

*A Discovery of the Bermudas, Otherwise Called
the Isle of Devils
(1610)*

By SILVESTER JOURDAIN

A DISCOVERY...

EING in [a] ship called the "Sea Venture," with Sir Thomas Gates our governor, Sir George Somers, and Captain Newport, three most worthy, honored gentlemen (whose valor and fortitude the world must needs take notice of, and that in most honorable designs) bound for Virginia, in the height of 30 degrees of northerly latitude or thereabouts we were taken with a most sharp and cruel storm upon the five-and-twentieth day of July, anno 1609, which did not only separate us from the residue of our fleet (which were eight in number), but with the violent working of the seas our ship became so shaken, torn, and leaked that she received so much water as covered two tier of hogsheads above the ballast; that our men stood up to the middles with buckets, barricos, and kettles to bail out the water and continually pumped for three days and three nights together without any intermission; and yet the water seemed rather to increase than to di-

minish. Insomuch that all our men, being utterly spent, tired, and disabled for longer labor, were even resolved, without any hope of their lives, to shut up the hatches and to have committed themselves to the mercy of the sea (which is said to be merciless), or rather to the mercy of their mighty God and redeemer (whose mercies exceed all His works), seeing no help nor hope in the apprehension of man's reason that any mother's child would escape that inevitable danger, which every man had proposed and digested to himself, of present sinking. So that some of them, having some good and comfortable waters in the ship, fetched them and drunk one to the other, taking their last leave one of the other until their more joyful and happy meeting in a more blessed world; when it pleased God out of His most gracious and merciful providence so to direct and guide our ship (being left to the mercy of the sea) for her most advantage that Sir George Somers (sitting upon the poop of the ship, where he sate three days and three nights together, without meal's meat and [with] little or no sleep), conning¹ the ship to keep her as upright as he could (for otherwise she must needs instantly have foundered), most wishedly-happily descried land. Whereupon he most comfortably encouraged the company to follow their pumping and by no means to cease bailing out of the water with their buckets, barricos, and kettles; whereby they were so overwearied, and their spirits so spent with long fasting and continuance of

¹I.e., keeping a lookout and directing the steersman.

their labor, that for the most part they were fallen asleep in corners and wheresoever they chanced first to sit or lie; but, hearing news of land, wherewith they grew to be somewhat revived, being carried with will and desire beyond their strength, every man bustled up and gathered his strength and feeble spirits together to perform as much as their weak force would permit him; through which weak means it pleased God to work so strongly as the water was stayed for that little time (which, as we all much feared, was the last period of our breathing) and the ship kept from present sinking, when it pleased God to send her within half an English mile of that land that Sir George Somers had not long before descried, which were the islands of the Bermudas.

And there neither did our ship sink but, more fortunately in so great a misfortune, fell in between two rocks, where she was fast lodged and locked for further budging; whereby we gained not only sufficient time, with the present help of our boat and skiff, safely to set and convey our men ashore (which were 150 in number) but afterwards had time and leisure to save some good part of our goods and provision, which the water had not spoiled, with all the tacking of the ship and much of the iron about her, which were necessaries not a little available² for the building and furnishing of a new ship and pinnace, which we made there for the transporting and carrying of us to Virginia. But our delivery was not more strange, in falling so opportunely

²Advantageous.

and happily upon the land, as our feeding and preservation was beyond our hopes and all men's expectations most admirable.³

For the islands of the Bermudas, as every man knoweth that hath heard or read of them, were never inhabited by any Christian or heathen people but ever esteemed and reputed a most prodigious and enchanted place, affording nothing but gusts, storms, and foul weather, which made every navigator and mariner to avoid them as Scylla and Charybdis, or as they would shun the Devil himself; and no man was ever heard to make for the place but as, against their wills, they have by storms and dangerousness of the rocks, lying seven leagues unto the sea, suffered shipwreck. Yet did we find there the air so temperate and the country so abundantly fruitful of all fit necessaries for the sustentation and preservation of man's life that, most in a manner of all our provisions of bread, beer, and victual being quite spoiled in lying long drowned in salt water, notwithstanding we were there for the space of nine months (few days over or under) not only well received, comforted, and with good satiety contented, but out of the abundance thereof provided us some reasonable quantity and proportion of provision to carry us for Virginia and to maintain ourselves and that company we found there, to the great relief of them, as it fell out, in their so great extremities and, in respect of the shortness of time, until it pleased God that by My

³Wonderful.

Lord's coming thither their store was better supplied. And greater and better provisions we might have made if we had had better means for the storing and transportation thereof. Wherefore my opinion sincerely of this island is that whereas it hath been and is still accounted the most dangerous, unfortunate, and most forlorn place of the world, it is in truth the richest, healthfullest, and pleasing land (the quantity and bigness thereof considered) and merely natural, as ever man set foot upon. The particular profits and benefits whereof shall be more especially inserted and hereunto annexed, which every man to his own private knowledge, that was there, can avouch and justify for a truth.

Upon the eight-and-twentieth day of July, 1609 (after the extremity of the storm was something qualified), we fell upon the shore at the Bermudas; where after our general, Sir Thomas Gates, Sir George Somers, and Captain Newport had by their provident carefulness landed all their men and so much of the goods and provisions out of the ship as was not utterly spoiled, every man 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 thereunto 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 plentiful thereof that in half an hour he took so many great fishes with hooks as did suffice the whole company one day. And

fish is there so abundant that if a man step into the water they will come round about him; so that men were fain to get out for fear of biting. These fishes are very fat and sweet and of that proportion and bigness that three of them will conveniently lade two men: those we called rockfish. Besides there are such abundance of mullets that with a seine might be taken at one draught one thousand at the least; and infinite store of pilchards; with divers kinds of great fishes, the names of them unknown to me; of crayfishes very great ones and so great store as that there hath been taken in one night with making lights even sufficient to feed the whole company a day. The country affordeth great abundance of hogs, as that there hath been taken by Sir George Somers, who was the first hunted for them, to the number of two-and-thirty at one time, which he brought to the company in a boat built by his own hands.

There is fowl in great num[ber] upon the islands where they breed, that there hath been taken in two or three hours a thousand at the least, the bird being of the bigness of a good pigeon and layeth eggs as big as hen eggs upon the sand, where they come and lay them daily although men sit down amongst them, that there hath been taken up in one morning by Sir Thomas Gates's men one thousand of eggs; and Sir George Somers' men, coming a little distance of time after them, have stayed there whilst they came and laid their eggs amongst them, that they brought away as many

more with them, with many young birds very fat and sweet.

Another seafowl there is that lieth in little holes in the ground, like unto a cony hole, and are in great numbers, exceeding good meat, very fat and sweet (those we had in the winter) and their eggs are white and of that bigness that they are not to be known from hen eggs. The other bird's eggs are speckled and of a different color. There are also great store and plenty of herons, and those so familiar and tame that we beat them down from the trees with stones and staves—but such were young herons—besides many white herons without so much as a black or grey feather on them; with other small birds so tame and gentle that, a man walking in the woods with a stick and whistling to them, they will come and gaze on you, so near that you may strike and kill many of them with your stick; and with singing and holloing you may do the like.

There are also great store of tortoises (which some call turtles) and those so great that I have seen a bushel of eggs in one of their bellies, which are sweeter than any hen egg; and the tortoise itself is all very good meat and yieldeth great store of oil, which is as sweet as any butter; and one of them will suffice fifty men a meal, at the least; and of these hath been taken great store, with two boats, at the least forty in one day.

The country yieldeth divers fruits, as prickled pears, great abundance, which continue green upon the trees all the year; also great plenty of mulberries, white and

red, and on the same are great store of silkworms, which yield cods of silk, both white and yellow, being some coarse and some fine.

And there is a tree called a palmetto tree, which hath a very sweet berry upon which the hogs do most feed; but our men, finding the sweetness of them, did willingly share with the hogs for them, they being very pleasant and wholesome, which made them careless almost of any bread with their meat; which occasioned us to carry in a manner all that store of flour and meal we did or could save for Virginia. The head of the palmetto tree is very good meat, either raw or sodden; it yieldeth a head which weigheth about twenty pound and is far better meat than any cabbage.

There are an infinite number of cedar trees (the fairest, I think, in the world) and those bring forth a very sweet berry and wholesome to eat.

The country (forasmuch as I could find myself or hear by others) affords no venomous creature, or so much as a rat or mouse or any other thing unwholesome.

There is great store of pearl, and some of them very fair, round, and oriental,⁴ and you shall find at least one hundred seed of pearl in one oyster. There hath been likewise found some good quantity of ambergris, and that of the best sort. There are also great plenty of whales, which I conceive are very easy to be killed, for

⁴Lustrous.

they come so usually and ordinarily to the shore that we heard them oftentimes in the night abed and have seen many of them near the shore in the daytime.

There was born upon the Bermudas, at the time of our being there, two children, the one a man-child, there baptized by the name of Bermudas, and a woman-child, baptized by the name of Bermuda; as also there was a marriage between two English people upon the island. This island, I mean the main island, with all the broken islands adjacent, are made in the form of a half moon, but a little more rounder, and divided into many broken islands, and there are many good harbors in it; but we could find [only] one especial place to go in, or rather to go out from it, which was not altogether free from some danger, and that lieth on the southeast side, where there is three fathoms water at the entrance thereof, but within six, seven, or eight fathoms at the least, where you may safely be landlocked from the danger of all winds and weathers, and more to the trees. The coming into it is so narrow and strait between the rocks as that it will with small store of munition be fortified and easily defended with all advantage the place affords against the forces of the potentest king of Europe.

There are also plenty of hawks and very good tobacco, as I think, which through forgetfulness I had almost omitted.

Now, having finished and rigged our ship and pin-

nace, the one called the "Deliverance," the pinnace the "Patience," we prepared and made ourselves ready to ship for Virginia, having powdered⁵ some store of hogs' flesh for provision thither and the company thereof for some reasonable time but were compelled to make salt there for the same purpose, for all our salt was spent and spoiled before we recovered the shore. We carried with us also a good portion of tortoise oil, which either for frying or baking did us very great pleasure, it being very sweet, nourishing, and wholesome.

The greatest defects we found there was tar and pitch for our ship and pinnace, instead whereof we were forced to make lime there of a hard kind of stone and use it, which for the present occasion and necessity, with some wax we found cast up by the sea from some shipwreck, served the turn to pay⁶ the seams of the pinnace Sir George Somers built, for which he had neither pitch nor tar.

So that God, in the supplying of all our wants beyond all measure, showed Himself still merciful unto us, that we might accomplish our intended voyage to Virginia, for which I confidently hope He doth yet reserve a blessing in store, and to the which I presume every honest and religious heart will readily give their Amen.

When all things were made ready and commodiously fitted, the wind coming fair, we set sail and put off from

⁵Salted.

⁶Cover with tar or the like.

the Bermudas the tenth of May in the year 1610, and arrived at Jamestown in Virginia the four-and-twentieth day of the same month, where we found some three-score persons living. And being then some three weeks or thereabouts past, and not hearing of any supply, it was thought fitting by a general consent to use the best means for the preservation of all those people that were living, being all in number two hundred persons. And so, upon the eighth of June, 1610, we embarked at Jamestown, not having above fourteen days' victual, and so were determined to direct our course for Newfoundland, there to refresh us and supply ourselves with victual to bring us home.

But it pleased God to dispose otherwise of us and to give us better means. For being all of us shipped in four pinnaces and departed from the town, almost down half the river, we met My Lord De La Warr coming by with three ships well furnished with victual, which revived all the company and gave them great content. And after some few days My Lord, understanding of the great plenty of hogs and fish was at the Bermudas and the necessity of them in Virginia, was desirous to send thither to supply himself with those things for the better comforting of his men and the plantation of the country.

Whereupon Sir George Somers, being a man best acquainted with the place, and being willing to do service unto his prince and country without any respect of

his own private gain, and being of threescore years of age at the least, out of his worthy and valiant mind offered himself to undertake to perform with God's help that dangerous voyage for the Bermudas, for the better relief and comfort of the people in Virginia and for the better plantation of it; which offer My Lord De La Warr very willingly and thankfully accepted. And so upon the nineteenth of June Sir George Somers embarked himself at Jamestown in a small barge of thirty ton or thereabout that he built at the Bermudas, wherein he labored from morning until night, as duly as any workman doth labor for wages, and built her all with cedar, with little or no ironwork at all, having in her but one bolt, which was in the kelson.⁷ Notwithstanding, thanks be to God, she brought us in safety to Virginia, and so I trust He will protect him and send him well back again, to his heart's desire and the great comfort of all the company there.⁸

The Bermudas lieth in the height of $32\frac{1}{2}$ degrees of northerly latitude, Virginia bearing directly from it, west-northwest, 230 leagues.

⁷A line of timbers bolted to the keel to secure it to the floor timbers.

⁸Somers reached Bermuda safely after battling a storm, only to die there shortly afterward "of a surfeit in eating a pig," according to Edmund Howes's continuation of the *Annals of John Stow* (1614), p. 942. See also the *Dictionary of National Biography*.