

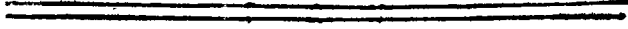
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978-1-108-06536-8 - The Narrative of the Honourable John Byron Commodore in a Late Expedition Round the World: Containing an Account of the Great Distresses Suffered by Himself and his Companions on the Coast of Patagonia, from the Year 1740, till their Arrival in England, 1746

John Byron

Excerpt

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THE
 NARRATIVE
 OF THE HONOURABLE
 JOHN BYRON.

THE equipment and destination of the squadron fitted out in the year 1740, of which commodore Anson had the command, being sufficiently known from the ample and well-penned relation of it under his direction, I shall recite no particulars that are to be found in that work. But it may be necessary, for the better understanding the disastrous fate of the Wager, the subject of the following sheets, to repeat the remark, that a

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frange infatuation seemed to prevail in the whole conduct of this embarkation. For though it was unaccountably detained till the season for its sailing was past, no proper use was made of that time, which should have been employed in providing a suitable force of sailors and soldiery; nor was there a due attention given to other requisites for so peculiar and extensive a destination.

This neglect not only rendered the expedition abortive in its principal object, but most materially affected the condition of each particular ship; and none so fatally as the Wager, who being an old Indiaman bought into the service upon this occasion, was now fitted out as a man of war, but being made to serve as a store-ship, was deeply laden with all kinds of careening gear, military and other stores, for the use of the other ships; and, what is more, crowded with bale goods, and encumbered

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ed with merchandize. A ship of this quality and condition could not be expected to work with that readiness and ease which was necessary for her security and preservation in those heavy seas with which she was to encounter. Her crew consisted of men pressed from long voyages to be sent upon a distant and hazardous service: on the other hand, all her land-forces were no more than a poor detachment of infirm and decrepid invalids from Chelsea hospital, desponding under the apprehensions of a long voyage. It is not then to be wondered that captain Kid, under whose command this ship failed out of the port, should in his last moments preface her ill success, though nothing very material happened during his command.

At his death he was succeeded by captain Cheap, who still, without any accident, kept company with the squadron till we had almost gained the

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southernmost mouth of Straits Le Maire ; when, being the sternmost ship, we were, by the sudden shifting of the wind to the southward and the turn of the tide, very near being wrecked upon the rocks of Staten Land ; which, notwithstanding, having weathered, contrary to the expectation of the rest of the squadron, we endeavoured all in our power to make up our lost way and regain our station. This we effected, and proceeded in our voyage, keeping company with the rest of the ships for some time ; when, by a great roll of a hollow sea, we carried away our mizen mast, all the chain-plates to windward being broken. Soon after, hard gales at west coming on with a prodigious swell, there broke a heavy sea in upon the ship, which stove our boats, and filled us for some time.

These accidents were the more disheartening, as our carpenter was on board the Gloucester, and detained there
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by the incessant tempestuous weather, and sea impracticable for boats. In a few days he returned, and supplied the loss of the mizen-mast by a lower studding-sail boom ; but this expedient, together with the patching up of our rigging, was a poor temporary relief to us. We were soon obliged to cut away our best bower anchor to ease the fore-mast, the shrouds and chain-plates of which were all broken, and the ship in all parts in a most crazy condition.

Thus shattered and disabled, a single ship (for we had now lost sight of our squadron) we had the additional mortification to find ourselves bearing for the land on a lee-shore; having thus far persevered in the course we held, from an error in conjecture: for the weather was unfavourable for observation, and there are no charts of that part of the coast. When those officers who first perceived their mistake, endeavoured to persuade the

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captain to alter his course, and bear away, for the greater surety, to the westward, he persisted in making directly, as he thought, for the island of Socoro; and to such as dared from time to time to deliver their doubts of being entangled with the land stretching to the westward, he replied, that he thought himself in no case at liberty to deviate from his orders; and that the absence of his ship from the first place of rendezvous, would entirely frustrate the whole squadron in the first object of their attack, and possibly decide upon the fortune of the whole expedition. For the better understanding the force of his reasoning, it is necessary to explain, that the island of Socoro is in the neighbourhood of Baldivia; the capture of which place could not be effected without the junction of that ship which carried the ordnance and military stores.

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The knowledge of the great importance of giving so early and unexpected a blow to the Spaniards, determined the captain to make the shortest way to the point in view ; and that rigid adherence to orders from which he thought himself in no case at liberty to depart, begot in him a stubborn defiance of all difficulties, and took away from him those apprehensions, which so justly alarmed all such as, from an ignorance of the orders, had nothing present to their minds but the dangers of a lee-shore*.

* Captain Cheap has been suspected of a design of going on the Spanish coast without the commodore ; but no part of his conduct seems to authorize, in the least, such a suspicion. The author who brings this heavy charge against him, is equally mistaken in imagining that captain Cheap had not instructions to sail to this island, and that the commodore did neither go nor send thither, to inform himself if any of the squadron were there. This appears from the orders delivered to the captains of the squadron, the day before they sailed from St. Catherine's (L. Anson's Voyage, B. I. C. 6.) ; from the orders of the council of war held on board the Centurion, in the bay of St. Julian

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We had for some time been sensible of our approach to the land, from no other tokens than those of weeds and birds, which are the usual indications of nearing the coast ; but at length we had an imperfect view of an eminence, which we conjectured to be one of the mountains of the Cordilleras. This, however, was not so distinctly seen but that many conceived it to be the effect of imagination : but if the captain was persuaded of the nearness of our danger, it was now too late to remedy it ; for at this time the straps of the fore-jeer blocks breaking, the fore-yard came down ; and the greatest part of the men being disabled through fatigue and sickness, it was some time before it could

(C. 7.) ; and from the conduct of the commodore (C. 10.) who cruized (with the utmost hazard) more than a fortnight off the isle of Socoro, and along the coast in its neighbourhood. It was the second rendezvous at Baldivia, and not that at Socoro, that the commodore was forced by necessity to neglect.

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be got up again. The few hands who were employed in this business now plainly saw the land on the larboard beam, bearing N. W. upon which the ship was driving bodily. Orders were then given immediately by the captain to fway the fore-yard up, and set the fore-fail ; which done, we wore ship with her head to the southward, and endeavoured to crowd her off from the land : but the weather, from being exceeding tempestuous, blowing now a perfect hurricane, and right in upon the shore, rendered our endeavours (for we were now only twelve hands fit for duty) intirely fruitless. The night came on, dreadful beyond description, in which, attempting to throw out our topfails to claw off the shore, they were immediately blown from the yards.

In the morning, about four o'clock, the ship struck. The shock we received upon this occasion, though very great, being

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[10]

being not unlike a blow of a heavy sea, such as in the series of preceding storms we had often experienced, was taken for the same; but we were soon undeceived by her striking again more violently than before, which laid her upon her beam ends, the sea making a fair breach over her. Every person that now could stir was presently upon the quarter deck; and many even of those were alert upon this occasion, that had not shewed their faces upon deck for above two months before: several poor wretches, who were in the last stage of the scurvy, and who could not get out of their hammocks, were immediately drowned.

In this dreadful situation she lay for some little time, every soul on board looking upon the present minute as his last; for there was nothing to be seen but breakers all around us. However, a mountainous sea hove her off from thence;