

Literature, &c.

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HISTORY OF A DESERTED SAILOR.

On the morning of Saturday, the 5th of May, upwards of a century ago, a ship belonging to the Duch squadron came in sight of Ascension Island. Anchoring at some distance off shore, she put off a boat, which under the efforts of an active crew, made rapidly for the island. The boat contained, besides the crew, an individual heavily manacled, and a guard. The prisoner, seated at the stern between the two soldiers who guarded him, sat with his head buried in his hands; but gave no further sign of emotion until he was disturbed from his position by the sound of the boat grinding on the white shore of Ascension: when with an agonised look at his comrades, and at the vessel, he silently rose, and in company with his guard, left the boat, and stepped on the beach of his prison. A sailor's chest, some bedding, and sundry other articles, were taken from the boat; the prisoner's chains were removed in silence, and the crew and guard re-embarked, leaving him alone on the beach; and nothing moved by his now frantic entreaties to them to return and take him with them, they pulled hard to the ship, apparently anxious to take leave of a scene so painful. Arriving on board, the anchor was presently heaved, all sail set, and the vessel stood out to sea, leaving the unhappy man sunk on the sand in the most abject despair. Before noon she was out of sight; and in every direction nothing was visible but the blue and desolate waters, tossing up their heads to the sky. The nature of the crime which was visited by this dreadful punishment we are not permitted to divulge; but that it was of great heinousness, may be gathered from his own confessions. Some mercy mingled with the sentence, as was manifest in the numerous little articles which were left for him on the shore. Among these was a limited supply of provisions, consisting of a little rice, onions, peas, and meal. He had also a cask of water, two buckets, an old frying-pan, and a fowling-piece, but no ammunition. Some paper, a Bible, a few clothes, and some unimportant sundries, completed the list of his possessions.

The island itself was of a nature so savage and repulsive, as was well calculated to impress with horror and despair the steepest heart condemned to so vast a dungeon. Being of volcanic origin, its surface was strewn with broken rocks, ashes, and pumice, here and there, a little red soil, scorched and sterile, peeped from between masses of rock upon which the traces of fire yet existed. Its shores on one side were frightful to approach: horrid precipices of black lava seemed to fringe the island with mourning, and threaten intrusion with death, while at their base were deep chasms, eaten out by the insatiable wave. Further on, the wildest confusion of rocks, whose jagged summits added to the desolation of the spot, was occasionally relieved by small patches of glittering, naked beach white like snow composed of fragile coral, and frailer shells ground to dust against the iron bulwarks of the island. The other side of the island was more hospitable, possessing a less frowning coast, a good bay, and a tamer sea-shore. Inland, a few acres of plain stretched away between the gloomy-looking hills, but even these were either wholly barren, or scantily covered with a weak growth of innutritious plants, such as grass, ferns, purslain, and a convolvulus. Not a shrub was there on the whole island; and the only spot refreshing to the eye wearied with so long a glance at desolation, was a tall mountain called the Green Mountain, whose verdant sides gave the promise, which they did not fulfil in reality, of supplying something that might support the outcast during his stay there. The spot was, on the whole, somewhat like a vast cinder, spotted here and there indeed with green; but otherwise as dry and burnt as if it had just been vomited from the depths of some vast volcano. Yet the place was the habitation of a legion of wild goats, and populous nations of rats and mice over-scrampered it; and one or two tribes of melancholy insects awoke with its morning sun, and went to sleep at an early hour in the afternoon. Its shores, fierce looking they were, were more lively: flocks of 'boobies' strutted along its glittering sands in all the impudent independence consequent upon unacquaintance with mankind; a vast turtle or two, six or seven hundred pounds now and then, crawled from the blue waters, and after taking a short walk for the benefit of their health, crawled in again, walking over possibly hundreds of enraged crabs on their way back; and the waters themselves were livelier still for they abounded in eels, old wives, and rock-cod. The extreme length of the island was a little more than seven miles, its extreme breadth about six, and its general form was oval.

Such was the miserable and most unpromising circumstanced under which this unhappy man was left to take his chance of perishing utterly, or the more remote one, of being discovered and rescued by some passing vessel. As his journal, which he regularly kept from the first day of his landing has been preserved, we are able to proceed with the rest of his history. After recovering in some measure

from the shock of being left alone and after watching with an aching heart the ship's snowy topsail sink beneath the waves of the horizon, he addressed himself to his first labour, which was the construction of a tent. The spot he selected for its site was sufficiently gloomy, for it was beneath one of the dismal overhanging black rocks of which mention has been made; but it assisted to cover his tent from the weather, and it was close to the beach upon which he, and all he possessed, had been left. By the close of the first long and weary day, a temporary tent was raised, into which he brought his chest, bedding, and all his other chattels; and here, heavy and sick of heart, he spent the first night. Rising early the following morning, after partaking of his lonely meal, he set forth to explore the island. It was the Sabbath, and around was more than the stillness of that sacred day—it was the silence of the grave. No 'church-going bell,' no faint notes of a village hymn, no quiet tumult of a departing congregation, came to the outcast's ear—the wind was asleep, the waters were at peace; but in his heart there was no peace, and in himself was alone unquiet amid surrounding quietude. He searched in vain for some green thing which might promise him food; he then returned to his tent, and, to beguile the dull hours, set about some alterations in its arrangements, he also covered it with a tarpaulin, which he fastened down with stones, thus securing himself from rain. Towards evening, the solitude of the beach was broken by bustling flocks of boobies; on approaching them, he found them so tame, as to permit him easily to seize several, which he afterwards killed, skinned, and salted, laying them in the sun to dry. His eyes were ceaselessly directed to the horizon; but viewed from whatever eminence, it revealed nothing but the same hopeless unbroken blue line. Hoping it might catch the notice of some distant vessel which might escape his eyes while searching for food, he made a white flag with a portion of his linen, and fastening it to his almost useless fowling-piece, he planted it in the most conspicuous position he could desire. Sauntering afterwards along the beach, he had the good fortune to overtake a fine turtle, which he killed by beating it on the head; and this supplied him with provision for a little time. As the terrors of his lonely situation grew upon him, he began to fear lest the threatening overhanging rock under which he had placed his tent, should suddenly fall and overwhelm him: he therefore removed his dwelling to a less alarming position. He was by this time in a very miserable and disconsolate state of mind: often, after a long day's fruitless search for water and food, returning home with torn feet and an aching heart, he would pray with one of old that he might die. But he would by no means be accessory to his own death, as, in the constancy of hope, he still looked to his signal been seen, and himself delivered out of that terrible place. Conceiving it singular that he had met as yet with no beasts upon the island, he searched carefully for footmarks on the beach and inland; but without success; the unbroken surface declared to him, again, and again, that he was alone. The contents of his water-cask also daily reminded him that, unless he shortly succeeded in finding water, the most terrible fate awaited him. On one of his excursions he met with a little purslain, which he boiled with the boobies, and thus made a tolerably palatable dish for one in his condition. The few other herbs which that niggard desert afforded he was afraid to eat, nor were they sufficiently inviting to induce him to make the attempt. Every day saw him now anxious and careworn leave his tent, bucket in hand, seeking for water; and every day saw him return in the evening almost fainting, and with an empty vessel. His supplies of food also grew short; boobies became scarce—turtle were not seen. He then used to boil a little rice in a little water, of which he made most of his meals. Many, many times, and with a gaze made intense by the struggle in his mind between hope and despair, were his eyes bent upon the lonely waters, but no ship appeared. It was fortunate that, as yet his bodily health continued good. Thus were his days spent at this time: in the morning, the spring of hope peared its assuaging waters over his soul, and he set forth fully expecting success of some sort; in the evening those waters were cut off, and he beguiled the night by reading until his eyes were weary, and then as a diversion, he would set to mending his clothes. Finding no promise of native esculents, he thought to increase his stock by planting a few of those he had with him. He therefore set some onions and peas in a patch of soil near his tent. Finding a number of nests of sea-fowl, many containing eggs, he plundered them, and made his principal food of their contents: he was much at a loss for a light at night; at length he hit upon the expedient of melting down some of the turtles' fat; and thus, with a saucer for his lamp, and a bit of rag for the wick, he had a tolerable light, which he used to keep burning all night. Thus passed a fortnight of his life in this great prison.

All his search for water had proved unavailing, and he was under the painful necessity of daily diminishing his stock, without the means or the prospect of being able to replenish it. He explored the island in a new direction, looking narrowly into every cranny of the rock, and searching every spot covered with a little fresher-looking herbage than the rest; but no bubbling waters appeared. Be- thinking him, then, of his fishing tackle, he repaired to the rocks to try his fortune in a fresh

direction; he spent several hours in this employment in vain, which was somewhat remarkable, as the waters were unusually prolific of fish. Meanwhile a sad accident had occurred. Turning homewards, what was his surprise to behold a dense volume of smoke rising up to the skies in the direction of his tent! Deeply alarmed, and dreading the worst he flew with the utmost speed to the spot: he found the message too true: his tent was on fire! Hastily snatching up his buckets, he ran to the sea; and thus, by considerable efforts, he was enabled to quench the consuming element. It appears that the origin of the fire was attributable to his having carelessly left his tinder-box, with some lighted tinder in it, upon his quilt. By this calamity he lost a shirt, handkerchief, and a part of his quilt; and his Bible was much singed. Yet he felt thankful to God for what he had saved. He then knelt down, and earnestly intreated God to 'give him the patience of holy Job' under his accumulating sufferings. The spirit of his journal at this time is one which betokens a degree of humble acceptance of his punishment, severe as it was, and of patient submission to the Supreme Will. Thus the month of May passed away—his provisions diminishing, his barrel of water failing, his hopes growing fainter, and the future full of the gloomiest anticipations, in consequence of the rapidly increasing heat of the weather.

On the first of June, there is this touching entry in the journal:—'It would be needless to write how often my eyes are cast upon the sea to look for shipping; and every little atom in the sky I take for a sail; then I look till my eyes dazzle, and immediately the object disappears. When I was pat on shore, the captain told me that it was the time of year for shipping to pass this way, which makes me look out the more diligently.' At the end of the first week in this month, he had but two quarts of water left in his cask, and this was so muddy, as only to be drinkable after straining through a handkerchief. He then thought of digging for water. After digging to the depth of seven feet, he found not so much as the trace of moisture, and he desisted from his labor with feelings easier conceived than described. At this time deep considerations of his apparently approaching death filled his mind, and he spent many hours in prayer and in solemn meditations upon a future state. On the morning of the 10th of June, faint and sick with thirst, he drank his last portion of water to the very dregs, and in the strength of it, he went out on a fresh search for some of this precious fluid. After four hours tedious walking, under a burning sun, he at length became so weary and faint, as to be unable to proceed any farther, that he lay down wishing he might die. His situation was that of the fainting Hagar in the wilderness, and his deliverance was to prove as signal. Rising at length from the earth, he walked slowly over the rocks towards his tent, as he thought to die. But not so; his eye was led to a hollow place in the rock, towards which he eagerly sprang, who can paint his joy, or describe his gratitude, on finding that it contained a little silver rill of water, pure, fresh and cool! The poor fellow cast himself on the earth, and drank most immoderately of the delicious fluid. In the intoxication of his joy, he sat down by its side, and drank again and again of its life giving draught. The treasures of the whole earth were poor and mean in comparison with that tiny streamlet. Evening was closing in, and taking care to mark well its position, he returned to his tent with a step more elastic than he had yet known, and a heart of brimful gratitude and joy. Thus one source of his deepest anxiety, was, for the time at least, diminished. He was now able to use the water freely: but whether from previous excessive over fatigue, or as the consequences of a long disappointed hope, cannot be said, but it is evident that new symptoms of delirium began to appear, and of these he was himself conscious. Strange fancies filled his mind at times, which disappeared at other times.

At this period there occurs the following remarks in his journal:—'It makes me very melancholy to think that I have no hopes of getting off this unhappy island.' The sharp volcanic rocks, which were like so many broken glass bottles, cut his shoes to pieces, and wounded his feet so severely that he was scarcely able to stand upright. New also a terrible adventure befel him. Awakening from sleep he heard a dreadful noise around his camp. Listening more attentively, he recognised the voices of either men or evil spirits in loud conversation, close to him. This continued all night, so that he awoke in the morning unrefreshed. The next day, and for several days subsequently, he speaks of having been repeatedly accosted by an apparition; which assumed the form of one of his old comrades. Greatly to his relief, it at length departed. Although it is manifest the unhappy man firmly believed all these supernatural events, we are safe in ascribing one and all to the inroads of delirium upon his understanding. Possibly, from the free use of water, these symptoms, which might have taken a part of their origin in the want of that fluid, disappeared; and the entries in the journal resume their usual simple character. For some time past his supply of wood for fuel failed him, and, as we have before mentioned that not so much as a shrub existed in the island, he began to despair of again tasting cooked food, when one day as he paced along the beach, a large tree was cast ashore. This he cut in half, and was thus resupplied with fire

materials for a little time. Another difficulty then opposed him: he was quite unable to procure any fresh food; and with a raging thirst preying upon him, he wandered about the land, seeking it in vain. As if to heap misfortunes on his devoted head, the influence of the sun, the heat of which blazed his face, dried up his well. Previously to he had filled his cask, and, for convenience sake, had removed most of his things to a near to the well. Thus was all his first labours renewed again, while there remained him less energy of body and mind to struggle against them. One day as he wandered the shore, he was startled at the appearance of a rude cross in the distance. On approaching it, he found it the grave mark, as he conjectured, of some one buried in that spot: was the first token he had perceived on island, of a previous visit by his fellow, and while it kindled hope, it was also a melancholy promptings upon his own condition. He too, appeared to be cast into one dead, yet with this difference—he was deserted in his death. This brings him to the close of another month. In spite of most diligent search, water was not found. On the last day in June he was found, with mournful brevity, 'There is now no drop.'

July opened upon this miserable man all the intense heat of the season in that latitude. In one of his water seeking excursions, he saw, for the first time, large flocks of goats, to the amount of several hundred. He vainly endeavoured to pursue them, they proved far too swift for his despatch, strength, and bounded away, leaving him in desolation. Great flocks of sea-fowl were then visible in the strand, in such numbers that, when they took wing at his approach they appeared like a dense cloud, which mingled between him and the sun, completely intercepted the light. Once he found a nest on the shore, and early in August, he discovered other traces of the visits of previous years, finding in a rock—which at a distance looked something like a rude cottage—old nails, and pieces of broken bottles, and so a piece of a broken ear. He now to mind his early attempt at horticulture, set out for the spot where he had planted pease and onions, near to the place where he had first pitched his tent. He saw from the distance to his joy, that some green had appeared on the spot, and on drawing near he found that a few had sprang up; but the withering hand was upon him in all the rest had been utterly devoured by vermin. For the period of three months had not fallen a half hour's rain on the island. At this period of the history, with his hopes increasing upon him, he thus writes: 'My heart is so full that my pen cannot write it. I now and then find a little water, the goats have left me. I always soon come to the last drop, and use it very sparingly. On one of his visits to his old tent, he found it, he was much alarmed at hearing great noise, as if a hundred copper kettles were at work. His alarm continued until he resolved to search for the cause of his agitation, and ascending a hill, he discovered origin in chattering of a vast flock of boobies, which whirled into the air as soon as he perceived him. This little discovery relieved his mind, which under the pressure of his situation, was become much excited. He measured the contents of his water, and found he had but six gallons left, and drank by measure, and eked out his allowance as much as he could, abstaining from his food. The entries in his journal present a melancholy monotony.—'Went out in search for water, but in vain,' is the only madum for many days. How earnestly he lifted up his prayers and his eyes to the heavens may well be imagined! But that was true of them which had its primary reference to another race: 'the heavens are over thy head shall be brass, and the earth under thee shall be iron.' 'I am up,' he writes, 'to the heavens all around me if the sky was overcast, that I have some hopes of rain: but all, to me, was very clear.' He was now fully out until evening looking far and wide many times was far from home as the night approached. On one of these occasions, the sun having set, he was completely sleep away from his cave: having been tormented; such a prodigious number surrounded him, as put him in considerable jeopardy of being devoured alive. He took good care after this to return to the cave before dark. Despair was now rapidly his mind, resisted only by a few struggling hopes of finding any water, and wandering the strand lost in distraction. Here he found a turtle, which he succeeded in killing, and he staked his burning thirst with the test avidity in the creature's blood. For a period, he found some relief in the fluid contents of the eggs of the fowl, but both proved ill substitutes for water, and he was seized with an illness, he ardently hoped might end his sufferings. His head swelled, he became dizzy, and frequently delirious: he could no longer stand, and could only crawl from place to place. He often crawled up to a turtle, which his razor he killed, and then the poor creature lay by his side, quenching his thirst in blood. And now approaches the close of his mournful history. Battered with thirst, he drank in desperation a quantity of salt water; but this had nearly immediately fatal to him. Now in a