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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Dostoyevsky Smith Willis
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Henry Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Vinci
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Gogol Busch
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The Call Of The South 1908

Louis Becke

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THE CALL OF THE SOUTH

By Louis Becke

London, John Milne, 1908

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CHAPTER I ~ PAUL, THE DIVER

"Feeling any better to-day, Paul?"

"Guess I'm getting round," and the big, bronzed-faced man raised his eyes to mine as he lay under the awning on the after deck of his pearling lugger. I sat down beside him and began to talk.

A mile away the white beach of a little, land-locked bay shimmered under the morning sun, and the drooping fronds of the cocos hung listless and silent, waiting for the rising of the south-east trade.

"Paul," I said, "it is very hot here. Come on shore with me to the native village, where it is cooler, and I will make you a big drink of lime-juice."

I helped him to rise—for he was weak from a bad attack of New Guinea fever—and two of our native crew assisted him over the side into my whaleboat. A quarter of an hour later we were seated on mats under the shade of a great wild mango tree, drinking lime-juice and listening to the lazy hum of the surf upon the reef, and the soft *croo, croo* of many "crested" pigeons in the branches above.

The place was a little bay in Callie Harbour on Admiralty Island in the South Pacific; and Paul Fremont was one of our European divers. I was in charge of the supply schooner which was tender to our fleet of pearling luggers, and was the one man among us to whom the silent, taciturn Paul would talk—sometimes.

And only sometimes, for usually Paul was too much occupied in his work to say more than "Good-morning, boss," or "Good night," when, after he had been disencumbered of his diving gear, he went aft to rest and smoke his pipe. But one day, however, he went down in twenty-six fathoms, stayed too long, and was brought up unconscious. The mate and I saw the signals go up for assistance, hurried on board his lugger, and were just in time to save his life.

Two days later he came on board the tender, shook hands in his silent, undemonstrative way, and held out for my acceptance an old octagon American fifty dollar gold piece.

"Got a gal, boss?" "I admitted that I had.

"Pure white, I mean. One thet you like well enough to marry?"

"I mean to try, Paul."

"In Samoa?"

"No — Australia."

"Guess I'd like you to give her this 'slug' I got it outter the wreck of a ship that was sunk off Galveston in the 'sixties,' in the war."

It would have hurt him had I declined the gift. So I thanked him, and he nodded silently, filled his pipe and went back to the *Monti-ara*.

Nearly a year passed before we met again, for his lugger and six others went to New Guinea; and our next meeting was at Callie Harbour, where I found him down with malarial fever. Again I became his doctor, and ordered him to lie up.

He nodded.

"Guess I'll have ter, boss. But I jest hate loafin' around and seein' the other divers bringin' up shell in easy water." For he was receiving eighty pounds per month wages—diving or no diving—and hated to be idle.

"Paul," I said, as we lay stretched out under the wild mango tree, "would you mind telling me about that turn-up you had with the niggers at New Ireland, six years ago."

"Ef you like, boss." Then he added that he did not care about talking much at any time, as he was a mighty poor hand at the jaw-tackle.

"We were startin' tryin' some new ground between New Hanover and the North Cape of New Ireland. There were only two luggers, and we had for our store-ship a thirty-ton cutter. There were two white divers besides me and one Manila man, and our crews were all natives of some sort or another—Tokelaus, Manahikians and

Hawaiians. The skipper of the storeship was a Dutchman—a chicken-hearted swab, who turned green at the sight of a nigger with a bunch of spears, or a club in his hand. He used to turn-in with a brace of pistols in his belt and a Winchester lying on the cabin table. At sea he would lose his funk, but whenever we dropped anchor and natives came aboard his teeth would begin to chatter, and he would just jump at his own shadder.

"We anchored in six fathoms, and in an hour or two we came across a good patch of black-edge shell, and we began to get the boats and pumps ready to start regular next morning. As I was boss, I had moored the cutter in a well-sheltered nook under a high bluff, and the luggers near to her. So far we had not seen any sign of natives—not even smoke—but knew that there was a big village some miles away, out o' sight of us, an' that the niggers were a bad lot, and would have a try at cuttin' off if they saw a slant.

"Early next morning it set in to rain, with easterly squalls, and before long I saw that there was like to be a week of it, and that we should have to lie by and wait until it settled. About noon we sighted a dozen white lime-painted canoes bearing down on us, and Horn, the Dutchman, began to turn green as usual, and wanted me to heave up and clear out. I set on him and said I wanted the niggers to come alongside, an' hev a good look at us—they would see that we were a hard nut to crack if they meant mischief.

"They came alongside, six or eight greasy-haired bucks in each canoe—and asked for terbacker and knives in exchange for some pigs and yams. I let twenty or so of 'em come aboard, bought their provisions, and let 'em have a good look around. Their chief was a fat, bloated feller, with a body like a barrel, and his face pitted with small-pox. He told me that he was boss of all the place around us, and had some big plantations about a mile back in the bush, just abreast of us, and that he would let me have all the food I wanted. In five days or so, he said, we should have fine weather for diving, and he and his crowd would help me all they could.

"About a quarter of a mile away was a rocky little island of about five acres in extent. It had a few heavy trees on it, but no scrub, and there were some abandoned fishermen's huts on the beach. I asked the fat hog if I could use it as a shore station to overhaul our boats

and diving gear when necessary, and he agreed to let me use it as long as I liked for three hundred sticks of terbacker and two muskets.

"They went off on shore again to the plantations, and in a little while we saw smoke ascendin'—they were cookin' food, and repairin' their huts. Later on in the day they sent me a canoe load of yams, taro, and other stuff for the men, and asked me to come ashore and look at the village. I went, fur I knew that they would not try on any games so soon.

"There were, in addition to the bucks, a lot of women and children there, makin' thatch, cookin', and repairin' the pig-proof fencin'. I stayed a bit, and then came on board again, an' we made snug for the night.

"Next morning we landed on the island, repaired two of the huts, and started mendin' sails, overhauling the boats, and doin' such work that it was easier to do on shore than on board. Of course we kep' our arms handy, and old Horn kep' a good watch on board—he dassent put foot on shore himself—said he was skeered o' fever.

"The natives sent us plenty of food, and a good many of 'em loafed around on the island, and some on board the luggers and cutter, cadgin' fur terbacker and biscuit. Of course they always carried their clubs and spears with 'em, as is usual in New Ireland, but they were quiet and civil enough. Every day canoes were passin' from where we lay to the main village, and returnin' with other batches of bucks and women all takin' spells at work; an' there was any amount o' drum beating and *duk duk*{*} dancin', and old Horn shivered in his boots swearin' they were comin' to wipe us out. But my native crews and I and the other white divers were used to the nigger customs at such times, and although we kep' a good watch ashore and afloat, none o' us were afraid of any trouble comin'.

* The *duk duk* dance of Melanesia is merely a blackmailing ceremony by the men to obtain food from the women and the uninitiated.

"On the fifth night, I, another white diver, named Docky Mason, his Samoan wife, and a Manahiki sailor named 'Star' were sleeping

on shore in one of the huts. In another hut were three or four New Ireland niggers, who had brought us some fish and were going away again in the mornin'.

"About ten o'clock the sky became as black as ink—a heavy blow was comin' on, and we just had time to stow our loose gear up tidy, when the wind came down from between the mountains with a roar like thunder, and away went the roofs of the huts, and with it nearly everything around us that was not too heavy to be carried away. My own boat, which was lying on the beach, was lifted up bodily, sent flyin' into the water, and carried out to sea.

"We tried to make out the cutter's and luggers' lights, but could see nothing and every second the wind was yellin' louder and louder like forty thousand cats gone mad, and the air was filled with sticks, leaves, and sand, and I had a mighty great fear for my little fleet; fur three miles away to the west, there was a long stretch o' reefs, an' I was afraid they had dragged and would get mussed up.

"That's jest what did happen—though they cleared the reefs by the skin of their teeth. The moment they began to drag, all three slipped. The luggers stood away under the lee of New Ireland, stickin' in to the land, and tryin' to bring to for shelter, but they were a hundred miles away from me, down the coast, before they could bring-to and anchor, for the blow had settled into a hurricane, and raised such a fearful sea that they had to heave-to for twenty-four hours. It was two weeks before we met again, after they had had to tow and 'sweep' back to my little island, against a dead calm and a strong current, gettin' a whiff of a land breeze at night now an' agin', which let 'em use their canvas. As for the cutter, she ran before it for New Britain, and brought up at Matupi in Blanche Bay, two hundred miles away, where old Horn knew there was a white settlement of Germans—his own kidney. He was a white-livered old swine, but a good sailor-man—as far as any man who says 'Ja' for 'Yes' goes.

"When daylight came my mates and I set to work to straighten up.

"Docky Mason's native wife—Tia—was a 'whole waggon with a yaller dog under the team'. She first of all made us some hot coffee, and gave us a rousin' breakfast; then she made the New Ireland

bucks—who were wantin' to swim to the mainland—turn to and put a new roof of coco-nut thatch over our hut, although it was still blowin' a ragin' gale. My! thet gal was a wonder! She hed eyes like stars, an' red lips an' shinin' pearly teeth, an' a tongue like a whip-lash when she got mad, an' Docky Mason uster let her talk to him as if he was a nigger—an' say nuthin'—excep' givin' a foolish laugh and then slouchin' off. And yet she was as gentle as a lamb to any of us fellows when we got fever, or had gone down under more'n twenty fathoms, and was hauled up three parts dead and chokin'.

"Well, boss, we got to straights at last, although it was blowin' as hard as ever. We had a lot o' gear on shore in that native house, for I was intendin' to beach the cutter an' give her copper a scrubbin' before we started divin' regular.

"There was near on a ton o' twist terbacker in tierces (which we used fur tradin' with the niggers), a ton o' biscuit in fifty pound tins, boxes o' red an' yaller seed beads, an' knives an' axes, an' a case o' dynamite, an' heaps o' things that was a direct invitation to the niggers, an' a challenge ter the Almighty to hev our silly throats cut. And those four or five bucks, whilst Tia was hustlin' them around, was jest takin' stock as they worked.

"By sunfall the wind an' sea in the bay had gone down a bit; an' the bucks said that they would swim on shore (their canoe had been smashed in the night) and bring us some food early in the mornin'. I gave 'em a bottle o' Hollands, an' my kind regards for the old barrelled-belly swine of a chief, some terbacker fur themselves; and then, after they had gone, looked to our Winchesters and pistols, which the bucks hadn't seen, fur we always kept 'em outer sight, under our sleepin' mats.

"'Paulo,' sez Tia to me, speakin' in Samoan (an' cussin' in English), 'you an' Docky an' "Star" are a lot o' blamed fools! You orter hev shot all those bucks ez soon ez they hed finished. Didn't you say that, "Star"?'"

"'Star' had said 'Yes' to her, but being an unobtrusive sorter o' Kana-ka, he hadn't said nuthin' to us—thinkin' we knew better'n him what ter do.

"We kep' a good watch all that day an' the nex' day, and then at sunset two bucks in a canoe came off, bringing us six cooked pigeons from the chief, with a message that he would come an' see us in a day or two, and bring men to build us better houses to live in until the luggers and the cutter came back.

"We collared the two bucks and tied 'em up, and then Tia made one of 'em eat part of a pigeon—she standin' over him with a Winchester at his ear. He ate it, an' in ten minutes he was tyin' himself up in knots, and was a dead nigger in another quarter of an hour. The pigeons were all poisoned.

"We kep' the other nigger alive an' told him that if he would tell us what was a-goin' on we'd let him off, and set him ashore, free.

"'At dawn to-morrow,' says he, 'Baian' (the fat old chief) thought to find you all dead, because of the poisoned pigeons sent to you. And then he meant to take all the good things you have here, and set up your heads in his *duk duk* house.'

"Before daylight came, Docky Mason an' 'Star' an' me hed fixed up things all serene ter give Baian and his cannibals a doin'. Fust ev all—to show our prisoner that we meant business, Tia held up his right hand, an' Docky sent a Winchester bullet through it, an' told him that he would send one through his skull ef he didn't do what he was told.

"Then we took two empty one gallon colza oil tins, and filled 'em with dynamite, tamped it down tight, and then ran short fuses through the corks, and carried 'em down to the place where our prisoner said Baian and his crowd would land. It was a little bay, lined on each side by pretty high, ragged coral boulders, covered with creepers. We stowed the tins in readiness, and then brought our prisoner down, and told him what to do when the time came. I guess that that nigger knew that ef he didn't play straight he was a dead coon. Tia sat down jest behind him, and every now and then touched his backbone with the muzzle ev her pistol—jest ter show him she was keepin' awake. At the same time he wasn't unwillin', for he hed told us that he and his dead mate were not Baian's men—they were slaves he had captured from a town he had raided somewhere near North Cape, and they were liable to be killed and eaten at any time if Baian's crowd ran short of pig meat or turtle.

"A little bit higher up, Docky Mason, 'Star' an' me, planted ourselves with our Winchesters, an' one of our boats' whaler's bomb guns, which fired four pounds of slugs and deer shot, mixed up—the sorter thing, boss, thet you an' me may find mighty handy here in this very place, if we get rushed sudden. We made a charcoal fire, and then frayed out the ends of the dynamite fuses so thet they would light quickly.

"When daylight came, we caught sight of nigh on fifty canoes, all crammed with niggers, paddlin' like blazes to where we was cached, but making no noise. Even if they hed we would not hev heard it, fur the wind and the surf beatin' on the reef would hev drowned it.

"On they came and rushed their canoes into the little cove, four abreast, and Tia prodded our buck in the back, and told him to stand up and talk to Baian, who was in one of the leadin' canoes.

"Up he jumps.

"Oh, Baian, Baian, great Baian,' he called, 'the two white men are dead in their house, and we have the woman bound hand and foot.'

"Good,' said Baian with a fat chuckle, as he put one leg over the gunwale of his canoe to step out, and the next moment I put a bullet through him, and then Docky Mason lit the first charge o' dynamite, and slings it down, right inter the middle of the crowded canoes, and before it went off he sent the second one after it.

"Boss, I hev seen some dynamite explosions in my time—especially when I hev hed to blow up wrecks—but I hev never seen anything like thet. The two shots killed over thirty niggers, wounded as many more, and stunned a lot, who were drowned. Those who were not hurt swam out of the cove, and neither Docky nor me had the heart to shoot any of 'em—though we might hev picked off a couple of dozen afore they got outer range.

"Before we could stop him our prisoner jumped down among the dead and wounded, got a long knife, an' in ten seconds he had Baian's' head off, and held it up to us, grinning like a cat, on'y not so nice, ez he hed jet black, betel-nut stained teeth, and red lips like a piece ev raw beef.

"We hed no more trouble with the niggers after thet turn-up, you can bet yer life.

"The buck stayed with us until the luggers came back, and a few days after we landed him at his own village—ez rich ez Jay Gould, for we gave him a musket with powder and ball, a cutlass, half a dozen pounds ev red beads, and two hundred sticks of terbacker. I guess thet thet nigger was able to buy himself all the wives he wanted, and be a 'big Injun' fur the end of his days."

CHAPTER II ~ THE OLD SEA LIFE

One Sunday morning—when I was about to leave the dear old city of Sydney for an unpremeditated and long, long absence in cold northern climes, I went for a farewell stroll around the Circular Quay, and, standing on some high ground on the east side, looked down on the mass of shipping below, flying the flags of all nations, and ranging from a few hundred to ten thousand tons. Mail steamers, deep sea tramps, "freezers," colliers—all crowded together, and among them but *one* single sailing vessel—a Liverpool barque of 1,000 tons, loading wool. She looked lost, abandoned, out of place, and my heart went out to her as my eyes travelled from her shapely lines and graceful sheer, to her lofty spars, tapering yards, and curving jibboom, the end of the latter almost touching the stern rail of an ugly bloated-looking German tramp steamer of 8,000 tons. On that very spot where I stood I, when a boy, had played at the foot of lofty trees—now covered by hideous ill-smelling wool stores—and had seen lying at the Circular Quay fifty or sixty noble full-rigged ships and barques, many brigs and schooners, and but *one* steamer, a handsome brig-rigged craft, the *Avoca*, the monthly P. and O. boat, which ran from Sydney to Melbourne to connect with a larger ship.

Round the point were certainly a few other steamers, old-fashioned heavily-rigged men-of-war, generally paddle-wheel craft; and, out of sight, in Darling Harbour, a mile away, were others—coasters—none of them reaching five hundred tons, and all either barque- or brig-rigged, as was then the fashion.

And they all, sailers as well as the few steamers, were manned by *sailor-men*, not by gangs of foreign paint-scrubbers, who generally form a steamer's crew of the present day—men who could no more handle a bit of canvas than a cow could play the Wedding March—in fact there are thousands of men nowadays earning wages on British ships as A.B.'s who have never touched canvas except in the shape of tarpaulin hatch covers, and whom it would be highly dangerous to put at the wheel of a sailing ship—they would make a wreck of her in any kind of a breeze in a few minutes.

In my boyhood days, nearly all the ships that came into Sydney Harbour flying British colours were manned by men of British blood. Foreigners, as a rule, were not liked by shipmasters, and their British shipmates in the fo'c'stle resented their presence. One reason of this was that they would always "ship" at a lower rate of wage than Englishmen, and were clannish. I have known of captains of favourite clipper passenger ships, trading between London and the colonies, declining to ship a foreigner, even an English-speaking Dane or Scandinavian, who make good sailor-men, and are quiet, sober, and hardworking. Nowadays it is difficult to find any English deep-sea ship or steamer, in which half of the hands for'ard are not foreigners of some sort. And now practically the whole coasting mercantile marine of the Australian colonies is manned by Germans, Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians.

When I was a young man I sailed in ships in the South Sea trade which had carried the same crew, voyage after voyage, for years, and there was a distinct feeling of comradeship existing between officers and crew that does not now exist. I well remember one gallant ship, the *All Serene* (a happy name), which was for ten years in the Sydney-China trade. She was about the first colonial vessel to adopt double-top-gallant yards, and many wise-heads prophesied all sorts of dire mishaps from the innovation. On this ship (she was full rigged) was a crew of nineteen men, and the majority of them had sailed in her for eight years, although her captain was a bit of a "driver". But they got good wages, good food, and had a good ship under their feet—a ship with a crack record as a fast sailer.

In contrast to the *All Serene*, was a handsome barque I once sailed in as a passenger from Sydney to New Caledonia, where she was to

load nickel ore for Liverpool. Her captain and three mates were Britishers, and smart sailor-men enough, the steward was a Chileno, the bos'un a Swede; carpenter a Mecklenburger joiner (who, when told to repair the fore-scuttle, which had been damaged by a heavy sea, did not know where it was situated), the sailmaker a German, and of the twelve A.B.'s and O.S.'s only one—a man of sixty-five years of age, was a Britisher; the rest were of all nationalities. Three of them were Scandinavians and were good sailor-men, the others were almost useless, and only fit to scrub paint-work, and hardly one could be trusted at the wheel. The cook was a Martinique nigger, and was not only a good cook, but a thorough seaman, and he had the utmost contempt for what he called "dem mongrels for'ard," especially those who were Dagoes. The captain and officers certainly had reason to knock the crew about, for during an electrical storm one night the ship was visited by St. Elmo's fire, and the Dagoes to a man refused duty, and would not go aloft, being terrified out of their wits at the dazzling globes of fire running along the yards, hissing and dancing, and illuminating the ocean for miles. They bolted below, rigged up an altar and cross with some stump ends of candles, and began to pray. Exasperated beyond endurance, the captain, officers, two Norwegians, the nigger cook and I, after having shortened canvas, "went" for them, knocked the religious paraphernalia to smithereens, and drove them on deck.

The nigger cook was really a devout Roman Catholic, but his seaman's soul revolted at their cowardice, and he so far lost his temper as to seize a Portuguese by his black curly hair, throw him down, tear open his shirt, and seize a leaden effigy of St. Jago do Compostella, which he wore round his neck, and thrust it into his mouth. In after years I saw Captain "Bully" Hayes do the same thing, also with a Portuguese sailor; but Hayes made the man actually swallow the little image—after he had rolled it into a rough ball—saying that if St James was so efficient to externally protect the wearer from dangers of the sea, that he could do it still better in the stomach, where he (the saint) would feel much warmer.

The barque, a month or so after I left her in Noumea, sailed from T'chio in New Caledonia, and was never heard of again. She was overmasted, and I have no doubt but that she capsized, and every one on board perished. Had she been manned by English sailors,

she would have reached her destination in safety, for the captain and officers knew her faults and that she was a tricky ship to sail with an unreliable crew.

In many ships in which I have sailed, in my younger days, no officer considered it *infra dig.* for him, when not on watch, to go for'ard and listen to some of the hands spinning yarns, especially when the subject of their discourse turned upon matters of seamanship, the eccentricities either of a ship herself or of her builders, etc. This unbending from official dignity on the part of an officer was rarely abused by the men—especially by the better-class sailor-man. He knew that "Mr. Smith" the chief officer who was then listening to his yarns and perhaps afterwards spinning one himself, would in a few hours become a different man when it was his watch on deck, and probably ask Tom Jones, A.B., what the blazes he meant by crawling aft to relieve the wheel like an old woman with palsy. And Jones, A.B., would grin with respectful diffidence, hurry his steps and bear no malice towards his superior.

Such incidents never occur now. There is no feeling of comradeship between officer and "Jack". Each distrusts the other.

I have not had much experience of steamers in the South Sea trade, except as a passenger—most of my voyages having been made in sailing craft, but on one occasion my firm had to charter a steamer for six months, owing to the ship of which I was supercargo undergoing extensive repairs.

The steamer, in addition to a general cargo, also carried 500 tons of coal for the use of a British warship, engaged in "patrolling" the Solomon Islands, and I was told to "hurry along". The ship's company were all strangers to me, and I saw at once I should not have a pleasant time as supercargo. The crew were mostly alleged Englishmen, with a sprinkling of foreigners, and the latter were a useless, lazy lot of scamps. The engine-room staff were worse, and the captain and mate seemed too terrified of them to bring them to their bearings. They (the crew) were a bad type of "wharf rats," and showed such insolence to the captain and mate that I urged both to put some of them in irons for a few days. The second mate was the only officer who showed any spirit, and he and I naturally stood