

BECKE LOUIS

THE SOUTH
SEAMAN

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The South Seaman

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The South Seaman / An Incident In The Sea Story Of Australia – 1901:*

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On the 22nd of July, 1828, the Sydney South Seaman, *Indefatigable*, eleven days out from the Port of Conception in Chili, was in lat 17° S. and about 127° E. long., six hundred miles distant from the nearest land—the then almost unknown Paumotu Group, which Cook had well named the Dangerous Archipelago.

Five years before, the brig was named the *Calder*, and was then commanded by Captain Peter Dillon, a famous officer in the East India Company's service; his name is interwoven with the sea story of Australia as the commander of the Company's ship *Research*, and the discoverer of the relics of the gallant and ill-fated La Perouse, whose ships were wrecked on Vanikoro Island, in the New Hebrides group, in 1788.

When the *Colder* was under the command of Captain Dillon she was a crack Indian trader to Port Jackson, but newer and smarter vessels drove her out of the trade; and in 1828 she was owned by Mr. John Duncan, an English merchant of Valparaiso, who for this present voyage had loaded her with wheat for

Sydney, and sent her to sea under the command of Mr. Joseph Hunter, after changing her name to *Indefatigable*.

The first and second mates of the brig were Europeans, as also were two or three of the crew—the rest were Chilenos, picked up at the last moment of sailing. The steward was a Bengali, a man devoted to his captain, with whom he had long sailed in other seas. The Chilenos were not alone lazy and incompetent seamen, not fit to keep a look-out, nor take the wheel in rough weather, but what was worse, they were treacherous scoundrels, as ready for murder with their long, ugly sheath-knives, as British merchant sailors are with their fists for honest fighting.

Naturally enough, with such men as these the mates frequently quarrelled, and on one or two occasions the officers were driven to resort to blows to maintain proper discipline. And a Chileno, or any other Spanish South American, never forgives a blow, though a knife-thrust or a pistol-shot in the dark would not be considered anything else than proper to vindicate wounded honour. But the mates of the *Indefatigable* were simple-minded, rough British seamen. They wanted the Chilenos to work the ship like sailormen should work a ship—the Chilenos hated work of any kind, and especially hated the steady discipline of this English merchant ship—the officers of which, when necessity demanded it, would rout out the watch below and send them aloft to shorten sail. And so, in less than a week from the day the brig sailed from Conception, mutiny and murder was plotted in the foc's'cle by the Chilenos, But none of the Englishmen on board

had any thought of danger.

Mr. Loftgreen, the chief mate, had the middle watch. It was a marvellously clear and starlight night, with just enough wind astern to keep the brig's light canvas full and give her steerage way. As the officer slowly paced the short poop, he with difficulty resisted the soothing lullaby of the murmur of the water as it rippled past the ship's side.

On the foc's'cle, one of the Chileno sailors, named Antonio Mancillo, kept the watch, and just as Loftgreen, overcome by the stillness of his surroundings, had stopped his walk and was leaning on the rail at the break of the poop, almost dozing—good seaman as he was—he heard the Chileno cry out sharply—

"There is an island close ahead!—Come for'ard, Senor Loftgreen."

The mate ran hastily forward, but as he reached the short ladder which led to the topgallant foc's'cle, two Chilenos, each carrying a cutlass, sprang upon and seized him by the arms, while Mancillo held the point of a knife to his throat.

"Ha, you Ingleese dog! If you speak, you die now; we shall kill you," said one of the mutineers in a fierce whisper.

Loftgreen, a tough, wiry young fellow, struggled desperately, and freeing his right arm struck one of the Chilenos a blow that sent him down as if he had been shot, and cried out loudly, "Murder!" "Mutiny!", Mancillo meanwhile making savage thrusts at him with his knife, and the other man trying to run him through with his cutlass; but the mate, unarmed as he

was, was able to cope with them both, for tripping up Mancillo he struck him on the chest so violently that he fell against the man with the cutlass.

Then the mate took to his heels and ran aft, calling loudly for assistance. The disturbance, so far, had scarcely lasted two minutes, and those of the ship's company who were not on deck knew nothing of what had happened.

Loftgreen, notwithstanding that he was wounded and bleeding in the right arm, and half-dazed from a somewhat severe cut on the head, succeeded in reaching his cabin, where he seized a pair of pistols, and still crying loudly to his sleeping fellow-officers, prepared to defend himself to the last. Unfortunately his pistols were not loaded, and in his hurry and confusion he could not find his bullet bag.

Just then the Bengali steward, awakened by the noise, came running up the companion way, and was met by one of the mutineers—the helmsman—who struck him to the deck by a blow on the shoulder from a cutlass.

Captain Hunter, awakened from his slumber by the stamping of feet and the outcry, guessed what had happened. Quickly seizing his pistols, and buckling on his sword (in those days merchant captains always possessed swords, for they had use for them sometimes) he ran out of his cabin, just as the mutineers reached the door. He discharged both pistols together, but unfortunately was too excited to take aim, and neither shot had any effect, but for a little while he kept the Chilians at bay with

his sword, until covered with wounds he staggered; in an instant one of them darted in upon him, and a cutlass was thrust through his heart.

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