

The Mutineers

A SEA SKETCH

Compiled from the papers of a London Detective Police Officer.

by Austin C. Burdick

It was in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and twenty-seven, in early spring. I had become sick and tired of catching rogues and villains in the great Babel of London, and I resolved to take a few months' respite from my disagreeable duties; and in order to do this I knew I should have to leave the island, for, let me be anywhere in England, from Land's End to the Tweed, and I knew that I should be called upon to catch some wished-for character for the benefit of Mr. Justice. An old friend of mine, Captain Albert Souther, was upon the point of sailing for New Holland, and I made up my mind to take a trip with him, he having generously offered me snug quarters in his cabin.

The ship which he commanded was a heavy Indiaman. On the present occasion he was to take a few convicts for Botany Bay, and he had also quite a number of passengers who had taken passage for Cape Town, where they talked of locating themselves for agricultural purposes. In addition to his cargo, which was mostly stores for the colony at New South Wales, he carried some thousands of pounds in gold, that was consigned to the governor at Sidney.

In due time I was ensconced in my aquatic quarters, and with much promise of pleasure I bade a temporary adieu to Old England. Our ship was a noble craft, and she afforded all the comfort that could reasonably be desired. Captain Souther was an excellent ship-master, being a stout, brave man, and very cool in seasons of danger. His crew consisted of forty men, most of whom had been under him some years. He liked them for their uniform good conduct and subordination, and they liked him for his kindness and gentlemanly bearing. The convicts, six in number, were carefully disposed of, so that no trouble could be apprehended from them. The passengers for Cape Town were fifty-six in number and they were all of them stout, able men. When I first cast my eyes among them I marked some of them as men whom I had seen before; but, though a few of them had villainous looking countenances, yet I was not positive that any of them were known rogues.

For some time everything went on well. I spent much of the time in the cabin reading, and as the situation was a novel one for me, I did not take so much notice of odd matters as I otherwise should. Everything was odd to me.

We had passed the Canary Islands, and must have been somewhere off Cape Blanco, when I was destined to find that I had not, after all, escaped the business I was trying to flee from. I was sitting in the cabin early one morning, engaged in writing in my notebook. I had been left entirely alone, and had seized the moment as a favorable one for writing up my notes of incidents and aspects of the past three days. While I was thus busy at work Captain Souther came down. There was something so peculiar in his step that it was at once struck my attention, and I looked

up. The captain was much agitated, and I saw that he was very pale about the lips. He carefully closed the door behind him, and then came near me and sat down.

“Mr. Lamworth,” said he, addressing me, “speak low, sir.” He spoke in a whisper, and then drew his stool closer to me.

“What is the matter?” I asked, closing the book in which I had been writing, and laying aside my pen.

“Matter enough,” he returned. “There’s mutiny on board my ship!”

“Among your crew?” I inquired.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “All I know is, that my pistols have been stolen from my berth, and that there is a bag full of cutlasses among the luggage in the long-boat. Where are your weapons?”

“In my berth,” I replied.

“Let’s look,” said he.

We went to my berth, but my pistols were missing! I knew that I had seen them there the night before, for I had at that time freshly primed them.

“This is something that needs looking after,” I said, after I was sure that my pistols were gone.

“Yes—it does,” added Souther, “and you are just the man to do it. You have been for years engaged in overhauling land-pirates, and I don’t see why your wits mayn’t work as well at sea.”

Despite my desire to be rid of this kind of work my nerves were all strung now. It had become a second nature with me to feed my wits on the searching after rogues, and I entered instinctively into the spirit of the present emergency. I was like a hound just come upon the track of a fox.

What sign have you given on deck that your suspicions are aroused?” I asked, after I had resolved the matter over in my mind a few moments.

“Not any,” returned Souther.

“Have you spoken about it to any one?”

“Only yourself.”

“Have you reason to suspect any of your crew?”

“No, sir. I do not believe a single man of them could be drawn into a mutiny.”

“Then it must be among the passengers for Cape Town.”

“I think so.”

“Your money is all under this floor.”

“Yes, —directly underneath where you sit. Six boxes of it.”

“Think any of those fellows know where it is?”

“Oh, yes. Some of them were here when it came on board.”

I got the captain to explain to me all that he had seen on deck. He had discovered the bag of cutlasses in the long-boat by accident while reaching over after a rope-yarn. He saw the brass hilt of one just peeping out at the mouth of the bag, and from the abrupt projections all over the bag's surface he knew that it must be full of the same kind of weapons. He did not touch the bag, and he moreover assured me that no movement of his could have betrayed the startling knowledge he had gained.

I bade Souther go on deck and look after his business as though nothing had happened, and for the present to leave the rest with me. He went up, and shortly afterwards I followed. The crew were all on deck, but most of the Cape Town passengers were below. There were only five of them up, and they were on the starboard side of the forecabin. I carelessly lounged forward as far as the waist, and there I climbed up on a water-cask and leaned over the rail. When I turned to come down I cast my eyes into the long-boat, my elevated position giving me a view of its interior. I could see beneath the boat's temporary roof, which, during pleasant weather, was sometimes raised, and I knew that I saw the very spot where the captain had seen the bag, but it was not there for me to see. I saw other articles which he had described as lying close about it, but even they were not in the position in which he had described them. I knew that the bag must have been moved. Much of the baggage of these Cape Towners was in the longboat, so they had perfect liberty to go there when they chose.

As soon as I had taken this observation I went down to the galley to light a cigar. The galley was forward, on the steerage deck, and having lighted my cigar I quietly took a stroll along the deck, whistling a careless medley as I went, seeming as easy as though I were half asleep, but yet with every wit at work. All the passengers were there, some of them lounging about, and others sitting upon the deck. I looked carefully into every eye among them, and I was not slow in reading the mischief that brooded there.

If I am to read a villain I want to look him directly in the eye without his mistrusting that I suspect him. There is a peculiar expression of the eye under such circumstances—an expression that I cannot clearly define, but yet which long years of experience had given to my understanding. It is a sort of wavering expression—a tendency of the eye to droop before the gaze of a stranger. It has a kind of wistful sparkle, too, —and then there is a twitching of the muscles beneath the lower lid, as though that eye wished to look calm, but could not. I candidly

believe that no man can have a plan for crime formed in his mind, and, when my suspicions are once aroused, hid it from me in his eye.

It was no uncommon thing for me to stroll about the steerage when I was smoking, albeit smoking was generally confined to the upper deck. As I remarked before, I looked every man in the eye and yet did it in such a manner that no suspicions could have been excited. Before I left that deck I felt confident that I had counted over forty men that were laboring under the weight of meditated crime. I *knew* that if mutiny was intended, *they* were engaged in it.

When I returned to the deck I walked aft to where the captain stood.

“Beautiful morning, isn’t it?” said I, loud enough to be heard by some of the Cape Town passengers who had come upon the quarter-deck.

“Very,” returned Souther, as innocently as could be desired.

Send Millman down,” I whispered, as I passed on towards the cabin.

Mr. Millman was the lieutenant, and he had been on deck since four o’clock in the morning. Shortly after I entered the cabin he followed me, and with a wondering expression on his countenance he asked me what was wanted.

“Mr. Millman,” I asked, “did you notice any one approach the long-boat while Captain Souther was down here a short time since?”

“There were several of the passengers loafing about there,” he answered.

“But did you see any one get up so as to reach into the boat?”

“Yes,” said Millman, after a moment’s thought, “I think the man they call Breton did.”

“You are sure of it, are you?”

“Yes—now I come to think of it, I am. He reached in and got out a small bag of clothes.”

“A bag of clothes?”

“Yes, for he opened it and took out a frock, and then put it back.”

“Was he not some time in replacing it?”

“Yes, He seemed to take some pains to stow it away carefully.”

“Where are your pistols, Mir. Millman?”

“In my berth.”

“Let’s look.”

“Why—somebody must have taken them,” uttered the lieutenant, gazing first at me, and then at the place where he had kept his weapons. “What does this all mean, Mr. Lamworth?”

I explained to him all that was suspected, and though he was much startled at first, yet I persuaded him to be quiet, making him understand that the least sign on his part might prove fatal to us. He understood me, and when he left the cabin he was as calm as could be. I enjoined it upon him that he should pass no sign or look of intelligence with the captain, and that he should not overlook in the least the movements of the Cape Towners.

After he had gone I sat down to think. It was a hard case, to say the least. There were fifty-six of the passengers, and I believed that all of them were in the plot. We could only muster forty-two to oppose them, for of course we would not dare to trust the six convicts, and then, perhaps, these fellows might mean to set the convicts at liberty and enlist them in the mutiny. Difficulty arose on every hand. In the first place I knew not how the villains meant to move, nor when, —in the next place they had all the arms, and we had none—and next, we could not alarm the crew without arousing the enemy; for I knew full well that the moment the sailors found out the mischief, that moment they would betray themselves. They were too impulsive to be trusted with such a secret at present. Of course the villains would be regularly organized, with a plan of operations all concocted.

Presently Captain Souther came down.

“Captain,” said I, “what on earth induced you to take such a villainous looking set of fellows on board?”

“I could not help it,” replied he. “they purchased their passage in a lump, of the company’s sub-agent at Liverpool. But then they didn’t all look like villains.”

“Perhaps not,” I rejoined. The truth was, even I had just detected them as villains. I spoke at first under the influence of annoyance.

I informed Souther that I believed the whole gang of the Capemen were in the bloody plot, and also that I apprehended that their plans were all laid. He was very nervous and very anxious, and he told me that he must depend upon me entirely. I saw that he placed great confidence in my ability to circumvent the villains, and I promised him that I would do all I could to help him, and in return I made him pledge himself that he would remain perfectly passive, seeming to take no notice of the movements of the suspected men.

My first object was to find out, if possible, when the mutiny was to be openly made, so that I might know what time I could devote to observation. To this knowledge I was helped by a very slight accident. When I went again on deck I found that nearly all of the Cape Town passengers were up. My first surveillance was upon Breton. He was a dark-featured, slim built man, with a face almost bloodless, showing a heartless, cold-blooded fellow. His eyes were sharp and quick,

and he looked exceedingly intelligent. He was just the man to lay a deep, deadly scheme. I was soon satisfied, from the movements that I saw, that he was the leader, and also that he had no mistrust that his plans were suspected.

After taking such general observation as I deemed sufficient, I lounged carelessly forward. Breton was just abreast the foremast, and was at work with a needle and thread upon his pea-jacket. As I passed slowly by the place where he sat, I saw that he was sewing a leather strap upon the inside of his thick jacket. It was a narrow strap, some twelve or fourteen inches in length, and he was fastening it so that it formed loop-like beackets. My step may have been quicker as I passed on, for I had reached an important point—I was confident of it. Breton was sewing that strap upon the left-hand, inner side of the breast, and it was surely for the purpose of holding a cutlass and pistols! In the course of my walk about the deck I found six other men engaged in the same occupation!

“Now,” thought I, “their plan is to take place tonight.” These fellows often remained on deck during the evening, and, as the nights were damp and cool, they made a practice of throwing on their pea-jackets after nightfall. This conclusion was easily arrived at, for those thick jackets were certainly being prepared to hold offensive weapons, and they would not surely be worn till after dark. Now I felt easier.

O, how easily I could read the mischief in the countenances of those men, now that I was upon the scent. Every look—every motion, was caught by me and turned to account. I saw how curiously they nodded to their leader, and I saw how eagerly they ever and anon looked towards the long-boat. Then, again, I saw the wistful glances that they frequently turned towards the cabin. I could see the word “*gold*” upon their lips, and I could read the thought of murder in their hearts!

At noon I told the captain of my progress, and bade hi rest easy, only enjoining upon him that both he and Millman should have an eye to the long-boat.

Among the Cape Towners there was one that had particularly arrested my attention. He was a young man, and though there were ample marks of evil upon his countenance, yet I quickly detected that he was of a timid nature. I noticed that his hands trembled while he was at work on his pea-jacket, and that he would turn suddenly pale when he found any one looking at him. I had heard him called Malcolm. Of him I determined to make some use if I could get my hands on him.

All of that afternoon I remained on deck, and I know that no look from either Souther, Millman, or myself, could have betrayed our suspicions. It came to be nearly dusk, and the opportunity I had long wished for turned up in my favor. Malcolm came towards the wheel, and I beckoned him to approach me. He did so but he trembled when he came up.

“Can you read writing?” I asked, in a pleasant, confidential way.

“Yes sir,” he replied.

“Then I wish you would come into the cabin and help me transcribe part of the ship’s log. I want to write it all up in my own book, and I have neglected it for the past few days. You can read it off while I write it. Come—I will satisfy you for it.”

He seemed totally disarmed of all fear by my frank manner, and he followed me without hesitation. When we reached the cabin I lighted a candle, and then bade Malcolm take a seat. With a steady hand I drew a sharp carving-knife from my bosom.

“Beware!” said I, in a very low tone, at the same time laying one hand upon his shoulder; “if you speak, or make a noise loud enough to be heard on drack, I’ll kill you on the instant!”

I know that my face is one capable of assuming rather an uninviting aspect, and as the poor fellow looked up at me, and then at the gleaming knife, he turned as pale as death. He shook in every limb. I saw that I had not been mistaken in his character.

“Now,” said I still keeping my position, “I am going to ask you some questions. Life is at stake, and I would as lief plunge this knife to your heart as to eat my supper. If you hesitate, or lie to me, you are a dead man! Is there not a plan formed among your companions for robbing this ship?”

The fellow was thunderstruck. He crouched down as far from the point of the knife as possible, and in any other situation I could have pitied him.

“Answer my question!” I uttered.

“Yes!” gasped the terror-stricken man, in an almost inaudible whisper.

“Are not all your Cape Town companions engaged in the plot?”

With all his fear the fellow hesitated. I saw that he had other things to fear besides my knife, so I resolved to touch him on the tender spot.

“Mark me,” said I. “I know the crime which you have planned, and if you will confess to me the while plot, I will see that you are saved from harm. You shall not suffer with the rest, nor shall you be harmed in the least. I give you my pledge for your safety.”

This operated upon the fellow like magic.

“Now answer me. Are not all your companions in the plot?”

“Yes,” he whispered, with a trembling eye upon my knife.

“And is not Breton the leader?”

“Yes.”

“You have the arms hidden in the long-boat.”

“And you have been fixing your pea-jackets to hold the weapons.”

“Yes,” he said, with a look of astonishment.

“You meant to take the gold *tonight*?”

“Yes.”

“And you meant to have murdered the whole crew.”

The fellow hesitated again, but I soon got an affirmative answer from him, and at length by sharp questioning, I got the whole secret from him. It had been planned that the villains should arm themselves secretly as soon as they had eaten their supper, and that at nine o'clock, as soon as the bell struck, they were part of them to fall suddenly upon the watch on deck and kill them all. Part were to take charge of the fore-castle companionway, to kill the other watch as fast they should come up, and a few were detailed to put those to death in the cabin. I could not help shuddering at the picture which was thus opened to me, but I kept my emotions to myself.

After I had gained all the details that I needed to guide me, I told Malcolm that he might go on deck, for I knew that he would not dare to disclose what he had done. By assuring him that I would see that he was protected from all harm, I succeeded in getting him quieted down so that his manner would not betray him on deck, following, myself, immediately after him.

As quickly as possible I told the captain all that I knew, and my plans for action were soon laid down. It was now fairly dusk, and the cook came up and called the passengers to their supper. They all went down but two, and those two remained close by the long-boat. I knew well their mission there, but I had the advantage of them.

With quick, but cautious movements, the captain, lieutenant and myself hastened around among the crew and whispered the danger that hung over them. The brave fellows started with excitement, but they spoke not a loud word. Souther and myself took each an iron belaying-pin, and went forward, and at a preconcerted signal we knocked the two villain-sentinels down. The thing was done without a mishap. We gave them another blow a-piece, to make sure that they should give no alarm, and then we sprang for the bag of cutlasses while some of our men closed the hatches and secured them. We found the arms, and they were quickly distributed among the crew.

By this time there was an uproar in the steerage, and a dozen voices were shouting for admittance upon the deck. Our men had now become fully acquainted with what had taken place, and they were unfastened, and the villains came rushing up, but they only hastened to their death. It was now dark on deck, and as the scamps came up from the lighted steerage they were unable to immediately distinguish objects about them, and many of them were struck down before they could see who opposed them. We had levelled a dozen of them, and then I bade the crew fall back and let the rest of them come up, for I feared that if we kept on as we had begun most of

them would fall back into the steerage and prepare to stand a siege, and this I knew would be troublesome work.

As soon as our men fell back matters worked as I could have wished, for the whole pack of incarnate scoundrels came rushing wildly upon the deck. As soon as they were all up we set upon them. They knew not what to do. They sprang towards the long-boat, but they were knocked back, and then, as they fell back, they were met again. Most of them were brave fellows and strong, but we had them unarmed—they were wild with disappointment and fear—and they saw not how they had been taken.

Such a battle could not last long. In fifteen minutes from the time that the two men had been struck down by the long-boat everything was settled. Thirty-two of the villains were lying dead upon the deck. Breton had been one of the first to come up from the steerage, and he was one of the first killed.

On the next morning the deck was cleared of its ghastly load, and then the prisoners were examined. None of them denied their crime, but they begged hard for mercy.

At St. Jago we fell in with a British frigate, and our prisoners were put on board, together with such evidence as was necessary for their conviction.

I have felt proud a great many times in my life, but I never experienced, on any other occasion, so much real gratification as I did when Captain Souther grasped me by the hand and told me that I had saved his ship and his life—and then when the hardy, impulsive seamen gathered about me and blessed me. There is a vast amount of real joy in feeling that you have helped your fellows.

Malcolm we kept on board until we reached Cape Town, and there we landed him to follow the bent of his own inclinations. The rest of the cruise passed off as pleasantly as could be wished.

The Flag of Our Union, March 11, 1854