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Part of the crew of the Wager, man of War.

NARRATIVE OF THE LOSS OF
THE WAGER MAN-OF-WAR,

(One of Commodore Anson's Squadron,)
And the subsequent Distresses suffered by the Crew, during a period of more than 5 Years.

BY THE HONOURABLE JOHN BYRON.

THE Wager man-of-war, one of the ships attached to Commodore Anson's enterprise, had been an Indiaman, and was deeply laden with all kinds of stores, naval and military, crowded with bale goods, and encumbered with merchandise. Thus circumstanced, she sailed with difficulty; and her crew consisted of men dispirited by the prospects before them, and worn out with past fatigues.

Captain Cheap was desirous of proceeding directly for the island of Socoro, 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.

We had for some time been sensible of our approach to the land, from no other tokens than 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 the mountains of the Cordilleras. It blew a perfect

hurricane, and right upon the shore, our endeavours (we were now only twelve hands fit for duty) were entirely fruitless. A night, dreadful beyond description, came on, in which, attempting to throw out our top-sails to claw off the shore, they were immediately blown from the yards.

In the morning, at four o'clock, May 14th, about ninety leagues to the north of the western mouth of the Straits of Magellan, in the latitude of between 47 deg. and 48 deg. south, the ship struck. The shock we received upon this occasion, though very great, yet being not unlike the 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 could now stir was presently upon the quarter-deck ; and on this occasion great alertness was shown by many, who for about two months, had not made their appearance upon deck. Several poor wretches, who were in the last stage of the scurvy, and could not immediately get out of their hammocks, were drowned.

In this dreadful situation, the ship lay for some little time, every soul on board looking upon each succeeding minute as his last, for there was nothing but breakers to be seen all around us. At length a mountainous sea heaved her off, but she presently struck again, and

broke her tiller. In this terrifying and critical juncture, to have observed all the various sensations of horror, operating according to the several characters and dispositions among us, it was necessary that the observer himself should have been free from all impressions of danger. There were instances, however, of behaviour so very remarkable, that they could not escape the notice of any one who was not entirely bereft of his senses; for some were, to all intents and purposes, in that condition. One man, in particular, in the ravings of despair, was seen stalking about the deck, flourishing a cutlass over his head, calling himself king of the country, and striking every person he came near, till his companions, finding no other security against his tyranny, knocked him down. Some, reduced by long sickness, and the scurvy, on this occasion became petrified, as it were, and bereft of all sense, and were thrown to and fro, like inanimate logs, by the jerks and rolling of the ship, without exerting any effort to help themselves.

We now ran into an opening between the breakers, steering by the sheets and braces, when providentially we stuck fast between two great rocks; that to windward sheltered us, in some measure, from the violence of the sea. We immediately cut away the main and foremast, but the ship kept beating in such a manner, that we imagined she would hold together but a very short time. The day now broke, and the weather, which had been very thick,

cleared away for a few moments, and gave us a glimpse of the land, not far from us. We now thought of nothing but saving our lives. To get the boats out, as the masts were gone, was a work of some time; and when accomplished, so many were ready to jump into the first, that they narrowly escaped perishing before they reached the shore.

I now went to Captain Cheap, who had the misfortune to dislocate his shoulder by a fall the day before, as he was going forward to get the fore-yard swayed up, and asked him if he would go on shore; but he told me, as he had done before, that he would be the last to leave the ship, ordering me to assist in getting the men out as fast as possible. I had been with him very often from the time the ship first struck, according to his desire, to acquaint him with everything that passed; and I particularly remarked, that he gave his orders at that time, with as much coolness as he had ever done during the former part of the voyage.

The scene was now greatly changed; many, who but a few minutes before, had shown the strongest signs of despair, and were on their knees, praying for mercy, imagining they were now not in that immediate danger, grew very riotous, broke open every chest and box that was at hand, staved in the heads of casks of brandy and wine, as they were borne up to the hatchways, and got so drunk, that some of them were drowned on board, and lay floating about the decks for several days. Before I

left the ship I went down to my chest, which was at the bulk head of the ward-room, in order to save some little matters, if possible; but while I was there, the ship thumped with such violence, and the water came in so fast, that I was forced to get upon the quarter-deck again, without saving a single rag but what was upon my back. The boatswain and some of the people would not leave the ship so long as there was any liquor to be got at, upon which Captain Cheap suffered himself to be helped out of his bed, put into a boat, and carried on shore.

The land did not wear a very favourable appearance. Deso late andbarren, we could hope to receive little benefit from it, excepting the preservation it promised us from the sea; but we still had wet, cold, and hunger to struggle with, and no visible remedy against any of these evils. We discovered an Indian hut, at a small distance from the beach, in a wood, into which as many as possible crowded, without distinction, the night coming on exceedingly tempestuous and rainy.

During the night, one of our company, a lieutenant of invalids, died in this miserable hovel, and of those who, for want of room, took shelter under a great tree, which stood them in very little stead, two more perished by the severity of that cold and rainy night.

In the morning, the calls of hunger, which had hitherto been suppressed by our attention to more immediate dangers and difficulties,

became too importunate to be resisted. We had most of us fasted eight-and-forty hours, and some longer. It was time, therefore, to make inquiry what store of sustenance had been brought from the wreck by the providence of some, and what could be procured on the land by the industry of others. The former amounted to no more than two or three pounds of biscuit-dust, reserved in a bag; and all the success of those who ventured abroad, was to kill one sea-gull, and pick some wild celery. These, therefore, were immediately put into a pot, with the addition of a large quantity of water, and made into a kind of soup, of which each partook, as far as it would go.

We were in all, about one hundred and forty who had got on shore; but some few still remained on board, detained either by drunkenness, or a view of pillaging the wreck, and among them was the boatswain. These were visited by an officer in the yawl, who endeavoured to prevail upon them to join the rest; but, finding them in the greatest disorder, and disposed to mutiny, he was obliged to desist from his purpose, and to return without them.

The ensuing night proved tempestuous, and the sea running very high, threatened those on board with instant destruction, by the parting of the wreck. They were then as solicitous to get ashore, as they were before obstinate in refusing the assistance we sent them; and when the boat did not come to their relief the moment they expected it, without considering

how impracticable it was to send it to them in such a sea, they fired one of the quarter-deck guns at the hut. The ball barely passed over the covering of it, and was plainly heard by the captain and us who were within. Another attempt, therefore, was made to bring these madmen to land; which, however, from the violence of the sea, and other impediments, occasioned by the mast that lay alongside, proved ineffectual. This unavoidable delay made the people on board outrageous. They began beating to pieces every thing that fell in their way; and, carrying their intemperance to the greatest excess, broke open chests and cabins for plunder, that could be of no use to them. So earnest were they in this wantonness of theft, that one man had evidently been murdered on account of some division of the spoil, or for the sake of the share that fell to him, having all the marks of a strangled corpse.

In the outrage they seemed particularly attentive to one point, which was to provide themselves with arms and ammunition, in order to support them in putting their mutinous designs into execution, and asserting their claim to a lawless exemption from the authority of their officers, which they pretend must cease with the loss of the ship. But of these arms, of which we stood in great need, they were soon deprived upon coming ashore, by the resolution of Captain Cheap, and Lieutenant Hamilton of the marines.

Among these mutineers, who had been left

on board, was, as I have before observed, the boatswain, who, instead of exerting the authority he had over the rest, to restrain them as much as possible, was himself a ringleader in the riot. This man, without respect to the figure he then made, being dressed in lace clothes, Captain Cheap, by a well-aimed blow with his cane, felled to the ground. It was scarcely possible to refrain from laughter at the whimsical appearance made by these fellows, who, having rifled the chests of the officers' best suits, had put them on over their greasy trowsers, and dirty checquered shirt; but they were soon stripped of their finery, as they had before been obliged to resign their arms.

The incessant rains, and intensely cold weather, in this climate, rendered it impossible for us to subsist long without shelter; and the hut being much too little to receive us all, it was necessary, without delay, to devise some expedient which might serve our purpose; accordingly, the gunner, carpenter, and some others, turned the cutter keel upwards, and, fixing it upon props, made no despicable habitation. We procured some sea-fowl, and found limpets, muscles, and other shell-fish in tolerable abundance. A provision, in any degree proportionate to the number of mouths to be fed, could not, by our utmost industry, be procured from the part of the island we had hitherto traversed. The climate and season were, likewise, utterly unfavourable to adven-

turers, and the coast, as far as the eye could embrace seaward, was a scene of such dismal breakers, as to discourage the most daring from making attempts in small boats.

Our long-boat was still on board the wreck, therefore a number of hands were now dispatched to cut the gunwale of the ship, in order to get her out. While we were employed in this business, three canoes of Indians appeared paddling towards us, having come round the point from the southern lagoons. It was some time before we could prevail upon them to lay aside their fears and approach us, which at length they were induced to do, by the signs of friendship we made them, and by showing some bale goods, which they accepted, and suffered themselves to be conducted to the captain, who likewise made them several presents; with the novelty of these they were much affected, but particularly when shewn the looking-glass; the beholder could not conceive that it was his own face which he beheld, but that of some other person behind the glass, and went round to the back of it, in order to satisfy himself.

These people were of a small stature, very swarthy, having long black, coarse, hair, hanging over their faces. It was evident, from their great surprise, and every part of their behaviour, as well as their not possessing a single article which could be derived from white people, that they had never seen such; and as they uttered not a word in any language

we had ever heard, nor had any method of making themselves understood, we presumed they could have had no intercourse with Europeans.

These savages, who, upon their departure, left us a few muscles, returned in two days, and surprised us by bringing three sheep. At this interview we bartered with them for a dog or two, which we roasted and ate. A few days afterwards they made us another visit, and bringing their wives with them, took up their abode with us for some days, when they again left us.

Whenever we were permitted by the weather, which was now grown somewhat more dry, but extremely cold, we employed ourselves about the wreck; from which we had, at several times, recovered several articles of provision; these were deposited in the store-tent. Ill-humour and discontent, from the difficulties we laboured under in procuring subsistence, and the little prospect of any amendment in our condition, was now breaking out apace. In some it showed itself by a separation of settlement and habitation; in others by a resolution of leaving the captain entirely, and making a wild journey by themselves, without determining upon any plan whatever.

Besides the seceders already mentioned, some formed a scheme of deserting us entirely: these were ten in number, the greatest part of them the most desperate and abandoned of the

crew; who, to do a notable action before they went off, placed half a barrel of gunpowder close to the captain's hut, laid a train to it, and were preparing to perpetrate their wicked design of blowing up their commander, when they were with difficulty dissuaded from it, by one who had some compassion and remorse of conscience left. These wretches, after rambling some time in the woods, and finding it impracticable to get off, for they were then convinced that they were not upon the main, as they imagined when they first left us, but on an island, within four or five leagues of it, returned and settled about a league from us; however, they were still determined, as soon as they could procure craft fit for their purpose, to get to the main. But, before they could effect this, we found means to prevail upon the armourer, and one of the carpenter's crew, two very useful men to us, who had imprudently joined them, to return to their duty. The rest, one or two excepted, having built a punt, and converted the hull of one of the ship's masts into a canoe, went away up one of the lagoons, and were never heard of more. These being a desperate and factious set, did not distress us much by their departure, but rather added to our security.

Some savages returned, and we found that their intention was to settle among us, for they had brought with them their wives and children, in all about fifty persons, who immediately set about building themselves wig-wams,

and seemed easily reconciled to our company. Could we have entertained them as we ought, they would have been of great assistance to us, who were extremely put to it to procure food, being still one hundred in number. But the men now subject to little or no controul, endeavoured to seduce their wives, which gave the Indians such offence, that, in a short time they found means to depart, taking everything along with them.

Our number, which was at first one hundred and forty-five, had been reduced, and chiefly by famine, to one hundred; which put the rest upon all manner of shifts and devices to support themselves. Among the ingenious this way, was one Phipps, a boatswain's mate, who, having got a water puncheon, scuttled it, then lashing two logs, one on each side, set out in quest of adventures in this extraordinary and original piece of embarkation. By these means he would frequently provide himself with wild fowl, when all the rest were starving; and it must be very bad weather indeed which could prevent him from putting out to sea when his necessities required it. Sometimes he would venture far out in the offing, and be absent the whole day; at last he had the misfortune to be overset by a very heavy sea, at a great distance from the shore; but, being near a rock, though no swimmer, he managed so as to scramble to it, and with great difficulty ascended it. There he remained two days, with very little hopes of any relief, for he

was too far off to be seen from the shore; but, fortunately, a boat having put off, and gone that way in quest of wild fowl, he was discovered making such signals as he was able, and brought back to the island. He was not so discouraged by this accident, but that soon afterwards, having procured an ox-hide, used on board for sifting powder, and called a gunner's hide, by the assistance of some hoops, he formed something like a canoe, in which he made several successful voyages.

The long-boat being repaired, some of our company were selected to go out in the barge, to reconnoitre the coast to the southward, which might assist us in the navigation we were about to undertake. This party consisted of Mr. Bulkeley, Mr. Jones, the purser, myself, and ten men. The first night we put into a good harbour, a few leagues to the southward of Wager's Island, where, finding a large bitch big with puppies, we regaled upon them. After a series of disasters, and sufferings scarcely credible, we were compelled to return to our old spot.

At a period when despair was ready to overwhelm us, a fresh and unexpected prospect opened to our view. A few days after our return a party of Indians came to the island in two canoes. Among these was an Indian of the tribe of the Chonos, who spoke Spanish, but with that barbarous accent that rendered it almost unintelligible to any but adepts in that language. He was a cacique, or chief, of

his tribe, which authority had been confirmed to him by the Spaniards.

Our surgeon, Mr. Elliot, being master of a few Spanish words, made himself so far understood by the cacique, as to let him know that our intention was to reach some of the Spanish settlements if we could; that we were unacquainted with the best and safest way, and what tract was most likely to afford us subsistence in our journey; promising, if he would undertake to conduct us in the barge, he should have it, and everything in it, as soon as it had served our purpose.

To these conditions the cacique, after much persuasion, at length agreed. Accordingly, having made the best preparation we could, we embarked on board the barge, to the number of fifteen. After a dangerous voyage of some days, we came to an Indian settlement, where we were luxuriously regaled upon fish and potatoes. This was the most comfortable meal we had made for many months. We soon arrived at a Spanish settlement, where we were taken possession of, and sent as prisoners to St. Joys. At this last mentioned place we were humanely treated and comfortably lodged, by a Scotch physician named Gedd. Here we were invited to dine with Admiral Pizarro and his officers, one of whom kindly offered us two thousand dollars, of which we only took part, and were thereby enabled to appear decently. After two years' residence, we embarked in a French ship, were taken to Brest, and there

put on our parole. In three months an order came for our liberation, and we shortly afterwards landed at Dover.

We immediately set off for Canterbury, upon post horses; but Captain Cheap was so tired by the time he got there, that he could proceed no farther that night. In the morning he still found himself so much fatigued, that he could ride no longer; therefore it was agreed that he and Mr. Hamilton should take a post chaise, and that I should ride. But here an unlucky difficulty was started; for on sharing the little money we had, it was found to be inadequate to our expenses for the journey to London, and my proportion in particular fell so short, that it was scarcely enough to pay for horses, much less the necessary refreshments upon the road, or even the turnpikes. The latter I was compelled to defraud, by riding as hard as I could through them, without paying the least attention to the men who called out to stop me. The want of refreshment I bore as well as I could.

When I got to the Borough, I took a coach and drove to Marlborough-street, where my friends lived when I left England, but when I came there I found the house shut up. Having been absent so many years, and having in all that time never heard a word from home, I knew not who was dead, who was living, or even how to pay the coachman. I recollected a linen draper's shop not far from thence, where our family used to deal; I therefore

drove thither, and, making myself known, they paid the coachman. I then enquired after our family, and was told that my sister had married Lord Carlisle, and lived in Soho square. I immediately walked to the house, and knocked at the door; but the porter, not liking my figure, which was half French, and half Spanish, with the addition of a large pair of boots, covered with dirt, was going to shut the door in my face, but I prevailed upon him to let me in.

I need not acquaint the reader with what surprise and joy my sister received me. She immediately furnished me with money sufficient to appear like the rest of my countrymen. Till then I could not properly be said to have finished all the extraordinary scenes in which I had been involved by a series of adventures for the space of five long years.

Some of those who abandoned Captain Cheap, and had pursued a different route through the Straits of Magellan, in the long boat, had previously reached England; but the number of those who had this good fortune was comparatively small, and their distresses, for variety and duration, were without a parallel.