

THE ADVENTURES OF A SUPERCARGO

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The adventures of a supercargo by Louis Becke

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LOUIS BECKE

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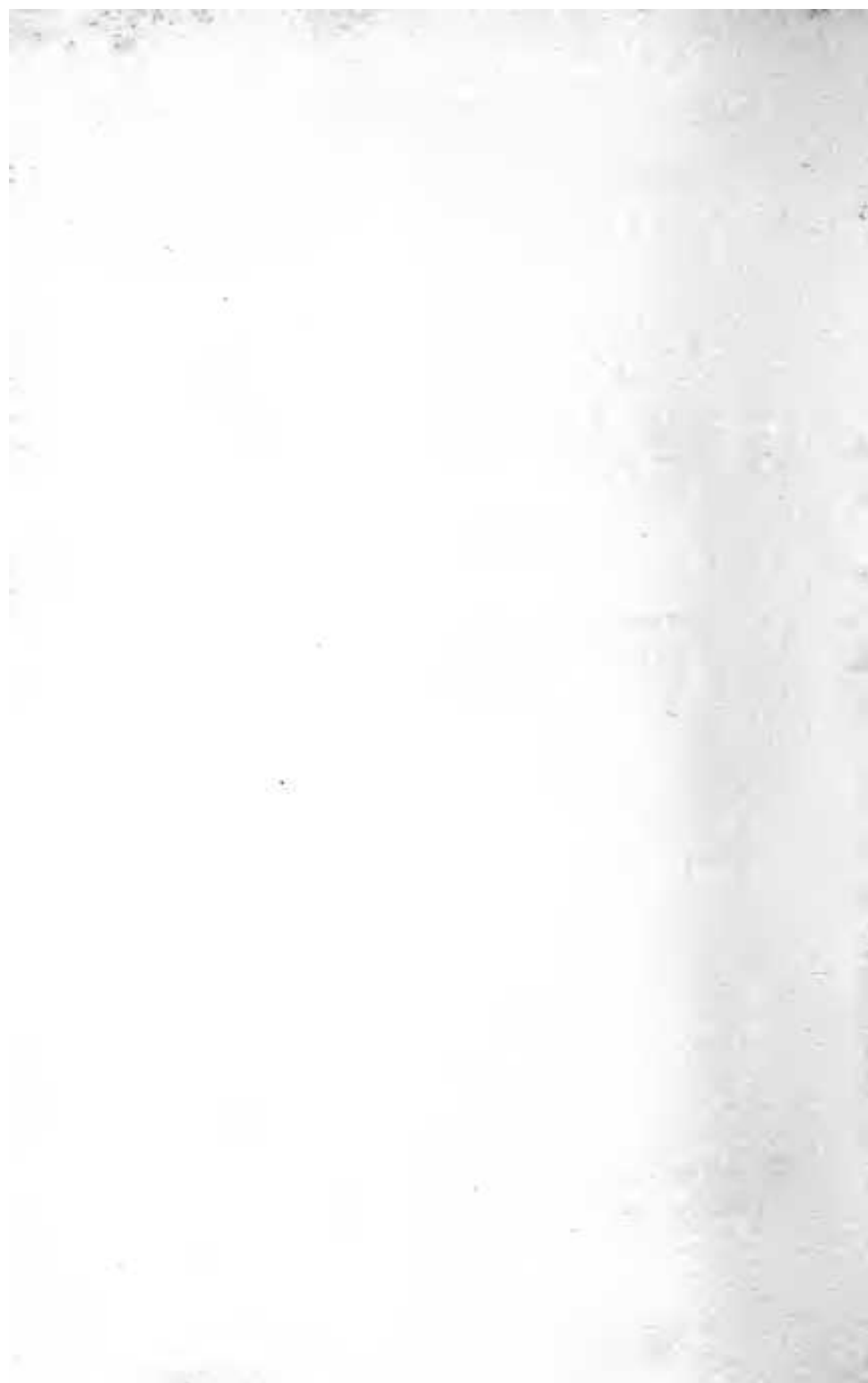
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TO
MY OLD SHIPMATE IN SOUTHERN SEAS
MY DAUGHTER
NORA LOIS

HONFLEUR, CALVADOS,
January, 1906.



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CHAPTER I

THE night air was heavy with the perfume of the wild convulvulus and the flowers of the golden wattle, as a lad of sixteen, carrying a weighty fish basket slung from his shoulder, began the ascent of a narrow, rocky path leading from the shores of the quiet little bay to the densely timbered uplands.

The summit gained, he freed himself of his load, by slipping the leather strap over his head, and as the basket touched the ground, it canted on one side, and a number of large silvery bream, still alive, slid out upon the grass, their bodies gleaming under the light of the myriad stars shining out from a vault of cloudless blue.

With a sigh of content, the youth sat down upon the sward and looked at the scene below, and then across the slumbering water to the blaze of the lights of the city, four miles away. Just beneath was the deep, land-

locked bay, darkened by the shadows of the high, tree-clad hills, and showing no sign of life, except a faint gleam from the stern ports of a large barque, whose bulk impressively dominated over that of several smaller vessels—brigs, schooners, and a dismantled and ancient paddle-wheel steamer. All—even the lofty-sparred barque herself—were “condemned” craft, and had been moored in the cove for a long time, some for three or four years. And they were all dear to the heart of the boy, who was now regarding them with wistful eyes, and building up romances about them in his imaginative brain. For he had known them ever since they had been towed into the secluded little cove, to await being sold as coal hulks, or to be broken up for the sake of their copper or Muntz metal bolts.

Once, when he was three years younger, there had been as many as fifteen “condemned” in sleepy Sirius Cove, and then one day there came along two panting tugs, and four of them were taken away to be made “fit for sea” again to take coal to California or Panama or Valparaiso. For those were the days when the private marine surveyors had very pleasant financial relations with the official Marine Board of New South Wales, and many hundreds of sailormen went to their deaths in heavily-insured, ex-condemned, and rotten old crates called ships, whose captains and officers well knew that there were ten chances to one of the vessel

not reaching her destination if she met with bad weather. But they were heavily-insured; and the "hard-up" captains and mates who signed the articles at the Shipping Office were always broken and reckless men who cared little for their own lives, and still less for those of the scratch crews of dead-beats and loafers, who called themselves "Able Bodied," and "Ordinary Seamen." If the ship arrived at her port of discharge, the skipper and his officers received a bonus in addition to their wages, and the crew, who had already spent their one or two months' advance, and were in debt to the ship, were encouraged to stick to her for the return voyage by the gift of a few bottles of Queensland rum, and the seizure by the captain of such wretched effects as they possessed. These were locked up in the cabin, so that if any one of the hands before the mast deserted, he would go ashore with nothing but what he stood up in—a ragged shirt, and a pair of worn-out pants, with perhaps an ancient pair of shoes or sea-boots.

But, if the ship never turned up again, and was reported "missing" at Lloyds, there was but little comment made, except by the people in the insurance office. They took big risks, and charged big premiums, and had no concern otherwise about men's lives. And even in these latter days, the life of a merchant seaman too often counts for naught.

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