

DEVIL'S CARGO

By
**CAPT. FRANK H.
SHAW**

The stake was ten million in gold. Life was cheap for that—but when the Sea-Devil made his desperate play with a gun in his hand and a swarm of cut-throats at his back, he overlooked one small detail—the mad laughter of a fear-crazed man.



HE warning bell had rung aboard the R. M. S. *Coristan*, and the friends of the passengers were flocking ashore. The marine superintendent, standing on the landing stage, with his open watch in his hand, glanced quickly to where the roadway led up into the city's teeming heart, and stamped his foot impatiently. The gangways were drawn ashore one by one; first the steerage, then the second-class, until only the one reserved for saloon passengers remained. Pilot, captain and officers had taken up their positions on the navigating bridge; the surgeon, having examined every intending passenger, was resting behind a ventilator as he twirled a cigarette; and the purser was hurrying to and fro with a strange air of having undertaken a bigger job than he could handle.

"What's all the waiting for, mister?" asked a tall, portly man, a Frenchman by his accent, of the second officer, who was following the quick glances of the superintendent's eyes. "Waiting for a passenger?"

"Something more important," said the second officer. "We're carrying out a lot of specie to the New York banks—on account of the general shortage of cash, I suppose. They reckon it at about two millions, I fancy."



The tall Frenchman walked away as calmly as though two million pounds' worth of specie were an everyday matter, but just as he turned, Miles Freedom, the second officer, pursed up his lips into a soundless whistle.

"By Jove!" he said suddenly to himself. "You here! That's more than a little fishy, or I'm a Dutchman. And yet when I saw you last, my friend, your hair was yellow, and now it's brown. Funny thing! But that's easily settled."

He beckoned a quartermaster.

"You see that gentleman there, Smith? Get a roll of canvas out of the sail-locker, put it on your shoulder, and walk past him. Let the canvas brush his head slightly—as if it was an accident, you understand? Look sharp about."

"Yes sir, very good, sir."

The quartermaster vanished, to return a minute later with an unwieldy roll of sail-cloth on

his shoulder. It was very heavy, that was evident, for the sailor staggered along uncertainly, and when he drew abreast of the Frenchman he allowed the roll to swing wildly for a moment before he clutched it tighter and proceeded on his way.

"Look where you're going," cried the Frenchman, glancing around as his hands flew to his hat. Freedom, who had witnessed the occurrence out of the tail of his eye, smiled quietly.

"Not a bad guess," he thought. "His hair's yellow, right enough, under the wig."

The simple trick had succeeded. With the sharp jerk to his hat, the man's wig had slipped a little to one side, and had revealed a gleam of tawny hair.

No one had noticed the occurrence save Freedom, and he kept his knowledge to himself, but sent his keen eyes roaming over the decks of the liner.

Time after time that inscrutable smile crossed the young officer's face as he singled out the faces he was on the lookout for. Then, as a mutter of sound swept up from the packed landing stage to his ears, he walked briskly to the gangway.

THE crowd had opened out into two orderly bodies, leaving a clear lane between. A score of stalwart policemen were pressing back the more curious; here and there, with hands thrust carelessly into the pockets of their coats, stood detectives from Scotland Yard. Each man fingered a loaded revolver, but appeared quite disinterested.

There was a rumble of heavy wheels now. A great net of knotted rope was draped under the sole remaining gangway, so that if any case of specie should by chance fall from its bearer's shoulder it would be brought up in the meshes and saved from the swift-flowing river. Three heavy drays lumbered down the lane abreast of the steamer. On each dray were seated several armed men.

The guards sprang to the ground, forming into a close ring about the precious freight, and the thick tarpaulins were flung back, revealing the specie cases. Each case was as much as a strong man could conveniently lift, was sealed in a dozen places and bound with iron. Inside each case was

the sum of five thousand pounds in sovereigns.

The stevedores eddied around the wagons, and a steady stream of burdened men started to ascent the sloping gangway. One by one they reached the liner's deck, and following the lead of the second officer, they reached the steel-doored specie-room in the vessel's bowels. The seamen were there in readiness and the cases were stowed away methodically, with as little emotion as though they had been barrels of apples. Only when the last case was stowed did one big quartermaster climb to the very summit of the pile of boxes and yelled:

"I'll be a bloomin' millionaire for a minute, anyhow," and sat in state, until a quick word from the second officer brought him down to the reality of fourteen pounds ten a month and much hard work.

Freedom swung the heavy steel door to and locked the cumbersome portal fast. One after another he tested the massive padlocks, saw that the big main bolt was shot home, and then, with something of a sigh at the responsibility he was incurring, went toward the bridge. Before he left the long white enameled corridor that led to the specie room he cannoned against the tall Frenchman.

"Where's the barber's shop anyhow?" asked the man carelessly.

"Not down here, my friend," answered Freedom with some curtness. "You're a good deal out of your course down this quarter. Up on the saloon deck."

Then Freedom signed his name to the receipt for the specie, carried the document to both captain and purser, and received their signatures, delivered the receipt to those entrusted to receive it, and reported that all was well below.

BEFORE the *Coristan* reached Queenstown it was tacitly conceded on all hands that she had never carried a more popular passenger than M. Jules Ranzone of Paris. In the smoke-room he was the most brilliant raconteur; his unfailing fund of stories kept the entire male complement of saloon passengers in an uproar.

In the great dining-saloon ladies watched him and longed that he would speak to them. Even the gruff old autocrat of the Atlantic, Captain Henderson, unbent several degrees, and had been

so thawed, it was unofficially reported, as to invite Ranzone into the sanctuary of his own cabin, and from that haven had come the popping of corks and the fragrance of peculiarly delightful cigars.

In the officers' mess-room he was persona grata. Even the sailor's forecabin, which is as sacred to the seamen as the cemetery at Lucknow is to white faces, knew him well, and the steerage barman could have told tales of great quantities of bottled beer finding their way to the horny-handed sailors in their watches below.

THE only man who did not share in the general enthusiasm was Miles Freedom, and his messmates chaffingly inquired the reason of his unvoiced hostility.

"I'm not hostile," he protested, always smiling his inscrutable smile, "but I'm responsible for two millions' worth of specie, and I can't let myself go this trip, somehow."

"One would think that you slept with the specie on your chest," grunted the chief officers. "Can't you let your mind rest, man? Why, the gold's as safe in the *Coristan's* strong-room as if it were in the vaults of the Bank of England where it came from."

"Yes, I know," said Freedom laughingly. "That's why I'm so careful about it. By the way, sir, can I have the carpenter and his mate in their spare time? The guard is none too strong."

"Want to make doubly sure? Very well, take 'em, and I hope you'll keep 'em at work. Laziest couple aboard the ship. Think they're necessary to the ship's welfare, but I'll teach 'em a lesson one of these days." The chief officer rolled out on deck and cast a critical look at the weather before turning in. He loved to grumble, had grumbled all his life.

"The old ship would make a fine haul for a pirate, captain," said Ranzone the same night when the men of the saloon had foregathered in the smoke-room. Fancy getting a haul of ten million dollars at one go! Makes me feel inclined to turn pirate myself, so it does."

"Pirates!" sniffed Captain Henderson, "pirates! I'll tell you some yarns about pirates. Now, when I was a lad in the China trade, we—"

"I suppose it would be impossible for a pirate to get a hold of that specie you carry under hatches this voyage?" interrupted a nervous

looking man—who was named James Mackintosh on the passenger list.

"Quite impossible," snorted the skipper. "Look at the impossibilities of it, gentlemen. Each of the cases weighs close on a hundred weight. It was tallied from the bank, it was tallied a hundred times before it reached the ship? an armed guard stands before the door day and night, with instructions to fire his rifle if anyone comes too close, and an attack from the outside is frankly impossible because, to put it simply, there isn't a ship other than a destroyer could catch the *Coristan* if once she showed her heels. Now, as I was saying, about the China Seas—"

"Why, of course, it's impossible," cried Ranzone suddenly. "If you're going to send cold chills down our backs, Mackintosh, with talking about pirates and things, I'm going to bed. I vote we change the subject." And Captain Henderson never told them of his experiences in the China Seas.

IT seemed as though the gods of the air were smiling upon the liner as she ploughed her way across the Atlantic. The saloon contingent rejoiced openly in the possession of Ranzone, whose quick wit and ready repartee had endeared him to all hands. Especially was this the case with the captain. Ranzone formed a habit of accompanying him to his room every day at noon, when the ship's progress was calculated and her position on the chart mapped out.

"I'm quite ignorant of the first elements of navigation," said the Frenchman with a chuckle, "but I guess any blamed fool could make out which way this ship's going. You go ahead, captain, and I'll sit here and envy."

It was about ten o'clock that night that Ranzone knocked at the door of the Marconi house. In answer to the cheerful "Come in" that answered his knock, he entered the little apartment.

"Say, isn't this a wonderful thing now," he remarked easily fingering the litter of instruments that lay about the table. The Marconi operator, a young, fresh-faced boy, frankly delighted with his position, laughed heartily, and then, with an air of suitable gravity, he commenced to explain the intricacies of his calling, passing from battery to valve with the glib tongue of the born

demonstrator.

"That's amazing," commented Ranzone when he had done. "Are you on duty all night, may I ask, mister?"

"Yes. I relieved my opposite number at eight, and I'm on till eight next morning. But there won't be anything doing tonight. We've picked up all the homeward bound ships, and we shan't be in touch with any of the land stations until tomorrow. I might as well be in my bunk as here for all the good I am."

"Well, you've got an easy job," said Ranzone. "Won't you have a drink? I've got a little of the real thing in my flask here." The operator looked longingly at the flask, but he shook his head. "Not allowed in working hours," he said dubiously.

"Then have a cigar," said his visitor. "That can't do you any harm." He produced a well filled case and handed one to Sparks. Striking a match he held it to the end and the Marconi man puffed luxuriously. The Frenchman watched him keenly.

Gradually the youngster's eyes closed sleepily. He brushed his hand over his brow several times, but could not overcome the growing drowsiness. Finally he laid his head down on the table and slept serenely.

"Number one on the list," remarked Ranzone coolly as he dragged the lad back onto the settee and bound his hands.

Then he inserted a gag in his mouth, threw a gay blanket over the form and sat down to the sounding key. The calm night grew alive with the harsh crackle of the mysterious electric spark that flowed from the liner's heart and vanished in interstellar space.

EIGHT bells—midnight—rang out along the liner's deserted decks. Ranzone walked briskly along the saloon deck to the dark spot abaft the hand-steering gear on the afterdeck.

"All here?" he asked quietly, and the nervous looking man, Mackintosh, answered as calmly: "All here, boss."

The Frenchman shone a light on the group of men clustered there. There were about fifty in all, steerage passengers, second-cabin passengers, one or two men in the uniform of stewards and a sailor.

"I suppose things are going well enough,"

said Ranzone. "I called the yacht two hours ago and she said she'd stand by for us. You, Mac, did you see to the crew?"

"The watch below won't waken, that's certain," said Mackintosh with an ugly laugh. "I hocused their drink for them, every man. Bill's giving the watch on deck their doses now. They'll be asleep inside an hour. I'm going along to the lookouts in a minute, and they'll not give any trouble. There are only the two officers on the bridge now.

"And the two engineers down below, of course. The second officer is the only man we can't get at in a hurry. I've tried to give him drink and I've tried to give him cigars, but he won't bite. He's keen, but he won't bother us. I'll slip a knife into his throat if he comes mooning around."

"Good enough, Mac. Now as soon as you hear the engine-room bell ring, make straight for the specie room. Mackintosh, here will have settled the armed guard. Two men must stand outside the second officer's door and if he opens, knife him at once. I'll look after the men on the bridge, and Tomson, there, will see to the engineers. Better have a couple of men with you, Tomson.

"Put on that uniform jacket and the men in the engine room will think you're an officer come down with a message from the bridge. Hit the engineers under the ear and bolt the stokehold door. Stop her when I ring. As soon as the yacht comes alongside, you others break down the specie room door and start carrying the stuff to the gangway. There'll be a chute up from the yacht. I reckon that's about all there is to say."

Further details were settled between the leaders and before one o'clock, on a dark morning all was in readiness for the looting of two million pounds sterling.

The simplicity of the idea was its chief charm.

THERE was little suspicion that any such event was afoot in the mind of the *Coristan's* first officer—Sladen—as he crouched—up—in—the weather corner of the flying bridge and rubbed his eyes. The chief thing in his mind was the consciousness of a very pressing sleepiness that seemed to weigh down his lids as with leaden weights. Instinct more than desire kept him

awake, peering steadily forward over the untroubled sea.

The fourth officer, who shared the watch with his senior, walked to windward.

"Spouse I'd better take a run down to the specie room to see that everything's right, Sladen? Confound these regulations anyhow; as if anything could happen to the bally gold!"

"Yes; better go down," said the senior officer, prolonging his words into a phenomenal yawn.

The fourth officer slipped from the bridge, passed down the wide saloon companionway, descended still farther, and found everything normal in the corridors about the specie chamber. He asked a few questions of the man on watch, to which satisfactory answers were returned.

"Anybody been about?" asked the fourth as he turned away. It was the stock question and required no answer. The sailor, yawning a little, said that no one had been near. Then Spofforth clambered back to the bridge, and with the first officer's sanction, retired to the darkened chart room for a pipe.

The *Coristan* smoked along through the purple night like a dying meteor. The majority of her lights had been extinguished, but here and there a feeble glow made itself manifest. Faint gleams of phosphorescence scintillated from her razor bow; far astern, ghostly and unreal, stretched her creamy wake. The constant splash-splash of exhaust water, the occasional clatter of a shovel in the stokehold were the only sounds that broke the steady mutter of the parted waters and the hissing of the light-flung foam.

Sladen gave himself up to a sleepy feeling. The quartermaster in the wheelhouse steered automatically, for in that placid sea the *Coristan* needed but little guidance. The extra quartermaster was fast asleep on the floor of the wheelhouse. Unsuspecting peacefulness reigned over the *Coristan*.

FROM out the black silence ahead a single light gleamed furtively. It disappeared, to reappear and remain stationary, burning with increasing brightness as the *Coristan* leaped over the intervening space.

Sladen rubbed his eyes, and wondered vaguely why there had been no long drawn hail of

"light on the port bow, sir," from the lookouts. Just at that moment the quartermaster glanced at the clock over his shoulder, leaned forward and struck four strokes on the bell. Contrary to custom, there was no answer from forward. Sladen became angry. He walked briskly to the door of the chart room.

"Spofforth! Spofforth!"

"Hello! Oh, is that you, sir? What's wrong?"

"Go forward and see what the hell's wrong with those lookouts. They haven't reported a light on the bow, and they haven't struck the bell."

Spofforth came out of the chartroom, dashed suspiciously into the rails of the bridge, steadied himself and descended the ladder quietly, for fear of arousing the sleeping captain beneath the bridge.

His foot had barely touched the deck before a dark figure sprang out of darkness and a strong hand clutched him over the mouth. Then something heavy struck him under the ear and he lost interest in the derelictions of sleepy lookout men. Ranzone laid him noiselessly down and climbed the ladder slowly.

"Were they asleep?" asked Sladen, seeing a figure approach. Then he, too, lost interest in his surroundings as a blow felled him to the deck. At the same moment two stout figures climbed the bridge ladders and tackled the two quartermasters in the wheel house. The *Coristan* was completely in the hands of the enemy.

"Look alive now," said Ranzone sharply. "Got that rocket, Tomson? Fire it, then."

A second later a thin line of fire flew upward from the liner's bridge, to burst into a shower of gaily colored sparks in the darkness overhead. Less than a minute later a similar line of fire left the bosom of the sea in the direction of that single steadfast light.

"It's the yacht, right enough," muttered the tall one. "Let him have another rocket. Now then, Tomson, away you pelt to the engine room for all you're worth. I'll look after things here."

TOMSON softly padded down the ladder, and Ranzone followed him, to turn the keys in the two doors of the captain's room and to screw home the heavy deadlights that protected the portholes. The captain of the *Coristan* even if he

came to his senses, which was unlikely in view of the heavy drugging he had had, was out of action.

Men ran nimbly along the decks and flung the heavy storm doors to silently, screwing them home closely, and thus cutting off all fears of interference from the passengers and stewards who slept in the saloons. Other men closed the steerage hatches and the doors of the second saloon.

As Ranzone went back to the bridge a thin whistle ran up the engine room speaking tube.

"Who's there?" he asked quickly, and the voice of Tomson came in answer "We're all right here. Ring her off when you like."

The yacht in the distance now showed a second flare, and began to edge in toward the liner. Ranzone rang the engines to stop, and the steadfast throbbing died away. A hoarse hail came out of the gloom as the yacht crept slowly alongside.

MILES FREEDOM had been restless all that night. When he left the bridge at midnight he felt that something was stirring in the atmosphere, and he paid two visits to the specie room between midnight and one bell. Then satisfied that his own imagination had been distorted, he went to his room and lay down on the velvet covered settee.

It was the sudden ringing of the engine room bell that wakened him.

With the quick action of a sailor, he rolled off the settee and turned on the electric light with one motion. A revolver was in his drawer; he took it out and ran the chambers through his fingers. It was loaded completely. Then he opened his door and was about to step out into the alleyway when the door was flung to violently in his face, with such force that he was stunned for the moment. Recovering himself, however, he attempted to break the door down, but without success, for the shipwrights who had built the *Coristan* had not shirked their work.

Giving up hope of breaking out that way, he suddenly dropped to the deck and squinted through the grating at the bottom of the door. The legs of a man were plain, and without thinking of the consequence, Freedom put the muzzle of his revolver to the grating and fired. There was a snarling cry, and the figure in front of the door

moved away, only to fall crashmgly.

Then Freedom threw all his weight on the door, the lock burst off and he was out in the corridor.

A shot whizzed past his head as he paused, but before the wounded man could fire again the second officer was past him, had felled the second villain and was racing like the wind toward the specie room.

THE uncanny stillness of the ship made him wonder. He had thought that the men he had suspected all along had risen in a body and obtained possession of the ship, with the intention of carrying her to some foreign port where they could get rid of her without trouble. Then he saw that the liner was stopped. He dashed along the corridor that led to the specie room, and here he fell back in astonishment.

The great 'tween-deck doors had been flung open abreast of the specie chamber, and through the yawning orifice could be seen the heaving hull of another vessel.

Lights flickered on her decks. A great chute ran from the *Coristan's* side to the other vessel's hold, and down this were slipping box after box from the specie room.

Forty or fifty men were working like bees, some inside the gloomy chamber passing the heavy boxes out, others carrying them along the deck, others placing them on the chute, while yet other men aboard the second vessel received them and stowed them carefully away.

For less than a minute Freedom observed this, saw the massive door of the specie-room lying flat on the deck, with the broken padlocks beside it, and the armed guard securely trussed to his own rifle with turn after turn of stout rope. Then one of the men saw him as he leveled his revolver.

"Look out!" he cried.

Before Freedom's finger could press the trigger a smashing blow fell on his wrist, and a great grip closed on his throat from behind. It was Ranzone himself who tackled the young officer.

"Fetch that rope along," commanded the Frenchie. "Don't stop, the rest of you. Look alive with the stuff, or else we'll have daylight on us before we get clear."

Someone brought a rope, and the two men

together deftly bound Freedom's feet and hands. The steady rattle and thud of the falling boxes never diminished; the scoundrelly gang worked with all the coolness of born stevedores.

"We'll let you watch, since you're so interested," sneered Ranzone. "There you are, my son. We'll prop you up there, and if you so much as open your mouth, I'll blow the top of your head off with your own gun."

Freedom stared for a little while at the swiftly moving thieves, and then, of a sudden, he burst into loud uncontrollable laughter.

"Stop that, you fool!" commanded the tall fellow. "What on earth are you laughing at?"

"I—can't help it," cachinnated Freedom. "When I'm in a dead funk I always laugh."

"Then laugh quietly."

IF any of the passengers had been aroused by the ship's sudden stoppage, they had, in all probability, put it down as another of the wonders of the vasty deep, and had snuggled down still more comfortably in the blankets.

Down in the silent engine-room a tight-bound engineer glared unspeakable things at another engineer equally tightly bound, and from the stokehold came the clanging of shovels and the usual sounds of work. Tomson, with all an engineer's skill, had rung the telegraph that in liners communicates with the stokehold to keep the steam back, and the stokers, glad of the momentary respite, asked no questions.

From above there came a sullen knocking, as the chief engineer, wakened by the cessation of the steady beat that was to him as his own heart's pulse, pounded upon his locked door. But the conspirators had not overlooked one detail in the gigantic scheme. On the bridge the bewildered Sladen tried in vain to free himself from his bonds; at the foot of the bridge ladder Spofforth lay serenely unconscious of the momentous looting.

The two quartermasters were trussed back to back, and were poisoning the pure night air with their curses. In the fore-castle the watch below slept soundly and dreamlessly; stowed away in various corners the deck watch also snored unconcernedly.

FREEDOM could have kicked himself for the simplicity with which the stunning maneuver had been carried out.

He stood there glaring at Ranzone, who menaced him with cocked revolver and saw, over the Frenchie's shoulder every detail of what was going on. A constant stream of men passed him, with sweat dribbling down their faces, their hands raw and bleeding, from the rough edges of the compact little boxes that held five thousand sovereigns each.

He counted the boxes mechanically—there was nothing else to do—and saw that they were almost all transshipped now. He calculated swiftly that another five minutes would see the last box sent over side, and then he wondered vaguely what would happen next. Would Ranzone shoot him where he stood, lest he should at some future date, bear testimony against him? He hardly thought that likely. If the chief of the thieves were afraid of detection he would need to shoot every soul aboard the *Coristan*, for he would, of course, leave the liner as soon as the work was accomplished, and his absence would in itself be sufficient evidence of guilt.

But it might be that the Frenchie would murder him just for sheer wantonness. Freedom was not a coward, but he began to wonder vaguely what dying was like. He had ceased to trouble about the loss of the gold.

"THAT'S the last of them," said Macintosh suddenly, and the man who had just left the specie-chamber paused to wipe his forehead with a hairy arm. "There's nothing else worth having this trip. If we went in after the ladies' jewelry we'd have the whole ship humming about us in a brace of shakes."

"Now, shall I knock this youngster on the head or not?" asked Ranzone of Macintosh, surveying Freedom sardonically. "Truss him up a bit tighter, Mac, and we'll leave him here to think things over. Now let's get out."

The two last of the criminals disappeared down the chute and Freedom was left alone. He saw the funnel of the yacht rising and falling outside the gaping gangway doors; heard the clanging of the engine-room telegraph, saw her slowly recede, and once again that irresistible fit of laughter came upon him. Still choking with

hysterical mirth, he fell to the deck, and rolled to the gangway.

IT was the chief engineer who battered down this door and charged madly into the hushed engine-room as the dawn broke over the sea and showed the motionless *Coristan* gently rising and falling to the sleepy swell.

Mr. Macpherson was a man of few words on ordinary occasions, but when his astonished eyes showed him his two most trusted engineers trussed like fowls, one to either of the main pillars of the engines, he exploded into fluent Doric and called upon all the gods of mechanism to bear witness to his astonishment. For five full minutes he expatiated on the iniquity of men who would allow the sanctity of their engine-room to be violated; then he thumbed a dozen bearings mechanically, eyed the gauges with an expert eye, and finally cut the engineers loose.

"What's the meanin' o' this?" he asked sternly, as a heavy battering came on the tight-bolted door of the stokehold. The engineers could only gasp and stretch their benumbed limbs, and, not receiving satisfaction from purely animal actions, the chief engineer raced to the bridge.

He released the half-insensible Sladen, rattled down the ladder and tripped over the inanimate Spofforth, and then flung open the door of the captain's room. Captain Henderson roused himself at the entry of the Northern giant, and asked dully what was the row was about.

"Row!" cried the indignant Scot. "Row! Mon, ye're a cool customer. Here's hell wi' the lid off occurin' aboard yer ship, an' ye sleep through it a' like a suckin' wean. Ye've got an unco' easy conscience, Captain Henderson, or else ye keep a brand o' whusky I've sought in vain for lang years. Yer ship's been held up an' held doon, an' held a' ways the gither, or I'm an—aye, I'll e'en gae so far—or else I'm an Englishman."

Henderson struggled feebly into his pants. His head was singing dolefully, and every fibre of him was racked with dead pain. He was reflecting numbly on the liberality of Ranzone in the matter of champagne overnight, when Sladen dashed down from the bridge with his news.

"The ship's looted," gasped the first officer, staring and very pale. "One of the quartermasters has reported that specie-room empty and Freedom

lying trussed alongside the gangway. The gangway's open, and the swine have made a clean sweep of every ounce of gold aboard the ship!"

OUT into the gray day flocked the superior officers of the *Coristan*, and there gazed blankly at one another. The bolted stormdoors, the shuttered portholes, the battered steerage hatch that could be seen from where they stood all bore evidence to the strange happenings of the past night. Then, without a word, the three men turned and ran swiftly to the specie-room.

There was no hope there. The yawning void was all they could see—that and the opened gangway doors. Freedom was rubbing himself into painful activity; the trussed and helpless guard stared blankly at the white-faced men.

"What—what does it all mean?" gasped Captain Henderson, his face worked tremendously. "Good heavens, Macpherson, what does it all mean?"

"A yacht came alongside—" began the second officer, but he got no farther. Before the words were fairly out of his mouth, Captain Henderson leaped along the corridor and gained the upper deck, the others following.

"See anything?" he cried as he reached the bridge and snatched the binoculars—from their box. But there was nothing to be seen on all that heaving gray expanse of water—not so much as a flicker of smoke on the skyline.

"Tell us what you know," commanded Henderson, and Freedom told them what he had witnessed of the occurrence, sparing no single detail.

"That cursed soft-spoken Ranzone!" yelled the skipper when the tale was done. "If ever I see him again I'll rip the lying throat out of him!"

"It was verra clever," commented the chief engineer. "But ye might as weel look for a needle in a haystack as for yon yacht on the Atlantic. I doot we'd better get the engines workin' again, sorr."

Suddenly Henderson sat down, and slow, painful tears dripped from his eyes.

"It's ruin for every man aboard," he said slowly. "It's complete ruin. And more than that, by gad! it's ruin for the company. They'll never trust a boat of this line again. Two million sterling, and all gone!"

"I suspected that man Ranzone from the first," said Freedom, while the rest stood around in silent misery. "I recognized him for the man who was tried and convicted four years ago for the looting of the *Flying Dutchman's* luggage-van. I'd have said so if anybody would have believed me, but—they'd have called me a liar."

"Confound you, sir!" roared the captain in childish spleen. "Why didn't you speak your warnings! We'd have been saved this shameful ruinous thing."

"Because I hadn't any evidence to go on but my own eyes and senses," said Freedom quietly. "I made sure it was the man, and I singled out at least a dozen of his chums. But if I'd spoken, and if I'd been believed, the thing wouldn't have been tried on, and there'd have been a false alarm. As it was—" He burst out into violent laughter that shook him like wind shaking a young forest. Captain Henderson glared at him sternly.

"Shut your fool's head!" he growled, but Freedom laughed on.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said at length, wiping his eyes. "But since I knew no one would believe me, I had to act on my own hook. Come this way."

THEY followed him, openly contemptuous. Down the familiar corridor they went, past the open specie-room door, and so on to the ship's spare refrigerator.

With a dramatic gesture Freedom flung open the lined door, and switched on the light. There, in a compact pile on the floor, stood the missing boxes of gold!

Freedom counted them out aloud, and the gathering crowd could see for themselves that the seals were all undisturbed.

"I was responsible for the stuff in part, sir," explained Freedom, coolly. "I thought I'd be on the safe side, and so I got the carpenters to make duplicate boxes like these. He's a good man is Chips, and so's his mate, and he made them so well you couldn't have told the difference. Then he filled 'em with old firebars and any old thing, covered them with dummy seals", and carried the real stuff here at night when no one was about. After that we put the dummies into the specie-room, and locked it up carefully. Ranzone and his gang have got off with about fifteen tons of carpenter's stores and rubbish, that's all. I'd give something to see their faces when they open the first box."

But history is silent on that point.