

From the Knickerbocker for January.

THE BERMUDAS.

A SHAKSPEARIAN RESEARCH: BY THE AUTHOR OF THE SKETCH-BOOK.

Who did not think, till within these four years, but that these islands had been rather a habitation for Divells, than fit for men to dwell in? Who did not hate the name, when hee was on land, and shun the place when he was on the seas? But behold the misprision and conceits of the world! For true and large experience hath now told us, it is one of the sweetest paradises that be upon earth.—*A Plain Description of the Bermudas*; 1613.

In the course of a voyage home from England, our ship had been struggling, for two or three weeks, with perverse head-winds, and a stormy sea. It was in the month of May, yet the weather had at times a wintry sharpness, and it was apprehended that we were in the neighbourhood of floating islands of ice, which at that season of the year drift out of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, and sometimes occasion the wreck of noble ships.

Wearied out by the continued opposition of the elements, our captain at length bore away to the South, in hopes of catching the expiring-breath of the trade-winds, and making what is called the southern passage. A few days wrought, as it were, a magical "sea change" in every thing around us. We seemed to emerge into a different world. The late dark and angry sea, lashed up into roaring and swashing surges, became calm and sunny; the rude winds died away; and gradually a light breeze sprang up directly aft, filling out every sail, and wafting us smoothly along on an even keel. The air softened into a bland and delightful temperature. Dolphins began to play about us; the nautilus came floating by, like a fairy ship, with its mimic sail and rainbow tints; and flying fish, from time to time, made their short excursive flights, and occasionally fell upon the deck. The cloaks and overcoats in which we had hitherto wrapped ourselves, and moved about the vessel, were thrown aside; for a summer warmth had succeeded to the late wintry chills. Sails were stretched as awnings over the quarter-deck, to protect us from the mid day sun. Under these we lounged away the day, in luxurious indolence, musing, with half shut eyes, upon the quiet ocean. The night was scarcely less beautiful than the day. The rising moon sent a quivering column of silver along the undulating surface of the deep, and gradually climbing the heaven, lit up our towering top-sails and swelling main-sails, and spread a pale, mysterious light around. As our ship made her whispering way through this dreamy world of waters, every boisterous sound on board was charmed to silence; and the low whistle, or drowsy song, of a sailor from the fore-castle, or the tinkling of a guitar, and the soft warbling of a female voice from the quarter-deck, seemed to derive a witching melody from the scene and hour. I was reminded of Oberon's exquisite description of music and moonlight on the ocean:

— Thou rememberest
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back,
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,
That the rude sea grew civil at her song;
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
To hear the sea-maid's music.

Indeed, I was in the very mood to conjure up all the imaginary beings with which poetry has peopled old ocean, and almost ready to fancy I heard the distant song of the mermaid, or the mellow shell of the triton, and to picture to myself Neptune and Amphitrite with all their pageant sweeping along the dim horizon.

A day or two of such fanciful voyaging, brought us in sight of the Bermudas, which first looked like mere summer clouds, peering above the quiet ocean. All day we glided along in sight of them, with just wind enough to fill our sails; and never did land appear more lovely. They were clad in emerald verdure, beneath the sereneest of skies: not an angry wave broke upon their quiet shores, and small craft, riding on the crystal waves, seemed as if hung in air. It was such a scene that Fletcher pictured to himself when he extolled the halcyon lot of the fisherman:

Ah! would thou knewest how much it better were
To bide among the simple fisher-swains:
No shrieking owl, no night-crow lodgeth here,
Nor is our simple pleasure mixed with pains.
Our sports begin with the beginning year;
In calms, to pull the leaping fish to land,
In roughs, to sing and dance along the yellow sand.

In contemplating these beautiful islands, and the peaceful sea around them, I could hardly realize that these were the "still vexed Bermoothes" of Shakspeare, once the dread of mariners, and infamous in the narratives of the early discoverers, for the dangers and disasters which beset them. Such, however, was the case; and the islands derived additional interest in my eyes, from fancying that I could trace in their early history, and in the superstitious notions connected with them, some of the elements of Shakspeare's

wild and beautiful drama of the Tempest. I shall take the liberty of citing a few historical facts, in support of this idea, which may claim some additional attention from the American reader, as being connected with the first settlement in Virginia.

At the time when Shakspeare was in the fulness of his talent, and seizing upon every thing that could furnish aliment to his imagination, the colonization of Virginia was a favourite object of enterprise among people of condition in England, and several of the courtiers of the court of Queen Elizabeth were personally engaged in it. In the year 1609, a noble armament of nine ships and five hundred men sailed for the relief of the colony. It was commanded by Sir George Somers, as admiral, a gallant and generous gentleman; above sixty years of age, and possessed of an ample fortune, yet still bent upon hardy enterprise, and ambitious of signalizing himself in the service of his country.

On board of his flag-ship, the Sea-Vulture, sailed also Sir Thomas Gates, lieutenant-general of the colony. The voyage was long and boisterous. On the twenty-fifth of July, the admiral's ship was separated from the rest, in a hurricane. For several days she was driven about at the mercy of the elements, and so strained and racked, that her seams yawned open, and her hold was half filled with water. The storm subsided, but left her a mere foundering wreck. The crew stood in the hold to their waists in water, vainly endeavouring to bail her with kettles, buckets, and other vessels. The leaks rapidly gained on them, while their strength was as rapidly declining. They lost all hope of keeping the ship afloat, until they should reach the American coast; and wearied with fruitless toil, determined, in their despair, to give up all farther attempt, shut down the hatches, and abandon themselves to Providence. Some, who had spirituous liquors, or "fiery waters," as the old record quaintly terms them, brought them forth, and shared them with their comrades, and they all drank a sad farewell to one another, as men who were soon to part company in this world.

In this moment of extremity, the worthy admiral, who kept sleepless watch from the high stern of the vessel, gave the thrilling cry of "land!" All rushed on deck, in a frenzy of joy, and nothing now was to be seen or heard on board; but the transports of men who felt as if rescued from the grave. It is true the land in sight would not, in ordinary circumstances, have inspired much self-gratulation. It could be nothing else but the group of islands called after their discoverer, one Juan Bermudas, a Spaniard, but stigmatized among the mariners of those days as 'the islands of devils' 'For the islands of the Bermudas,' says the narrative of this voyage, 'as every man knoweth that hath heard or read of them, were never inhabited by any christian or heathen people, but were ever esteemed and reputed a most prodigious and enchanted place, affording but gusts, stormes, and foul weather, which made every navigator and mariner to avoide them as Scylla and Charybdis, or as they would shun the Devil himself.'

Sir George Somers and his tempest-tossed comrades, however, hailed them with rapture, as if they had been a terrestrial paradise. Every sail was spread, and every exertion made to urge the foundering ship to land. Before long she struck upon a rock. Fortunately, the late stormy winds had subsided, and there was no surf. A swelling wave lifted her from off the rock, and bore her to another; and thus she was borne on from rock to rock, until she remained wedged between two, as firmly as if set upon the stocks. The boats were immediately lowered, and though the shore was above a mile distant, the whole crew were landed in safety.

Every one had now his task assigned him. Some made all haste to unload the ship, before she should go to pieces; some constructed wigwams of palmetto leaves, and others ranged the island in quest of wood and water. To their surprise and joy, they found it far different from the desolate and frightful place they had been taught, by seamen's stories, to expect. It was well wooded and fertile; there were birds of various kinds, and herds of swine roaming about, the progeny of a number that had swam ashore, in former years, from a Spanish wreck. The island abounded with turtle, and great quantities of their eggs were to be found among the rocks. The bays and inlets were full of fish; so tame, that if any one stepped into the water they would throng around him. Sir George Somers, in a little while, caught enough with hook and line to furnish a meal to his whole ship's company. Some of them were so large, that two were as much as a man could carry. Crawfish, also, were taken in abundance. Waller, in his 'Summer Islands,' has given us a faithful picture of the climate:

For the kind spring, (which but salutes us here,)
Inhabits these, and courts them all the year:

* * A Plain Description of the Bermudas.

Ripe fruits and blossoms on the same trees live;
At once they promise, and at once they give;
So sweet the air, so moderate the climate,
None sickly lives, or dies before his time.
Heaven sure has kept this spot of earth uncurst,
To shew how all things were created first.

We may imagine the feelings of the shipwrecked mariners, on finding themselves cast by stormy seas upon so happy a coast; where abundance was to be had without labour; where what in other climes constituted the costly luxuries of the rich, were within every man's reach; and where life promised to be a mere holiday. Many of the common sailors, especially, declared they desired no better lot than to pass the rest of their lives on this favoured island.

The commanders, however, were not so ready to console themselves with mere physical comforts, for the severance from the enjoyment of cultivated life, and all the objects of honourable ambition. Despairing of the arrival of any chance ship on these shunned and dreaded islands, they fitted out the long boat, making a deck of the ship's hatches, and having manned her with eight picked men, despatched her under the command of an able and hardy mariner, named Raven, to proceed to Virginia, and procure shipping to be sent to their relief.

While waiting in anxious idleness for the arrival of the looked-for aid, dissensions arose between Sir George Somers and Sir Thomas Gates, originating, very probably, in jealousy of the lead which the nautical experience and professional station of the admiral gave him in the present emergency. Each commander, of course, had his adherents: these dissensions ripened into a complete schism; and this handful of ship-wrecked men, thus thrown together on an uninhabited island, separated into two parties, and lived asunder in bitter feud, as men rendered fickle by prosperity, instead of being brought into brotherhood by a common calamity.

Weeks and months elapsed, without bringing the looked-for aid from Virginia, though that colony was within but a few days' sail. Fears were now entertained that the long-boat had been either swallowed up in the sea, or wrecked on some savage coast; one or other of which most probably was the case, as nothing was ever heard of Raven and his comrades.

Each party now set to work to build a vessel for itself out of the cedar with which the island abounded. The wreck of the Sea-Vulture furnished rigging, and various other articles; but they had no iron for bolts, and other fastenings; and for want of pitch and tar, they paved the seams of their vessels with lime and turtle's oil, which soon dried, and became as hard as stone.

On the tenth of May, 1610, they set sail, having been about nine months on the island. They reached Virginia without farther accident, but found the colony in great distress for provisions. The account they gave of the abundance that reigned in the Bermudas, and especially of the herds of swine that roamed the island, determined Lord Delaware, the governor of Virginia, to send thither for supplies. Sir George Somers, with his wonted promptness and generosity, offered to undertake what was still considered a dangerous voyage. Accordingly, on the nineteenth of June, he set sail, in his own cedar vessel of thirty tons, accompanied by another small vessel, commanded by Captain Argall.

The gallant Somers was doomed again to be tempest-tossed. His companion vessel was soon driven back to port, but he kept the sea; and, as usual, remained at his post on deck, in all weathers. His voyage was long and boisterous, and the fatigues and exposures which he underwent, were too much for a frame impaired by age, and by previous hardships. He arrived at Bermudas completely exhausted and broken down.

His nephew, Captain Mathew Somers, attended him in his illness with affectionate assiduity. Finding his end approaching, the veteran called his men together, and exhorted them to be true to the interests of Virginia; to procure provisions, with all possible despatch, and hasten back to the relief of the colony.

With this dying charge, he gave up the ghost, leaving his nephew and crew overwhelmed with grief and consternation. Their first thought was to pay honour to his remains. Opening the body, they took out the heart and entrails, and buried them, erecting a cross over the grave. They then embalmed the body, and set sail with it for England; thus, while paying empty honours to their deceased commander, neglecting his earnest wish and dying injunction, that they should return with relief to Virginia.

The little bark arrived safely at Whitechurch, in Dorsetshire, with its melancholy freight. The body of the worthy Somers was interred with the military honours due to a brave soldier, and many volleys were fired over his grave. The Bermudas have since received the name of the Somer Islands, as a tribute to his memory.

The accounts given by Captain Mathew Somers and his crew of the delightful climate, and the great beauty, fertility, and abundance