

A fictional account of Charles Darwin's voyage around the world.

Darwin-A Novel

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DARWIN FELT THE HOT BLOOD in his eyes, sensed the hatred of the two women who had smashed his skull with sharp stones from the riverbed, the firelight from the burning village behind them fringing their bodies in the darkness. The blood flooded into his eyes so that he could barely make out the fists, each clenching a stone, dropping toward his face for another blow. The fire flared behind them as the roofs of their houses caught, filling his sight with the redness of flames seen through blood. And then darkness blotted up the light.

A pinpoint of red grew into the glowing tip of Lucy's cigar. Darwin was on his back, flaccid after their first time together, his first with anyone, the night screeches of the Brazilian rainforest all around. Orange smoke curled out of the corners of the beautiful mouth of the ambassador's daughter as she drew so hard on the cigar that its tip burst into flames.

Orange smoke turned into flames leaping among the pieces of dry driftwood and guanaco dung as Old Bernantio, squatting on the other side of the campfire, told the stories of his people. "When Walleechu first created all the animals," he began, "each one knew the place where it properly belonged." But Darwin already knew the story, as if he had heard it before, from the war among the tribes of animals to the truce in which their ambassadors agreed that each tribe must in future keep to its own territory and consort only with its own kind, those with scales together, those with hair together, and so on.

The dancing flames of the campfire became the curly red hair of Captain Fitzroy shaking from side to side in disapproval. Darwin's ideas about the origin of species were wrong. Everything about the voyage of the *Beagle* was wrong Fitzroy's shaking curls insisted until they became the red Phrygian caps of General Rosas's troops encamped beside the Rio Negro. "My plan is to kill every male, whether man or baby, and every female old enough to breed," Rosas proclaimed, standing tall in his tent while he pointed at the maps spread

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out before him. “The girls will be sold in Buenos Aires. Not a single Indian will be left to interfere with the Argentine nation’s settlement of the pampas.”

Like drying blood, the redness began to lose its brilliance, becoming the gore-besmirched torso of one of the general’s victims. The corpse hung upside down from an ombu tree along the road to Buenos Aires, a dark pile of entrails spilling from the gashed abdomen onto the ground beside a face. First that face belonged to Augustus Earle, Lord Palmerston’s secret agent with whom Darwin had crossed the Patagonian desert.

Then, as the face faded into darkness, it became Darwin’s own, warmed by the fireplace in the public room at the Devonport Inn. The winter gale that blew up the English Channel out of the Atlantic chilled the town of Plymouth. Darwin consoled himself that while such contrary winds might have kept HMS *Beagle* from sailing for two full weeks, he had at least been able to stay ashore rather than abide the cramped quarters aboard. He was ship’s naturalist, but his status as a civilian supernumerary required no set duties and allowed him the freedom to busy himself in town. He had used the time to write long letters, sharing his hopes and trepidations with family and friends he would not see for the next two years. He had made several purchases to fill out his kit. He smiled as he thought of the rifle and two pistols he had bought at a good price in a pawnshop near the dockyard. And he had read another few volumes of von Humboldt’s account of a journey through the wilds of South America, not to mention having begun Lyell’s iconoclastic *Principles of Geology*.

This Boxing Day morning he sat beside the big fireplace in the inn’s public room. His eyes were fixed on the copy of Lyell that lay open on the table. But rather than concentrating on geology, he was yet again dwelling on the wisdom of agreeing to sail on a voyage around the world. The prospect seemed more ominous with every day stuck in port. He had almost no experience with ships. He had never even been out of sight of land, and the *Beagle* seemed so tiny compared to the immensity of the open ocean.

Most worrying of all was the delay in leaving. He feared it would exhaust his resolve. At this rate, the planned voyage of two years could stretch into four or more. Thus far seafaring seemed to consist of waiting in port for favorable winds. And judging by the men who filled the inn's tables, the blue coats of naval officers contrasting with the scarlet of marines, gambling at whist would be the requisite entertainment during much of that time. Such men had learned how to dull the monotony of blockading French ports year after year and, since Waterloo, the monotony of life ashore on half pay while waiting for the next war. This time they had already been waiting an unprecedented decade and a half, with no relief in sight, victims of their own success.

Back home in Shrewsbury, he lamented, the family home would yesterday have been full of Christmas cheer. His father, being a popular doctor and community patriarch, never lacked for company dropping by. Darwin thought of singing around the piano, of warm pies, and of walks in the woods with his sisters and brother.

And Fanny might be visiting. Last autumn, riding in the woods together to hunt pheasants, they had kissed on the lips, and she had let him reach under her skirts to feel a smooth, soft thigh. He blushed a little to relive the rush of excitement while sitting in the public room of an inn.

Here, far from the comfortable familiarity of Shrewsbury, he felt as oddly displaced as a creature from the bottom of the sea he had agreed to sail on—and as lonely. He tried to concentrate on Lyell, but the account so contradicted Scripture that he felt overwhelmed, lost, disoriented. He desperately needed to discuss such ideas among learned company, but Plymouth was not Cambridge, nor even Shrewsbury. If not for the constant clamor of the card players, which provided at least a semblance of company, he might have returned to his room after breakfast.

A loud "Mister Dahwin!" interrupted his gloomy thoughts. Just inside the door stood Captain Fitzroy, a stocky young man with curly red hair and the hawkish, aristocratic features of his Stewart ancestors. "The weather is changing, Dahwin. I believe the wind will veer during the night and we will be able to sail at dawn. The jolly boat

will collect you at noon.” Fitzroy did not make the slightest gesture of reassurance, not even a grin, before turning to the door and leaving a startled Darwin to dwell on the news.

A glance through the window, revealed the captain in his dripping navy cloak hurrying up the street in the direction of the Admiralty offices. A civilian in unadorned black accompanied him. Darwin could not be sure without seeing the face but thought he recognized the tall figure of Augustus Earle, the artist Fitzroy had engaged for the voyage. The captain no doubt needed to check for final orders before sailing, but Darwin could think of no reason for an artist to report to the admiral.

When he had first met Earle on board two weeks ago, the artist was well spoken and had seemed pleasant enough but also quite guarded, to the point of making the introduction somewhat uncomfortable. Of course all the new shipmates had been somewhat reserved upon first meeting each other, as anyone would expect. Those who would be so closely confined together for month after month had no wish to offend each other from the outset or, worse, reveal minority opinions on sensitive topics. Who knew what might fester only to flare up after months at sea? Even the highest-ranking officers took time to reveal themselves, listening first for idiom and intonation. Navy rank, after all, was one thing and social rank altogether something else. Yet Earle had been a little too reticent, all the more strange since he and Darwin were to be rare civilians aboard a navy ship and might naturally have felt drawn together.

As for Robert Fitzroy, Darwin had know him only since meeting in London in September and had as yet not formed a strong opinion of the young captain, who at twenty-six was only four years his senior. Fitzroy certainly seemed dedicated to duty and expert in it, commendably so. He could not otherwise have been promoted so rapidly, whatever his lineage, especially given the current peace. Yet he was perhaps too preoccupied with duty, to the point of obsession, and exceedingly serious even on social occasions. His family’s reputation for lunacy also worried Darwin. He recalled that an uncle, no less than the famous Lord Londonderry who had been the Tory Secretary of War, had slit his own throat with a penknife a few years ago.

Nonetheless, Darwin's professors had all praised Fitzroy as having been an intelligent and likable student. Doctor Henslow had even ventured that the two young men were so similar in inclination and ability that if they had overlapped at Cambridge they would have been close friends. Both also exhibited a strong spirituality. Darwin was entertaining the possibility of becoming a parson, and Fitzroy seemed bent on Christianizing the indigenes of South America. He had returned from his last voyage with four Fuegians. Now, a year later, one of them was dead of smallpox, but the other three had been schooled in English, Christianity, the horticultural and domestic arts, and other diverse aspects of civilized life. Fitzroy planned to return them in that enlightened state to Tierra del Fuego. An Anglican missionary would accompany them, and together they would establish, through example and leadership, the seeds of civilization in that land at the ends of the Earth.

Of course Fitzroy's character was critical to Darwin, he reflected. If most aspects of seafaring remained mysterious to him, the first principle seemed obvious—the success of any voyage depended, at bottom, on the captain. While Fitzroy was without question an intriguing fellow, his family's aristocratic lunacy and his own overly serious demeanor remained somewhat worrisome. If he broke down under the pressures of command, everyone aboard the *Beagle* would suffer the consequences.

Yet, Darwin reprimanded himself, to quit the voyage now because of vague doubts about Fitzroy's sanity would itself be lunacy. Tomorrow, finally, they would sail for all the exotic places he had read about. The jungles of Brazil, the pampas of Argentina, the deserts of Patagonia all awaited with little-known plants and animals, spectacular geology, and who knew what else. Beyond Tierra del Fuego and the Straits of Magellan, the fronds of palm trees beckoned in the trade winds, crowning the white sand beaches of the atolls that speckled the vast Pacific.

To be sure, he reflected, the voyage's main purpose was more mundane than visiting exotic places. The *Beagle* was to chart the southern coasts of South America. Fitzroy had already undertaken one such survey as first lieutenant aboard the *Beagle* and now was to

further that work as her captain. He had refitted her with all the latest instrumentation, including two-dozen chronometers to determine longitude and the new Massey's Patented Sounding Leads. To match that capacity to chart, Fitzroy also intended to collect plant and animal specimens, note geology, and describe whatever other unknown phenomena presented themselves. Darwin and Earle would fulfill that much more exciting, to the young naturalist, secondary goal of the voyage.

All qualms thus buried under visions of exotic landscapes, Darwin was waiting at the quay when the jolly boat arrived. He had even put aside that morning's doubts about the adequacy of the tiny *Beagle*, anchored well out in Barnett Pool but clearly visible now that the rain had stopped. He had become so excited at the prospect of finally getting underway that he stumbled when boarding the jolly boat, enticing the seaman at the tiller into testing the mettle of an obvious lubber.

"Beggin' your pardon, guv'nor. She's a right small sloop, *Beagle* is, don't you say? For a voyage roun' the world, I means, sir."

Darwin, startled at the question, stammered, "A sloop?! A sloop...? Captain Fitzroy told me it was a brig...."

"Well, she's a sloop 'cause she's small, sir, not even two fifty ton and no more'n ninety foot stem to stern. Havin' two masts be what's makes 'er a brig, sir."

"But it's got three masts!"

"Aye, that she do, guv'nor, now. But she were built wi' two. The yard just added the mizzenmast a few weeks ago, turnin' 'er into a barque. 'Er be a ship 'cept on account the mizzen's rigged fore an' aft. That's what's make 'er a barque, sir."

"A barque? Not a ship? A brig? Bloody hell, man!"

"Just as you say, sir. Coffin brig us calls this type on 'count o' the hellish lack o' freeboard, what's puts 'er awash right easy wi' any sort of sea runnin', sir."

Darwin let the sailors have their silent laugh behind their beards, making no comment and turning inward again, where he had often found himself since arriving in Plymouth. He even chuckled at himself. A year ago he never would have imagined that he would now be

here, about to embark on a voyage around the world with these rough men. He neither knew much nor wanted to know much about ships—and even less about something called, apparently, barques. He had first experienced sea travel only a few weeks ago, while taking the steam packet from London to Plymouth. He had treated that short trip as a trial of his seamanship, to judge if he would be susceptible to seasickness and if he would be able to endure, if not enjoy, the cramped life aboard. He felt he had passed on both counts. The details of masts and rigging need be no concern of his. Still, the term coffin brig worried him.

They had drawn close to the *Beagle* now, and he was comforted by her businesslike appearance if not her tiny size. Fitzroy had spared no effort in equipping the brig to complete the immense task before them. He had assured Darwin that the *Beagle*, once refitted, would be like her canine namesake: small but quite capable and dogged in pursuit of her mission.

As the jolly boat pulled up to the gangway and the sailors tossed their oars, Darwin recalled that during the refit the dockyard had indeed added the mizzen, purportedly to aid maneuverability in the in-shore waters where their mission would take them. They had also added a sheathing of two-inch fir planks over the oak hull to guard against catastrophe while working close in to reefs. An outer skin of new copper would resist the boring of teredo worms in the Pacific. She looked very earnest with her black and white paint, the fresh copper glistening just above the gray chop of the harbor. Running from the copper up to the top of each mast, Harris's Patented Lightning Conductors would guard against the ferocious lightning storms they could expect in the tropics. In addition to the jolly boat, six other boats built to Fitzroy's specifications would allow exploration of shallow estuaries. The victulator had provided ample provisions, much of it in the form of tins of Kilner and Moorsom's Patented Preserves of meats, vegetables, and soups. Stores of antiscorbutics such as lemon juice and pickles would keep them all healthy. And, dearest of all to Darwin's heart, ample supplies of jars, barrels, and preservatives would keep his botanical and zoological specimens from spoiling.

As Darwin looked up at the perilous looking gangway ladder, he saw Augustus Earle watching him over the bulwark. Whatever had occupied him at the Admiralty offices had not taken long. By the time Darwin had scrambled awkwardly up to the deck, though, the artist had disappeared.

The *Beagle* churned with final preparations. A chain of sailors was noisily passing water casks down into the hold. Officers were directing other work gangs to check cordage and sails. Fitzroy would want no accidents while leaving port under the gaze of the Admiral's telescope.

Darwin looked up at the rigging and just shook his head at the seeming tangle of rope. He wished the *Beagle* were a steamer, like the London-Plymouth packet. No weight of intricate rigging and obscuring sails would hang overhead, dependent on capricious winds and justifying the jargon that sailors used to the confusion of passengers. The packet had been elegant in its simplicity, the slim stack sending up its column of smoke while the paddlewheels steadily pushed her along the coast straight into the wind. But the *Beagle* was not a steamer. The Royal Navy was too stodgy to rush into such new technology and too cautious during peacetime to become reliant on coal that was not as ubiquitously available and free as wind.

With barely acknowledged greetings to his preoccupied shipmates, Darwin quickly made his way aft toward his cabin under the poop. Strong smells of paint, tar, and rosin alternated in the crisp air as he picked his way among the gear, ropes and men that filled the deck.

As he opened the door, his teenage servant, Syms Covington, welcomed him to what officially was the chartroom but on this voyage would serve as Darwin's accommodation. "Greetings, Mister Darwin. They were working on charts earlier so the stove has been going a while and your cabin's nice and warm. I'll just fetch your baggage from the gangway."

"Thank you," replied Darwin as he took off his cloak and hung it by the stove. As Syms shut the door, it somewhat broke the waves of noise coming from the deck, and he turned to look around the cramped cabin he had first seen two weeks ago. It seemed even

smaller than he remembered, his imagination having enlarged it during the time ashore. It was only ten feet on a side, with bookcases, cabinets, a wardrobe, a washstand, and the stove lining the walls. A large table dominated the center of the space, leaving a strip of open floor no more than two feet wide to walk around, all the while cracking one's skull on the deck beams and tripping over the tiller ropes. Even at that, the mizzenmast angled down through the cabin and obstructed the narrow strip of open floor to the right of the door, thereby making a complete circuit of the table impossible. Under the skylight, a hammock hung above the charts spread on the table.

When Syms returned and was stowing the baggage, Darwin asked, "Who was looking at charts, Syms?"

"Why, it was the captain and Mister Earle, sir. Also, the captain asked that you join him and the senior officers in their mess at eight bells."

Darwin, curious, inspected the charts. Many were rolled and piled on shelves under the table, but a few were spread out as if in use, weighed down with heavy brass dividers and rulers. On top was a chart of the coast of Brazil around Rio de Janeiro. Darwin could not imagine what in particular might have occupied Fitzroy and Earle, and no pencil marks betrayed their purpose.

Little the wiser, he shoed Syms out of the cabin and began a final check of the equipment he had brought aboard upon first arriving in Plymouth. Anything forgotten now would be difficult to acquire en route. Eight bells in the afternoon watch, four o'clock, would leave time to do a thorough inventory. The wardrobe seemed in order, so Darwin turned to the instrument cabinet. He had been able to borrow some of the items from the British Museum. Most of the rest he had purchased in London. The microscope, made by Bancks & Son in their workshop on The Strand, rested snugly in its padded wooden box. An array of square leather cases held various compasses, altimeters, and clinometers. They would be essential for geological work. A larger, cylindrical case held the refracting telescope, also made by Robert Bancks. The thermometers and hygrometer, with its delicate mechanism actuated by the tension of a human hair, would serve to determine atmospheric conditions. The camera obscura would help

him to accurately draw specimens. Every single one would be sketched, cataloged as to location and behavior, wrapped or bottled, skinned or dried, and packed away in the hold in crates for shipment to Henslow in Cambridge. Syms had wrapped the instrument cases in tarred sailcloth to keep out the damp, then fitted them tightly into the cabinet, padding with more cloth where necessary to prevent any shifting as the *Beagle* rolled. Darwin took his time reassuring himself that every piece of equipment was in working order before carefully redoing Sym's handiwork. Then he placed the guns and boxes of percussion caps and cartridges he had just brought aboard in the chest beside the washstand.

Everything seemed to be well stowed so he turned to the bookcases that held the brig's library, opening the glass doors that would keep the salt air and the rats from the paper. The five volumes of Cuvier's *Recherches sur les Ossements Fossiles des Quadrupèdes* rested next to the four of von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*. Beside them, he slipped in the three Humboldt volumes he had taken ashore and Lyell's *Principles of Geology*. Fitzroy had contributed such volumes of Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* and Purchas's *Pilgrimes* as were relevant to their itinerary as well as a few fuller accounts such as Father Falconer's book on the Jesuits in Patagonia. Reference volumes on botany, zoology, surveying, phrenology, astronomy, taxidermy, and Spanish and Portuguese grammar, rounded out the small library. Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* would provide a bit of an antidote to all the science.

Darwin pulled *Paradise Lost* from its shelf and began to flip through the dozen cantos. He knew the lines so well from long hours of study that he barely saw the words, reflecting instead on Milton. The great poet had also studied for the clergy at Christ's College in Cambridge. But he had ultimately decided not to enter the Church, to instead further and share his spirituality through writing. Could, Darwin wondered, he ever attain that sort of self-discipline? Or did he require the structure of the Church to lead a productive life? He did not want to become like his brother, Erasmus. 'Ras seemed to be

adrift, ostensibly pursuing a career but in reality doing little but spending the stipend their disappointed father provided.

Only the striking of eight bells finally distracted Darwin from his musings, and he quickly hurried down to the officers' mess. Crowded around the long table were the people who would lead this expedition and the other two supernumeraries. They, like Darwin, were essentially Fitzroy's guests and had no official standing in the Royal Navy. With some twinges of guilt, Darwin noted that the entire mess was no bigger than his own cabin and that the officer's cabins giving onto the mess, some with doors standing open, were little more than half the size, albeit not burdened by a monstrously huge chart table.

Darwin was slightly late, the last to arrive. When he entered the rest grumbled their greetings and immediately turned toward the head of the table, where Fitzroy stood expectantly. Everyone had already been introduced over the past several weeks, so their captain launched straight into his briefing.

"Gentlemen, we have seventy-two souls aboard, all men but the one Fuegian girl. It is our duty to lead them in our multifarious purpose. I'm afraid that our service to the King will be rather more humble than that of our predecessors against the Frogs and Dagos—but, nonetheless, not unimportant. What we lack in prize money, we will make up for in a multitude of additions to scientific knowledge and our Lord's flock."

As Fitzroy paused, a compliant mixture of agreeable murmur and knowing chuckle spread around the table. On one side of it stood the two lieutenants, John Wickham and Matthew Sullivan, Sergeant Beareley of the Royal Marines, and the sailing master, Edward Chaffers. The master was striking, his face so deeply lined and tanned by a life on deck that it might have been one of the fossils Darwin hoped to collect. The others were all much younger, in their twenties, but like the master looked to be confident, sanguine men who knew that next to the captain they would shoulder the bulk of the responsibility for the voyage. Across the table stood the senior warrant officers—the surgeon and the purser, Robert MacCormick and George Rowlett. They made a matched set, both well into their thirties: the surgeon

short, thin, nervous, and Irish; the purser short, fat, lymphatic, and Scottish. The two midshipmen, Arthur Mellersh and Philip King, barely into their teens, skinny and awkward, pressed their narrow backsides as close against the wall as possible. Beside and towering over Darwin stood the enigmatic Earle. Even his age seemed indeterminate, anywhere between thirty and fifty, thought Darwin. Richard Matthews, the Anglican missionary charged with the daunting task of converting Tierra del Fuego, nervously hovered next to Fitzroy. He was about the same age as the captain and Darwin, as tall as Earle, but gangling where the artist was muscular.

“As you will not be unaware,” continued Fitzroy, “our main purpose is to survey the coasts of South America, principally those of Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, and the Chilean archipelago. Those coasts remain largely uncharted in any detail, but we know they are forbidding, lending all the more import to charting their few safe anchorages and supply points. In addition,” he continued without an iota of sarcasm, “we are to continue westward across the Pacific in order to circumnavigate the globe. Our highly precise set of chronometers will allow us to fix the longitude of key locations and thereby resolve the disagreements that currently exist over said locations among the leading authorities. All of which will be quite a feather in our cap, so to speak. Now that Britain controls the seas, the Admiralty is highly desirous of promoting safe and rapid shipping to all parts of the globe by providing reliable charts that are accurate and precise in all respects. Our particular part in fulfilling that objective, and a not unimportant part, is to chart potential bases out of which to patrol the South Atlantic sea-lanes and approaches to Cape Horn, it being, as you are all not unaware, a shorter passage to the South Pacific than the Cape of Good Hope. In addition, I have taken on Misters Darwin and Earle here as supernumeraries, at my own expense, to record and collect all manner of exotic phenomena we will most certainly encounter. And, finally, the Admiralty has sanctioned the return of our three Fuegians to their own land and the establishment there of an Anglican mission, again, not in small part at my own expense. Mister Matthews here has been charged with undertaking that brave project. Perhaps one day civilized indigenes will succor sailors who wreck

rounding the Horn and we, gentlemen, will have a not insignificant part of the credit for it.”

Darwin, easily bored by pontification, allowed his thoughts to drift. While in London, he had heard quite a lot about the Fuegians, whom he had yet to meet. Apparently, while surveying the coast of Tierra del Fuego on the previous voyage of the *Beagle*, a party had taken a whaleboat to spend a few days exploring a narrow inlet. One morning they had woken to find the boat gone. The beach where they had dragged it up was empty except for the thieves’ footprints. After roundly cursing themselves for having failed to set a watch, they had built a rough craft from driftwood and the sail they had used as a tent. Blessed by fine weather, unusual enough in those latitudes, they had reached the *Beagle* late the next day. Pringle Stokes, the captain on that voyage, had spent an entire week chasing the stolen boat. Each village had turned up some article, an oarlock or piece of rope, but never the boat itself. The Fuegian inhabitants had invariably fled into the forest, but Stokes did manage to capture three young men and a girl, intending to barter them in return for the boat. That strategy had been futile, however, the boat apparently being much more valuable to its new owners than the freedom of their kin. The hostages had nonetheless proven so valuable as guides and so generally intelligent, quickly grasping the rudiments of English, that Fitzroy had requested leave to take charge of them at his own expense, educate them in England, and return them home at some future opportunity. Little had anyone known then that Stokes would die on that voyage, Fitzroy assume command of the *Beagle*, and his opportunity to return the Fuegians come so soon.

“So!,” continued Fitzroy, interrupting Darwin’s musings. “You can see that our mission is indeed multifarious, so to speak. The Admiralty has projected that we might accomplish all within two years. I am not unconfident that we shall not disappoint. Are there any questions, gentlemen?”

Chaffers, who had been on the previous voyage and, in fact, had commanded the party that had lost the whaleboat, glanced around to be sure of having the floor before raising his gravelly voice: “Think we’ll ever get that blasted boat back, Cap’n?”

“No, Mister Chaffers; it’s likely firewood by now. But we carry a headstone made of good Scottish granite for Captain Stokes, who, as you’ll remember, sorely resented having to give up on that boat. Four years is long to make do with a wooden cross, but I expect it’s still standing at Port Famine and that we’ll find his grave so as to make it up to him.”

“Amen to that, sir,” said the master.

Of those present, the purser and surgeon had also served on the previous voyage. Now they were both looking intently back and forth between Chaffers and Fitzroy. Some among the other eight shuffled uncomfortably with this first articulation of a distinction between those who had shared something unspoken in Tierra del Fuego and those who had not.

“Then, gentlemen,” exclaimed Fitzroy, reaching for a glass of port from the table, “I give you the King!”

The others took up their own glasses with a ragged chorus: “The King! God save the King!” The midshipmen showed the most gusto of all, with a high pitched but still rousing “God save King Billy!” After all, when a boy no older than them, King William had also served as a middy in American waters. It made no matter that in those days the whole world had been against Britain and very nearly destroyed the Royal Navy that now ruled the seas.

For the first time during the briefing, Fitzroy smiled. “Very good, gentlemen. Carry on if you will. Apprise your juniors of our activities. We sail on the morning ebb and there’ll be no mistakes. There’s always a chance for a slip ‘twixt the crouch and the leap.’ But make no mistake about it; we’ll have no slips!”

As those who would not shortly be eating in the mess filed out of its narrow door, Fitzroy motioned to Darwin with his head and said, “Please be so good as to join me for dinner in my cabin, Dahwin.”

As they crossed the passageway to Fitzroy’s door, they could hear the volume of conversation in the officers’ mess mounting. It seemed the same insipid mix of facetious sparring, clichéd puns, and stale jokes current among the whist players at the Devonport Inn. Darwin thought such chatter a bore but supposed it a small price to pay for sustaining spirits while minimizing conflicts. He suspected that by the

time this voyage was over, minor habits would have become major irritants.

Fitzroy's cabin was twice the size of Darwin's and without a large chart table occupying most of it. The padded berth looked regal compared to a hammock. Doors led to a spacious storeroom aft and a private water closet. The storeroom held the food that Darwin's father had partially paid for and that the two would share at the small table. The skylight over the table pierced the quarterdeck just forward of the wheel. The discordant ticking of twenty-four chronometers filtered in through one of several other closet doors. Fitzroy's servant, Henry Fuller, and Syms had set a fine table of roast pork, potatoes, and carrots.

"I'll tell you this, Chawes," said Fitzroy as he peered over the rim of his wine glass after a sip, "when Henslow first wrote me about you, I could barely believe my luck. I thought I would have to suffer the voyage without any gentlemanly company at all. Yet here sits a Cambridge man! And you're thinking of joining the clergy as well! No prospect could warm my heart more."

"And the good doctor spoke even more highly of you, Robert. But your officers seem a likely enough bunch."

"Oh, yes. Competent, steadfast, and not unorderly. Wickham and Sullivan have gone through the Portsmouth naval school, of course. They know everything an officer ought to know and nothing more."

To Fuller and Syms, waiting for further orders as discreetly as possible in such a confined space, Fitzroy said "leave us in peace, if you please," and nodded toward the door.

Only after the two servants had gone, did he continue. "Sullivan in particular has a genius for spit and polish. Mellersh and King will also do, but none of the officers have gone to Eton or Shrewsbury or indeed to any school of any repute at all. And Cambridge!? Completely beyond them in the conception, I dare say!"

Darwin did not like such snobbery and tried to shift the conversation toward a more constructive direction. "I sorely miss Cambridge. We were a close bunch at Christ's College."

“Fond memories, indeed. I most miss the chapel at King’s College. Say, did you know George Simmons when you were at Shrewsbury School? Birmingham borne and bred. Not enough of a Tory to go to Eton so he stayed closer to home. He would have been an upper boy when you started.”

“Actually, yes. I fagged for him.”

“Really, Chawes...? Hope he wasn’t too hard on you, so to speak?”

“No, not much. Usual stuff. Found him quite a likeable chap.”

Fitzroy suddenly raised his glass and voice in a toast: “Here’s to your Shrewsbury, then, Chawes! Waterloo wasn’t won on its playing fields, but it’s one of the great schools nonetheless.”

“Indeed, indeed,” murmured Darwin into his glass, trying desperately to think of a topic that might elicit more interesting conversation. “Say, tell me, did you attend Doctor Sedgwick’s geology lectures at Cambridge?”

“Geology is one of my passions actually, and partially because of Doctor Sedgwick’s lectures. He could diagram the strata by waving his hands through the air.”

“Well he’s still at it. I ask because I’ve been reading Lyell’s new book. His *Principles of Geology*. Disturbing in the extreme. It’s as strikingly convincing as it is contrary to Scriptures. I keep at it only on the strength of Sedgwick’s recommendation, you see?”

“Lyell does not convince me in the least. I’ve looked at his book. Mainly a load of unsubstantiated opinion, if you ask me. You must remember that he has not seen much of the world. A bit of England, a bit of the continent. The result is a wealth of philosophizing and a dearth of firsthand experience—typical for Oxford men, I must say. I’ve always closely observed the strata along the coasts I surveyed, and I invariably see evidence of the Noachian deluge, such as thick layers of fossilized marine shells in cliffs far above where the highest tides now reach.”

“Yet,” continued Darwin, for the first time feeling some enthusiasm for the conversation, “Lyell claims that such strata are due to the same slow, steady, inexorable, natural workings that we observe today. He abjures falling back on Biblical explanations such as the

Flood. Your marine strata, according to him, derive from the slow emergence of the land from the sea due to the pressures of volcanoes and earthquakes. In other places the land, he argues, has slowly submerged beneath the sea, in a sort of compensatory effect.”

“Ah, Dahwin,” Fitzroy shook his head in exaggerated exasperation, “I find it surprising that someone as familiar with Scriptures as yourself, more so than myself I would wager, should give credence to such irreligious speculations. The Flood was universal, contemporaneously and contiguously covering the Earth even unto the highest mountains. How else can you explain what I have seen...? There are vast level tracts of land in Patagonia, as you will see for yourself soon enough. As Lyell should see. Those tracts are strewn with the crushed remnants of shells, of the type that live in shallow waters just offshore but broken into sharp fragments as if from being suddenly and violently submerged under a great weight of water. They are not at all rounded as shells are when tossed repeatedly onto a beach by the natural action of surf as the tide slowly goes in and out. So, the sea must at one time have risen up quickly, crushing the shells under its weight as it rushed in upon the land, carrying the shells with it in one catastrophic flood. And when the waters receded, extensive tracts covered by sharply broken shells were exposed to the air. Do you follow? I have seen them with my own eyes—unlike Lyell.”

“Quite, quite, Robert.” Darwin did not appreciate being lectured at when he wanted to discuss. It wasn’t quite condescension, but neither was it conversation. Yet at least his musings were finally finding voice. And Fitzroy, he had to allow, had a much broader experience of the world than himself.

“And if that catastrophic Flood,” continued Fitzroy, “sent by the Almighty to cleanse the Earth, happened in those places I’ve seen, in the manner I’ve described, the tendency of fluids such as water being to equilibrium, so to speak, it must have happened everywhere the same. The many stories of floods among the tribes of the world, such as those of Tierra del Fuego, merely confirm my observations and Scripture.”

“Well, you are right in that Lyell has not seen much beyond England. He perhaps relies overmuch on the descriptions of others. I’m

greatly looking forward to seeing these Patagonian districts you mention...,” Darwin trailed off.

“But anyone should see that the rocks of England Herself suffice to disprove Lyell’s ideas. Are we to believe, as he claims, that the Earth is old enough that mighty mountains have been eroded down to hills by the slow action of the tides against the shore? You told me that you have traveled between Cambridge and Brighton. So you crossed the sand hills of the Weald between the chalk of the North and South Downs. Only the sea rushing in upon the land in a great and rapid and tumultuous deluge could have eroded out the chalk to expose the underlying strata of the Weald. If, instead, we posit the slow action of the tides we see today against chalk cliffs, as we can observe at Dover, the maximum rate of denudation we can possibly imagine is an inch per century. And at that rate the Earth would need to be a preposterous hundred million years or more old! Just to form the Weald! All perfectly impossible, my dear Chawes.”

In the face of Fitzroy’s conviction, Darwin could barely muster a rebuttal. “I’m sure you’re right, Robert, but Lyell does point out that the Earth might indeed have such antiquity. He shows that types of plants and animals, now known only as fossils, occur in distinct rock strata. It’s as if those species went extinct during different periods, when each of those strata was forming through the slow accumulation and consolidation of sediments. And, if we can accept that interpretation, then the Creator did not author all species at the same time but, rather, created new ones to replace those that went extinct during each period. Surely that process would have taken eons to transpire, Robert, perhaps even more than your hundred million years.”

“Again, logic and observation give the lie to Lyell. That’s a good one, eh?” chuckled Fitzroy, “the lie to Lyell.... But think on this. And I’ll put it to you very clearly. God created all species when he created the Earth, as revealed in Genesis. Some went extinct during the Flood. The differentiation of their fossils into distinct strata is easily explained by the fact that objects of different densities sink to different depths in water. So it is no surprise that one finds large dinosaurs such as we do not find today in different strata than those in which we find small mollusks. Each sank to the depth corresponding

to its density and became encased in the debris that swept down as the sea violently flooded in upon the land. When the waters receded, the strata became exposed to the air and hardened into rock. Ipso facto, Lyell is rubbish.”

Darwin could only concede: “Robert, you’re convincing. I can only look forward to seeing your Patagonian tracts of shattered shells for myself in the coming months.”

After dinner, Fitzroy asked Darwin if he would like to see his chronometers while Fuller cleared the table and set up the chess set. When Fitzroy opened the closet, the dissonant ticking flooded into the cabin. Each wooden chronometer box nestled in a bed of sawdust within a compartment on one of two shelves. Each ticked at its own pitch and volume to contribute to the cacophony. Fitzroy pulled out and opened one box. Within, set in gimbals that ensured the mechanism remained perfectly level, rested a chronometer, about six inches in diameter, ticking loudly as its hands measured out Greenwich time.

“Fuller winds them once per day, beginning at exactly two bells in the forenoon watch,” noted Fitzroy like a proud father. “As you can see, these are the best scientific chronometers, made by Molyneux, French, Morrice..., some of the finest instrument makers around. If I can’t clear up the various confusions about longitude, no one can.”

Darwin did his best to express enthusiasm but was too upset that he had not been able to muster enough of Lyell’s arguments to mount a more credible discussion. He himself was far from being convinced of the veracity of the *Principles of Geology*. But he did feel the issues involved were far from black-and-white, and he would have appreciated a more sympathetic appraisal from Fitzroy, a balanced discussion rather than a categorical rejection. Conversations with Fitzroy, despite the captain being only four years older than Darwin, were starting out to be more like those he had suffered through with his father than those he had enjoyed with Henslow.

So after dutifully complimenting Fitzroy on the chronometers, he was grateful to turn to the distraction of chess.

Fitzroy opened with his king's pawn. "Henslow mentioned you are a demon at chess, even beat him sometimes."

"Maybe once or twice, no more I'm sure."

"Well, I never could beat him. What do you think of M'Cohmick?"

"Our surgeon?"

"Yes. An Irishman who did a year at medical school and now fancies himself a naturalist. You've shadowed my first two moves, but this will stop you," he said while moving his white bishop to threaten Darwin's queen's knight.

"Yes. He mentioned that he went to Edinburgh. I did too, for two years before moving to Cambridge."

"Only five moves and we've got the middle chockablock. What made you switch to Cambridge? Think I'll castle."

"I did not have enough interest in medicine to do well at Edinburgh. Spent most of my time wandering the countryside and the shore of the Firth of Forth, collecting insects and starfish."

"Well, M'Cohmick is not my choice of surgeon, but since he was already assigned to the *Beagle*, it would have caused too much of a fuss, so to speak, to get rid of him. I see I gave you the chance to finally bring that knight to bear on your king's pawn. But that allows me to do this!" Fitzroy moved his own knight forward to the fifth rank.

"That's easily solved," responded Darwin as he moved his rook's pawn up to threaten Fitzroy's knight.

"Can you believe he thinks he should be the First Lieutenant on this voyage?! He's one of those Irishmen that my grandfather the Marquis of Londonderry so abhorred. Bad enough they hate us, worse when they want so desperately to ape us, like his affected speech. I had my fill of him last voyage. It's a bit late for that pawn because my purpose is to take this here pawn."

Darwin in turn took the knight with his king. "Thank you for the knight, then. I understand that the tradition in the Royal Navy is that the surgeon acts as ship's naturalist?"

Fitzroy moved his white bishop back a rank. "Check!"

"Ah. Well, I won't retreat back into my hole. There."

Fitzroy walked his queen up the diagonal to the edge of the board. “Did M’Cohmick tell you that? It’s not uncommon but hardly applies to this voyage. This is a scientific expedition, and M’Cohmick must learn to stifle his pretensions and concentrate on his medical duties. He let us down last time, you know, in Tierra del Fuego.”

“How now with my knight?” I will bring my own queen into play, directly behind her king.”

“Ah, but mine is a deceitful bitch and checks you with a single sideways step.”

“And my lowly pawn takes your regina horribilis, putting me a knight and queen ahead of you!”

“As I warned..., *deceitful*.” Fitzroy took the pawn with his black bishop. “Check. And mate! And in only twelve moves! Either I am much improved since Cambridge or I need to apologize for distracting you with all this talk about our Irish surgeon. Shall we play another? I promise to keep mum.”

They played the second game in silence while smoking Havana cigars and sipping Marsala wine. The second game took three times as long as the first. Darwin opened with his king’s pawn, and Fitzroy pursued the Sicilian Defense but failed to develop his pieces well enough to counter an attack by Darwin’s queen and bishops in the end game.

They would depart very early in the morning, given a fair wind, so they left off chess at a game apiece and turned in. The long voyage ahead left many opportunities for a rematch.

A fictional account of Charles Darwin's voyage around the world.

Darwin-A Novel

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