

# BECKE LOUIS

"THE GALLANT, GOOD  
RIOU", AND JACK  
RENTON

**Louis Becke**  
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Riou", and Jack Renton**

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«The Gallant, Good Riou», and Jack Renton / 1901:*

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## «The Gallant, Good Riou», and Jack Renton / 1901

### "THE GALLANT, GOOD RIOU"

This is a true story of one of Nelson's captains, he of whom Nelson wrote as "the gallant and good Riou"—high meed of praise gloriously won at Copenhagen—but Riou, eleven years before that day, performed a deed, now almost forgotten, which, for unselfish heroism, ranks among the brightest in our brilliant naval annals, and in the sea story of Australia in particular.

In September, 1789, the *Guardian*, a forty-gun ship, under the command of Riou, then a lieutenant, left England for the one-year-old penal settlement in New South Wales. The little colony was in sore need of food—almost starving, in fact—and Riou's orders were to make all haste to his destination, calling at the Cape on the way to embark live stock and other supplies. All the ship's guns had been removed to make room for the stores, which included a "plant cabin"—a temporary compartment built on deck for the purpose of conveying to Sydney, in pots of earth, trees and plants selected by Sir Joseph Banks as likely to be useful to the young colony—making her deck "a complete garden,"

says a newspaper of the time. Friends of the officers stationed in New South Wales sent on board the Guardian great quantities of private goods, and these were stored in the gun-room, which it was thought would be a safer place than the hold, but, as the event proved, it was the most insecure.

The ship arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in November, and there filled her decks with cattle and provisions, then sailed again, her cargo being equal in value to about £70,000. On December 23rd—twelve days after leaving the Cape—what is described as "an island of ice" was seen. Riou gave orders to stand towards it in order to renew, by collecting lumps of ice, the supply of water, the stock of fresh water having run very low in consequence of the quantity consumed by the cattle.

The Public Advertiser of April 30, 1790, describes what now happened. As the ship approached the island, the boats were hoisted out and manned, and several lumps collected. During this time the ship lay to, and on the ice being brought on board she attempted to stand away. Very little apprehension was at this time entertained of her safety, although the enormous bulk of the island occasioned an unfavourable current, and in some measure gave a partial direction to the wind. On a sudden, the base of the island, which projected under water considerably beyond the limits of the visible parts, struck the bow of the ship; she instantly swung round, and her head cleared, but her stern, coming on the shoal, struck repeatedly, and the sea being very heavy, her rudder broke away, and all her works abaft were shivered. The

ship in this situation became, in a degree, embayed under the terrific bulk of ice, for its height was twice that of the mainmast of a ship of the line, and the prominent head of the berg was every moment expected to break away and overwhelm the ship. At length, after every practicable exertion, she was got off the shoal, and the ice floated past her. It was soon perceived that the *Guardian* had six feet of water in her hold, and it was increasing very fast. The hands were set to the pumps, others to find out the leaks, and they occasionally relieved each other. Thus they continued labouring unceasingly on the 24th, although on the 23rd not one of them had had the least rest. The ship was at one period so much relieved that she had only two feet of water in the hold; but at this time, when their distress wore the best aspect, the water "increased in a moment to ten feet." Then the ship was discovered to be strained in all her works, and the sea running high, every endeavour to check the progress of a particular leak proved ineffectual. To lighten the ship, the cows, horses, sheep, and all the other live stock for the colony were, with their fodder, committed to the deep to perish.

John Williams, boatswain of the *Guardian*, wrote to his parents in London, and told them about the disaster, and although we have no doubt he was handier with the marline-spike than with his pen, some of his badly spelled letter reads well:—

"This axident happened on the 23rd of December, and on the 25th the boats left us with moast of the officers and a great part of the seamen. The master-gunner, purser, one master's mate,

one midshipman, and a parson, with nine seamen, was got into the longboat and cleared the ship. The doctor and four or five men got into a cutter and was upset close to the ship, and all of them was drowned. As for the rest of the boats, I believe they must be lost and all in them perished, for wee was about six hundred leagues from any land. There was about fifty-six men missing; a number drowned jumping into the boats; the sea ran so high that the boats could scarce live. The commander had a strong resolution, for he said he would sooner go down in the ship than he wold quid her. All the officers left in the ship was the commander, the carpenter, one midshipman, and myself. After the boats left us we had two chances—either to jump or sink. We cold just get into the sailroom and got up a new forecourse and stuck it full of oakum and rags, and put itt under the ship's bottom; this is called fothering the ship. We found some benefit by itt for pumping and bailing we gained on hur; that gave us a little hope of saving our lives. We was in this terable situation for nine weeks before we got to the Cape of Good Hope. Sometimes our upper-deck scuppers was under water outside, and the ship leying like a log on the water, and the sea breaking over her as if she was a rock. Sixteen foot of water was the common run for the nine weeks in the hold. I am not certain what we are to doo with the ship as yet. We have got moast of our cargo out; it is all dammaged but the beef and pork, which is in good order. I have lost a great dele of my cloaths, and I am thinking of drawing of about six pound, wich I think I can make shift with. If this

accident had not hapned I shold not have had aney call for aney. As for my stores, there is a great part of them thrown overboard; likewise all the officers stores in the ship is gone the same way, for evry thing that came to hand was thrown ovarboard to lighten the ship. I think that we must wait till ordars comes from England to know what we are to do with the ship."

The chronicles of the time also relate how at daylight on Christmas morning, when the water was reported as being up to the orlop deck and gaining two feet an hour, many of the people desponded and gave themselves up for lost. A part of those who had any strength left, seeing that their utmost efforts to save the ship were likely to be in vain, applied to the officers for the boats, which were promised to be in readiness for them, and the boatswain was directly ordered to put the masts, sails, and compasses in each. The cooper was also set to work to fill a few quarter-casks of water out of some of the butts on deck, and provisions and other necessaries were got up from the hold.

Many hours previous to this, Lieutenant Riou had privately declared to his officers that he saw the final loss of the ship was inevitable, and he could not help regretting the loss of so many brave fellows. "As for me," said he, "I have determined to remain in the ship, and shall endeavour to make my presence useful as long as there is any occasion for it." He was entreated, and even supplicated, to give up this fatal resolution, and try for safety in the boats. It was even hinted to him how highly criminal it was to persevere in such a determination; but he was not to be

moved by any entreaties. He was, notwithstanding, as active in providing for the safety of the boats as if he intended to take the opportunity of securing his own escape. He was throughout as calm and collected as in the happier moments of his life.

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