

NON-FICTION

Louis Becke

The South Seaman

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE SOUTH SEAMAN: AN INCIDENT IN THE SEA STORY OF AUSTRALIA

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By Louis Becke

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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.

Then the mutineers again turned their attention to the gallant mate, who was unable to get out of his cabin, one of the attacking party having turned the key from the outside. The cabin lamp had been knocked over in the struggle, and the darkness made the murderers careful of their movements, for they were afraid that Loftgreen might force his door and burst out upon them, and after a hurried discussion they ran on deck.

Meanwhile Mr. Todd, the second mate, aroused by the cries and shots in the main cabin, jumped out of his bunk, and trying to open his cabin door, found it was fastened from the outside. Throwing himself against it, he burst it open at the same moment as the wounded steward crawled past upon his hands and knees. Unable to speak, the Bengali placed a cutlass in the officer's hands, and pointed to the hacked and bleeding body of the dead captain, just discernible in the darkness. Todd at once secured Hunter's pistols, and Loftgreen at the same moment burst the door of his cabin and came out, and the two men, who had no time for words, prepared to sell their lives dearly, believing that those of the crew who might have been loyal had been slaughtered. For some minutes they stood waiting in the darkness, and heard no sound but the moans of the steward, who was fast weakening from loss of blood.

Then came a sudden rush down the companion-way, and the Chilenos, with savage cries, were upon them! Poor Loftgreen's pistols were in bad order, and missed fire, and although the two men fought desperately with their empty weapons they were soon overpowered, and with the steward were taken on deck and lashed to the poop stanchions. Exhausted and bleeding profusely, they presently saw some of the mutineers emerge from the cabin, dragging with them Captain Hunter's body, which they at once threw

overboard.

Before these events had taken place the Chilians had quietly secured the fore-scuttle, battening down the carpenter, cook, and three other European seamen, so that even before Loftgreen was attacked the ship was practically in the hands of the six mutineers, for the man at the wheel was one of their number.

Leaving the two officers and the steward guarded by two men, the remaining four mutineers, after heaving-to the brig, went below to the bloodstained cabin, and breaking open the spirit-locker began a carousal which lasted some hours, to the accompaniment of music on Mancillo's guitar. They took care, however, to relieve the two sentinels, and kept themselves sober enough to shorten sail if it became necessary.

At daylight, after giving all their prisoners food, the mutineers held a consultation as to their future proceedings, and at noon, in pursuance of their design, they hoisted out the longboat, and placed in her a couple of breakers of water, a bag of biscuit, and a few pieces of salt meat.

Then Loftgreen and the second mate were liberated, and the former taken below. Seated at the cabin table were Mancillo and three of his fellow-ruffians.

As soon as the chief officer entered Mancillo rose, and drawing a loaded pistol from his belt he pointed to a large sheet of paper lying on the table, and ordered Loftgreen to make a rough chart showing the course and distance to the nearest land, adding, "You see that we have now got this brig. You are the only man on board who can navigate her. You must stay with us, for we want you to sail the ship to Manila. The other men we shall put in the longboat, and this chart you will draw will be good enough for them to reach the nearest land."

"The nearest land! Good God! it is inhabited by ferocious cannibals who will eat them! You cannot be so inhuman!" said the mate.

Mancillo laughed cruelly-"Let them be eaten I so much the better for us. When they are dead they cannot talk."

"Then let me share their fate, I--"

The leader of the mutineers placed the muzzle of his pistol against Loftgreen's chest.

"Be silent, you damned Ingleese dog! Be silent, and do what I tell you, or by the Holy Virgin, I kill you."

Thereupon the mate, notwithstanding his wounded arm, and with his thoughts distracted by the fate before him, not only made a good chart, but he did more; for it suddenly flashed upon him that in all probability neither Mancillo nor any of his fellow-ruffians could read English, so after finishing the drawing he turned to Mancillo and said-

"Mr. Todd is an ignorant man, and this chart will be of no use to him unless I can give him directions how to steer. Will you let me do so?"

"No!" answered the mutineer, quickly, "you must not speak to him again, nor to any of the others."

"As you will. Poor fellows; I can do no more, but at least I can write on the back of the chart and tell Mr. Todd the prevailing directions of the winds, the courses to be steered, and the name of the least savage of the islands he can make for."

Then coolly turning the chart over, he scribbled a few lines upon it.

"There," he said, "read that; you will see that that can do no harm."

Mancillo looked critically at the writing for a few minutes, and Loftgreen's heart thumped against his ribs as he watched. Then a sigh of relief burst from him as the mutineer spoke.

"We are not murderers, and do not mind for you to give the second mate the good directions. But if you are lying to us we shall have your life for it."

These were the words he had written: "Not allowed to speak or write. Coast the islands, all are dangerous till you reach Otaheite. Am forced to navigate the mutineers to Manila, I will try to retake the ship, as I think I can gain over Jose and the cook, and then make for Otaheite. Have patience, and trust in God always."

Loftgreen was then again placed in irons, and one of the mutineers stood sentry in the cabin over him,

while Mancillo and the rest went on deck and set about disposing of the remaining prisoners, Mr. Todd was the first man ordered into the boat, which had now been lowered and brought alongside. Then Mancillo handed him the chart and a compass.

"Here," said the mutineer, "we give you fine chart, just made for you by the mate. You see he has write out for you your course, so you will soon make the land." Then he added with a grin-"Is not Antonio Mancillo damn good fellow, eh?"

Poor Todd looked at the chart, and then at the writing at the back of it, and miserably anxious and dejected as he was, he found it hard to resist smiling at the clever way in which his fellow-officer had got to windward of the Chileno. However, he pulled a long face, and said there was mighty little chance of reaching anywhere but a savage island, with such a poor chart as that. "What," he added angrily, "is the good of this writing? We could find a cannibal island without this," and he contemptuously flung the chart into the stern sheets of the boat.

Then, one by one, the wounded steward, the carpenter, and a Swedish seaman whose name is not recorded, were brought on deck and forced, at the point of cutlasses, to enter the boat, which was then cast adrift.

As the boat dropped astern, Mancillo ran up a flag of some description, and the remaining mutineers gathered on the poop and jeered at Todd and his companions; their insulting cries and mocking words reaching the ears of the half-maddened Loftgreen in the cabin, and reminding him that he was alone and at the mercy of utter scoundrels, with any one of whom his life was not worth a moment's purchase.

But although they were not manacled, the second mate and his companions in the boat were in little better plight, for their distance from the nearest land they could hope to make was nearly six hundred miles. But Todd was no faint-heart.

"Better the open sea, my lads," he said, "than the brig and those damned Spanish cut-throats. We are at least free men. Poor Mr. Loftgreen, I fear, will be murdered."

Then after dressing the steward's wound-a cutlass slash which had severed the collar-bone-he ordered the sail to be hoisted and took the tiller. This done he steered a due west course, which according to the mate's chart would bring them to the easternmost of the Faumotus-a group of low-lying islands almost unknown in those days except to American whale-ships.

In the boat were sufficient biscuits, salt beef, and water to last them, with great economy, for a fortnight. The boat itself was a good one, and they were provided with a compass and a course to be steered. The men were on good terms with each other and loyal and submissive to their officer; so they had much to be thankful for, and their chief sorrow in leaving the brig was their fears for the safety of Loft-green, who had always been a kind and considerate officer.

For fifteen days the boat sailed before light breezes, till on August 7th they made Tawere Island in the Paumotus Archipelago (named by Cook "Resolution Island" after his ship) almost in the centre of the vast group, having passed without sighting them many other low-lying atolls which lay in their course on the starboard hand. To their joy the brown-skinned natives of Tawere behaved very kindly to them, for several whale-ships, and, later on, the missionaries of the London Missionary Society's ship, had visited their island, and the people were well-disposed to white men. The island afforded but little in the way of food-only fish, pigs, coconuts, and a coarse species of taro, but of these the people were profuse in their presents to the white men.

Only remaining a day and a night at Tawere, Todd bade farewell to the amiable natives, and continued on his course, sighting many other islands of the group, but calling at none. Then came a heavy gale from the south, and he had to let the boat run right before it to the north. The sea was short and lumpy, and only continuous bailing kept her from filling.

Early on the morning of the 15th further misfortunes overtook them; a sudden squall sprung the mast, although the sail was close reefed. Then the rudder gudgeons carried away, and the boat broached to and shipped a heavy sea, which with other damage tore the compass from the after-thwart, where it had been placed, and completely smashed and rendered it useless. A few hours later, however, the weather cleared, the gale died away, and the gentle south-east trade again breathed upon them. That evening they made

Anaa (Chain Island), the natives of which, owing to previous association with South Seamen-as whaling and trading ships were then called-were very good to them. At Anaa, Todd and his comrades remained for two days, and on the morning of the 20th day they sighted the noble outlines of Tahiti, the Garden of the South Pacific.

Here they thought their troubles were ended, for the natives of Tahiti were known to not only be friendly to white men, but Christianised as well.

But as soon as the sea-worn men approached the beach, numbers of canoes, filled with natives armed with muskets, put off, and surrounding the boat, made the white men prisoners.

Greatly alarmed at this proceeding-which was such a contrary reception to what they had expected from the Tahitians-Todd at first imagined he had lost his reckoning and arrived at some strange island But some of the natives spoke a little English, and very soon their conduct was explained to the white men.

Some months previously a party of escaped convicts had arrived at the island in a small schooner, which they had seized at Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania). In bringing the vessel to an anchor the convicts lost her on the reef, and their lives had been saved by the Tahitians. The strangers were hospitably received, but their degraded natures were soon made evident They broke into a chief's house, stole food, arms, and ammunition, placed them in a boat belonging to the local white missionaries, and ran away with her. A party of Tahitians gave chase, and were fired upon by the convicts, who killed four of their number and badly injured their canoe, so that the remainder had the greatest difficulty in reaching the land again.

Todd and his companions were thought to be another party of convicts, and the queen and chiefs of the island gave orders that they should be kept close prisoners.

But this additional misfortune was soon over, for as the boat, escorted by the canoes, entered Papeite Harbour Mr. Todd saw lying at anchor the London South Seaman *Tiger*, Captain Richards. This vessel had been at Conception at the same time as the *Indefatigable*, and the officers of each ship had met. In the course of an hour or so Todd saw Captain Richards and told his story, and then the misunderstanding with the Tahitians was cleared up and the second mate and his companions supplied with every comfort A week later the *Tiger* sailed for Sydney, taking the four men with her.

Meanwhile what had become of the *Indefatigable*, and how fared poor Loftgreen with the mutineers?

As soon as the longboat was clear of the brig the mutineers released the mate.

"We now want the brig navigated to Guam" (one of the Ladrone Islands), said Mancillo to Loftgreen; "I am captain now, and you must do as I bid you. Beware of a mistake. If you take the ship out of her course we will serve you as we served Captain Hunter."

So the voyage, which lasted until the 12th of December, began. The life led by the men in the longboat was easy enough compared with the terrible months of mental torture endured by the unfortunate mate. Only that fine weather prevailed the whole time, the brig would most assuredly have been lost, for the mutineers were utterly without discipline, and would only furl, or set, or trim the sails just as the humour took them. Every night Loftgreen was put in irons and left to himself till daylight.

There was a considerable supply of wine and spirits on board, and four out of the six Chilians were continuously drunk. Then these four vowed that it was essential to the success of their enterprise that Loftgreen should be murdered. The two men who did not drink were more prudent ruffians, and knew that without their navigator they were helpless, and so they protected him.

Very often Loftgreen, who had a fair knowledge of Spanish, had to stand in the midst of the Chilenos whilst he was taking observations, and listen to them debating as to whether they should take his life at once or spare him until they reached Guam. And it was only the heroic resolve to save the ship for his owners that prevented him from trying to escape in a small quarter-boat, or attempting to kill the mutineers in their sleep, and let the brig drift about the Pacific till he was sighted by another ship.

He soon found out that the mutineers had no idea that Guam was actually settled by the Spaniards. It is probable that they knew that Guam was owned by Spain, but no doubt thought that the island was inhabited only by natives, like Saipan and Rota in the same group. One of the two mutineers, who entertained friendly feelings towards him, told him that Mancillo's idea was to sell the brig to the islanders in return for liberty to

lead his ideal of life-eating, drinking, sleeping, and keeping an extensive harem on one of the many islands in the North Pacific.

At last the brig arrived at Port San Luis d'Apra, in Guam, and a native pilot brought her to an anchor. One of the mutineers remarked to Mancillo that he supposed they were safe, "But," said he, pointing to some houses ashore, "those are not native houses; there are Europeans living here."

A boat was lowered, and Mancillo, after dressing himself in Captain Hunter's best clothes, was rowed ashore by two of his fellow-mutineers to see what the place was like. To their intense surprise they found awaiting them the Alcalde of San Luis, and a lieutenant and guard of Spanish soldiers.

The Alcalde questioned them closely as to who they were, and what had brought them to Guam. Their replies did not satisfy the official, who, placing Mancillo in custody and taking half a dozen soldiers with him, made the two Chilenos row him off to the ship.

On seeing the soldiers approach, the remaining mutineers, cowards as they were, concluded that their shipmates had betrayed them, and ran below to hide themselves, leaving Mr. Loftgreen on deck to receive the Alcalde, who was soon in possession of the whole story. Unlike most Spanish officials, he did not want a bribe to ensure his performance of his duty. He promptly seized the *Indefatigable*, and the Chilenos were taken ashore and marched to the fort under guard. Then the Alcalde and Governor, with much formality, held a court, and took the mate's evidence; the result of which was the mutineers were placed in heavy irons, and the almost heart-broken Loftgreen was received in the Governor's house as an honoured guest and supplied with every comfort.

Soon afterwards the *Rainbow*, a British frigate commanded by Captain Rous, put into San Luis d'Apra. The *Rainbow* had made many important discoveries in Australian waters, more particularly on the northern coast, but the name of her gallant commander will probably be longer remembered as Admiral Rous, the famous turf patron, than as Captain Rous the explorer and navigator.

Mr. Loftgreen was received on board the *Rainbow* as English naval officers always receive a brave and distressed merchant seaman. The mutineers were handed over to the British captain for conveyance to Manila for trial. The frigate arrived at Manila on January 19th, and there the Chilenos had short shrift, for within three days they were brought to trial and duly garrotted.

Mr. Loftgreen, who made many friends in Manila, was afforded a passage to Sydney, and the *Indefatigable* was condemned as a prize to the Spanish Government. She was afterwards lost in a typhoon in the China Sea.

Such is one of the many incidents of the sea story of Australia.