, going across to his own ship, where the cook was serving out hot mugs of coffee, gulped one, and eyed the remnants of the two packing cases that Forbes had opened on the MALABART's deck. Two centrifugal pumps, stocky and powerful, squatted there in the midst of the confusion, and the engineer was directing the fitting of the steam lines.

"We'll lash the ships alongside. It's safe, I think, and it's so still in these waters they'll not chafe," Drake said to Catlin and the engineer. And that maneuver was quickly effected. The pump suckers were hauled across and splashed into the half-drowned hull of the salvaged ship and a few minutes later two great streams of water were pouring steadily into the sea. When daylight came the diving apparatus was planted on the RHODIALIM's deck, and, guided by a water torch, the man who had abandoned diving made a descent, found the sea cocks and closed them. And now the salvage was practically assured.

It was nearly noon when Drake said to Catlin:

"Now we'll go below and get at the bottom of this business. We'll have a little chat with that second mate we've got trussed up."

They brought the man up to the deck. He was sullen, cowed, and palpably frightened. Drake regarded him coldly for a full minute, frowning before he said:

"We brought you up to get at the truth of this. Why did you come back to the ship? Did Morris send you?"

The man started to evade, to stammer, to make palpably false statements until Drake threatened with:

"Stow that guff! The only chance you've got is to come across with a clean yarn. If you do that, you'll get away clean. Now quit your waving the hook, or back below you go, until I can hand you over to the shore police in Piræus. If it suits you better to talk Greek—Christophe, come here and tell me what this man says. I want to get it straight."

Christophe came, added his own urgings to overcome the man's reluctance, and then listened with a dry grin to a voluble confession. Now and then he interrupted with a question, and although Drake understood the gist of the mate's words, Christophe finally turned and in his own way told what he had learned.

"Thees man, he think maybe he and these other mens can maybe get lots of little things like chronometers and glasses and such what left behind; so after lost Captain Morris boat in fog, they row back see if she still afloat, and come aboard. He swear he not know anything about how she sink on purpose. Engineer what Morris frien' run on deck, yell she sprung big leak, and Morris make fuss, and then say no hope and mus' take to boats. When these man come aboard and find

you, they thinks maybe ship not sink after all, and if they can get her back they make lot of money for save her. So, fight like hell. He swear that all he know. Maybe he spik truth, I think so.”

Drake stared at the man for a moment. Then, with apparent irrelevance, he asked Christophe:

“How do people go by land from Nauplia to Piræus, and how long does it take?”

“Road over the mountains, sir. Easy go. But take maybe two, three days.”

“Telephone, I suppose?”

“Sure, captain, sir. Nauplia fine city. One time capital of Greece and—”

“Good! You tell this man we’re going to keep ’em aboard the MALABART until we get ready to make it to Piræus, and that nothing will happen to them, unless they try to leave before we get ready for them to go.”

The mate of the RHODIALIM understood, and broke into profuse promises; but to make certain that they could not escape, Drake had all the boats of the MALABART brought around to the salvaged ship, moored, and the oars taken away, before he liberated his battered prisoners and told the cook to feed them.

Catlin was still wondering what Drake had in mind when, a few days later, the RHODIALIM was ready to put to sea under her own steam. Then Drake said to his mate:

“Mr. Catlin, you take Beltramo and whatever scratch crew you need for the engine room and ship, and go aboard the RHODIALIM and follow us to Piræus; but first have the boat that scum came in brought around, chuck in grub and water enough to take them to Nauplia, then chuck them in after it and tell ’em to go and be damned to ’em.”

The mate’s wonder ceased on the day when the two ships came to the crowded docks of the Greek seaport, amid the babbling exclamations of those who recognized the salvaged ship. Drake called to Catlin to accompany him, and they walked from the docks to make their official reports.

“We ought to get a neat bit of salvage money out of this trip,” Catlin said.

“We’ll get that all right. And I’m going to cut it up—half of it, anyhow, among every man that was with us. Christophe ought to get a good chunk, and so should Beltramo.”

“But what I can’t get is why you held that gang of beach combers until we were ready to come here,” Catlin said, observing that The Old Hyena was in high good humor.

“I waited to give Bill Morris and his pals time to get back and swear to their story of how the ship was lost,” he said. “It’s about time they, as well as Hakim & Letin, were put out of business.”

