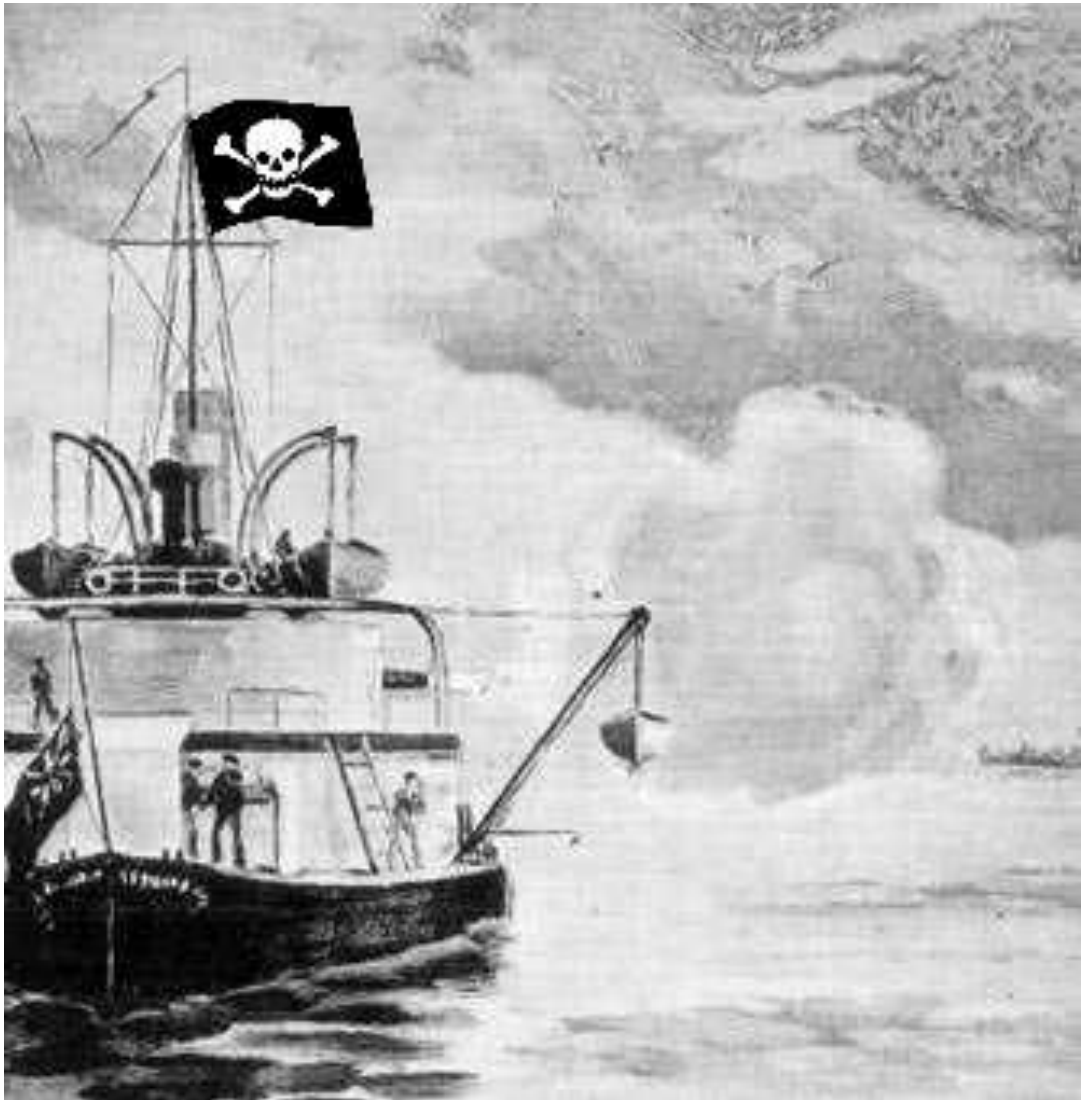


HMVS CERBERUS:



The Taking of the Cerberus Hoax

The following account was published in the "Herald Newspaper" on July 17 & 20 1876. Although not described as a hoax, the date (August 1) attributed to the article, was most likely intended to alert readers to its lack of authenticity.

The Herald July 17 1876

The Taking of the Cerberus

(FROM OUR WAR CORRESPONDENT)

August 1st 1876

At daylight this morning the report of a heavy piece of ordnance was heard in and around Hobson's Bay; no there is no war vessel in the Harbor, and the mail steamer not due, the inhabitants of Williamstown, Sandridge, etc, were aroused from their slumbers, firstly, by the noisy report, and, secondly, by the smashing windows, and crockery. Our special reporter happened fortunately to be at Sandridge making inquiries into the now all absorbing topic, Wilson and Brown, but this celebrated case must now give way to more important affairs.

Our reporter awakened by the concussion, immediately rushed out to ascertain the cause of the firing; interviewing the watchman of the Sandridge Railway Pier, who was just returning from his cold and cheerless night watch; he ascertained that a gun had been fired from the Cerberus, and that immediately after the smoke had cleared away, a black flag was seen flying from the mast-head. We need hardly say that crowds of people were now abroad witnessing the alarming sight. A black flag! What does it mean? Speculation had a good innings this time, without a chance of being got at by, the talent; but no one booked the bets. So all was speculation. Spectators looked at that black flag, but could make nothing of it. Was Captain Panter mad? The first lieutenant drunk? etc, etc. At last, after much council, it was decided to send a boat off, and ascertain all about it. Our reporter, with that pertinacity (only acquired by reporters and porters) obtained a place in the boat. We let our reporter say what occurred in his own words---

"We left the Sandridge railway pier at 8.6 a.m, and rowed to the Cerberus. On arriving within speaking distance we hailed the vessel, to know if Captain Panter was on board. Reply - No. Could we come along-side? Yes, but no one would be allowed on board, as it was contrary to orders. Why was the gun fired, and the black flag hoisted? Because we've taken your darned Cerberus, and mean to keep her until we're paid off."

Our reporter states that the consternation fixed on the faces of all the boats crew, including himself, was something to be seen to be understood. Our readers will understand that no time was lost in returning to Sandridge, but, of course, as usual, they arrived just when the train to town had left; our reporter telegraphed for a special train so as to be the first to give the news; the authorities interviewed the station master, that they might have an engine, ballast truck, anything to get up to Melbourne, and give the news to the Government; however, bad as things were, all had to wait until the next train arrived.

Our reporter, on arriving in town, rushed to this office, and reported all the news that we were able to give our readers by this special edition, issued at 11 a.m. We cannot conceive the meaning of the affair, and must await further intelligence; our reporter, who is second cousin to an officer at the Treasury, hopes, by some means, to overhear what is done at Cabinet Council, which of course, will be called immediately. If not before, as soon as our reporter returns, we will issue another Extraordinary, giving the latest particulars.

12.30p.m. - Our reporter overheard (never mind how) that the Cabinet have decided on sending the Collector of Customs, and a picked crew of officials, used to searching after contraband goods, on board the Cerberus, and ascertain what is the matter. This we shall soon ascertain, as we can depend on Mr Guthrie. His valiant

essay to enter Stevenson's fanlight is not yet forgotten. Our reporter, by hook or by crook, means to be one of the party; and, as we have specially engaged the wire from Sandsridge, we shall issue another edition or receipt of further news.

10 p.m. — Another heavy gun report heard from the Bay. What can it mean? 3 p.m. — Telegram from our reporters:— "The Russians are in possession of the Cerberus, and have moored her, so as to be between the Nelson and the Sandridge, none of the shore batteries can fire at her; if they did they would fire at the Nelson, the shipping in the lines, and do tremendous damage to Williamstown by spent balls."

3 p.m. Our reporter has just arrived, and states he managed to secure a seat in the Customs boat, and went alongside the Cerberus. when they were hailed "to keep off" until further orders. Ultimately, a smiling gentleman, in full naval uniform, appeared on deck, and enquired the business of his visitors. Being informed, he replied that he had the honour to be the commander of the Cerberus, also that he had sufficient shot and shell on board to bombard Melbourne, ——— thanks to Victorian foresight. The commander also intimated that having a crew of sixty men on board he was short of provisions, and if Mr Guthrie, on returning to Sandridge would kindly intimate to Stewart, White and Co., and Elworthy, Dobbon, and Co., that unless they supplied him with all he required, he should be under painful necessity of shelling their respective stores; as for coals, he would supply himself; he rather fancied an armed boats' crew would bring any of the coal hulks alongside him pretty soon; if not, he would go alongside them.

The commander spoke plainly. that he had come for money, but would only treat with the Governor or the Chief Secretary on that subject. Meantime he would wait for provisions, and a supply of ammunition from the arsenal, and if these were supplied without delay, he would wait until daylight to-morrow that the Cabinet might discuss the matter; he was easy, being sure no one should take the Cerberus by surprise as he had done; but if he was not interviewed by someone in authority at or before daylight he would bombard Melbourne.

5 p.m. Our reporter was allowed to be present at the Cabinet meeting held immediately after the return of Mr.Guthrie. (No delay occurred this time by the M. and H. B. U. R. Co., as the boatswain of the Cerberus quietly told the coxswain of our boat that "unless they put on specials, the commander would blow the place all to pieces, as he wanted smartness, and meant to go, as soon as he had the dollars.")

It was decided at the Cabinet meeting that Mr. Guthrie should again interview those on board the Cerberus, to ascertain who the parties really are that hold possession. We shall issue extraordinaries as fast as the news arrives. Before our reporter left for Sandridge, he stated, that in his opinion, the Cerberus had been surprised by an organised gang of lumpers, nothing was easier to do, there being only thirteen men on board, and a few men could do the job almost any night in the week.

6 p.m. Acting on the hint supplied by our reporter, we have ascertained that Captain Panter was at a ball on the night in question, the chief officer was at a wedding, the second officer engaged in Masonic duties, and the few hands on board were snug in their bunks. This important information we also recieved by telegram from our reporter, who, on his arrival, with Mr.Guthrie, at Sandridge, found that the original crew of the Cerberus had just landed at the pier, having been cast adrift by the pirates.

6.15 p.m. Our reporter telegraphs he will be up by the next train with important information; this we will publish as soon as possible.

7.10 p.m. Our reporter states that after interviewing the late crew of the Cerberus. he gleaned the following facts:— Captain Panter and the officers of the Cerberus left that vessel at short intervals between 5 and 7 p.m. last night. Shortly afterwards the bulk of the crew did likewise for a few hour's spree on shore, only thirteen of the crew remaining on board; these retired to rest about 10.30 p.m, leaving one man on the look-out. About midnight the watchman (who no doubt was dosing), suddenly found himself seized and gagged, but supposing it was being done by some of his mates as a joke for finding him asleep, he attempted no resistance; however, he soon found out it was no joke, and noticed two boats come alongside, filled with armed men. He calculated that at this time there could not have been less than sixty men on board, but owing to the darkness, and the silence maintained by all hands he was unable to glean anything as to their nationality.

Shortly one, who seemed to be in command, and who spoke very fair English, ordered him to show where the crew were sleeping; with a pistol at his ear; he had to obey orders, and, with half a dozen, they went below, and before the crew were sufficiently awake to realise the position, the whole of them were gagged and in irons, and stowed away safely. When the rest of the crew came on board, it is supposed they noticed nothing amiss, and were quietly gagged and ironed as they came on board and stowed away in another part of the vessel, but we have no positive information on this point.

However, one thing is certain—the Cerberus has been taken, but by whom we have yet to learn. And what should have been our defence, is now a weapon turned against ourselves, for her heavy guns now menace the city, and the colonists who have paid enormously for the protection of the best class, find the Cerberus turned against them, and this is without any warning, and by a handful of men.

Where is the boasted telegraph's, our forts, our Volunteers? What of the boast that no enemy could come without our knowledge, giving us ample time to prepare. We can only say, in spite of all the boasting, the enemy is here, and the turrets of the Cerberus frown on our devoted city.

8 p.m. The rest of the crew of the Cerberus have just landed at Sandridge. Our surmise as to the easy capture, as stated in our Extraordinary at 7.10 p.m., was correct; they had no suspicion. and quietly secured as they came on board.

10 p.m. Mr. Guthrie has returned; he was refused admittance on board the Cerberus and was told the original programme would be strictly adhered to.

Midnight. Our reporter has returned from an expedition in the Bay, and found the Cerberus had left her moorings, and anchored so as to command the Nelson, and at the same time is in a better position to shell Melbourne. He also noticed a schooner anchored close under the quarter of the Cerberus, as if for protection.

One a.m. August 2nd. We learn from Elworthy and Co., that their boat with provisions, and Stewart and Co.'s boat with stores, went off to the Cerberus as ordered. These were recieved, but one allowed on board; while discharging they took an opportunity to discover the name of the schooner before mentioned; on the stern is Firefly, Boston. Where does she come from? No such vessel has been reported. We shall wire to the surrounding colonies, and let our readers know as soon as possible.

2 a.m. Telegraphic communication, both with Adelaid and Sydney is interrupted. [Note by Editor, Always is if anything important occurs.]

3.30 a.m. No news from the Bay. The Cabinet have decided on sending Sir James McCulloch to the Cerberus, to make terms. He is to leave in the Customs boat, at 4.30 a.m.

4 a.m. Telegraphic communication resumed. Neither Sydney nor Adelaide know anything of the schooner Firefly.

5 a.m. A special messenger has arrived at this office from the bay. He reports that an armed boat's crew went alongside the P. and O. Co.'s coal hulk, unmoored and towed her alongside the Cerberus. She is now coaling as fast as possible. Steam is up, and the turrets have been well tried. Our informant watched proceedings from a respectful distance, but from the way in which the turrets now turn around it is evident a master spirit is on board.

5.30 a.m. The gun fire heard this morning at 5.15 was from Cerberus, and the shot fired struck the turret of the new Government House, doing considerable damage. By this, it would appear that the present owners of the Cerberus are in earnest and that they know well how to use their prise. Whatever is Sir James McCulloch about? Another concussion like the last, will break the remainder of the windows left.

Additional particulars will be given in our next issue.

The Taking of the Cerberus

(FROM OUR WAR CORRESPONDENT)

Continued from Tuesday

6.30 a.m. Our reporter has just returned from the Cerberus. He, with Sir James McCulloch, was admitted on board, and courteously shown to the Commander's cabin. The ultimatum is, the sum of £3,000,000 in gold by 11 a.m, or the city will be shelled.

A Cabinet meeting will be held immediately. Our reporter could not gather any news as to the nationality of the privateers. Steam was up, and every aperture on the Cerberus was carefully guarded by armed men.

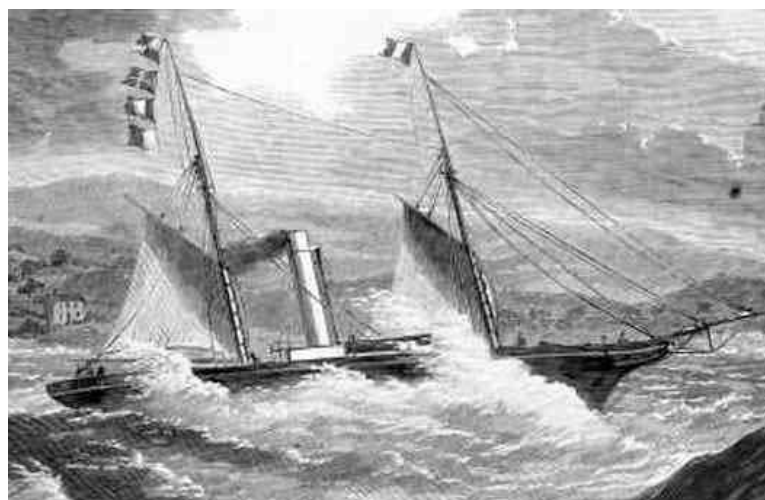
8 a.m. The Cabinet have called on the various banks to contribute the sum demanded. Telegraphic messages would have been sent to London, but the cable is unfortunately again broken.

Sir James McCulloch expects the British Government to pay the sum demanded of us, otherwise he will advocate a total separation and an independent state.

9.30 a.m. The banks have raised the money for Sir James McCulloch, on the Governor's giving a full undertaking to issue Government debentures for the full amount, and having a short bill passed through Parliament at once, making the bank's notes legal tender, without responsibility on the part of the banks to give gold or silver for them on presentation.

11.30 a.m. Mr. Guthrie has returned to Sandridge, having paid the money to the commander of the Cerberus, we learned that the bag of gold was counted out, the others examined and weighed against the first one on butchers scales. Mr. Guthrie was thanked politely, and immediately on his leaving, the Cerberus unmoored and steamed slowly down the Bay with the Firefly in tow.

12 (Noon) The Harbor Master despatched the Pharos to watch the movements of the Cerberus; this appeared to be noticed on board the Cerberus, and a shot from the latter was sent so close to the Pharos that Captain Stanley deemed it only common prudence to return to his anchorage, as his vessel is unarmed, and could do nothing.



The Government Steamer "Pharos"

3 p.m. Captain Payne received a telegram from officials at Queenscliff, of which we have been favoured with a copy:—

"Cerberus, with schooner in tow, passed the Heads at 2.50 p.m. Sea calm, wind N.W. Signalled for boat to follow outside; have sent Customs boat, and signalled the pilot to go alongside. Have you any orders for me?"

4.30 p.m. Captain Coffey reports to us that he is of the opinion that the so-called schooner Firefly is the schooner Haidee, 225 tons, sold by him privately, to a Mr. Smith, some six weeks ago, avowedly for the pearl fishery, it is known that this vessel has received extensive repairs and alterations, and was filled up with guns, stores, etc. for this perilous avocation.

Mr. Otto Berliner has been employed to ferret out this extraordinary affair.

5 p.m. We are again favored by the courtesy of the Government with a copy of telegram first received by the officials from Queenscliff:—

"Cerberus" hove to about four miles outside the Heads, the schooner went alongside the Customs boat; and pilot schooner reached her shortly after, but were sternly ordered to keep a cable's length off, until further orders. Meantime a transfer was made of stores, gold, men, etc., to the schooner, while an armed boat's crew kept rowing around the vessel to prevent any near approach. At 5 p.m. the schooner hailed the Customs boat, and told them to take charge of the Cerberus. Meantime the schooner filled her sails, and (sic) took a S.S.E. course and was soon out of our sight in the darkening night. The Customs boat went alongside the Cerberus, and Not (sic) a living soul was found on board the Cerberus. The first idea was to turn the guns on the receding schooner, but no one knew how to use them. Furthermore, on examination, every gun was found securely spiked and mutilated; the mechanism of the turrets smashed in a wilful manner; and, altogether, the Cerberus, our boat and pride, was a floating, useless piece of property. The privateers had drawn the furnaces, refilled and saturated the coals with salt water, so that it was impossible to get up steam. The Customs boat, therefore, left at once for Queenscliff to telegraph for all tug assistance. Meantime the pilot schooner will tow the Cerberus out as far from danger as her limited powers will permit, until she receives further assistance. Her course will necessarily be as near S.E. as possible."

7 p.m. We hear from Queenscliff that two tug boats have gone to bring in the Cerberus.

7.45 p.m. Cerberus towed in and anchored at Queenscliff; this dispatch is owing to a change in the wind, enabling the pilot schooner to approach the Heads with the Cerberus in tow, then the tugs picked her up just outside. The captain of the pilot schooner intended to venture in with the flood tide if assistance had not arrived.

9 p.m. Mr. Berliner reports that the Haidee or Firefly has been receiving her supplies from nearly every ship-chandler, so that will take time to ascertain what she really received. Meantime we trust all ship chandlers and others who have supplied anything to this Mr. Smith, for the Haidee or Firefly, whichever it may be, will at once report to Mr. Berliner, so that we may know who the desperados are. We incline to think that no foreign enemy has taken our £3,000,000.

11 a.m. The mystery is explained. As we surmised by our last extraordinary, the taking of the Cerberus has been by no foreign enemy but by domestic foes.

A young man rather worse for liquor, inquired at one of the hotels at Sandridge if the Cerberus had left.

His inquiry and manner were suspicious, that the Police were communicated with, and he was given into custody. He gives the name of Thomas Jones, and has admitted that the whole affair was planned in Melbourne, and that as soon as he heard that his mates had received the £3,000,000, he went on a spree, and was too late apparently to go on board and receive his share. The prisoner will appear at Sandridge Police Court at 10 a.m. tomorrow; meantime we cannot help expressing our views, although, this has been a Melbourne affair, for it seems quite possible that any innocent looking schooner, with concealed crew on board, can come through the Heads with one of our own pilots on some flimsy pretext, and do again, what we have done ourselves, but possibly with more hardship, and at a greater cost to this country.

3rd August (Noon) Thomas Jones was bought up at Sandridge Police Court this morning at 10 a.m. on a charge of being drunk, and was fined 6s. On being asked by the Magistrate if he was prepared to substantiate his statement of yesterday as to his share in the taking of the Cerberus, he denied any knowledge of the affair, and if he had said anything it must have been owing to the excitement of affairs respecting the Cerberus, which, no doubt, caused him to talk about it when under the influence of drink. Prisoner discharged. Berliner, we understand, will keep Mr. Tom Jones under surveillance.

4 p.m. Tom Jones is carefully watched, Berliner has interviewed the Chief Secretary, and recommended a reward of – £200 to any accomplice, also a free pardon, on giving every information about the taking of the Cerberus. The Governor will preside at an Extraordinary Executive Council meeting, at 5 p.m, to discuss the matter.

6 p.m. The governor and Council have issued a special Government Gazette, offering a reward of £250 and free pardon to any accomplice in the taking of the Cerberus, providing he gives a full and true account. We fancy Mr. Thomas Jones is going to be in funds in spite of his excuses this morning.

10.30 p.m. Although, in the interest of justice, we cannot give the names of those implicated in the taking of the Cerberus, we are happy to inform our readers that our misfortunes emanate from our own population, and not from foreign foe, although, as before stated, nothing could easier be done by a foreign enemy than has been done by domestic traitors; for it is evident that while we are looking out for flying squadrons, a simple schooner, with armed men perdue, could take our boasted Cerberus at any time. However, we trust the government will have learnt a lesson by our past misfortune, put the Cerberus in thorough repair and working order, and keep her so day and night, in readiness, at any moment, to repel either domestic or foreign foe. 5,000,000 is a heavy price to pay for experience, but we hope we shall now have thorough efficiency. The country, we are sure will not grudge the expense.

For the information of our readers we condense the particulars of the evidence given by Thomas Jones at the Government House, before the Governor and Executive Council, as before mentioned, the Press are pledged to suppress all names, and any particulars that would interfere with the course of justice.

Thomas Jones' evidence – therefore simply this–

Thomas Jones is an engineer, and has been employed on the international steamer for a period of about ten years on and off. He has generally been discharged from his employment on account of drunkenness, is clever at his work when sober, and thoroughly understands the working and mechanism of engines, and can do any repairs that can be done on board ship. About seven weeks ago, he met a man at a public house at Emerald Hill, who, from his conversation, was also an engineer, and finding that Jones was out of employment, and down on his luck, promised him a billet, and made an appointment for the next night; the appointment was kept, and Jones was introduced to a third party, called Captain Brown, who wanted a crew of engineers, etc., to proceed in his schooner to take charge of a steamer, purchased by his owners at Manilla; wages were agreed upon, and Jones was to be at Sandridge at a certain hour next morning; he was taken on board the Haidee or Firefly, and found all hands busy refitting, he was told to help, and do what he could, and cheerfully obeyed commands.

At midnight he was aroused from sleep, and all hands were mustered in the cabin, about forty-five men, all told. The so called Captain Brown then informed him of the plot to take the Cerberus, and that each man would have a share of what could be extorted from Melbourne, according to his rank in the ship. The prospects were made dazzling, and the option a pig of iron at his feet and a cold bath; or, the oath. This ordeal was most impressive. as all on board had sworn to do or die. Jones therefore took the oath, and was informed by the crew that any attempts at desertion or treachery would be followed by a pistol shot at once. Day by day and night by night, new hands came on board, until Captain Brown alias Smith, had as many as he considered required for his daring outrage, and all were sworn in like himself, and doubtless, like himself, dazzled with the riches of three millions of money being divided amongst sixty men. The only cause of complaint on board the schooner, was the number of men required by the captain. No grog was allowed, and the gangways, bows and stairs were apparently carelessly, but carefully, guarded by a picked and faithful crew of officers and men, night and day, so that no chance should occur of desertion; a waterman's boat came daily for the captain, and

in his absence the chief officer was most vigilant. The schooner was, to all appearance, being fitted out for the pearl fishery, and the tween decks were fitted up permanently for a large crew. The boats from the storekeepers were admitted **** * without reserve, and the spare men then were always made busy up aloft or below, as if they were labourers from the shore. One man tried to send a note by a boatman, but it was seized by the second officer, the man sent below, and excuses made, and when all boats left the poor man was put in irons, and I suppose he is so now. From what I saw, the schooner must have received twelve months provisions for a crew of sixty men, and altogether six or eight carronades. A * gun also came on board, but was sent below.

Shortly after midnight of the 20th July, the captain called all hands, and for the first time gave us a glass of grog. He explained his project, dazzling us with the wealth we would possess in twenty-four hours, made each man take a further oath on the Bible to be true to each other, and took a list of the qualifications of each man on board. Twenty five men, carefully picked, were then told "off" and embarked in the life-boat, accompanied by the captain, second and third officers, and we rowed to the Cerberus. It is useless to repeat Mr. Jones further evidence. Our reporter already *** * They found an easy capture.

The only..... (*the next seven rows are unreadable*)

up the anchor, and, with the remaining boats and crews, towed the schooner under the quarter, and under the protection of the Cerberus. The remainder of this disgraceful history is already known to our readers. Jones says the glass of grog he had on board so tempted him that he managed to conceal himself on one of the larger storekeeper's boats, without even their knowledge, intending to have a good drink and go on board again. However, he missed his passage. He is £250 the richer by his folly, and we are £3,000,000 the poorer by "our" folly, and the only satisfaction we have is that we know who took the Cerberus, and our money. Jones has not the slightest idea where the Firefly intended to go; this was never mentioned on board.

This is all the information we can give our readers, bound as we are, in the interest of justice, and we therefore cease our special extraordinaries with this issue on this disastrous affair. Trusting that time will clear up the present unknown, and that our late misfortune will be a lesson for the future.

O.I.L.

Credits

Articles transcribed by Stoker Cherylle Thurling (Victorian Navy) 2003.

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Pharos sketch from *Illustrated Australian News* August 8 1868.