

The Baby's Shoe
A Literally True Tale of Patagonia
Walter Clarence

I PRESUME most of my readers have heard of Patagonia, and the Straits of Magellan; but few, very few persons have really seen that coast, and land of utter desolation. Even among those “who go down to the sea in ships and do business in great waters,” there are comparatively very few who know more regarding this far southern locality than that Cape Horn is situated at its southern extremity, and that it is a disagreeable spot for navigators and mariners to pass in consequence of the stormy weather which prevails over the greatest portion of the year, and the intense cold that is experienced, except on rare occasions, even during the summer season. Masters of vessels usually give Cape Horn a wide berth—steering far to the southward, where the wind is generally more steady, and where they are not so liable to be caught by heavy squalls off the highlands. It is but seldom that those who “double Cape Horn,” as it is termed in nautical parlance, even sight the curved summit of the lofty rocks off Terra del Fuego, whence the appellation of Cape Horn is derived, and those see it only at a distance. At one period it was thought that ships bound to the Pacific Ocean would save time, and avoid tempestuous weather and rough seas, by going through the narrow straits of Magellan, and I believe some few ships did take this course; but it was soon discovered that the navigation through the straits was tedious and fraught with numerous perils, on account of the fogs and variable currents which therein prevail, and the practice was discontinued, and of late years, so much of the commerce between the Atlantic and Pacific is carried on by means of steamships, aided by the railroad across the Isthmus of Darien, that the voyages around the cape are much less frequently undertaken than they were a few years ago, and it is possible, in the course of time, may be almost altogether discontinued, even by whalers.

In the summer of 1845, H.M. ship *Beagle*, a government surveying schooner, which had been for years employed in the survey of the coast of Patagonia and the Straits of Magellan, came into the port of Valparaiso, short of both officers and crew, many of whom had died, while others had been invalidated home. The lieutenant commander, Hall, was to replenish his crew by drafts from any man-of-war he could find in Valparaiso, and to obtain the services of a few officers as volunteers, until the *Beagle* was relieved by a ship sent out from England, and then on her way. He experienced no difficulty in either case. Sailors, and men-of-war men especially, are always ready for a change from the daily monotony of their lives—even though the change may promise to expose them to greater hardships, and there were plenty of young officers eagerly desirous of serving for a few months on board the surveying schooner.

The writer of this present article was one of the volunteers on that occasion; the summer had just begun—that is to say—it was the beginning of November, the summer season in the southern hemisphere—and it was not thought we should be called upon to suffer any very great hardships during the brief period our services would be required.

We sailed for Terra del Fuego, the large island southward of the American continent, between which and the mainland runs the far-famed Straits of Magellan. It is not my purpose to give a scientific, or even a geographical account of the cruise, which, except to a few, would be tedious

and uninteresting. Suffice it to say that one day the Beagle came to anchor in a deep inlet, midway through the straits, and officers and men all left the vessel for a run on shore, leaving only a sufficient number on board to care properly for the vessel. The Patagonian tribes are not numerous, neither are they such a gigantic race as the records of earlier mariners pretended. Lord Byron and Admiral Gambier reported on their return from Patagonia in the middle of the last century, that they had met with savages ten feet in height, and one of these navigators related how a chief who had been presented with a small mirror, was so astonished at seeing therein the reflection of his face, that he started with surprise, and knocked down, by the movement, twelve stout sailors, who chanced to be standing in a cluster near him! Still they are a tall, muscular people, perhaps on an average not less than six feet in stature, and consequently the tallest race of men in the world. We have frequently seen them, clad in their guanaco-skin mantles, and generally coming down to the shore on horseback—males and females; and have conversed with them by signs, and traded trifling articles with them for skins, and except that they are superior in stature, we found them to resemble in color and features the ordinary American Indian. But on the shore on which we had now landed, we saw no signs of inhabitants, and the soil appeared to be utterly unfit for the support of human beings. Desolate and gloomy as is the entire coast of Patagonia, this particular spot appeared to be the centre of the desolation of desolation! Gigantic rocks towered above our heads to the height of seven or eight hundred feet, overhanging the water, and threatening to fall at any moment and fill up the narrow channel of the strait. These rocks are full of dark, deep, black caverns, worn by the constant motion of the water, which rushed into them and receded with a terrific, howling, rushing sound, as if they were the veritable curves of Eolus—the abode of the winds—which were sent forth hence to do their mission, to desolate the sea-coast of distant shores, or to waft the sail of commerce to its destined haven. Huge seabirds, among the rest of the gigantic albatross, had built their nests high up in the most inaccessible portions of these beetling cliffs, safe enough from the intrusion of their only enemy, man, and as nightfall approached, they wended their way homewards from sea in thousands, darkening the atmosphere with the shadow of their huge wings, and screaming discordantly, and filling the air with horrible and deafening sounds, which were echoed and re-echoed among the rocks and cliffs, and repeated a thousand fold. Lazy, stately penguins marched solemnly to their nests in the rock, like a line of soldiers, after having spent the day in fishing on the reefs, and now and then a huge walrus, or some other species of seal, poked up his tusked head at the mouth of the caves, with a frightful baying sound, appearing as if he were the demon guardian of the dark, gloomy abode. The spot was sublime in its fearful desolation. For a day or two—in the companionship of others—it was calculated to fill the mind with a not unpleasing feeling of awe; but to have resided here a month, a week, and alone, or with but one or two companions, without hope of rescue, we thought and said, would drive the unhappy creatures thus situated to insanity. We had wandered perhaps a mile from the shore, climbing gently all the way, occasionally discharging our fowling pieces at some incautious seabird, resting idly on the rocks, oftener, to listen to the terrific reverberations, as the noise of the report flew from rock to rock, from cavern to cavern, and seemed to roll along from peak to peak, echoing and re-echoing, until the atmosphere trembled with the concussions all around us; when suddenly, one of the party, somewhat in advance of his companions, uttered an ejaculation of surprise, which called us all to his side as quickly as possible. He held something in his hand.

“What is it?” what prize have you discovered?” was asked, impatiently, by one and another.

He held aloft by its string a shoe—a tiny baby’s shoe—such as might have been worn by an infant of two or three years old! Perhaps nothing else on earth could have occasioned such an outburst of exclamations of surprise and wonder, as the sight of such an object in such a place!

How came it there? We asked one another more by looks than words. Then, one by one each took the shoe in his hand, handling it reverentially, as if afraid it would disappear—as if each one doubted his own eyes. It was, indeed, a child’s shoe—a dainty little piece of workmanship—made of puce-colored prunella—(I believe I am correct in the term)—the glossy, soft material from which such articles are manufactured. It was not much worn, but the color was a little decomposed by exposure. But—good God of heaven! what child of that tender age could have been brought to this desolate spot? Unfitted to be the abode of the severest anchorite the world ever saw. A spot on which Saint Kevin would have gone mad!

If a child had been here, a woman had been here too! That idea seemed naturally to follow by a logical conclusion. Not a savage Indian, inured to hardships; but a delicate lady—such as one might imagine to be the mother of a child who should wear such a shoe as that! For there was not one amongst us who had not possessed the shoe with an individuality—and decided from its appearance that it had once been worn by a pretty little girl, with light hair and wondering blue eyes, just able to toddle alone, and to be proud of its elegant pedal coverings, and desirous of attracting the attention of every one it saw to them.

I recollect reading once, of the excitement caused amongst a party of rough gold diggers in California, in consequence of a woman’s shoe having been found by one of the number. How they danced, and sung, and offered wonderful sums in gold dust to the lucky finder, to obtain possession of the coveted treasure. How it called up to the minds of those rough miners visions of home and absent yet dearly loved ones they might never meet again, but for whom they were toiling in the midst of privations and hardships in a far distant land. But, I venture to say, that woman’s shoe never called up such yearning desires for home, such wonder as to its advent to this gloomy seat of desolation, such soulfelt pity for its once possessor, as did the finding of the infant’s shoe on the desert shores of Patagonia.

“But where there is a shoe, there must be something else! Unless it dropped from the clouds!”

Such was the conclusion we all arrived at. Robinson Crusoe found the print of a naked foot in the sand, and surmised that some human creature, savage or civilized, was near him; but finding no further evidence, believed that Satan had set the stamp to torment him. But his satanic majesty surely could have no motive in placing an infant’s shoe, of evident human manufacture, in this sterile, God-forsaken spot!

“Perhaps some unfortunate ship passing through the straits, had been wrecked here, and a passenger, or the captain’s wife and child, might have been on board!”

“If so, where were they now? Where were the remnants of the wreck? What had become of those who had escaped and wandered here? Were they still living, or had they perished by starvation, or gone mad with despair, and hurled themselves into the dark waters of the strait, or had they,

happily, been rescued by some passing vessel? Whoever they were, whatever had become of them, how came this infant's shoe to be left exposed in such a spot, and nothing else besides?"

A general search was resolved upon, though if any shipwrecked persons were living on the coast, they must have wandered far away, or they must have heard the report of the guns, and knowing that they were fired by civilized beings, they would have joyfully made their appearance. For a long time the search resulted in finding no other evidences of humanity in this gloomy region. We were about to give up and to regard the mystery as inexplicable, when a prolonged shout from a sailor, who had ventured by himself to climb a slippery rock, which had led him to a fissure on its opposite side, attracted our attention. We shouted in reply, and as quickly as possible made our way towards him. It was no easy task for a while, until we found that if we had gone a little further on, we should have come to a ledge of rock, over which we could have passed with comparative ease.

The sailor had discovered two skeletons! The bones were bleached as white as snow, but they were evidently male skeletons, and those of tall, large-framed men. A few—very few—shreds of coarse cloth and canvass were found near, adhering to the rocks. The clothing had been torn from the bodies of the sufferers by the carrion birds, doubtless, and the greater portion carried away by the wind, while the flesh had been picked clean from the bones, by the same vile creatures! This discovery urged us to proceed further, though from the appearance of the skeletons they must have lain thus exposed to the elements for years, at least.

In a short time our search was rewarded by the discovery of a cleft in the rocks, which might have served for a shelter from the inclemency of the weather. A few pieces of plank scattered around, satisfied us that human beings had once dwelt on the spot, and we entered the cavern. Hanging to the side of the rock within, were several articles of female attire, and a heavy, coarse, pilot jacket. Near these lay a sea-boat, very much worn. It was so dark within, that we could scarcely see, and night was coming on. We therefore returned to the ship, and the next morning renewed our search, provided with matches, lanterns and torches. We again visited the spot and entered the cavern. After striking a light we discovered several articles of cabin furniture, much broken and worn. A table stood at the far end, and on it lay, open at the gospel of Saint Matthew, a Bible of the description issued by the British and Foreign Bible Society, printed in 1807. Several other books, an epitome of navigation, Johnson's Dictionary, Mackenzie's Man of Feeling, and a child's primer—all old and worn, the latter printed in Liverpool, in 1806.

Stowed near by were three or four provision casks, marked T.S.K.—all empty! But on the opposite side was another cask still, containing several pieces of seal's blubber, perfectly hard and dry. All this was sadly suggestive! A party of shipwrecked persons had evidently been here, and had resided here for a long time; or why were at least four casks of provisions, each capable of containing two hundred weights, found here—empty? How many in number had been the unfortunates, we as yet could not say. We had seen but two skeletons.

"Hillo, there!" was shouted by a lieutenant, who had quitted the cavern a few moments before. We answered the shout, and proceeded to the spot from whence it came.

He had lighted upon another cavern, or indenture in the rocks, which had been and still was

partially boarded over by ship's timbers. Here there were signs of a greater attempt at comfort. A handsome Pembroke table occupied the centre, and on it lay a Church of England prayer-book, a volume of Cowper's poems, and a lady's work-box. Two glasses also stood on the table, and in a sea-chest were several articles of female clothing of a better quality than those in the other cave. The clothing was marked G.B. We looked at the imprint of the books. They were all of the same old date. All printed at the beginning of the century!

We felt satisfied that there must be other skeletons, unless all had died earlier than the two men whose remains had been found, and had been interred by them who left no one to perform the last sad office for themselves! A further search revealed an inner cavern, or rather an inner room, the rock answering for the slides, and the top carefully boarded over. Here was a smaller table, and three stools such as are sometimes used on board ship. In brackets on the wall hung a ship's musket, a cutlass, and a large spyglass, and in one corner was a bed of canvass (pieces of ship's sails), on which lay, in a crouching posture, a female skeleton, clothed in woolen garments, still perfectly whole; and scattered around were numerous trinkets, and smaller articles of clothing.

We quitted the cavern sick at heart, and proceeded to search yet further. Not far distant we found another indentation in the rock, in which were several pans and kettles, rusty and eaten with age and the action of the elements, and the base of the rock still showed marks of having been submitted to the action of fire. There was no wood on this desolate coast; but pieces of broken and charred furniture lying around, accounted for the scarcity of furniture in the caverns, and showed that one by one, everything except what was actually indispensable, had been burnt to supply warmth and fire for cooking purposes. Perhaps these last would have gone too; but death stepped in, and rendered it no longer necessary!

After consultation, it was resolved to gather together the three skeletons, and after finding a fitting spot—if such were possible—to inter them decently, and to remove the best preserved articles found, to the ship. The contents of the sea-chest were closely examined, in hopes of finding some better clue to the unfortunate victims' names, or that of the ship from which they came; but nothing was discovered, though the search brought to light a quantity of infant's clothing, and a child's rattle, and a necklace of coral beads. In the volume of Cowper's poems, was written on the fly leaf, "To Mary, from Jane Bruce, Christmas Day, 1804."

After a long search we discovered a small patch of shallow, sandy soil, on which we determined to dig the graves; but we found that already this spot had been chosen for a burying ground. Some curious piles of stones and pieces of rock attracted our notice, and we found upon examination, that they had been thus placed as headstones over the graves of those of the unfortunate party who had died while there were still left others to bury them out of sight. All were marked with the initials of those who lay buried beneath, but at this distant date, I have forgotten the initials, though I noted them down at the time. Furthest of all, standing alone, was a smaller pile, more hastily disposed, and sheltered by the rocks from the rude winds. On the top was a heap of baby toys, arranged in order, and a vase of cut-glass—empty—but which had probably once contained some memento of the infant who lay beneath. For this was the tomb of the child whose little shoe had led to the sad discovery, and it had evidently died while the mother, whose skeleton we had found in the interior cavern, was still able to ornament the grave, and probably to come and weep over it every day.

We buried the two male skeletons in one shallow grave; that of the woman and mother side by side with that of the child, and there in that far distant spot, in that bleak, inhospitable, desolate region they will rest in peace, probably never again re-visited by human beings, till the graves of the earth shall give up their dead!

The relics we had found were taken on board the *Beagle*, and the greater portion were carried to England by Lieutenant Commander Hall, but the child's shoe was purchased of the sailor who found it, by an officer, who said he should always keep it as a memento of the sad discovery of the fate of those hapless beings. Probably the shoe had fallen from the infant's foot while being carried in the arms of its father or mother, or one of the crew, and had been left unheeded when it fell.

It is a sad thing to reflect upon—these poor creatures thus left to perish slowly on this desert coast, with no hope of rescue. A sad thing to reflect upon, the mother watching over the dying infant; then carrying it to its bleak, shallow grave, and weeping over it, as she arranged the rocks and the toys with which the babe had so often played. A sad thing to think of the party, watching day by day, hoping against hope, for the rescue that never came, and at last, when all their provision was gone, and nearly all their means of procuring warmth were expended, subsisting for a while on seal's blubber, until at last they died one by one of starvation and cold! But saddest of all must have been the fate of those who survived the rest. The poor woman who died alone in the cavern, crouching her limbs together for warmth, and the men, who had probably gone to take a last look to see if some ship were not coming, on board of which they might yet escape and be rescued from death, and falling to the earth in weakness ere they reached their rude shelter, and thus exposed to the cold, pitiless elements yielded up their breath! Several years after, I heard that Lieutenant Hall, on his return to England, had made diligent inquiry in hopes of learning the name of some ship that had sailed to that distant coast, and never since been heard of, that he might gain some clue to the names of those on board, and let their friends know their unhappy fate. But all that he could learn was that two ships—the *Laurel* and the *Sappho*, had sailed from Liverpool, both in 1809, for Valparaiso, and had never arrived there, and that the captains' names were Dobson and Williams. This was all. The owners of the ships were dead. Nobody knew anything of the crews or passengers. Perhaps their friends were all dead long ago, or those who still lived had been so young at the time, that they had forgotten them. A report was published in the newspapers, and it was surmised that one or both of those ships tried to pass through the Straits of Magellan, and had got on shore; that the crew and passengers had escaped to the rocks and carried thither such provisions and furniture as they could, and thus lived until their provisions were gone and they had died of starvation, and the vessel or vessels had been broken up or burnt by the natives for the sake of the iron, which the Patagonians have some simple, rude means of fashioning into weapons and other articles adapted to their own wants. They have abundance of iron amongst them which must have been procured in this way, but they will never explain how they became possessed of it.

The Patagonian savages are not a cruel race, and it is likely that they never discovered the ship, until all belonging to her had died, or they would have rescued them and cared for them in their rude way, as they have often done to others in similar circumstances; and it is probable that when they did discover the wreck, finding no one on board, they had never taken the trouble to search

the shore—a mile inland, where we had found the remains of the unfortunate passengers and crew.

Flag of Our Union, Aug. 3, 1861