

A VOYAGE THROUGH THE STRAIT OF MAGELLAN TO THE PACIFIC.

"The western wind was wild and dank in foam,  
And all alone went she." /\*/

The Wyoming left Rio de Janeiro on the 12th of December, 1859, and steamed out of that beautiful bay under a cloudless sky. On the 22nd we caught our first gale, and another on the 24th. On the evening of the 27th, through the saffron mist of a glorious sunset, the coast of Patagonia burst upon us; and that night, weary with being knocked about, we found an anchorage under the shelter of Cape Virgin, the easternmost land.

By daylight the next morning, that is, at two o'clock in the afternoon, we were underway again; rounded the cape, and attempted to enter the Strait of Magellan. In this we were destined to disappointment; for a sharp gale came blowing out of its open jaws, and the ebb-tide foamed against the ship's stem. So we bore away for the Tierra del Fuego shore, and found a good anchorage for the night under its lee. The next day our luck was better for, with fine weather, and a mill-race of tide after us, we dashed into the strait, and by four o'clock that afternoon were snugly anchored in Peckett Harbour. On passing in we observed flocks of wild geese upon the brown hill-sides. The excitement among the sportsmen on board was intense. A party landed, but the game was too shy to secure many in so open a country.

Bright and early the next morning we set fifty sailors on shore, and to give them "a run;" and with it some practical practice in rifle shooting, at which more would be learned than in a month's firing at a target dangling from the foreyard, or at a cask anchored off from the ship. We see in the papers that Garibaldi's best soldiers are sailors; that they are more ready at expedients, happier, better foragers, and have more "dash" than landmen. We are glad to hear so good an account of Jack. The day has gone by in our navy when it is thought "lubberly" in a sailor to know how to handle a musket. The latter has superseded the boarding pike in repelling boarders; and there is no reason why the crew of every man-of-war should not be a battalion of practised riflemen. The arms, the ammunition, and the men are there; the Government has only to enforce practice. But this practice should not be confined to firing at a target at stated times: the men should be sent on shore to hunt and shoot whenever an opportunity presents itself. A man will shoot almost as well for his dinner as for his life, if he only has to do it.

Carrying out this idea, it was not long after landing before the Minie balls [Type of rifle bullet which came into use in 1850s, Ed.] were whizzing fearfully among the wild geese; and, as a consequence, the birds recognised the men a mile off, and away they went. However, as Jack had an idea that his musket was good for at least three miles, he was pretty sure to send a ball after them, and a curse after it, by way of helping it along. Some of the more enthusiastic had gone over fifteen or twenty miles of ground before getting back to our camp, which was made on the shore of an inlet within three or four miles of the ship. As hungry as wolves, we cooked and devoured almost all the game we killed. After supper, in spite of fatigue, a party of a dozen gathered around the fire, and commenced calculating the chances of "catching," as one of them expressed it, "them flying devils, the geese, with their sails furled, and at anchor in the night-time." From this literally "wild-geese chase," they were only dissuaded by an "ancient mariner," who has great weight among them as a sportsman, from the fact of his once having been a "filibuster." He informed them authoritatively, that "the wild-geese, like the albatross, kept underway all night and 'hove-to' under easy sail, to keep clear of the foxes and other varmints." This appeared to settle the matter for before long all hands had rolled up in their pea-jackets or

blankets, and were sleeping as soundly as in their hammocks. The relish with which the crew enjoyed their liberty, and the many attendant amusing incidents, made the best part of the day's sport.

For the whole of the next day the shooting was kept up; and by sunset the men were sent on board, with every cartridge-box empty. Of course every man of the crew had seen a tiger or an ostrich which another was equally willing to swear was a fox or a crane. All, at least, were brimful of adventures, which, adroitly spun into "yarns," will serve as amusement for the whole cruise. Since then we have had smaller hunting parties in Nicaragua, when more game was killed; but certainly the event of the cruise so far was our two days of camp life at Peckett Harbour.

After sending the men on board, a small party in the cutter pulled over to Pitcher Island, not a half-mile from the ship. Here, from sunset to an hour afterward, we had splendid shooting, as the geese flew in to settle for the night. We could hear the foxes "rushing" them into the water on the mainland, and a moment after they would come hustling put us. We had hardly a chance to load more than one barrel at a time, and of course lost many shots; still we lived on wild-geese for two weeks, and our small mess have not small appetites.

The wild goose of the Strait of Magellan is in size and appearance not unlike our domestic bird. The male is black, white, and lead-colour, with black bars mid-way across the wings. The female is black and gray. The bill in both is black, and rather short and sharp. They feed in flocks in the daytime on the wild craneberry [cranberry, Ed.] growing on the hill-sides. All through the Strait the kelp-goose is found, but it is unfit for the table. It is called the "steamboat duck," from the use it makes of its wings while swimming.

On the morning after our return from the shooting excursion, we ran on to Sandy Point, where the Chilians have a post, kept up merely to give them a claim to the country. Here I saw a number of Patagonians; [Aonikenk natives, Ed.] big, dirty fellows, half-drunk, and looking like our Indians under similar circumstances. The Governor of Sandy Point had measured a hundred of them, and their average height was five feet eleven inches. This certainly indicates the fact that they are a large race, but by no means the giants the early navigators represent them. Living on the pampas, they are fine horsemen; and a man's wealth among them is estimated by the number of horses which he owns. Silver they value more than gold, as the former is more easily worked. Their only ornaments are made of it. Except an occasional rich chief, who indulges in the luxury of a pair, it is seldom that one meets with a man who has more than one wife. Mere "birds of passage" that they are, it is to be presumed the increase of baggage (the exclusive privilege of the fair sex the world over) deters the Patagonian gentleman from burdening himself with more guanaco robes than the woman can wear. Although the "Noah's Ark trunk" is not an institution of the country, the pack-saddle is. The guanaco supplies them with food and raiment and, as they only get bread from the white man, their diet is mostly of meat, for they have no vegetables. On their home, the pampas, they are a hardy brave race; but those I saw at Sandy Point were debased with liquor, for which they have the natural thirst of the "red man."

The women are plain, with large heads, feet, and hands. The children would be pretty if well washed. All have beautiful teeth, and bright black eyes, with the oblique eyebrow. There is a young German [Theophilus Schmid, South American Missionary Society. Ed.] living among them, who is acquiring their language, and I trust he may survive his hardships, and give us a minute account of this tribe. From the doctor of the colony I picked up a few crumbs of information. He says that in burying a cacique, homage is made to the rising sun; and the body is placed in the earth at sunset. No trace is left of the grave, and much skill is

displayed in concealing it. Their language is guttural in its tone, and figurative in its expressions; a letter is so rendered in it as to express the idea of a "paper-tongue." Nothing astonishes them so much as the idea that a man, two or three hundred miles off, can make a few black marks on a piece of paper, which shall make another smile when he looks at it. At such a time they will gather around the reader of the letter, and look anxiously in his face. If he smiles, or gives any other outward indication of what is passing in his mind, they at once exclaim, "See how he understands the paper-tongue!"

The guanaco, which is a species of llama, looks like a large woolly deer, and is found upon the plains in vast herds. Swift and shy, in an open country it is impossible to get within buckshot range of one. They feed usually in the valleys, leaving sentinels on the hill-tops, who give the alarm with a peculiar cry or neigh on the approach of danger. The Patagonians capture them by encircling the herd, and gradually closing upon it. When near enough, they charge, and by throwing the bola hobble the animal. This "bola" is nothing more than a round stone made fast by a thong five or six feet in length, somewhat after the manner of a slung-shot. It is swung rapidly round the head, and then thrown with the accuracy of a rifle ball at the legs of the guanaco, where it becomes entangled by the thong, and finally trips the animal up. The meat in the cold clear climate of eastern Patagonia will keep for six weeks. We obtained enough, for a few pounds of pilot-bread, to last us ten days. Its flavour is somewhat like that of venison but it is neither so delicate nor so tender.

On entering the Strait, as we did from the eastward, we had first the scorched-coloured pampas with their magically clear and magnifying atmosphere.

Swept by the south-west gales they are shorn of every tree, and only here and there a cluster of wild barberry bushes is to be seen. The shores are steep, and strewn with boulders, tracing their topography as if with a heavy black ink mark; while far to the northward the mountains fade away in the deep blue palpitating atmosphere. Cape Virgin, the first land that we saw, stood brown and traceless, blighted by the tempests that have swept over it since "Creation" was created.

We left Sandy Point at night; but before daylight we found ourselves "butting" head-foremost into a south-west gale; so we went into "Port Famine," hard by, and anchored. Here it was, in 1584, that Sarmiento established a colony. Its fate gave the name to the port. The admiral having been captured by the English, the people of the colony were left without supplies, and died of starvation. Spite of its name, however, and the sad history associated with it, the bay is a pleasant place "to look at." Upon the eastern side are the old settlements to the north the wooded hills, covered with flat-top beech trees, and slopes of long grass and barberry. Over to the west is "Mount Philip," clad with forests to the top; a beautiful mountain of its kind. Nearer the water, on the same side, the banks rise like green sodded ramparts; and beyond the Point, which is low and sandy, is the River Ledger, of which old Byron gives rather an overdrawn description. M\_, and E\_, and M\_, went up the Ledger a mile, and found good snipe and teal shooting. They inveigled also a brown-neck goose, smaller than that found at Peckett Harbour; but he was a noble fat fellow !

On January the 5th we entered "Crooked Reach." The scenery here is like that of the Alps. Jagged peaks of purple slate, covered with snow at the highest points, with a spasm of sunshine now and then dashing along them. The colourings of the foregrounds are varied and beautiful; with crimson mosses, and flat-top beech trees, and here and there, under the melting edges of a patch of snow, plats of green grass nestling in the moist and sheltered hollows. The headlands, as made, burst upon you like a Scottish mountain through the mist, reminding one of the landscape portion of one of Landseer's pictures. [Edwin Henry Landseer, prominent 19th-century British artist. Ed.] If I except the Swiss lakes (and I

can scarcely do so,) this is by far the most wonderful water I have ever sailed over. After leaving Loreda Bay, [sic; probably Laredo Bay, Ed.] you come to the wooded country, where the dark trees reach up from the shores to the mountain tops. The effect of this uniformity and density of green is sometimes marred by the blight of a ploughing "Willawa," that has blasted the tree tops and left them withered and rugged. From Cape Froward, the most southern land of the continent proper, the scenery nearly approaches that of the higher Alps; balder, more chaotic, and wilder in its features as you go westward. High, dome-shaped mountains, covered waist deep with snow and black jagged aiguilles, [mountain pinnacles, Ed.] stood desolate and wet against the storm-blurred sky; while the huge glaciers reached down from the gorges to the purple waters of the Strait.

Off Jerome Channel, a canoe came alongside, in which were huddled eleven inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego. [Kaweskar natives, Ed.] As these were the first seen by us, considerable curiosity was evinced to get a "good look" at them. They are not more than five feet in height; their complexion is of a dirty copper-colour; their hair tangled and coarse; and their eyes small and sharp, with inflamed lids. They saluted us with cries of " Gallita! " (hard bread, the Spanish of which they seemed to have learned). In the boat were three women and several children; these latter poor, naked, shivering little things, with noses which evidently had never been blown. One of the women sat aft of the " helm," or paddle used for that purpose. The boat was made of braids, sewed together with vines and thongs of sealskin. These people, it is said, live afloat; every family having a canoe to itself. The head man of the party came on board of us, dressed in a costume part civilised and part savage. He had on a ragged cotton shirt and a "seedy" sealskin cap. On reaching the deck, he walked aft very deliberately, and "planted" himself in front of the man at the wheel; and then and there intimated by pantomime that he was desirous of introducing his copper-coloured legs (which he extended one after the other at full length), into a pair of trousers. An old pair having been given him, he next, "by motions," very "pronounced" and energetic, expressed his willingness to be provided with a jacket. This, too, was given him, and both he received without the slightest demonstration of gratitude. We got rid of our friends with difficulty, and went once more upon our western way.

The same afternoon a gale from W.N.W., with cutting sleet, drove us for shelter into Playa Parda Cove. We anchored in the outer harbour, where we encountered the violent squalls which sweep through every notch and valley. Except on the western side of the cove, there are no trees, the mountains being slaty and bare. A party of us landed, but found no shooting. After a hard scramble we came upon a ridge of rocks, which looked down into a beautiful little mountain lake. This basin of purple water is surrounded by colossal perpendicular walls of slate, dotted with interval verdure and with beautiful cataracts falling down along them into the lake. These waterfalls look at a distance like slender slides of snow, or veins of delicately shaded marble. Under a scarred boulder sheltering the ground for a few feet around it, I found a little patch of wild lupins. Thus old Mother Earth strives to soften the desolation upon her bosom, and with a frail flower to hide her nakedness.

On the evening of the 6th we got underway from Playa Parda; and by midnight it was perfectly calm. We ran on through the night, finding no difficulty in seeing the way; and by sunrise were all outside of the Strait. Before an hour, however, a westerly gale came sweeping in landward, bearing in its arms the swell of the mighty Pacific. To steam against such a wind and sea was to burn coal at the rate of about a ton a mile; so we stood back and anchored in the "Harbour of Mercy," [Puerto de la Misericordia, Ed.] close under Cape Pillar. The scenery here is of the same wild, desolate character which I have already described. We found neither fish nor game; and our stay, in the midst of continuous bad weather, became tedious. Soon after anchoring, a family of Fuegians came on board.

Among them was a rather good looking girl, with small hands and feet. The men were a rascally, cannibal-looking set; just the "fellows," in fact, to whet their short, yellow teeth in "a piece of cold parson." Talking altogether, their voices sounded like a cackling of a flock of cormorants. In truth, these poor creatures, living on mussels, sea eggs, and limpets, pass at best but a kind of sea-shore bird existence. The general sound conveyed by their language is certainly like the call of birds of that species. You hear a continued ca-ca-ka-caka-kak sound; a boat they called a cauka. In imitating the sound of our language, they were wonderfully "apt," and when a word was given them to repeat, they pronounced it with exactness.

M\_\_ and myself landed, designing to hunt up their huts. We found their boat hauled up in a little cove, shut out from the anchorage by a bluff point of rocks. Having seen the little fellows scramble up the cliff near this place, we followed a slippery path, until we came to a promontory, as purple, flat, and bare on the top as a log-slab. From its farther edge we caught sight of the Fuegian huts. The whole nest set up a cry like a flock of startled gulls; and the men, armed with their sealing-clubs, came to meet us. Seeing our party well armed they changed any belligerent intentions they might have had; and commenced capering and dancing before us, leading the way down to the huts. Here we were received by the "Head of the Family" with an address, which our want of "edication" (the "creownin' gel-lory of the United'n States'n") prevents our rendering into English. This family consisted of eight men and six women; the latter all young. We are told by navigators, that of all women, the ladies of Terra del Fuego are the last to acknowledge their ages; for when one becomes passe, [passé, said of a woman past her prime. Ed.] her lord and master smokes her to death and eats her. The women seen upon this occasion were almost nude, with only tattered coverings of seal-skin; their limbs were smeared with "dirt and ashes," and it was hard to believe them human. Never, in all my wanderings, have I seen man brought so near the animal. Life, with a Fuegian is a fierce struggle with nature in her wildest, most desolate, and severest aspect; and, as a consequence, he is crafty, treacherous, and revolting to look upon.

On the 13th of January we got clear of the Strait, and in a few days afterwards came into fine weather. The change was like passing from mid-winter into spring, or like descending the Splügen [Splügen. Alpine pass in southern Switzerland, Ed.] on a September night, to bask upon the sun-lit shores of Como in the morning.

On the 20th we arrived in Valparaiso, and were once more in civilised land. Our letters, three months old, were waiting for us, and they brought us all good news. The Wyoming, scarred and stained with storm-marks, told plainly the weather she had fought against. We trust her as good and true, for we know how gallantly she behaved in breasting the perennial tempests of the Patagonian coast.

/\*/ Lines from "The Sands of Dee", poem by Charles Kingsley

Source: "Sydney Morning Herald" (NSW), 2 May 1861, accessed on Trove  
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