TWO YEARS’ CRUISE, &c.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Beagle Channel.—Picturesque Scenery.—Supposed Passage to Magellan Straits.—The Clay Cliffs and Narrows.—Wild and romantic Picture.—The Codrington Mountains and Land of Fire.—Suddenly come upon an unknown Reef.—Sense of Danger.—Approach of Evening.—Anchor for the Night.—Land and examine the Locality.—Lovely Morning.—Natives very numerous.—Departure.—Becalmed.—Visited by the Oen’s-men and Alikhoolips.—Their Astonishment.

As we advanced to the westward the channel narrowed until at length it was as if dwindling to a point with no apparent opening; and here the picture was exceedingly beautiful. From the heavy storms and tossing about of the day before, we were now transferred to a scene of great loveliness and softening quietude. To us, who had experienced several very quick transformations, the realization of such a delightful change as this could be duly appreciated, and its character understood; but to those who perhaps were there at a previous time under different circumstances, the feeling might have been very different. For myself, I truly enjoyed it. With a following wind—for it had actually changed almost at the very time we rounded the NE. part of Navarin Island, and was now aft—with this fair wind and cloudless sky I could from VOL. II.
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aloft well appreciate the pleasure of the scene and hour. As I glanced around, my mind was naturally carried away to many scenes I had visited in other parts of the world; and, though I may have seen things too favourably, I must still express the opinion I then formed, that many parts of Tierra del Fuego are far superior to anything generally represented of them by the early voyagers. Our position at the time of which I am speaking was a most singular one. Let us conceive a small vessel alone in what might be termed a mysterious, as it was an almost unknown, region of striking grandeur: let us fancy her moving slowly and quietly onward through some soft and pretty scenery immediately around her, but towards what appears in the short distance ahead a perfect chaos of wild and lofty mountains, having no outlet or termination: let us bring this before our mental view, and we have at once the situation of the schooner under my charge at that moment. From my station at the masthead I could see the channel narrowing, and our passage much farther, apparently stopped by a low range of clayey hills forming a front ground, while at the back arose jagged peaks and high mountains in solemn but barren majesty. On my left was Navarin Island, at present high, but not so lofty as it appeared farther on. Upon my right was also high land, but at its base could be seen several islands, and water passages leading, as I believe, by various gorges and passes of the mountains to the Magellan Straits. This idea was strengthened the farther we advanced, and the nearer to the clay cliffs we approached. I could perceive long channels of water running away behind the islands and hills, coming out again at a distance to the N.W.; and, had I been surveying instead of engaged on a specific duty, I should have explored those channels to see if they did not lead where I suspected, and where, necessarily, if they did, they would be worth knowing, for the future benefit of
ships going to the westward. Some nautical doubts and facts in reference to tides, &c., seemed, however, to negative the idea I had thus entertained; but these I now conceive could be met and satisfactorily removed.

It was near five P.M. when we approached the Narrows between the clay cliffs, as they were called by the officer who first discovered them, Mr. Murray, master of the "Beagle." Here the tide, which comparatively had been nil, now began to increase its velocity: the channel, which had hitherto been nearly straight, now took a more serpentine form; and the soundings decreased. But there was a gentle breeze; and we entered the Narrows amidst several tide eddies, gliding swiftly along, and passing many other islets, equally pretty with those we had left astern. Penguins, sheathbills, and other birds, were seen in numbers around us; and from a hidden nook came forth a canoe to bid us welcome. Our speed, however, was now too great for the Fuegians to overtake us; and a turn in the Narrows soon shut them out of our view. A few moments, and a fresh bend of the channel opened to us a new scene, as different to that we had just been passing as it was remarkable for its wild grandeur and magnificence. It reminded me of a quick transition from the plains of Lombardy to the rugged borders of the Alps. It was splendid! And it is impossible rightly to describe the effect produced by the sun's rays in the west as they fell upon the snow-topped mountains before us when we swiftly shot by the last point of the Narrows, and entered the huge natural canal which here formed the central division of the Beagle Channel.

But I had now to pay most minute attention to the ship. The Narrows passed, we had, as it were, entered through the gates which formed the division between any chance of civilization and of barbarism. For, the utmost extreme to which we could suppose any daring sealer to have ventured would not be farther than the other side of those
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clay cliffs now astern of us; nor do we know of any one, except in Capt. Fitzroy’s voyage, having come so far. And, looking back at those clay cliffs, the passage seemed to be totally closed. We were, apparently, shut in, and alone in that savage region, with no opening for escape save in the distance far ahead. Astern, from our position in mid-channel, I could perceive no entrance by which a vessel could come.

As we stood on to the westward, I soon found that the soundings could be no longer obtained by the handleud. After passing the Narrows there was a slight stir and bubble in the waters; then came a silent and, what could well be called in comparison, a mighty deep. From nine fathoms we suddenly went off to a depth beyond forty, no bottom at forty being obtained; and the dark colour of the water led us to infer that ground could not be touched except by a great length of line. In this idea the chart confirmed me in the few soundings marked upon it, and I therefore stood on, as it was yet good daylight, so as to make the most of our time, and of the fair and gentle wind that so befriended us, and which had now got round to N.E. by E., rather off the north shore.

For about an hour we thus advanced with all sail set, and everything favourable. It was now that, finding we were, as I conceived, in deep water, and with no dangers visible ahead of us, I sent all hands below to their supper, except one man forward to look out, the man at the helm, and myself. Pacing the deck thus alone, I could not but indulge in something like meditation. I had stood in many strange and lonely places, far north, far east, far west; but this one, far south, struck me, at this particular hour, as singularly lonely and peculiar. There was, as I have already observed, a sort of quiet, mysterious look about the wild and majestic grandeur of the scenery around, for we were now fairly in that part of the channel which could in truth be called Alpine. The lofty moun-
THE CODRINGTON MOUNTAINS.

In our sight, and bounding our view ahead, were baldheaded and of a conical shape, with the line of verdure on their ascent as distinctly marked as if drawn with mathematical nicety. Mr. Darwin has, in his journal, well described this; and I will, therefore, to avoid repeating his words, refer to his account; but the whole neighbourhood strikingly reminded me of the high peaks of Greenland, particularly as I noticed them about the Island of Disco. Some of the steeple-like mountains directly in front of us, at the extreme limit of our view, seemed like so many cathedrals with their lofty spires; those on our right were in many places bare, like the demuded crown of a man’s head, but with verdure above and below such spots. On our left were the Codrington Mountains of Navarin Island, dark and sometimes frowning, with four or five singular peaks like sugar-loaves appearing at the back between two other mountains, and over a level snowy ridge. Many of the brown summits of these mountains, free from snow, darted upwards, in several other places, not unlike whales’ teeth, while the lower parts of the hills, down to the water’s edge, were covered with a mantle of green.

Thus, then, the scene naturally produced meditation as I paced the deck by myself, while the officers and men got their tea. But suddenly my ear caught a sound;—or I might say my senses, acutely sharpened, intuitively felt the sound, for I know of nothing particular beyond the ordinary rush of water as the vessel went along;—yet, I seemed to feel a sound of coming danger. Such a feeling, even when, as now, not seen nor experienced by any one else, is, I can confidently say, often experienced by my brother mariners when in charge of a ship in dangerous places. It is as though some guardian angel watched over one to protect and warn from coming danger. In the present instance a curious sensation shot through me, quick as thought; a faint noise, so transient as to be hardly perceptible, was detected by my quickened ear,
and I stopped in my walk while I eagerly listened. A second of time was enough. I caught the sound of a faint rippling in the water, and I immediately sprang upon the platform abaft, and thence to the locker, for a glance over the side, as I shouted, “A cast of the lead! Quick there! Handlead will do!” and eagerly looked around for the supposed danger.

For the first moment I could see nothing: the same dark water, with the same smooth surface, appeared as when we had last tried for soundings, and had found none at forty fathoms; but, the next instant, I detected a long, thin, brown leaf, rather broad, with a stem about the size of my finger. It was pointing angularly towards me; therefore, as the tide now was, it had its root in advance of our direction on the starboard bow. It was enough! We had suddenly come upon an unknown reef; and the next moment or two all around us kelp was seen in abundance, even as the leadsman gave the rather startling cry, “Quarter less four! rocky, uneven bottom!” To starboard the helm until the ship, already in mid-channel, was pointing right across to the south shore, and to brace round the yards and trim sails, was but the work of a few seconds; while I, from the mast-head aloft, whither I had hastily ascended, scanned the waters ahead and astern to some distance. Kelp, however, extended some way, and I could not well determine which was best, to go more over to the south shore or the north. At length, a few casts of the lead decided me. “Four fathoms” and “half-four” kept me for a short time in much uncertainty, and I was on the point of hauling to the wind on the port tack and standing back by the way, or near the way, we had come, when “five fathoms,” and then “six,” and finally deep water again, with the disappearance of kelp, relieved me of all anxiety. Nevertheless, it was an awkward reef to come upon. Extending, as I find by my notes, a long way over from the north shore, and running
S.W. by W.*, it is apparently a rocky spit, projecting from a point of land that forms the S.W. termination of a bight on the north-west part of the clay cliffs' junction with the mountains. Unfortunately some of my notes of soundings and positions have, I find, been left in the ship; consequently, I can only put down its place according to the pencil memoranda I still have in my possession.

After clearing this reef, which I have named George Reef, I thought it well, as the evening was drawing in, to seek an anchorage for the night. To keep under sail after dark would hardly do. It was evident that many dangers existed that were quite unknown; therefore, it would be better to hold on in security until daylight again enabled us to see what we were about. Accordingly I now hailed in for the north shore, to pick up an anchorage. Here, however, was a difficulty. The deep water apparently extended close to the mountain's base; and not a friendly cove or nook appeared where we could get even a single night's shelter. Nevertheless I determined to hold on somewhere. I had previously, from an examination of the chart, taken into consideration the possibility of not finding any place to anchor in; and, moreover, the great probability of having a change in the wind, if not a gale, to contend with before getting clear of the Beagle Channel; but, had such been the case, I was in a measure prepared for it. I reflected that in most deep and longitudinal channels, the wind generally comes up or down, that is, from east or west. I had found this so in several places: in Lancaster Sound, Barrow's Straits, it was especially noticed; and though I may not be quite correct in this opinion, yet I cannot help thinking, that in such channels the wind rushes from the heaviest quarters through the oblong valley in a straight line, like as through a funnel.  *Squalls* may, of course, come occasionally down

* True, not magnetic, bearing.
the ravines, and through broken passes in the mountains; but the prevalent wind, if from the heaviest quarters, will be found as I have mentioned. At all events I argued thus; and in my reasoning I considered that, were it so, I should then be able to run back the way I had come, and find an anchorage on the other side of the clay cliffs under a lee.

But still there was the great probability of the wind coming different to what I fancied. It might be from the south, and consequently dead upon the north shore; or from the north, and thus dead upon the south shore. In either case it would be very necessary not to anchor where such a wild and savage place would thus be brought so close upon our lee. I had therefore to consider all these things, as every commander on an unknown coast probably does, and guard against any possible danger arising. And this is what I did. I ran the ship close up to where I could get an approach to soundings on the north shore, the wind being at the time slantingly from it; and, after running to within a cable’s length, I got bottom at 12 fathoms. I now ran along the shore diagonally, so as to feel my way, and see what ground there was to fall back upon, if need be. In this manner, I proceeded for about two miles without finding any good or suitable place, until we came to a point of the land that projected from a long slope in the termination of a valley. Here, it struck me, would be the place to anchor. It was not much better than several other places; but nevertheless it had an advantage I had not seen since passing the reef. It was a spit, though a small one; and therefore serviceable in holding on by, and also in getting under way, if suddenly required. Gradually from ten fathoms we got to seven; and when this latter mark was sounded, I dropped the anchor at two cables’ length from the shore.

The advantage of anchoring on a spit like this may be briefly stated. As the wind now was, we were under a
AN ANCHORAGE FOR THE NIGHT.

lee; and so also with any wind round as far as N.W. Should the wind change up or down, we had of course clear quarters (which would not have been found in a bight or cove) to ride by to any scope of chain; should the wind, however, come from a southern point, I found we could still have some little room to lay at anchor, if only a gentle breeze was blowing, and to get under way with no difficulty, if it came on to blow hard. The two miles of ground we had traversed would enable me, if necessary, to fall back in safety; while the point of a spit gave none of the difficulty a bay or bight would in getting clear of the shore, should the vessel not immediately gather headway sufficient to go out into the centre of the channel.

Directly the anchor was down, I went in the boat and sounded all round. Two ships' length astern we had ten fathoms; beyond it nothing at fifteen. On either side it was much about the same, showing the place where I had anchored to be something of a tongue-like formation, with the roots expanding slightly along shore. Ahead of us the soundings rapidly decreased, jumping from seven, five, four, to three and two and a half, the latter at a boat's length from the beach. Kelp marked the lesser soundings; and, upon the whole, it was a good place to lay for the night. It was nearly opposite the end of Codrington Mountains, and at the foot of an oblique valley running to the N.E.

Seeing some fires not far from us, I landed, with a view of obtaining intercourse with the natives; but, as it was already dusk, I imagine they had retired for the night, none of them coming out to meet me. I strolled about for perhaps half an hour, collecting and examining; and then, returning on board, set a good watch and retired below, leaving orders to be called at daylight in the morning.

Accordingly at 5 A.M. of the following day I was again on deck. I found the mercury very high, the
wind light from the northward, and sky unobscured. It was a most lovely morning. The mountains were all free from clouds, and the edges of their summits beautifully defined to the eye. Westward, above some inferior hills, the moon could be faintly seen; while the sun's brilliant glories appeared emerging from behind the dark ground to the east of us. I got under way, and while doing so the beach and rocks near us were covered with natives, dotted about in a most picturesque manner, and intently watching us; while others at a distance were hastening along to get a nearer look at the strangers. They were perfectly nude, wild and shaggy in appearance, with long spears in their hands, and yamma scoona sounding with the usual force from their lips. Talk of imps of darkness springing from crag to crag void of fear, here was something strongly akin to it, only substituting a copper-brown for the black. They were indeed like so many fiendish imps; and though I cannot give the picture literally correct, owing to the necessity I was under for making sail, and taking advantage of the wind, yet the idea may be formed from what I have said.

We had not been long under way when our breeze failed us, and became so light as not to move the ship more than two miles an hour; and finally, at 10 A.M., it was a calm. Now this was what I dreaded more than a gale; for, without wind I could help myself comparatively but little if, as I soon found, the natives came off to us in numbers. True, I had, in a measure, also prepared for this, in having places made for our sweeps or long oars to help in pulling the ship along; but this would not have moved her so fast as, I now discovered, the Fuegians could paddle in their canoes. There was, therefore, no alternative but to wait with patience, and use all precautions against being boarded by the dark and ferocious-looking beings that flocked around us.

Early after we had left our anchorage, canoes on both