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978-1-108-06679-2 - At Home with the Patagonians: A Year's Wanderings Over
Untrodden Ground from the Straits of Magellan to the Rio Negro

George Chaworth Musters

Excerpt

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AT HOME
WITH
THE PATAGONIANS.

CHAPTER I.

FROM THE STRAITS TO SANTA CRUZ.

Journey Planned.—Preparations.—Passage from Stanley.—The Straits.
—First Footsteps in Patagonia. — The Narrows. — Punta Arenas.—
Commandante Viel.—The Colony.—The Town.—Chilotes and Con-
victs.—Resources.—Visit to the Coal Bed.—Lieut. Gallegos.—The
Start.—Rio Chaunco.—The Patagonian Pampas.—Our Party.—Cabe-
cera del Mar.—Oazy Harbour.—A useless Chase.—A Fireless Night.—
Volcanic Hills.—Pampa Yarns.—Rio Gallegos.—First Indians.—Sam
Slick.—Rio Cuheyli.—Meeting with Tehuelches.—Caravan of Women.
—‘English’ Politeness.—Desert.—Santa Cruz at last.

In April 1869 chance took me to our remote colony of the Falkland Islands, with the purpose of taking thence a passage to Buenos Ayres to arrange some business matters. During my stay in the settlement, the coast of Patagonia, in the survey of which H.M.S. Nassau was then engaged, formed a frequent topic of conversation. I had formerly, when stationed on the south-east coast of America, read with delight Mr. Darwin's work on South America, as well as Fitzroy's admirable Narrative of the Voyage of the Beagle, and had ever since entertained a strong desire to penetrate if possible the little-known interior of the country. Now, at length, a favourable opportunity seemed to have arrived for carrying out the cherished scheme of traversing the

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country from Punta Arena to the Rio Negro, Valdivia, or even to Buenos Ayres. The accounts given me of the Tehuelche character and of the glorious excitement of the chase after the guanaco, graphically described by a seaman, Sam Bonner, who had been much on the coast and had resided at the Santa Cruz station, made me more than ever anxious to prosecute this plan; and, having a tolerable acquaintance with Spanish, which language many of the Indians know well, it seemed to me possible to safely traverse the country in company with some one or other of their wandering parties. Accordingly I bestirred myself to obtain information as to the best way of getting such an introduction to the Indians as would probably secure their consent; to which end most material assistance was afforded by Mr. Dean, of Stanley, who kindly provided me with letters of introduction to Captain Luiz Piedra Buena, an intelligent Argentine well known in Stanley, the owner of a schooner, in which he worked the seal fisheries on the coast, and also of a trading station at the Middle Island, on the Santa Cruz river. Mr. Dean was of opinion that I should be almost certain to meet with Don Luiz in the Straits of Magellan, and that he would willingly exert his influence with the Indians to enable me to carry out my plan of travel. I was furthermore provided with letters of credit to the firm of Messrs. Aguirre & Murga, at Patagones, or, as it is most commonly called at Stanley, the Rio Negro.

Thus armed with credentials, and equipped with a guanaco skin mantle, lazo and bolas, I availed myself of the offer of a passage to the Straits made by an old friend who was bound to the westward coast.

In the first week of April we sailed from Stanley, and, after a boisterous passage of eleven days, anchored in Possession Bay, just within the entrance of the Straits, to wait for the turn of the tide, as the extreme velocity with which the tides ebb and flow through these channels renders it impossible for any vessel not possessed of great steam power to proceed except the tide is favourable. Our first view of the Straits did not impress me favourably. On either

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hand the shores looked bleak and barren, though far away to the south and west the mountains of Tierra del Fuego could be distinctly seen. As we anchored early in the afternoon, a descent on the coast of Patagonia was proposed, and a party speedily volunteered—well provided with guns and other arms, for the purposes of sport and self-defence in case of necessity—and were soon in the boat. As the tide was out, the shoal water did not permit us to reach the shore, so we had to wade some two or three hundred yards over beds of sharp-edged mussels, and, after a climb up the steep cliff, found ourselves on the verge of a barren plain which seemed perfectly destitute of life.

After a tramp of some distance we came to the edge of a gully running down to the coast, where finding the torn carcase of a guanaco, we stopped to examine what was to most of us an unknown animal; and our speculations as to the curious hybrid form of the odd-looking 'camel-sheep' were put an end to by the discovery close by of the fresh footprints of a puma. These were eagerly tracked, in the hopes of a little entertainment; but after some tedious searching we abandoned the pursuit, and again resuming our excursion, tramped along through high, coarse grass, and sparsely scattered thorny bushes; some of the sportsmen varying the monotony by an occasional shot at a snipe. The day was very genial, the warmth of the bright sunshine was tempered by a wind just cool enough to make a walk pleasant, and the Patagonian climate was pronounced by all hands to be agreeable. Whilst we were beating a rough bit of ground, to our utter amazement and delight our friend the puma jumped out of a bush; but the first surprise was so great, that the opportunity of giving him a long shot was lost. Away we all started in chase, hoping to be able to keep him in sight from a small adjacent eminence; and after a good breather two of the party succeeded in viewing him to somewhere near the edge of the cliffs, mainly guided by a retriever dog, which seemed as anxious as anybody to see what the catamount hide was made of. On arriving at the cliff, a seaman observed his tracks on the soft clay of the

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shelving brow, and soon proclaimed his discovery of the puna in a hole or small cave just below, by the exclamation of 'There he is!' at the same time thrusting the stick he had been beating with nearly into the mouth of the 'lion,' which had set our dog, and appeared about to spring on him. Two shots were fired in quick succession, but apparently without effect, as he made good his retreat, affording us a fine view as he went off, springing in great bounds, along the beach. Pursuit was of course organised, but night being near failed to afford us an opportunity of a closer study of this specimen of the feline race; and we accordingly started again for the ship, after firing a shot or two into the numerous flocks of oyster-catchers and shags which were domiciled on the rocks and about the cliffs. The number of these and other sea-birds was incalculable; the numerous beds of mussels furnishing them with constant food.

Next morning we were under weigh with the flood-tide, and rapidly ran through the narrows at a speed of eighteen miles an hour. The scenery on the northern side of the Straits offered little variety until we sighted the Barrancas of San Gregorio, a range of somewhat picturesque hills, rising near the north shore of the bay of the same name, and running along for some miles in an easterly direction. On the southern or Fuegian side of the Straits the land was low for some distance from the coast, and resembled the northern shore, but high mountains were visible in the background. After passing the second narrows, an hour or two's run with the flood-tide and a good head of steam brought us opposite to the 'Island of San Isabel,' or Elizabeth Island; after passing which the snow-clad peaks of Mount Sarmiento, in the southern part of Tierra del Fuego, came into sight, appearing to rise out of the water, ninety miles distant, if not more. Steaming along the coast through numerous beds of the characteristic kelp seaweed, which in the most forcible way attracted our attention, by fouling the screw, and holding the ship as if anchored for about an hour, we passed Cape Negro, and opened completely different scenery. Instead of undulating plains, hills thickly wooded were seen; at the

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foot of one of which, on a low piece of flat ground, numerous horsemen, dressed in gay-coloured ponchos, were visible, careering about.

It was the afternoon of Sunday, which in all Spanish South American countries is a gala day, more or less appropriated to horse-racing. However, the sight of a steamer appeared to cause a diversion, and, in fact, a general race to the settlement ensued, all being apparently anxious for anything new or strange. The anchor was soon dropped, near an American schooner lying off the Sandy Point, from which the Chilian settlement of Punta Arenas derives its name.

There was no sign of the Nassau, then engaged in the survey of the Straits, which we had hoped to find in this anchorage; but from the Chilian officer, who speedily boarded us, we learned that she had sailed to the westward a day or two before our arrival, and was expected to return immediately. The results of the careful observations made by Mr. Cunningham, of the scenery and natural history of the Straits, have appeared while these pages were in preparation for the press; and it affords me pleasure to refer such as desire more scientific accounts of the botany and zoology, at least of Southern Patagonia, than it was in my power to obtain, to his work.

My own object in visiting Punta Arenas was to proceed thence to Santa Cruz with the Indians, or in whatever way might prove feasible; but, in truth, it was by no means clear to my mind how it was to be accomplished; it was, therefore, with great relief that I learned from the Chilian lieutenant that a small expedition was about to be despatched by the governor to Santa Cruz in pursuit of some runaways from among the deserters who were serving their term of punishment in the colony. He suggested that the Commandante would, doubtless, give permission to accompany this party; and, without delay, I accompanied him on shore, and was introduced to Commandante Señor Viel.

Nothing could exceed the kindness and courtesy with which the Commandante entered into my plans; he at once not only gave me permission to accompany the party, but,

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unasked, offered me the use of a horse, and told me not to trouble myself about the commissariat for the road. It was possible, however, that the deserters might be overtaken in the Pampas, in which case the party would return without proceeding as far as Santa Cruz; he therefore advised me to secure the services of some one acquainted with the route, who could act as guide in the event of our having to proceed without the rest of our companions.

I was afterwards introduced to Señora Viel, a fair Limena possessing all the proverbial charms of the ladies of Lima, and who bemoaned bitterly the isolation and ennui of life at Punta Arenas; she had literally no equals of her own sex, and scarcely any of the other, to speak to. Señor Viel had formerly commanded a Chilian ironclad, instead of which he had accepted the government of this distant colony; his zeal and energy in discharging the duties of his office were unceasing, and his naval habits asserted themselves in the strictness of discipline maintained, which was absolutely necessary to keep in order the motley population. But as a residence, viewed from a social point of view, Punta Arenas must have been unimaginably dull. The Commandante kindly pressed me to make his house my home, promising quarters for the night—which his own limited accommodation could not supply—in an adjacent house. So after two days, agreeably spent in the interchange of courtesies and visits, I bade adieu to my shipmates, who were to sail at daylight for the Western Straits, and removed myself and traps to a wooden house close to the Cuartel, the quarters of Don Centeno, the engineer in charge of the Government works. The next morning, accompanied by Captain Cushing, of the schooner Rippling Wave, I set out to procure some few necessary supplies, and make inquiries for a guide. We bent our steps to the store of a man named Guillermo, and after purchasing tobacco and other necessaries, the talk turned on gold, of which Don Guillermo showed us some specimens, obtained from the banks of a neighbouring stream. One of the crew of the Rippling Wave grew greatly excited and exclaimed, ‘ Ah, that’s the stuff we used to grub up

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in a creek in Californy ; I guess if the old boat lays her bones on these here shores, I'll stop and turn to digging again.' Hanging up in the store were some Indian bolas and a belt made of beads, studded with silver bosses, which the owner informed me was a woman's girdle, and, with the bolas, had been left in pawn by the Indians. They had not, however, visited the colony, at least for trading purposes, for several months, as they had taken umbrage about a dispute between a Chilian and an Indian, in which they considered their comrade to have been treated with injustice. The party described by Mr. Cunningham evidently arrived with doubtful intentions, and the tact displayed by Señor Viel removed their resentment. This information explained what had previously mystified me, viz., that nothing was to be seen or heard of the Indians with whom I had hoped to make acquaintance. My good fortune in arriving on the eve of the departure of the expedition, and the Commandante's courtesy, were now even more keenly appreciated by me, as otherwise I should have been simply stranded in Punta Arenas. The guide difficulty was not long of solution, although, from the natural dislike of most of the unofficial population to take part in the recapture of runaways, it had seemed rather perplexing. After we had quitted the store, we were accosted by a man named J'aria, who came to offer his services. A short examination of his knowledge and recommendations proving satisfactory, he was engaged on terms which certainly were far from exorbitant, and he deserves to have it recorded that he fully earned his pay. My equipments and preparations for the journey were now made complete by the thoughtful good nature of Captain Cushing, with whom I proceeded on board his vessel, where he provided from his stores, and forced on my acceptance, several most useful articles ; and it is pleasant to be able to publish my sense of the kindness received from one of our American cousins, who are always ready to sympathise with and befriend a Britisher, at least according to my experience.

A stroll of inspection round the settlement was extended to the saw-mill, not far distant, worked by water-power ;

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where, under the direction of Mr. Wells, an American, the trees when cut down are converted into boards to build the houses that take the place of the forest. Proceeding thence to the half-cleared outskirts, we found the Commandante supervising numerous labourers, principally of the convict class, who were busily engaged in felling trees, clearing stumps, and otherwise preparing the way for the future development of the settlement.

To anyone unaccustomed to frontier towns, the *coup-d'œil* of the town presented an irregular and random growth of wooden houses; but the plan which was indicated in outline was laid out after the usual Spanish American fashion, as originally prescribed by the Council of the Indies. A main street ran near and parallel to the beach, crossing a large vacant square—the Plaza, out of which, and at regular intervals from the main street, ran other embryo streets intersecting at right angles, so that the houses, whenever they should be built, would form blocks or ‘cuadros.’ In the Plaza were the church and a large unfinished school-house. Chilian ideas as to the public duty of education are advanced, and the schoolmaster is a state functionary, combining at this time at Punta Arenas the duties of secretary to the Governor with those proper to his office. The excellent sketch of Staff-Commander Bedwell (Cunningham, ‘Straits of Magellan,’ p. 70) shows the Governor’s house nearly at the end of the main street, and beyond it was the Cuartel, a palisadoed inclosure, containing the barracks, the gaol or lock-up, and the guard-house, irreverently termed by the officers of the Nassau ‘The Punch and Judy House,’ and shown in the same sketch.

From this a constant look-out is maintained, and a light displayed at night. The transverse streets, running up almost to the uncleared forest, were only indicated by scattered houses, and in the line of the main street two or three detached dwellings a mile distant were only separated from the trees by patches of potato ground.

The first penal colony planted in the Straits by the Chilian Government was established in 1843, at Port Famine,

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the ominous name of which recalls the miserable fate of the colonists left there by Sarmiento in 1581. The superior anchorage was the inducement to select the same place for the modern colony, but the same evil destiny seemed to cling to it. After struggling on for some years, during which the inhabitants were frequently reduced to great distress by the failure of supplies of food from Chili, it was sacked and destroyed by the convicts, who mutinied and killed the Governor and Padre. They afterwards seized a vessel in which they attempted to escape, but were pursued by a man-of-war, and met with deserved punishment.

The colony was subsequently removed to its present position, and in addition to the involuntary immigrants, chiefly deserters from the army, settlers were tempted by liberal grants of land, and a large number of Chilotes or natives of Chiloe were introduced. These men, who are of mixed Spanish and Indian blood, are a hardy, sturdy race, accustomed to the use of the axe in their own thickly-wooded country, whence they export quantities of timber. They are very Paddies in their diet, living almost altogether on potatoes, which grow freely in Chiloe, but in Punta Arenas do not attain large size. Besides land, the Chilotes receive wages from the Government for their labour, and are the most industrious portion of the population: the men are hard working, but also hard drinking, and the women are said to be very lax in their notions of fidelity. Of the convicts, some were allowed, for good behaviour, to live in their own houses, subject to certain restrictions; but many of them were utterly reckless, and needed to be kept under the strictest surveillance, and locked up in the Cuartel every night. Notwithstanding all precautions, escapes are continually contrived, and the runaways face the difficulties of the Pampas, sometimes succeeding in joining the Patagonians, but as often losing their way, and perishing of starvation, or becoming a prey to the pumas. Thus, ten or a dozen had succeeded in escaping just before my visit, necessitating the despatch of the expedition in chase of them. The garrison consisted of some fifty or sixty regular soldiers, besides irregular employes, who

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hunt wild cattle or deserters, as occasion requires. The number of troops is quite insufficient to defend the place against an attack of the Indians, but the southern Tehuelches are not naturally inclined to raids, and if well and fairly treated are more willing to avail themselves of the trading facilities afforded by the half-dozen stores, the existence of which could only, in my mind, be accounted for by the hopes of Indian barter, for they were far in excess of the wants of the colony. Still the permanent population was certainly a thirsty one, and seemed to do its best to encourage trade, at least in grog: drunkenness in the streets is, however, an offence punishable by imprisonment, and at the time of my visit the blacksmith was in durance vile, whence the Irish Doctor had only just been released for this venial offence.

There appeared to be little cultivation, with the exception of potatoes. The climate does not permit wheat or barley to ripen, though, perhaps, oats or rye might succeed. The tame cattle seemed to me stunted and miserable, but in the forests there are others of a wild breed, which are said to be large and of excellent quality; these, as well as the red deer, afford, during some portion of the year, occupation to a few hunters, who obtain high prices for their meat, but the supply is too scanty and irregular to prevent fresh meat from being a rare luxury. The resources and prospects of the colony naturally formed the subject of conversation at Señor Viel's, and Don Centeno, who was in charge of the survey of the newly-discovered coal bed in the vicinity, invited me to join him the next day in a visit of inspection.

Next morning we accordingly set out, and crossing a small stream, shortly arrived at the commencement of the forest, through which a straight road was in course of formation. Numerous groups of Chilotes were employed on all sides, some levelling the way already cleared, others at work felling trees, others applying fire instead of the axe. The timber consists chiefly of Chilian beech (*Fagus antarctica*) and Winter's bark, described by Mr. Cunningham, the former of which splits readily and is available for most purposes.

After Don Centeno had completed some minor details of