

BECKE LOUIS

"PIG-HEADED"

SAILOR MEN

Louis Becke

"Pig-Headed" Sailor Men

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Louis Becke «Pig-Headed» Sailor Men / From «The Strange Adventure Of James Shervinton and Other / Stories» – 1902

Crossing from Holyhead to Ireland one night the captain of the steamer and myself, during an hour's talk on the bridge, found that we each had sailed in a certain Australian coasting steamer more than twenty years before—he as chief officer and I as passenger; and her shipwreck one Christmas Eye (long after), which was attended by an appalling loss of life, led us to talk of “pig-headed” skippers generally. His experiences were large, and some of his stories were terrible even to hear, others were grotesquely humorous, and the memory of that particularly pleasant passage across a sea as smooth as a mill pond, has impelled me to retell some of the incidents I related to him of my own adventures with obstinate, self-willed, or incapable captains.

My first experience was with a gentleman of the “incapable” variety, and befell me when I was quite a lad. I had taken my passage in a very smart little Sydney (N.S.W.) barque bound for Samoa *via* the Friendly Islands. She was commanded by a Captain Rosser, who had sailed her for nearly twenty years in the South Sea trade, and who was justly regarded as the *doyen* of island skippers. He was a “Bluenose,” stood six feet two in his stockinged feet, and was a man of the most determined courage, unflinching resolution, and was widely known and respected by the white traders and the natives all over the South Pacific.

In those days there was quite a fleet of vessels engaged in the South Sea trade, and most of them were owned in, and sailed from Sydney, and I could have secured a passage in any one of three other vessels, but preferred the *Rimitara* (so I will call her), merely because the agent had told me that no other passengers were going by her. Captain Rosser himself frankly told me that he did not like passengers, but when he learned that I had been to sea before, and intended settling in Samoa as a trader, his grim visage relaxed, and he growled something about my finding the accommodation ample enough, as I was to be the only passenger.

The *Rimitara* was lying off Garden Island, and as she was to sail at eleven in the morning I went on board at ten with the captain himself. Just ahead of the barque was a very handsome brigantine, also bound for the Friendly Islands. She had been launched only a few weeks previously, and had been built for His Majesty King George of Tonga, at a cost of £4,000, as a combined cargo and despatch vessel. As Rosser and I stepped on the barque's poop the captain of the brigantine—whose decks were crowded with visitors—hailed the former and challenged him to a race.

“Oh, race with yourself, sir,” was Rosser's abrupt reply, as he bade his chief mate heave up, and then seeing that a number of ladies were standing beside the captain of the brigantine, he raised his hat, and added more good-humouredly that although the *Rimitara* was not a yacht like the *Tuitoga*, he would bet the captain of the latter ten pounds that the barque would be at anchor in Nukualofa Harbour forty-eight hours before him.

“Make it fifty,” cried the master of the new ship, amid the cheers of his guests.

Rosser shook his head, and replied with apparent unconcern (though he was really angry) that ten pounds was enough for any one to lose. “But,” he added, “don't think I'm going to race you. I'm just going to dodder along as usual.” (He kept his word most thoroughly.)

We got underway first, and were just passing out between Sydney Heads under easy sail, when the brigantine overtook us, and passed us like a race-horse galloping past a trotting donkey. She presented a beautiful sight as she swept by with yards braced up sharp to a good south-east breeze, and every stitch of her brand-new canvas drawing. One of the officers had the bad manners to take

up a coil of small line, and make a pretence of heaving it to us for a tow rope. Rosser looked on with an unmoved face, though our own mate made some strong remarks.

“Guess it’s that champagne he’s drunk,” was all that Rosser said as he turned away, and I have no doubt he was right, for we afterwards learned that nearly every one aft on board the brigantine was half-drunk when she lifted anchor, the visitors having brought on board half a dozen cases of champagne—as a matter of fact we had seen the steward opening bottles on the poop. In an hour the *Tuitoga* was a long way ahead.

Rosser said to us at dinner—

“That brigantine will come to grief. She’s overmasted, and the fellow who has her ought not to be trusted with her. He’s going to make a mess of things.”

Then in his slow, drawling manner, he told us that the command of the *Tuitoga* had been given to an ex-lieutenant of the navy, whose knowledge of sailing vessels was confined to his youthful experiences on one of the service training brigs; but King George of Tonga was anxious to secure an English naval officer to command the new ship, and out of some hundreds of eager applicants, Lieutenant Raye had been selected.

By sundown the brigantine was hull down ahead of us, though the barque was a very smart vessel, and we were then making eleven knots. At midnight, I heard the mate give orders to take in royals and topgallant sails, and going on deck, found the wind had almost died away.

Rosser was on deck, and told me that we were “going to get it hot from the N.E. before long;” and by four in the morning we were under topsails and lower courses only, the ship flying before a most unpleasant sea. I turned in again, and slept till daylight, when the second mate gave me a call.

“Come on deck and see something pretty.”

The “something pretty” was the brigantine, which was in sight about a mile away on our lee bow. She was in a terrible mess. Her fore and main royal masts and topgallant masts and jibboom had apparently all been carried away together, and she was almost lying on her beam ends. We ran down to her, and saw that her crew were busy in cutting away the spars and sails alongside. All her boats were gone, and her for’ard deck house had started, and was working to and fro with every sea.

In less than half an hour the mate and six hands from the barque were on board, assisting the crew, cutting away the wire rigging and trimming the cargo, the shifting of which had nearly sent her to the bottom. I went with the boat to lend a hand, and the second mate of the brigantine told me that the young captain had refused to listen to the mate’s suggestion to shorten sail, when the officer told him that the wind would certainly come away suddenly from the N.E. The consequence was that a furious squall took her aback, and had not the jibboom—and then the upper spars—carried away under the terrific strain, she would have gone to the bottom. The worst part of the business was that two poor seamen had been lost overboard.

“He’s a pretty kind of man for a skipper if you like,” said the second officer bitterly. “He ought to be hanged for pretending he’s a sailorman. It’s sheer murder to put such a jackass in command of a deep-water sailing ship.”

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