

## CHAPTER XV.

Survey of the Coast of Darien—Garachinè—Bay of Arditá—Cupica—  
San Franzisco—Solano—Utria—Cape Corrientes—River San Juan  
—Return to Panama.

WE remained in the Panama roads until the 1st of December, when we commenced the survey of the coast from Punta de Garachinè, in the Gulf of San Miguel, to the river San Juan. During this survey we had frequently bad weather, heavy rains, light winds, and the thermometer commonly at 84° and 86° Fahr. We took advantage of the intervals of sunshine in carrying out our operations, and constantly anchored in very deep water,—forty-four, fifty-four, fifty-six, sixty, and even sixty-two fathoms were often put down in the log-book. The coast is interesting as the scene of the trials of Pizarro and Almagro ere conquering Peru. It is still as the early voyagers described it: dense forests, drenched by torrents of rain, extend to the verge of the ocean, and human habitations are few and far between. The only change that seems to have taken place is in the character of the Indians: when the natives first

came in contact with Europeans they were warlike, and frequently engaged in skirmishes with them; to us they exhibited the other extreme,—they were shy, and, on seeing our vessels, fled into the woods, and only returned when they felt assured that we had no hostile intentions.

On the 3rd of December we reached Punta de Garachinè, where a party landed. Several of the marks erected in the previous year—large trees—had grown out again, and put forth shoots six feet long, so moist is the climate. On the 8th we were off Punta de Caracoles, and on the 14th off Punta de Piñas; at the latter place no inhabitants nor any traces of them were met with, although formerly it was thickly peopled. Continuing in a southerly direction we reached, on the 20th, the Bay of Ardita. On shore there were several canoes, and in some of them we found fresh plantains, but not a soul was to be seen. The following day however a canoe, with a white flag, came to the ship, carrying four Indians and two negroes. One of the former introduced himself as the alcalde of the village of Jorado: he had a stick with a silver knob, and was the only one who wore any dress; his companions were in the Adamite costume. They brought plantains, sugar-cane, eggs, and parrots for barter, and in a short time had disposed of everything. The alcalde told us that three rivers emptied themselves into the bay—the Ardita, the Jurador, and the Bocorichichi.

On the 28th we anchored in the Bay of Cupica, one of the finest natural harbours on this coast of Darien. The alcalde of the place, an Indian, seemed to be an intelligent man, and, as he spoke Spanish fluently, we

obtained from him much information ; we also told him of our pacific intentions, that he might inform the inhabitants, who, it appears, had fled into the interior. He knew all about the close approach of the river Nai-pipi, a tributary of the Atrato, to the Bay of Cupica. Captain Kellett and Lieutenant-Commander Wood went afterwards to test the fidelity of his accounts, and after walking several hours they came to a river, which they supposed or were told flowed into the Atlantic Ocean. If such was really the case, it might afford facilities for constructing a canal to connect the two seas ; indeed a company is now forming in London for the purpose of carrying out this project, and it is with regret I am compelled to confess that I possess no data which might enable me to pronounce an opinion on the feasibility of the scheme. Captain Kellett never spoke on the subject, probably because he was not certain whether the river that the party reached actually flowed into the Atrato, and that portion of his journal relating to Darien is unfortunately wanting, Mr. Trollope, the assistant surveyor, had at the time a severe attack of fever ; Mr. Wood's account, as given in several publications, is all I know about it. The land around the Bay of Cupica is hilly, but how far in the interior the country has the same character we had no means of ascertaining ; the vapours continually hanging over the dense forests preclude a distant view. The rainy season lasts almost throughout the year.

On shore we found a small village, situated on the banks of the river Cupica. The houses were built upon poles and reached by ladders, like those in the Bay of

Choco ; indeed this style of building may be traced from Guayaquil to the Gulf of San Miguel ; from the latter place to Central America a different mode prevails. The Indians cultivate pine-apples, guayavas (*Psidium pomiferum*), plantains, cassava, otò (*Arum*), and maize. They told us that a long time ago there was a large town in the bay, which had been "swallowed up" by the sea ; perhaps that town—if town it was—shared the fate of old Callao.

We made several excursions up the river Cupica, and were delighted with the luxuriance of the vegetation, and the vast groves of vegetable ivory (*Phytelephas* sp.). The "nuts" of this beautiful palm-like plant are now extensively used by turners, and converted into knobs for walking-sticks, buttons, toys, and various other articles. The Indians call this species, which is probably distinct from the one found on the Magdalena, *Antà*. It grows in low damp localities, principally on the banks of rivers and rivulets, and is diffused over the southern parts of Darien and the vicinity of Portobelo, districts which are almost throughout the year deluged by torrents of rain, or enveloped in the thick vapour that constantly arises from the humidity of the soil and the rankness of the vegetation. It is always found in separate groves, seldom or never intermixed with other trees or bushes, and where even herbs are rarely met with, the ground appearing as if it had been swept. In habit it resembles the *Corozo colorado*, or Oil Palm (*Elais melanococca*, Gærtn.),—so much so indeed that at first sight the two are easily mistaken for each other. Both affect similar localities, and have trunks which, after creeping along

the ground a few yards, ascend, and attain about an equal height; the leaves also resemble each other; and their fruit grows in a similar way, attached to short peduncles, and almost hidden in the axils. The habit, however, is nearly the only link that connects the *Antà* with the order of Palms: in flower, stamens, the organization of the fruit, indeed in almost every essential character, it differs so widely from that family, that it cannot but be separated, and united with *Pandaneæ*. The trunk creeps along the ground, and then ascends, seldom however higher than from four to six feet; it is always dragged down, partly by its own weight, partly by the aerial roots, and thus forms a creeping caudex, which is not unfrequently more than twenty feet long. The top is crowned with from twelve to sixteen pinnatifid leaves, the entire length of which is from eighteen to twenty feet. All the plants that I saw were dioecious, the males being more robust, and their trunks higher and more erect than the females. The flowers of both emit a most penetrating almond-like smell, which attracts swarms of honey-bees, chiefly the stingless species inhabiting the forests. The male flowers are attached to fleshy spikes, which are from four to five feet long, and hang down; the female flowers appear in bundles, on short thick peduncles, and stand erect. The fruit, being a collection of drupes, forms large heads, and is at first erect, but when approaching maturity its weight increases, and when the leaf-stalks, which so long supported the bulky mass, have rotted away, it hangs down. A plant bears at one time from six to eight of these heads, each containing on an average eighty seeds, and weighs, when ripe, about

twenty-five pounds. The uses to which the *Antà* is applied by the Indians are nearly the same as elsewhere : with its leaves their huts are thatched, and the young liquid albumen is eaten ; the “ nuts ” however are turned to no useful purpose. The Spanish Isthmians did not know, before I visited the Isthmus, that *vegetable ivory*, or *Marfil vegetal* as they call it, existed in their country ; and although they have been told that with the produce of the groves of Darien whole ships might be loaded, no one has yet taken advantage of the discovery.

After leaving Cupica we passed, on the 1st of January, 1848, Cape San Francisco Solano, and on the 3rd anchored in the Bay of Solano. The following day was an unfortunate one. The surf ran so high that landing and re-embarking were extremely difficult. In proceeding on shore in the dingy I was capsized, losing all I had in the boat, and had not the waves thrown me on shore I should have perished. Mr. Jago and Mr. Parkinson effected a safe landing, but in the evening they were unable to return to the ship ; it was already dark, when, through the exertions of the first lieutenant, Mr. Maguire, they were brought on board. On comparing notes, it was found that on that day nearly every one had met with some accident, or had lost something, verifying the old proverb, “ misfortunes never come alone.” But none of us had been in a more critical position than Mr. Whiffin.

“ Endeavouring,” says Mr. Whiffin, “ to pass from the beach of the Bay of Salano into a small nook separated from it by a bold, precipitous cape, where there appeared greater facility for a boat to land, a party of

officers, consisting of the surgeon, the purser, and myself, found it necessary to force our way along the edge of this headland, through the dense forest which crowded the summit. Each having with him a gun, no little difficulty was experienced in climbing up the steep slippery hill, and breaking through the creepers and hangers entangled amongst the trees and brushwood. The season of the periodical rains had but just concluded, and the succeeding few days of sunshine had been unable to evaporate the moisture with which the soil was sodden. Trunks of decayed trees, apparently sound, were strewed in every direction, and shivered into pieces on being kicked; while smaller trees, perfectly rotten, and only kept upright by the surrounding branches, crumbled in the hand that delusively grasped at them for support.

“Every five or ten minutes we had to cross small cascades, rushing down their rocky slippery courses, and either falling into the sea or losing themselves amidst some brushwood. Occasionally assisting each other to surmount the different barriers which impeded our progress, and converting each little mishap into a source of joke and amusement, we had accomplished perhaps two-thirds of the journey when we came upon one of those torrents to which I have alluded. It was larger than any we had yet met with, and certainly an ugly place to get over. The water ran lazily down a smooth, rocky inclined plane, from eight to ten feet wide, terminating about thirty feet below in a precipice upwards of a hundred feet deep, beneath which the sea dashed and roared violently.

“ My companions, with the help of the overhanging branches, effected the stride safely ; but in making mine I caught at a rotten stem—it powdered in my hand,—my foot slipped,—and oh ! awful to think of, I found myself sliding at a rapid pace down the slimy declivity into the foaming pit. Thoughts of all kinds crowded into my mind ; home—friends—the horrid death awaiting me—all were instantaneously reviewed. My impetus increased ; in vain I relinquished my gun ; in vain I tried to clutch the slippery, watery slab of rock ; in vain I endeavoured to plant my heels in some inequality—all was of no use : my fate appeared certain. Providentially my faculties were spared me, with even more than their wonted power. Still sliding, still nearing the awful brink, striving to retard my descent by all the muscular pressure in my power, I descried, on the opposite side of the watercourse to that on which I was, a small twig shooting between the fissures of the rocks. Oh, thought I, that it were on this side ! that switch might save me ! But how can I ever reach it ? However, it was my only chance,—the only ray of hope which deterred me from resigning myself to destruction. By an instinct almost incredible, (I have not the presumption to term it presence of mind,) I so twisted my body as to give it the direction requisite to enable me to gain the desired object. I approached nearer—nearer,—but when about to grasp it new apprehensions seized me. Would it hold me ?—was that also rotten ?—would not my weight and the force I had acquired either break it or root it up ? No ! I clutched it—it held ; I tightened my grasp, looked up, and saw my



two companions standing, as if transfixed, at the edge of the declivity. They rushed towards me, and with their promptitude and assistance I was soon extricated from my perilous situation, and conducted to a place of safety, where my head, for the first time, whirled with dizziness. At this moment my hat fell off, and slid down the slope into the gulf beneath, as if to impress upon me the horrible death from which I had been rescued."

Solano is a beautiful bay, with deep water, plenty of fish and wood, and a great quantity of wild cocoa-nut palms. The latter are found on the whole coast of Darien, in places where no human beings or any signs of them were to be seen,—thus corroborating the opinion of Martius, that the Isthmus of Panama is their native country, and that thence they spread over the tropical regions of both hemispheres.

Steering southwards, we were on the 9th of January off the Bay of Utria, a fine natural harbour, which seems to have been unknown to geographers previous to Captain Kellett's survey; indeed the western coast of Darien, which was formerly a mere straight line in our charts, has, since the expedition of the Herald, assumed a different aspect, and is found to possess excellent ports and shelter for both small and large vessels. On the 13th we anchored off the river Nuqui. There was only a single white man living at the place, and he was an Englishman; all the other inhabitants were Indians, who spoke the same language as those at Cupica.

On the 16th we arrived off Cape Corrientes, a pro-

montory easily distinguished by its dome-like mountain, the Janano, and, on coming from Chirambira, by its being the first high land seen by the voyager. We landed several times at this cape, but from that place until we reached the river San Juan we were prevented from going on shore, as the surf ran so high that it was dangerous to risk a boat in the attempt.

On the 28th we dropped anchor off the island of Chirambira, and for several days were employed surveying the mouths of the San Juan, one of the largest rivers in Darien. It is to be regretted that Captain Kellett was prevented from exploring this fine river, especially as it is known to approach the Atrato within a few miles, and, if reports may be relied upon, is actually connected with the latter by a canal, by means of which canoes pass from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The San Juan has several mouths, the principal one of which is between the islands of Cacagual and Chirambira. In Chirambira there is a small village, where we found a Spaniard who was distilling *aguardiente*, for which, as he informed us, there was a good market on the banks of the river.

Having connected the survey of the Bay of Panama with Punta Chirambira, where our survey of the Bay of Choco had been discontinued, and thus finished the delineation of the coast of Western South America, we set sail on the 1st of February for Panama, and, after paying another visit to Cape Corrientes, we reached our destination on the 12th.

There was a Frenchman at Panama who had a number of honey-bees, which he had brought from Europe,

and was going to take to Peru. With great trouble and expense he had succeeded in conveying the hives as far as the Isthmus, but most of the bees had died on entering the tropics, and their number was daily decreasing. It was the second time that he had attempted to introduce these valuable insects into Peru, and he had already lost a considerable sum of money in his fruitless endeavours. The Peruvian government had granted him a patent for six years, and he thought that if he could only get a few of the bees to the elevated regions of the Andes, all his outlay would soon be repaid.

Mr. Stephens, the enterprising American traveller,—to whom I was introduced by Mr. Nelson, the United States' consul,—was staying at the time at Panama; he had been sent by some company to make arrangements about the Californian steamers which were to run between Panama and San Francisco. Mr. Stephens is just such a man as one would fancy him to be from reading his works: he is of middle height and very active; his face shows much determination, and has a military air, which perhaps is in some measure owing to his wearing moustachios.

Towards the end of February the Herald sailed to survey the coast westward of Punta Mala, the islands of Coyba and Quicara, and the approaches to the port of Boca Chica, while I made a journey through parts of the province of Panama and Veraguas, visiting Chorera, Natà, Santiago, and David. The whole expedition returned to Panama towards the end of April; but I shall omit the narrative of these proceedings, as they would lead the reader into a maze of details, and give instead

a general sketch of the Isthmus of Panama\*, which, incomplete as it is, will most probably be acceptable at a time when the narrow neck of land which connects the two Americas is beginning to excite the attention of the commercial world, and when millions of British capital are about to be, or are already, invested in roads, railways, and canals across that country.

\* This sketch was originally written for my 'History of the Isthmus of Panama,' and is here inserted in consequence of the numerous applications for information which I have had from persons connected with the various companies projected, or already formed, for carrying out an inter-oceanic communication.