

CHAPTER V.

Boundary line of Nueva Granada—Commencement of the Survey—
 Bay of Choco—River Iscuande—Gorgona—Buenaventura—The
 Vinda of St. Peter and St. Paul—Bay of Panama.

WE now entered upon the coast of a new State, that of Nueva Granada. With a continent before them, the inhabitants dispute about boundaries. The river Mira, falling into the sea, is the boundary, but which of the mouths to take is the question. Those who wish to join Nueva Granada say the channel flowing south of Point Mangles is the one intended, while the Ecuadorians maintain that the Tumaco branch, about twenty miles to the northward, is the true one. As far as the natural divisions of the country go, one would say that it appertains to Ecuador; and in a late map the boundary line of the two countries is moved altogether to the river Paitia, or Patia, sixty miles north of Tumaco, falling into the sea just north of Point Guascamo.

The freshes, the rolling swells, and the numerous trunks of trees we were continually meeting, plainly indicated that we were in the vicinity of a large river.

The streams, although not large for a continent, or deep, still send a considerable volume of water into the sea; and draining a country of some elevation, they have more force than might be expected. In the afternoon the island of Gorgona was in sight; three peaks being its prominent features. The coast appeared to have a heavy surf breaking upon it; the trees were actually in the water; the tall mangroves, with roots exposed for twelve or fourteen feet, formed a huge tangled trellis-work, from which the tall straight stems rose to a height of sixty or seventy feet.

Having anchored during the night, we weighed at daylight on the 30th, and stood towards Gorgona. The wind being light, and varying between south-south-west and west-south-west, we made little progress, and at ten A. M. anchored about five miles from the mainland, the centre peak of Gorgona being about five leagues distant. The barge was hoisted out, and with the rest of the boats was prepared for surveying. The Pandora stood on upwards of five miles, then moored and fired three guns to measure the distance by. There our surveying work began; it was the base whence our proceedings in the Bay of Choco were to be carried forward. The boats then left the ship to sound between the two base stations, Herald and Pandora, and the mainland.

The shores are densely wooded, the tides strong, and the swell heavy on the banks and shoals lying off the creeks and streams with which this coast is interlaced. The province of Choco is a marshy country; the houses are built upon posts to avoid inundation or the redundancy of vegetation. One can think of nothing

save these circumstances; they are brought to mind on every occasion. On landing, the rank luxuriance of the vegetation is surprising. The alluvial soil is not only saturated with the rain which descends in torrents nearly every night, but is overflowed with the bursting waters of the numerous branches of the Patia, Iscuandé, Ammirales, and Sanguayange. The tall mangroves are seen actually growing in the water, forming a grove of innumerable pillars, at a distance quite ornamental, but from their intolerable monotony soon becoming hideous; the desert does not exceed in gloomy weariness these trackless forests. The mangrove-trees, however, are not useless; the wood, though it has a disagreeable smell, is much used for firing, and ignites quickly. The tall straight stems form posts for the houses. In this season the atmosphere is generally murky, so that a sight of the lower range of the Andes was rarely gained. One mass of foliage was all that could be perceived from Guascama to the mouths of the river San Juan.

The breakers, as seen from the ship, appeared to line the coast, but a channel was found, through which a line-of-battle ship might have entered. Inside also an extensive basin opened out, well protected by the outside shoals. The natives spoke slightly of it; but if trade flourishes, such a place on a coast seldom or never visited by storms must become important. There is a rise and fall of eleven or twelve feet, and the tide-stream has considerable force near the shore, more than two knots an hour. We did not, however, observe them accurately. The name of this inlet was the Sanguayange. We met

two or three people and saw only one house, and heard afterwards that the natives had been frightened by the appearance of the ships, there having been rumours of a disturbance between the republics of Ecuador and Nueva Granada. We were told that many had even gone so far as to leave their houses and retire up the country.

On the 1st of February we remained in the same position. The natives came off in some numbers, two or three rude boats with some decently dressed people; they brought fruit, but, from the little intercourse they had with the world, could give no information. On the 2nd we went into the river Iscuande. As in the Sanguayange, we found the depth of water considerable, but variable, still capable of affording protection. The houses were all built upon posts, made of the mangrove stems, and ascended by rude ladders, merely thick planks cut in notches. The ground-floor was often not even enclosed, and an enemy with a sharp axe might have brought the house down in a short time. The rafters of these houses in the air were of bamboo covered with matting and cloth made from bark, of admirable consistency, and almost like leather. The roofs were formed of palm-leaves, thatched much in the manner of our straw sheds, though they did not present the same neat and finished appearance. The sides were perfectly open, so that every breath of air could enter, which in such a climate, to an idle, lounging, lolling race, is a comfort. We were surprised to see so much neatness in the construction. In England the buildings would have been called elegant summer-houses; but the bamboo affords great facility for such purposes, and may be said to be

in architecture what the Banana is in food, the most bountiful and beautiful production in nature, and, by the very facility with which it is procured and applied, an incentive to indolent ease, an encourager of the too prevalent idleness of the tropics.

An uninhabited place, however beautiful, has always a forlorn and desolate aspect. In this region, where the mangrove forest and the jungle occupy by far the greatest space, a few cottages, simple as they were, gave quite a different impression. The inhabitants were civil, and all had a swarthy aspect; in fact it is unlikely that there is any pure Castilian or Spanish blood in South America. In the ages that have elapsed since the conquest, the races have mingled so much as to be almost indistinguishable. The very fact of their pretending to classify them into sixteen varieties would prove this assertion; and when we consider the contempt in which the old Spaniards professed to hold the Creoles, and the desire they had to return to Europe when a fortune had been amassed, it is not remarkable that the descendants of the original discoverers and explorers should soon have amalgamated.

On the 5th of February both vessels anchored off Gorgona, procuring wood and water, an easy task, streams being abundant, and the soil covered with the finest timber. In this island Pizarro and thirteen followers, whose names are deservedly commemorated for their courage and devotion, passed seven dreary months. We were disposed to look upon it as an earthly paradise, but the Spaniards, to whom it had been the scene of so much suffering and such undaunted resolution, had dif-

ferent feelings towards it. "The Hell," "the detested isle," were the terms they applied to it.

Few people live on the island, and they appear to enjoy the state of *dolce far niente* in which Creoles delight, and which appears to have been carried to its height among the inhabitants of Guanahani and Haiti on their discovery by Columbus. Guavas, pine-apples, oranges, limes, bananas, and camotes or sweet-potatoes are abundant. The guinea-hen, the common barn-door fowl, and a pig or two gave not only the necessaries, but the luxuries of life. The houses are similar to those on the mainland. The most airy summer-house in an English garden is more enclosed than those tropical domiciles; but they are adapted to the climate, and the broad eaves with a mat hung up inside would suffice if wind and rain should come on together, a conjunction that does not often occur.

The rise of the tide we ascertained to be five feet six inches; its highest was at 10h. 30m. A.M., and its lowest at 4h. 50m. P.M. By reduction therefore it would be high water at full, and change about 3h. P.M., and the rise and fall would be nine feet. Among other reminiscences of Gorgona, it may be noted that in 1705 the Cinque Ports, after leaving Alexander Selkirk on Juan Fernandez, was here run on shore by Captain Stradling, and the crew obliged to surrender to the Spaniards.

On the 7th we departed and took up a position on the Main, off the river Iscuande. The evening was clear and bright, but it rained heavily during the night, and we were given to understand by the natives that the wet season was following us; that northward rain is later in

the year than near the equator. On the 9th we stood to the north-east. Our plan of proceeding was very regular. The Pandora, the first day, took up a position more than five miles north-east of the Herald; this distance, measured by sound, formed the base for our future operations. On the following day we shifted our berth five miles, or thereabouts, beyond the Pandora; each day the boats went away sounding, or taking up stations for others to angle to; while true bearings, and measuring the angle from any boat showing her flag, employed those on board. The dense mass of foliage at a distance of five or six miles presented no objects of interest; in fact, the first station, in 1° north, could hardly be distinguished from the last, 120 miles further north. As far as estimating the tides by observation and sounding on board, we found the flood setting north-by-east, one knot an hour; the ebb south-south-west, about one and a quarter knot an hour. Heavy rains visited us chiefly during the night; the days were generally fine. A land-breeze usually blew off about east-south-east in the morning, but died away towards eight or nine in the forenoon. About noon, or rather before, the sea-breeze sprang up, faintly at first, but freshened up in the afternoon; towards sunset it was generally strongest, then it died away: the nights were commonly calm.

We meet no ships, and only a few inhabitants. It is an unfrequented coast in an uncivilized country, or rather a half-civilized and almost wholly unoccupied country. In England the confines of a wood remind one of a park; trees excite ideas of refinement, elegance, luxuriance, and retirement: there are so many feelings connected

with trees, that it cannot but influence one in beholding for so many leagues the vast forests with which the Pacific Ocean is skirted. There is a grandeur in the very desolation, with nothing human about it, but few and far between a poor palm-thatched cottage, inhabited by a race holding little intercourse with the world, and mostly either overcome by the climate or indifferent to exertion. The monotony is great; trees, and nothing but trees, ever since we made the land, relieved, and hardly relieved, by entrances into rivers lined with mangroves or swampy jungles.

On the 1st of March we were off the river Buenaventura, one of the chief estuaries on this coast, and promising to become a considerable emporium for the commerce of Nueva Granada. Some days, or rather nights, of heavy rain had cleared the atmosphere, and on Monday, the 2nd, we had a fine view of an inland range of the lower Andes, towering up to the height of several thousand feet. We proceeded up the river with the end of the flood, and found a channel of very regular soundings, quite sufficient for all the purposes of commerce. The banks displayed more scenery than we had been accustomed to,—little bays, nooks with islands, projecting cliffs. The intolerable mangrove was not quite so common as it had been in the southern part of the bay. On the 3rd of March the Pandora and four boats from the Herald ascended the river. The town of Buenaventura is situated on the left bank of the river, about six miles from the entrance. The site offers many advantages for commerce, and when population increases it will doubtless rise in importance. At present it is a miserable

collection of houses, containing about one thousand inhabitants. At the town the river is about a mile broad; at the entrance upwards of two miles, but full of sand-banks, and the channels somewhat intricate: buoys would greatly obviate these difficulties. If the Spaniards had not trammelled commerce in every possible way, and the republican governments hindered it almost as much by squabbling among themselves, it would long ere this have had a lighthouse and a pilot establishment. It is, in fact, the staple for the southern part of Nueva Granada and the towns of Cali, Popayan, and Cartago. The Government of Bogota has no control over the south-east part of the Isthmus of Panama; there is no land communication between Panama and the capital, the native tribes being independent, and holding little or no communication with the Spanish descendants; all communication must go by way of Buenaventura. The roads in the interior are, however, a great bar to its prosperity; they are rugged and difficult to traverse. Cattle are useless in transporting merchandize, and men unaccustomed to the almost perpendicular passes could not attempt it without the most imminent peril. The natives of the country, accustomed to these precipitous roads, supply the place of animals, and show extraordinary skill and courage in carrying on their backs, not only burdens, but men and women seated in chairs.

Buenaventura and its neighbourhood has the reputation of being damp and unhealthy. The country is surrounded by high mountains, and the rain is incessant. Dampier's description of it is as true as it is *naïf*; he says, "It is a very wet coast, and it rains abundantly

here all the year long ; there are but few fair days, for there is little difference in the seasons of the year, between the wet and the dry, only in that season which should be the dry time the rains are less frequent and more moderate than in the wet season, for then it pours as out of a sieve."

On the 3rd Mr. Hill, the master, landed to take observations for time in a little bay near the curious rock called the Vinda of St. Peter and St. Paul, and shot a curasson, the American turkey, weighing about nine pounds. When first seen this bird was pronounced a turkey buzzard, and on being brought on board, a rush was made for the cooks to pronounce upon it. A favourable opinion having been given, the dinner was ordered to be delayed, that the seasonable arrival might be dressed. Considering our short commons, Mr. Hill was voted unanimously the thanks of the mess. Attempts have been made to domesticate the bird in Europe, and from the ease with which it is tamed it would probably not be difficult to introduce so valuable an addition to the poultry-yard.

The Vinda, or look-out, of St. Peter and St. Paul, is an islet, steep, rocky, and clothed with trees. There is a narrow passage between it and the mainland, having four fathoms water, but it is not likely to be used, nor from its narrowness would it be desirable, more particularly as vessels would have no reason for being so near the land. Between the Wheatsheaf—as we styled it, or the Culo de Barca, as the natives call it, a remarkable rock—and the continent, there is no passage, even for a dingy, though it stands at some little distance from the land ; reefs and a breaking surf prevent a passage either by land or water.

The tides are strong and irregular, a rise and fall of eight feet at the neaps and twelve at the springs; the ebb sets to the south-west, and the flood to the east-north-east.

On the 7th we had a Buena Ventura gale, a single reefed topsail and top-gallant breeze, rather fresh, and accompanied with heavy rain. After continuing for two or three hours, it settled into a calm, dull, murky day, hardly enabling us to work against the tide. The ship tried to shift her berth more to the northward, but being unable to do it, anchored about sunset to the southward of the Negrillos, an awkward patch of rocks, twelve miles west W. by N. $\frac{1}{2}$ N. from the entrance to the river. A part of that reef is always above water, and there is a clear passage about three miles broad between them and the Palmas Isles. On the 9th of March, the rains being fast increasing formed a great drawback to our work; and having examined the coast as far as Point Chirambira, it was determined to proceed to Panama. The winds were contrary, generally from the northward, with frequent calms. We made the land twice,—the first time off Cape Corrientes, a high bluff point, rising almost perpendicularly from the sea, in lat. $5^{\circ} 28'$ north, and pointed out both from a north and south bearing by two remarkable truncated pyramidal hills, one of which is called the Dome, the other the Pyramid; the second time in the vicinity of Point Quemada, a bold bluff headland, so named by Pizarro, and distinguished as being the place of his first encounter with the natives of South America.

On the 23rd of March, in the morning, we made the land about Punta Brava, in the Bay of Panama, and about

noon observed the island of Galera. We ran between it and the Pearl Islands, thereby avoiding the San Jose bank, which had not then been examined. At midnight it fell calm, and we were obliged to anchor till daylight. The wind continued light and variable, and we were able to make but little progress. Nowhere will steam be more appreciated than on this coast, and in this bay in particular. About noon it again fell calm, and we anchored between Chepillo and Taboguilla. Chepillo has been called the pleasantest island in the bay,—perhaps from its nearness to Panama. It is a fertile level spot, abounding in fruits, and more open to the breezes from the north-west than Panama itself. On the 25th we at last reached the anchorage off Flaminco Island, and about ten o'clock in the evening received our letters, the first since leaving England.