

NON-FICTION

Louis Becke

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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"PIG-HEADED" SAILOR MEN

By Louis Becke

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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 PS4,000, 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 fore'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."

After rendering all possible assistance to the brigantine, we left her about mid-day; and had been lying at anchor for two weeks in Nukualofa Harbour before she put in an appearance outside the reef. A native pilot went out in a canoe, but the captain haughtily declined his services, and would not even let him come on board he wanted to show people that although he had never seen Nukualofa Harbour before, he could bring his ship in without a pilot. In less than half an hour, a swirling eddy caught the vessel, and earned her broadside on to the reef, where she would have been battered to pieces, had not our two boats gone to her assistance, and with great difficulty got her off again. Captain Rosser several times countermanded orders

given by his chief officer an experienced seaman and bullied and "jawed" his crew in the most pompous and irritating manner, and finally when we succeeded in getting the vessel off the reef with the loss of her false keel and rudder, and were towing her into smooth water inside the reef, he came for'ard, and abruptly desired our chief mate to cease towing, as he meant to anchor.

"Anchor, and be hanged to you," replied our officer with angry contempt; "the kind of ship you ought to command is one that is towed by a horse along a path in the old country."

We cast off and left him to his own conceit and devices. He let go in less than five fathoms, paid out too much cable, and went stern first on to a coral patch, where he stuck for a couple of days, much to our delight.

Within six months this gentleman succeeded in getting the brigantine ashore on four occasions, and she had to return to Sydney to be repaired at a cost of PS1,700.

My next two experiences were with the pig-headed type. I had made an agreement with the master of a Fiji-owned vessel also a brigantine to convey myself and my stock of trade goods from an island in the Tokelau or Union Group (South Pacific) to Yap, in the Caroline Islands in the North-west, where I intended starting a trading business. This captain was as good a seaman as ever trod a deck, and had had a rather long experience of the island trade, but a mule could not surpass him in obstinacy, as I was soon to learn, to my sorrow.

A week after leaving the Tokelaus, we dropped anchor on the edge of the reef of one of the Gilbert Group, to land supplies for a trader living there. The coast was very exposed to all but an easterly wind, and neither the mate nor myself liked the idea of anchoring at all. The skipper, however, brought his vessel close in to the roaring breakers on the reef, let go his anchor in six fathoms, and then neatly backed astern into blue water sixty fathoms deep. Here we lay apparently safe enough, for the time, the wind being easterly and steady.

By sunset we had finished landing stores and shipping cargo, and when the captain came off in the last boat, we naturally expected him to heave up and get out of such a dangerous place, but to our surprise he remarked carelessly that as the men were very tired, he would hold on until daylight.

"I wouldn't risk it if I were you," said the trader, who had come aboard in his own boat to "square up." "You can't depend on this easterly breeze holding all night, and it may come on squally from the west or south-west in a few hours, and take you unawares."

"Bosh!" was the reply. "Hoist the boats up, Mr. Laird, and tell the men to get supper."

"Very well, sir," replied the mate, none too cheerfully.

Just as the trader was going ashore, he said to me aside, quietly, "This little monkey-faced skipper is a blazing idiot" (our captain was a very, very little man). "I told him again just now, that if the wind comes away from west or south-west, or even if it falls calm, he'll find he's caught, to a dead certainty. But he as good as told me to mind my own business."

Naturally enough I was anxious. I had on board trade goods which had cost PS1,100, and of course had not one penny of insurance on them. The brigantine, however, was well insured, though I do not impute this fact as being the cause of the captain's neglect of a sensible warning.

After supper, the captain turned in, while the mate and I, both feeling very uneasy, paced the deck till about nine o'clock, at which hour the wind had become perceptibly lighter, and the captain was called. He came on deck, trotted up and down in his pyjamas for a few minutes, sat on the rail, like a monkey on a fence, and then asked the mate snappishly what he was "scared about?"

The mate made no reply, and the captain was just going below again, when two fishing canoes, with four natives in each, came quite near us, both heading for the shore; and the skipper asked me to hail them and see if they had any fish to sell. I did so.

"No," was the reply; "we are going back again, because much rain and wind is coming from the westward, and we want to get over the reef before the surf becomes too great." Then one of them stood up and added

"Why does not the ship go away quickly. This is a very bad place here when the wind and the sea come from the west. Your ship will be broken to pieces."

"What do they say?" inquired the little man.

I translated what they had said.

"Bosh, I say again," was the reply, "the glass has been as steady as a rock for the past three days," and then, to my intense anger, he added an insinuation that my fears had led me to deliberately misinterpret what the natives had said. The retort I made was of so practical a nature that the mate had to assist the skipper to his feet.

A quarter of an hour later, as the mate and I still walked the deck, discussing the captain's shortcomings, the wind died away suddenly, and then several of our native crew came aft, and said that a squall was coming up from the westward, and the mate, though neither he nor myself could then see any sign of it, went below and again called the captain.

He came on deck, with one hand covering his injured left optic, told me he would settle with me in the morning, and then took a long look astern, and there, certainly enough, was a long streak of black rising over the horizon. The mate stood by waiting his orders.

"It's not coming near us," said the little man more snappishly than ever, as he marched up and down the poop.

"I say it is," said Laird bluntly, "and I consider this ship will be ashore, if we don't slip and tow out a bit before it is too late."

The mate's manner had some effect on the obstinate little animal "Oh, well, if there's such a lot of old women on board, I'll give in. Call the hands, and we'll heave up."

"Heave up!" echoed the mate in angry astonishment, "what's the use of trying to heave up now! That squall will be on us in ten minutes, and if we had an hour to spare, it would be none too long. Why, man, it's a dead calm, and the swell will send us into the surf on the reef quick enough without our dragging the ship into it. Reckon the best and only thing we can do, is down boats, and then slip cable right-away. We might get a show then to lay along the reef, and get clear."

"I'm not going to lose a new cable and anchor to please any one," was the stupid reply. (He could very easily have recovered both anchor and cable with the assistance of the natives on the following day, or indeed months after.)

Then he sang out to the men to man the windlass.

The hands, realising the danger, turned to with a will, but within five minutes the first breath of the squall caught us, and sent us ahead, as was evident by the way the slackened cable came in through the hawsepipe.

We had out fifty-five fathoms of chain, and before twenty-five were in, the squall was upon us properly; the brigantine went gracefully ahead, overran her anchor, plunged into the roaring breakers on the reef, and struck bows on.

In another moment or two a heavy sea caught her on the starboard quarter, canted her round, and dashed her broadside on to the reef with terrific violence. Then, fortunately for our lives, two or three further rollers sent her crashing along till she brought up against two or three coral boulders, whose tops were revealed every now and then by the backwash. In less than twenty minutes she was hopelessly bilged, and her decks swept by every sea.

We carried three boats, and our native sailors showed their pluck and skill by actually getting all three safely into the water, two on the lee side, and one on the other.

The captain, now conscious of his folly, became very modest, and gave his orders quietly. The crew, however, took no notice of him and looked to the mate. He (the captain) ordered me into the first boat, in which were the ship's papers, charts, chronometer, &c. I refused, and said I preferred getting on shore in my own way.

I had seen that two native boys (passengers) had run out on to the bowsprit, and, watching their chance, had dropped over into a curling roller, and were carried safely ashore.

I had with me on board about nine hundred silver Mexican and Chili dollars some in a cash box, the rest in a bag. Calling my native servant, Levi, I asked him if he thought all the boats would get ashore safely. He shook his head, said that it was doubtful, and that it would be better for me to throw the bag and the cash box over the lee side, where they were pretty sure to be recovered in the morning at low tide.

"All the boats will capsize, or get stove in, going over the reef, or else will be smashed to bits on the shore," he said, "and the natives will steal everything they can lay their hands on, especially if the white men are drowned. So it is better to throw the money overboard."

I took his advice, and going on deck, we dropped both box and bag overboard, just where Levi pointed out a big boulder, against which the brigantine was crushing and pounding her quarter.

Again refusing to enter any of the boats, I watched my chance, and ran for'ard, followed by Levi, and as soon as a big roller came along, we dropped, and were carried ashore beautifully. Some hundreds of natives and the white trader were on the look out, and ran in and caught us before the backwash carried us out again.

The mate's boat had already reached the shore without accident, owing to the splendid manner in which he and his native crew had handled her; but both the captain and second mate came to grief, their boats broaching to and capsizing just as they were within a few fathoms of the shore.

However, no lives were lost, and although next morning the brigantine's decks had worked out of her and came ashore, the hull held together for some weeks, and we saved a lot of stores. My money I recovered two or three days later, though it had been carried more than a hundred yards away from the spot where it had been dropped overboard. The tin cashbox (which I had tied up in an oilskin coat, parcelled round with spun yarn, and weighted inside with several hundred Snider cartridges) was found buried in sand and broken coral, in a small pool on the reef; it presented a most curious appearance, being almost round in shape. The canvas bag was found near by, under a ledge of the reef, together with the binnacle bell which was doubled flat and a dinner plate! The bag (of No 2 canvas) had been hastily rolled up by Levi in the cabin table-cloth, weighted with all the loose Snider cartridges we could find in the darkened trade room, and tied up at each end like a "roly-poly." This proved its salvation, for when we dug it out (under three fathoms of water) the outer covering came away in fine shreds, and some of the big Mexican sun dollars had cut through the canvas.

So ended my second experience, and the only satisfactory thing about it to me, after losing over a thousand pounds worth of goods through the captain's obstinacy, was that when he was fussing about after the wreck trying to get one of the anchors ashore, he managed to lose his right forefinger. I regret to say that whilst I dressed the stump and bound up his hand for him, I could not help telling him that I was sorry it was not his head that had been knocked off previous to our going ashore. 'Twas very unchristianlike, but I was very sore with the man for his pig-headedness, and then he so bewailed the loss of his finger; never thinking of the fact that the boatswain had all but lost an eye, but had never even murmured at his hard luck.

My third experience of a "pig-headed" master mariner, followed very quickly so quickly, that I began to think some evil star attended my fortunes, or rather misfortunes.

After living on the island for three months, after the loss of the brigantine, two vessels arrived on the same day one, a schooner belonging to San Francisco, and bound to that port; the other, the *George Noble*, a fine handsome barquentine, bound to Sydney. Now, it would have suited me very well to go to California in the schooner, but finding that the skipper of the wrecked brigantine had arranged for passages for himself, officers and crew in her, I decided to go to Sydney in the *George Noble*, purely because the little man with the missing finger had become so objectionable to me brooding over my losses, and wondering how I could pay my debts that I felt I could not possibly remain at close quarters with the man in a small schooner without taking a thousand pounds worth of damage out of him during the voyage, which "taking out" process might land me in a gaol with two years imprisonment to serve. So I bade goodbye to good mate Laird, and the boatswain with the injured eye, and the native crew who had acted so gallantly; and then with Levi standing by my side, holding my ponderous bag of my beloved Mexican dollars in one hand, and a few articles of clothing in the other, I told Captain that I considered him to be an anthropoid ape, an old washerwoman, and a person who should be generally despised and rejected by all people, even those of the

dullest intellects, such as those of the members of the firm who employed him. And then recalling to my memory the sarcastic remark of the mate of the *Rimitara*, to the pompous captain of the *Tuitoga* about the command of a canal boat, I wound up by adding that he had missed his vocation in life, and instead of being skipper of a smart brigantine, he was intended by Providence to be captain of a mud-dredge, for which position, however, he had probably barely sufficient intelligence.

Feeling very despondent for I had but nine hundred Mexican and Chilian dollars to meet a debt of eleven hundred pounds, and had out of this to keep myself and servant for perhaps six months until I got another start as a trader, I went on board the *George Noble* and bargained with her captain for a passage to Sydney, at which port I knew I could at once meet with an engagement.

The captain of the *George Noble* was a very decent and good-natured German, named Evers. He agreed to take me and my henchman to Sydney for 125 dollars I to live aft, the boy to go for'ard with the sailors, and lend a hand in working the ship, if called upon in an emergency. The vessel, I found, was owned by a firm of Chinese merchants in Sydney, and carried a Chinese supercargo, but he was the only Celestial on board, the firm only employing him on account of their having so many Chinese traders throughout the equatorial islands of the Pacific.

I had not been long on board the *George Noble* when I discovered that Evers, who was a fine sailorman and a good navigator as well, was one of the "pig-headed" kind. His mate, second mate, and carpenter, were Britishers, as were nearly all the crew, but they and the skipper could not agree. There was no open rupture but Evers had the idea that both his officers and men disliked him because he was a "Dutchman." Perhaps this was so, but if it was, the officers and men never showed their dislike at being commanded by a foreigner they knew he was a good seaman, and gave him unvarying respect and obedience. Nevertheless, Captain Evers never spoke a friendly word to any one of his officers, and when he had to speak to them, he did so in such a manner of strained politeness and severity, that it was really unpleasant to hear him.

On our way to Sydney we called at various islands of the Gilbert Group, and finally went into Apaian Lagoon, where the barquentine had to load one hundred tons of copra (dried coco-nut). During the time I had been on board, Evers and myself had become very intimate, and, I am glad to say, through me, he and his officers became quite friendly with each other. And we all spent many happy evenings together. But I could see that Evers was extremely jealous of his second mate's reputation as a South Sea pilot, and he would very often purposely question him as to the entrance of such and such a passage of such and such an island, and then deliberately contradict his officer's plain and truthful statements, and tell him he was wrong. Foster, a good-humoured old fellow, would merely laugh and change the subject, though he well knew that Captain Evers had had very little experience of the navigation of the South Seas, and relied upon his charts more than upon his local knowledge he would never take a suggestion from his officers, both of whom were old "island" men especially the second mate.

We loaded the hundred tons of copra, and were ready for sea by nine o'clock one morning, when a number of large sailing canoes came off, crowded with natives from a distant part of the island, all anxious to buy firearms and ammunition in view of a great expedition against the adjacent island of Tarawa. They all possessed either plenty of money or copra, and Evers did a remarkably good, though illegal business, and sold them over a hundred rifles. By the time they had finished, however, it was past one o'clock, and I concluded that we could not leave the lagoon till the following morning. To my surprise, and the second mate's open-mouthed astonishment, the skipper, who was highly elated with his morning's trading, told the mate to clear the decks, and get ready to heave up.

"Why, he's mad!" said the second officer to me.

Now I must explain: Apaian Lagoon is a vast atoll completely enclosed on the eastern and southern sides by a low, narrow strip of land, densely covered with coco-palms, and on the northern and western by a continuous chain of tiny islets connected by the reef. On the western side there are two narrow ship passages, both exceedingly dangerous on account of their being studded with numerous coral "mushrooms" i.e., enormous boulders of coral rock, which, resembling a mushroom in shape, come to within a few feet of the surface of the water. Through these passages, the tide, especially the ebb, rushes with great velocity six or seven knots at least and vessels when leaving the lagoon, generally waited till slack water, or the first of the flood, when with the usual strong south-east trades, they could stem the current and

avoid the dangerous "mushrooms." But no shipmaster would ever attempt either of these passages, except in the morning, when the sun was astern, and he could, from aloft, con the ship. After two or three o'clock, the sun would be directly in his face, and render it almost impossible for him to get through without striking.

Here then was the position when Evers, cheerfully smoking a cigar, and smiling all over his handsome face, gave the order to heave up. It was blowing very strongly, the tide was on the ebb, the sun was directly in our faces, and we were to tear through a narrow passage at racehorse speed without being able to see anything.

I ventured to suggest to him that it was a bit late for us to get under way.

"Not a bit of it. Come along with me up on the foreyard, and you'll see how the *George Noble* will skip through."

We certainly did skip, for before the anchor was secured, we were dashing westwards for the passage at eight or nine knots, and Evers kept calling out to the mate to make more sail. By the time we were abreast of the passage, the *George Noble* had every stitch of her canvas on her, and was fairly "humming" along at nearly thirteen knots over the smooth water, and then when she spun into the narrow passage through which a seven-knot current was tearing, her speed became terrific, and I held my breath. The second mate and boatswain were at the wheel, and the crew were standing by the braces. The silence on board was almost painful, for the terrible roar of the current as it tore along the coral walls of the passage, deadened every sound.

"Starboard a little," shouted Evers to a sailor stationed in the fore rigging below us, who repeated the order to a man on the rail, who in turn passed the word aft.

"Steady, there, steady!"

I tried in vain to discern anything ahead of us; the blinding, blazing sun prevented my seeing aught but a mad seething swirl of water just beneath our bows, and on each side of us. Evers, however, seemed very confident.

"We'll be through in another two minutes" he began, and then came a terrific shock, and both he and I were jerked off the footrope, and toppled over the yard on to the bellying foresail!

We both rolled down on top of the windlass, and landed almost in each others arms, half dazed. I sat down on deck to consider who I was, and what was the matter, and Evers made a wobbly run aft, the ship still ripping along, for we had been checked in our mad career for a second or two only.

In two or three minutes we were outside, and clear of danger, and Evers, now much subdued, brought to under the lee of the reef, and anchored. Then we lowered a boat, and made an examination of the ship for'ard. Nothing was wrong with her above her water-line, but three feet further down her stem was smashed into a pulp, and bits of timber kept coming to the surface every now and then. An hour later we had nine inches of water in the hold, and the consequence of Evers's pig-headedness was that we had to keep the pumps going day and night, every two hours, till we rigged a windmill, which was kept going till we reached Sydney.

Six months later, the local trader of Apaian wrote to me, and told me that Evers "has improved the passage into the lagoon very much. You ran smack into a big mushroom, standing up right in the middle, and broke it off short, about fifteen feet below the surface. Hope the *George Noble* will do the same thing next time."