

SIR GEO. SOMERS AND HIS SHIPWRECK UPON THE BERMUDAS IN 1609.

BY JAMES PARTON.

We are pleasantly reminded, at this spring time of the year, of the Bermuda Islands, by the abundance of new potatoes brought thence by every arriving steamer, and exhibited wherever vegetables are sold. Those islands, one would think, ought to belong to the United States, from the nearest point of which they are distant only six hundred miles. Why they do not belong to the United States, how they became subject to Great Britain, and whence they derived the two names—Bermudas, and Somers Islands—the reader may gather from the strange tale which I am about to relate.

In year 1609, a fleet of nine vessels sailed from England, having on board more than five hundred persons, bound for the English colony in Virginia, planted at Jamestown two years before. The admiral commanding this fleet was Sir George Somers, a man of note among the naval heroes who had won distinction, in the reign of Elizabeth, against the Spaniards. The vessel in which he sailed, the largest and finest of the fleet, was called the *Sea-Venture*; and on board of her were a new Deputy-Governor of Virginia, Sir Thomas Gates, and several gentlemen of wealth and position, intending to cast in their lot with the Virginia colony. There were also on board this vessel a few women and children.

All went well with the fleet until it reached a point not far distant from the coast of Florida, when it had been seven weeks at sea. July the 25th, a hurricane struck the *Sea-Venture*, which drove her northward over the foaming ocean, for three days and three nights, separating her from the other vessels of the fleet.

The strained ship sprang a leak, and all hands were set to pumping and bailing, but in spite of their exertions the water gained upon them, until the men below, who were passing up pails and kettles, stood in water up to their waists. Worn out with toil, many of the men gave up, and were disposed to batten down the hatches and await the issue.—Some of them brought from their stores bottles of liquor, drank to one another, and then lay down upon the deck and fell fast asleep.

There was one man, however, on board who remained at his post, and did his duty the Admiral, Sir George Somers. When the storm first struck the ship, he took his place at the helm, and there, as one of his comrades afterward wrote, "he sat three days and three nights together without a meal's meat, and little or no sleep, steering the ship to keep her as upright as he could, for otherwise she must needs instantly have foundered." There he still sat on the third day, while the greater part of the crew, as the same chronicle informs us, "were fallen asleep in corners, and wheresoever they chanced first to sit or lie." With his hand upon the helm and his eyes peering into distance, he remained hour after hour.

"LAND!" cried the Admiral at length.

The word woke the sleepers, and put new strength into the exhausted. The pumping was resumed, and the ship kept from sinking until she struck between two rocks, which held her fast and upright as in a dock, about half a mile from the land which the Admiral had discovered. Instantly, as if by miracle, the wind lulled; so that they were soon able to hoist out their boats, and convey the whole company, a hundred and fifty in number, to the shore. And not only the people were saved, but a great part of the

provisions, utensils, cordage, sails, and iron-works of the ship.

The land upon which these tempest-tossed mariners had been cast was one of the Bermuda Islands, the one now called St. George, which is the largest of the group. The islands are four hundred in number, but only nine of them are large enough to be inhabited; the rest of them being little more than rocks in the ocean. The entire inhabitable area does not exceed twenty square miles.

If the escape of the company seemed miraculous, the island also appeared to their wondering minds to have been miraculously prepared for their coming. No sooner had Sir George Somers secured his passengers, and all of the contents of the ship that could be moved, than he looked about him to ascertain what there might be for the support of so large a number of persons wrecked upon land which no ship could be reasonably expected to approach. These islands had an ill name among sailors. Not only were storms supposed to rage about them continually but they were reputed to be the abode of malign spirits, and the scene of horrible enchantments, such as Shakespeare has described in "The Tempest." Nothing of this, however, appeared to the new comers.

"Every man," says an old tract before me, "disposed and applied himself to search for and to seek out such relief and sustentation as the country afforded; and Sir George Somers, a man inured to extremities, and knowing what there unto belonged, was in this service neither idle nor backward; but presently, by his careful industry, went and found out sufficient of many kind of fishes, and so plenty thereof, that in half an hour he took so many fishes with hooks as did suffice the whole company one day.

Of some fish they could take a thousand at a draught; and they found along the shore countless eggs of herons and other sea-birds. Turtles, broad backed and very fat, the largest furnishing a dinner for fifty men, floated on the surface of the tranquil sea; some of them containing "a bushel" of delicate and nutritious eggs. So numerous were they that forty large ones were taken in a day. But what astonished the shipwrecked colonists most, was to find the islands abounding in hogs. It seems that Spanish navigator, Bermudez, from whom the group was named, while conveying a load of swine, in 1522, from Spain to the West Indies, was wrecked upon the islands, and a large number of his hogs swam ashore. There were such numbers of them running wild in the woods, that Sir George Somers, on the first day that he hunted them, killed thirty two. And as to wild fowl, they could be captured with the naked hand.

In these pleasant islands, shaded by noble trees and cooled by the breezes of the ocean, the colonists established themselves. Two children were born there; a girl who was christened Bemuda, and a boy who was named Bermudas. A marriage was also celebrated; feuds and factions arose, and life went on very much as it goes on everywhere.

The Admiral, however, and the officers with him, aware of the ill name which the Bermudas had among sailors, and that ships avoided them as vexed with evil spirits, set about preparation for transporting the company to Virginia. Two large pinnaces were built of the Bermuda cedar, and rigged with cordage from the wreck; the Admiral himself labouring "from morning until night as duty as any workman doth labour for wages." After a residence upon the island

of nearly ten months, from July 27th, 1609, to May 10th, 1610, the whole company embarked, with a supply of turtles, oil, and salted pork, procured upon the island, and set sail for Virginia. Fourteen days after, the two pinnaces cast anchor in the James river, opposite Jamestown, where they found sixty starving wretches, subsisting upon roots, herbs, nuts and a little fish when they could catch any. Three hundred had miserably perished of hunger and disease, and in ten days longer there probably would not have been one left alive to tell the tale.

The minds of the survivors were not less disordered than their bodies. When Sir Thomas Gates and Sir George Somers asked them how they had fallen into a plight so deplorable, they gave in reply nothing but bitter recriminations and repinings, each accusing the others of insubordination, waste, idleness and mismanagement. The two knights saw that but one course was open to them and that was to convey the colony with all speed to a place where it could be fed. There were then about 200 of them and they had provisions for fourteen days. They resolved to go on board their vessels and make all sail for Newfoundland, where they hoped to procure provisions from the fishing fleet and passage home to England. With this intent, on the 8th of June, 1610, in the afternoon the whole company embarked. Some of them held the place where they had so keenly suffered in such abhorrence that they wished to set Jamestown on fire and burn it from the face of the earth. This however, Sir Thomas Gates forbade, and the town was spared.

In four small vessels the colonists glided away down the broad and yellow James with the returning tide, relieved, and happy only to change the scene. The next morning what was their amazement to see approaching them from the ocean a well-manned English long boat! When it drew nearer they learned to their unbounded joy that it had been sent to sound the river by Lord Delaware, Captain General of Virginia, who had arrived that morning with three vessels filled with supplies of all kinds, and bringing a powerful reinforcement of emigrants. The four pinnaces turned their prows up the stream again and went back to Jamestown, rejoicing now that the Deputy Governor had interfered to prevent its destruction. The next day Lord Delaware's fleet arrived. His Lordship came on shore and after a solemn religious service he read his commission and delivered an address to the colonists, rebuking sternly the pride and idleness which had well nigh proved the ruin of Virginia.

Lord Delaware hearing from the admiral of the marvelous productiveness of the Bermudas, and especially of the number of hogs running wild in the woods, asked him to go thither and bring back a supply to help through the next winter. It was a humble task for a man of his rank, but he accepted it, and set sail in the very pinnace which his own hands had helped to build. He arrived safely at the group where, exerting himself beyond his strength he fell sick and died. His companions, one of them his own son, regardless of their duty to the colony, set sail for England.

Such glowing accounts were published of Bermudas—or the Somers Islands as they were then called—that a colony was soon planted there, and the islands have never since been without inhabitants. At the beginning of the revolutionary war, when the colony was feeble and ill defended Paul Jones urged Congress to seize and hold them for the United States. His advice was not taken and they remain under the Dominion