

Title: "The Captive Boy in Terra del Fuego: being an authentic narrative of the loss of the ship Manchester, and the adventures of the sole white survivor."

Author: Mrs. Phebe Ann Hanaford (nee Coffin), New York, 1867

[original pages 187 - 203]

It was in August, 1854, that the "Manchester" struck on the rocks near Terra del Fuego, and it was in August, 1855, a year afterward, that the tidings of the shipwreck first reached Nantucket. An extra edition of the Nantucket papers was immediately printed, containing the letters which had been received; for the editors rightly believed that the entire community would eagerly receive all the news from a vessel so long missing; and that human sympathy for the survivors, always evident in a seafaring community, where all are liable to be personally interested in similar tidings, would lead every family to desire a copy of the letters. They are appended here as they were then published, showing the character of the first news, which came like a thunderbolt into the intensely interested community, bearing the tidings of bereavement and the call to mourning to many true and loving hearts upon the island. It should be understood that wherever the letters seem to conflict with the narrative as here written, it is because they were penned in haste, under circumstances of great excitement, or by those who were only partially acquainted with the facts. The following was published in the "Nantucket Inquirer:"

"The ship Manchester, Captain Alexander H. Coffin, of Nantucket, from New York, April 7th, 1854, for Valparaiso, before reported as a missing vessel, struck a sunken rock on August 28th, in about latitude 55° south, to the westward of Cape Horn, drifted until the 29th, when she grounded at five A. M. on a small island, and opened in two parts."

The following particulars of the disaster are contained in a letter dated on board the Spanish war vessel *Meteoro*, Don Buenaventura Martinez, commander, May 25, 1855. It is presumed to be the statement of the captain's son, one of the survivors:

"The American ship Manchester, of Nantucket, left New York for Valparaiso on the 7th of April, 1854, the complement of hands on board being seventeen, and the captain's wife. One man died at sea before we arrived at Montevideo, which port we put into on the 24th of July, 1854, and again left on the 28th for Valparaiso, after having shipped four extra hands at Montevideo.

"On the 28th of August, after passing Cape Horn, the ship struck on a sunken rock in about latitude 55° south, and to the southward of the Cape, land distant thirty miles. Not being able to keep her free with pumps got the boats out, which were shortly afterward stove: had

afterward the mainmast cut away.

"At twelve the same night she was full of water, but continued to drift until five A. M. of the 29th, when, after passing a small island, she grounded, and in twenty minutes opened in two parts, and all on board were immersed in the water. The captain and his wife clung together, but by some chance got separated, and the captain alone rose to the surface; he immediately seized upon a plank, and succeeded in rescuing his son, on which plank they drifted to the stern part of the vessel, where they remained till sunset, having concluded they were the only survivors of the ill-fated ship. They then managed to get ashore on the island where they found one barrel of bread and another of flour.

"Four days after the second mate and one seaman arrived at the island on a raft they had constructed on another island on which they were cast, distant one and a half miles. Here they remained while the captain was building a boat. Having all crossed on the raft to the island, on which the second mate first landed, (where was much of the wreck of the ship and cargo and provisions,) on the 3d of November the second mate died, being completely exhausted. His name was David Rees Evans, a native of South Wales.

"November 19th we first saw any of the natives, some men and women having landed from a canoe. We had just finished our boat and were ready for starting. The Indians having at first received what could be spared to them of our clothes, etc., retired, and afterward returned with bludgeons, and insisted on stripping us. Three attacked the captain and three the seaman, who having disabled two of them fled to the boat in which the boy already was. Unfortunately the captain received a blow which must have instantly killed him. The boy received two arrows in his jacket, but escaped unhurt. We landed on the island where part of the wreck still remained. Returning in the evening we found the captain's body lying naked on the rocks and dead. Not daring to remain, we took two barrels of bread and returned to the wreck.

"After remaining several days we ventured along the coast in our boat. At the end of about six weeks we found the provisions all expended, and subsisted on such shellfish as we could gather among the rocks. After subsisting for some time in this way a native canoe hove in sight. Being destitute of food for a month at least, except the raw shellfish, we gave ourselves up to the Indians, and having nothing to excite their cupidity, they behaved very kindly to us; and with them we remained up to the present time, having never once seen a vessel until a steamer passed a few days since, but we had no communication with her.

"Our eternal gratitude is due to the captain of the *Meteoro*, who has taken us on board, and fed and clothed us.

"Our ship was called the '*Manchester*,' of Nantucket, Captain Alexander Hall Coffin, from New York, bound for Valparaiso, with a cargo of coals and lumber, from the firm of Cartwright & Harrison, of New York. Saved, Thomas E. Coffin, the captain's son, and Robert Wells, seaman, of Boston.

"The commander of the *Meteoro* says, that in his passage in the Straits,

having anchored in Port Gallant (Fortescue Bay) during the night of the 24th of May; on the 25th several Indians in canoes came alongside, among whom were two Americans, literally as naked as themselves. He took them on board and brought them to Valparaiso, fulfilling for his part a duty imposed on him by Christianity and humanity."

After the foregoing was in type, Mr. Seth B. Coffin kindly handed us the following letters received by him, one from the United States Consul at Valparaiso, and the other from the son of Captain Coffin:

United States Consulate,  
Valparaiso, June 29, 1855.

Seth B. Coffin, Esq., Nantucket.

"My Dear Sir: I inclose you the following letter of Thomas E. Coffin, giving the melancholy account of the death of his father and mother, and the loss of the ship 'Manchester' of New York, and of his sufferings and perils. I have only time to say that he is in good health, and I shall send him and Robert Wells, seaman, who was saved, and has been with him all the time, to Baltimore, in the bark 'Eliza', Captain Phillips, who is a kind, good man, and will take good care of Thomas, and who will see that he goes from Baltimore home. The bark will sail in a few days.

"In haste, very respectfully,  
" Geo. B. Merwin,  
Consul of the United States"

Valparaiso, June 20, 1856.

Dear Cousin Seth: Can I, must I tell the sad tale? Yes, I must. The ship 'Manchester,' of Nantucket, left Montevideo July 28, 1854. We had very pleasant weather till we got off the Capes, then we had an awful gale which lasted two weeks, in which time we made very little headway. On the morning of the 28th of August we struck a sunken rock about thirty miles from the land. As soon as we had struck we sounded the pumps, and found she made water fast. We rigged them and went to pumping, but having coal in that choked them, we got the boats out, but there being a heavy sea running, they were stove; then there was no hope but the ship. Having lumber in, father thought that she might keep on the top of the water provided she had her masts cut away, which was done. At three o'clock in the afternoon we saw land; At nine o'clock in the evening she was full of water, and the sea made a clean breach over her. At five o'clock the next morning she went on a reef close to the land, and being full of water a heavy sea broke her up in twenty minutes. Father and mother, the steward, second mate, and myself were in the cabin, Mr. Pitman and crew were on the house, when the mainmast went by the board, carrying him and the crew overboard, and we heard nothing more of them. Those in the cabin when the ship went to pieces went down all among the timber, rocks, and kelp. Father had his arm around mother, and he did

not intend to part with her, but a rope or chain passing between them, they were separated. Mother never came up, but father and myself arose. He saw me and said, 'What poor soul is that?' and I replied, 'It is Thomas.' He then told me to come to him, and I did so, and we got upon the lumber. By and by we saw the stern of the ship and got upon it, and drifted five miles to an island. Four days after we were joined by the second mate and one seaman from another island, three miles from the ship. We remained on the island one month; in that time father made a boat, and we went to the island where the second mate came from. There we found provisions and some lumber. Father made another boat larger than the first, intending to get to St. Carlos, on the island of Chiloe, six hundred miles from where we were, but, alas! he never succeeded. On the 2d of November the second mate died of consumption. On the 22d of the same month some natives came to the island; we received them with kindness, and took them into our house and warmed them, and gave them biscuit and water. Seeing the second mate's clothes they wanted them, and we gave them all but a pair of pants. When they were ready to go we gave them some more bread, and they left and went on to the top of the hill and deposited the clothes. One came back, and father said, 'Thomas, get him a chunk of fire. I did so; but he did not want that; he wanted more clothes. We gave them the pants then, and then the rest came down and wanted the clothes that were on us. Father said, 'You don't want our clothes, and for us to be naked and cold?' but they were treacherous. Father saw it in their eyes, and said, 'George, get a bolt and defend yourself.' Then I had to witness an awful scene. One native tried to wrench the bolt that father had, while two others got on the top of him, having a club hammer, with which they gave him an awful blow over the left eye, which knocked it out and spilt his brains all over his face. At the same time George had three more on him, but he knocked two over. They ran a spear through the sleeve of my left arm. Seeing father on the ground, I ran to him, and tried to put him into the boat, but he was too heavy. George, seeing father on the ground, said, 'Take me, take my clothes, but don't kill me.'" Said I, 'No, jump into the boat.' We shoved her off, and I jumped in, but he fell in the water. The natives, seeing that we were escaping, ran on a point of land and threw a spear at me; but the Almighty guided it, and it passed within a few inches of my body, and struck in the boat and broke in pieces; then George got in. Finding that they could not reach us with spears they began to throw rocks at us, one of which struck me on the head, gave me a gash, and the scar of it will remain through life. We worked our boat to another island close to where the ship struck, and there was the fore part of the ship and some canvas, but not a soul was there or any provisions. We made a boat's sail, and after committing ourselves to the care of the Almighty, we started back to our island to get the bread. When we arrived there we found father's dead body stripped naked. We obtained two barrels of bread, and having got them into the boat we left as quickly as possible, as we didn't know but what the natives might be concealed. We also left father's body on the rocks. We got back to the hulk, and there we remained till nearly all our bread was out, waiting for a fair wind and good weather. At last they came, and we started for St. Carlos with one half barrel of bread. We managed to get one hundred miles along the coast. At last our provisions were out, and we lived six weeks on raw mussels, berries, and roots. On the 15th of February, 1855, we saw some natives, and they being friendly we gave ourselves up to

them, and remained with them till May 25, 1855. While living with them we lived principally on a dead whale which had been buried for months, and therefore was rank and putrid. On the 25th of May we saw the Chilian brig of war 'Meteoro,' Captain Martinez, and were brought to this port, arriving June 24. The consul has taken care of me, and the American captains here are very kind to me. We go home in the bark 'Eliza,' Captain Phillips, of Baltimore.

"This is the account of the awful tale. Only two saved out of nineteen: Robert Wells, called George on board the ship, and myself; and I feel thankful to my God for his kindness in sparing my life. I have found three letters from home. Tell Louisa to be a good girl and mind Aunt Lydia, for now she has no dear father or mother. I would write to Thaddeus and Aunt Lydia, but the story is too awful. I will now bring this to a close by bidding you good-by.

"Please excuse all blunders and bad writing.  
"Thomas Edward Coffin."

The interest felt by the community in the news from the "Manchester" was manifested in part by their deeds, as recorded in the following editorial, which appeared in the "Nantucket Inquirer:"

"Some weeks since we published the account of the wreck of the ship 'Manchester' of this port, and noted the kindness and liberality of the commander of the Chilian brigantine 'Meteoro' to the son of Captain Coffin, in paying the savages the ransom promised by the boy, and in clothing and conveying him to the care of the American Consul at Valparaiso. The importance of the fulfillment of the obligations to the barbarous natives will be particularly appreciated by the mariner, and possibly may be the means of rescuing many a shipwrecked sailor from a cruel death or hopeless bondage. The owners of the wrecked ship appreciated the humanity of the commander of the 'Meteoro,' and Captain E. W. Gardner, of this town, addressed a note to the Secretary of State calling attention to his noble conduct; but our government had previously instructed its minister to express to the government of Chili its high appreciation of the kindness and humanity of Commander Martinez in rescuing the known survivors of the 'Manchester.'

"The Odd Fellows' Lodge in this town, of which Captain Coffin was a member, realizing the peculiar circumstances of the case, at once took measures to testify to Don Martinez their appreciation of his services to the cause of humanity, and especially to the bereaved son of a member of their Order. Accordingly, suitable resolutions were adopted, and a beautiful pair of goblets procured, to be presented to the gallant and noble-hearted sailor as a memento of their appreciation of his obedience to the dictates of an enlightened humanity. The gift is inscribed in English and Spanish as follows:

"To Senor Don Buenaventura Martinez, commander of the Chilian brig-of-war 'Meteoro,' from Nantucket Lodge, No. 66, I. O. of O. F. of Nantucket, Mass., U. S. A., as a testimonial of their appreciation of

his humanity to the son of their deceased brother, Alexander H. Coffin, master of ship 'Manchester,' wrecked near Cape Horn, in about 55 degrees south latitude, on the 28th of August, 1854.'

"The goblets are of silver, lined with gold, and are exceedingly chaste and beautiful, the inscription particularly well executed. We subjoin the resolutions adopted by the Lodge of Odd Fellows in this place relative to Senor Martinez:

"/Resolved/, That humanity owes a debt of gratitude to the gallant and noble-hearted commander of the Chilian brigantine 'Meteoro,' Don Buenaventura Martinez, for rescuing from the savages the orphan son of our lamented brother, Alexander H. Coffin; for fulfilling the promises of the boy to the Indians; for treating him with whole-souled and parental kindness, and for tenderly nursing him, and placing the bereaved youth in care of the United States Consul at Valparaiso.

"/Resolved/, That, keenly appreciating the disinterested nobleness of Commander Martinez, we will procure and present to him some token, as a memento that we are not forgetful of those who are so fully alive to the claims of humanity."

The goblets were forwarded as intended, and the spirit in which they were received may be seen by the following letter, which appeared in the "Nantucket Inquirer" of June 20, 1856 :

"To the commanders of the lodge of Nantucket, No. 66:  
" Valparaiso, April 26, 1856.

"Gentlemen: Acknowledging the receipt of your communication of the 12th of December of 1855, with the two silver cups accompanying it, and which were delivered to me in the name of your highly respectable Lodge, I must confess that I was agreeably surprised at the high honor which you conferred upon me. When I took charge of young Master Coffin, son of the unfortunate captain of the bark 'Manchester,' wrecked at Cape Horn, and bestowed upon him such cares as my means and situation permitted, I can assure you I considered that I was only complying with a duty incumbent on every honest man, and obeying the sympathies which the unfortunate situation of the young man naturally inspired.

"I was well and fully compensated for whatever aid I gave him by the satisfaction I experienced at having gained my object, and in relieving him in his unfortunate condition; and never for one moment did I imagine that my proceedings toward him would procure me the honorable demonstration which you have thought proper to confer on me.

"On the acceptance of your kind testimonial, I beg to render a due homage to your benevolent feelings, and express to you how highly I esteem your kind appreciation of my proceedings, the which I consider as the brightest page in my nautical career.

"I have the honor to subscribe myself, gentlemen, your most obedient

servant,  
"B. Ventura Martinez."