

Trip of the Flying Cloud to Port Essington.

Towards the close of last month (January) considerable anxiety began to be felt in Palmerston by the friends of Mr. Sinclair, who nearly a month previously had left Port Darwin with two companions in an open boat, bound for Port Essington, where they intended to examine the country, and also to ascertain what prospects there were of establishing fisheries or other industries along the coast. The names of the men who accompanied Mr. Sinclair were Robertson and Miller, and they took enough provisions to last about three weeks, by the end of which time they expected to be back in Port Darwin. They started at the beginning of January, and as % they did not return by the end of the month, people began to fear that some accident had happened to the boat, or that the voyagers had come to grief in some way amongst the Malays or the aborigines. A deputation accordingly waited on Mr. Scott, the Government Resident, and suggested that some steps might be taken to ascertain the fate of the missing boat; and though at first there did not seem much room for alarm on the subject, yet, in a few days, as the boat still continued absent, it was determined to wait no longer, but to send the Government cutter, Flying Cloud, in search of her.

Captain Marsh therefore received orders to sail as early as possible, and he left Port Darwin at daylight on Tuesday morning, February 3, from which date we propose, in the subjoined statement, to give some account of the voyage.

Starting from Port Darwin with a fair wind, we reached Melville Island the same evening, and anchored there for the night, but did not land, and did not see any natives on the beach. The next morning we sailed for Coburg Peninsula! and, after a smart run, rounded the point called Vashon Heads (which leads to Port Essington) in the afternoon, and sailed some distance up towards the place of settlement formerly known as the town of Victoria. The captain anchored at first, however, in one of the little bays, midway between Vashon Heads and the settlement, and there remained for the night. From this point native fires were seen burning on the beach in the direction of Vashon Heads. On Thursday morning, February 5th, we sailed up to the old settlement and anchored early in the day, feeling certain that the natives who had lit fires down towards the Heads would soon follow the vessel up.

Having come to anchor at the settlement, the captain and others went ashore and spent a few hours in looking round. We landed on an old, jetty formed of pieces of rock and stone which the settlers who were there more, than 30 years ago had collected and rolled together, thus with the assistance of wooden piles and cross pieces making a very useful boat jetty. Portions of the wood still remain, and are apparently as sound as when the settlers left the place in 1849. They then remarked upon the durability of the timber; and there it is still in a good condition after the expiration of a quarter of a century. This wood was apparently obtained from the ironbark tree, which grows on the Peninsula, where there are also paperbark trees, white gum trees, cabbage palm trees (in great abundance), and various others. Mangroves, of course, are abundant, and there are a few bamboos, though they were probably brought by the first settlers from the Adelaide River. There is also a tree, from the bark of which the natives make very good rope; this is apparently the tree which is known by the name of the **Warouin** the Indian islands. Altogether the country round Port Essington is well timbered, and the soil appears to be very good.

Leaving the jetty, we walked up a rather steep cutting to what used to be the town or place of settlement. There is still standing in a state of excellent preservation the stonework of houses and cottages, built for the officers and men of the garrison that was stationed there. The masonry is very solid and well put together. Portions of outbuildings and work-shops are also still standing; and at a short distance inland there is the cemetery, which contains the tomb-stones and monuments erected over the graves of several officers and men who were interred there. The garden is also close by, and a part of the wooden fence still remains. We saw pineapple plants growing there and various trees of handsome appearance, which had evidently been planted and cultivated. One could not help regretting that a place where so many improvements had been made should have been completely abandoned, after all the money and trouble which had been expended upon it.

On returning to the vessel, after this visit ashore, we found two natives who had come alongside in a canoe, but they could not speak a word of English, and did not seem to understand our questions about the missing boat. Presently, however, another native made his appearance on the beach, and the canoe fetched him on board. This proved to be a tall, one eyed blackfellow, who introduced himself as Fat Jack (though he was remarkably thin) .and who said he was "English". He explained that he was one of the natives whose fires we had seen the day before, and that presently a great many more of the tribe, including his own father, and "Jack Davis, with his "missis," would come along the beach and visit the cutter. Sure enough, in a few minutes Jack Davis, who is the chief, and many others came on board. We asked him about the missing boat, and he said that three white men had been there, that their boat had been smashed on the rocks, and that they had since obtained two canoes from the natives, by which they hoped to get back from the Peninsula to Melville Island and thence to Port Darwin. We asked the name of the white men, and, after a considerable pause, one of them said, " Sin-sin-clair." This of course set all doubt at rest; but in order to convince us still more they produced a little white terrier dog, named Tiny, which Jack Davis's " missis " seemed to regard as a great pet. In fact all the tribe appeared to regard Tiny as a wonderful creature, though Tiny himself shrank from observation, and looked very wet and woe-begone.

On further questioning we found that Jack Davis was a very intelligent man. He remembered the officers and men of the old settlement; he had been to Singapore and China with a Captain Bisset; and he said he could speak Malay as well as English.

He and the other natives had several articles which Sinclair had given them, and he said that after the boat was lost he offered to build a hut for the white men; but they persisted in trying to get back to Port Darwin, so he gave them two canoes, and sent two natives to assist in managing them; but he advised them not to leave the coast unless the weather was fine.

He thought, therefore, that they might still be on the Peninsula in the neighbourhood of Trepang Bay or Cape Don - the point nearest to Melville Island. Jack also produced the following document, which had been given to him by one of the white men (Miller):

" John Davis behaved very kind and good to three Englishmen cast on shore at Point Vashon, January 24, 1874

"JAMES MILLER. " MR. SINCLAIR. "JAMES ROBERTSON."

Having heard all these statements of the natives, Captain Marsh determined to sail with the tide at daylight next morning, and if possible get round to Trepang Bay, with the hope of picking up the three white men, whose chance of reaching Port Darwin in native canoes was considered to be very poor indeed. In the meantime the captain gave Davis and his people some flour, pipes, tobacco, rice, etc, and we then went ashore again, with rifles and revolvers, as the natives said they could show us where there were some buffaloes or wild cattle, the tracks of which we had seen in the morning, though we had not seen anything to shoot at except some beautifully coloured parrots. Whether there really are any buffalo on this part of the Peninsula seems very doubtful. On landing with Jack Davis, he and his "missis" started off in advance, and we followed at a good round pace, through brushwood, through swamps, and up and down hill for a distance of five or six miles; but we did not see anything of buffalo, though we still saw tracks of some kind of cattle. However, after a long run we returned without having had a shot; it was not until another occasion that we came across the cattle.

We returned on board the vessel in the evening; and the next morning the captain set sail for the place where the white men were supposed to be in Trepang Bay, outside Vashon Heads. But as soon as we got away from the harbour there was round to be such a heavy sea running that Captain Marsh did not consider it safe to venture close into the coast, where the cutter would probably be driven ashore. He therefore returned to anchorage some distance inside the Heads. The next

day (Saturday) we went ashore with a wood cutting party, and in the after-noon the men belonging to the cutter succeeded in shooting a bull which had apparently become separated from a herd of wild cattle. The natives by this time had again come on board, and, as it still continued to blow hard outside, the captain asked Jack Davis to send one of the natives overland to the place where the white men would, be, in the event of their not having started on their voyage. To this Davis agreed, and at once selected an active intelligent blackfellow called Smike, who, with another, immediately departed for the opposite coast, carrying a letter wrapped up in oilskin, addressed to Sinclair, and also some preserved meat for the use of the castaways. He promised to be back in two days; and, in the meantime, we had more expeditions ashore, and in the course of one long journey, we came in sight of a herd of splendid cattle. Everybody at once let fly at them, and they started off like mad, with the natives following them. Very soon they were all out of sight; but shortly after we had returned to the vessel we found that the natives had killed and brought back a young bull. This was the second good feast of fresh meat we had had, and the quality of it was excellent.

Some of the natives remained on board most of the time we were anchored at this place, and we had plenty of opportunities of seeing their mode of life. They are all passionately fond of tobacco-women as well as men. Several of the women had light brown skins, and were evidently partly of Malay extraction. They were all great eaters, and the man known as Fat Jack was a notorious gourmand. One afternoon a canoe with five lubras in it was capsized under the counter of the vessel, and all the lubras were struggling in the water, yet Fat Jack would not leave his tea at the galley, when called upon to help the fair ones, because he said he was " very hungry."

As a rule, however, when they were eating together, the natives always showed a disposition to share and share alike.

On Wednesday morning the captain was considering the desirability of trying to sail round to Trepang Bay again, when we heard a loud shout from the natives who were camped on the beach, and presently we saw a blackfellow and some white men coming out of the bush.

These proved to be Smike, and the three castaways - Sinclair, Robertson, and Miller. They were immediately brought on board, and it was then quite clear that they had not been sent for a bit too early. Mr. Sinclair had no clothing but a waistcoat, and a piece of canvas tied round his waist. He was without hat, shoes, and trousers; and his arms and legs were covered with deep scratches and partly-healed wounds, the result of exposure to a broiling sun and long travelling through the prickly underwood of the bush. The other two had not suffered so much, as they had been lucky enough to pre-serve some amount of clothing. It appeared that they had been living ashore some weeks.

On leaving Port Darwin early in January they touched first at Melville Island, then at Trepang Bay, and then at Port Essington; and it was on their return from the latter place that they got their boat knocked to pieces near Vashon Head. This compelled them to take to the bush, where the natives were very kind to them, and Jack Davis built them a hut, where they remained some time. They then thought they would try to get back to Port Darwin, and Davis therefore gave them two canoes - a small one for Miller and a large one for the other two: He also sent some natives with them; and they started along the coast towards Cape Don in the direction of Melville Island. But Miller left the others, as there had been a complete misunderstanding between them almost from the beginning; and then after a while the blackfellows left them, and soon by some means or other they lost the sails of their canoe, and could not pull the boat, so that by the time Smike came up with them they were in a very pretty plight - no boats, no food, scarcely any clothing, their firearms useless, and their compass, chart, etc, lost overboard. Their chance of ever reaching Port Darwin was very small indeed, and in all probability they owe their lives to the arrival of the cutter and the perseverance of Smike in tracking them through the bush and around the coast. This man is a splendid blackfellow. He carried the letter and provisions safely to the white men, tracked them out one after the other, and brought them in a straight line to the cutter, through a country densely wooded. He hurried them across country as fast as he could, because he was afraid the cutter would have sailed; and it is said that Miller behaved in a very abusive and threatening manner to him on account of his anxiety to travel fast, but we hope this is not true. However, Captain Marsh and Mr. Sinclair gave Smike and Davis all the stores and other useful articles which were available for the purpose, including a boxful of provisions sent round by Sinclair's friends; and when we sailed from the place on Wednesday we left the whole tribe well pleased, and fully bent upon a day's enjoyment.

From Wednesday morning, February 11th, till Sunday, the 16th, we were on our way back to Port Darwin. We did not see any Malay proas during the trip, but ascertained from the natives that those which arrived had passed on beyond the Coburg Peninsula. Four of these proas had been seen by Mr. Sinclair and party near Melville Island, and they had come up with two of them again in Trepang Bay. Here they boarded one commanded by Captain Rimbau, who stated, through a native interpreter, that he visited the coast regularly every year. He hoisted the Dutch flag, and behaved very courteously to the Englishmen.

He asked them to take coffee, and seemed willing to give them all the information in his power. Each proa had from 30 to 40 men on board, and they all seemed cheerful and active. They are on good terms with the Port Essington natives, and are in the habit of employing them in their fisheries, for which they remunerate them with rice, tobacco, and canoes.

The foregoing are the chief particulars of this trip in search of the three castaways; but we subjoin a few more details which have been given to us by J. Miller, one of the party referred to :-

"We left Port Darwin, or Fannie Bay, on the 6th of January, and anchored two miles to the east of Cape Gambier on that night. The next morning we stood to the east and rounded Cape Keith five miles. We there came to an anchor, and we went ashore on Melville Island, taking firearms. There were a great many footprints of natives about, so we soon returned to the boat, and immediately afterwards about 50 natives rushed to the boat, yelling and shouting, and each one carrying a number of spears in the left hand. Fortunately they were too late. We then rounded Point Fayall six miles, and came to an anchor for the night. Whilst there saw a large alligator pass close to the boat. On the next day (the 10th) we weighed anchor and stood across Dundas Straits; and at daybreak I saw four large Malay proas standing out from under the land and steering east. On that evening we arrived at Trepang Bay, and saw two Malay proas there, each with about 40 men on board. They had not yet begun the season's work. We went on board and took coffee with the captain of one of the proas, and we gave them some biscuits. We then stood to the east and rounded Point Vashon two miles, where we came to an anchor for the night. After dark we heard the wild cattle ashore, bleating all along the coast. On the 11th we made Knocker Bay in the Gulf of Port Essington, and anchored for the night. On the 12th we arrived at the native camp, Port Essington, where we saw the natives and gave them some pipes, tobacco, and biscuits. We stopped there four days, looking around and obtaining information. About the 16th we started on our way back. All went well until the 20th, when we were near Point Vashon. Mr. Sinclair then went ashore naked, and lay down in the sand, and slept six hours in the broiling hot sun. The next day his whole body was one great blister. On the 23rd the blisters broke, and he was in a dreadful state - shocking to look at. But although Robertson had this example before him as a warning, he went ashore without his clothes for three hours, and also suffered from the effects of the sun. Afterwards it began to blow hard, and a heavy sea set in. We were on a lee shore, and our anchor was only a temporary one, made of pieces of wood and four pieces of iron as prongs. It was no good for holding. Whenever the sea struck the boat the anchor shifted, and at last she struck the rocks. The next sea filled her, and all was over in a few minutes. She went into a thousand pieces as soon as she struck. We slept at the place that night, and the next day started for Trepang Bay, hoping to find the Malays still there, but they were gone. Now the sun began to tell. Sinclair and Robertson became a mass of sores; they were in a shocking state and in great agony. That night we fell in with the blacks, one, of whom, Jack Davis, spoke good English. They gave us food and rendered great service to Sinclair and Robertson. I made enquiries what we could get along the coast, and they said trepang and turtle shell; and they gave me a small canoe 9 feet long, 18 inches wide, and 10 inches deep; it was very low in the water. I went then to the reef, two miles from the shore, and found there three sorts of trepang, black and red and grey, in abundance. The natives caught several turtles, which I helped to eat. Seeing next day that food was scarce, and that Sinclair and Robertson were ill, I took four natives and went into the bush with them. In the evening we killed an alligator, 10 feet long, which lasted us four days, and I sent some of it to Sinclair's camp. I then got into the little canoe, taking tortoiseshell, trepang, and small pearl with me, and bade the others goodbye.

I intended to cross Dundas Straits and pull along the lee of Melville Island and so reach Port Darwin, and there obtain help. But that night the wind freshened, and the canoe began to fill, which compelled me to throw the things overboard. I nearly reached Cape Don, but as the wind increased and the sea ran high, I was compelled to go to Popham Bay, and arrived at the Heads at 11 o'clock that night. The canoe there filled and capsized, and the firearms fell into the water. I took my wet clothes off and went along the beach and found the natives. They soon came back. They remained the next day, and I saw them make the rope which I have brought back.

They made it from the bark of a tree called the **Alibanya**. The same day they shifted their camp eight miles, as they had not much food to eat. Out of 25 of these natives only six had their full eyesight; the rest were all more or less blind. I left them the next day, and went into the bush to forage, and continued to do so until Smike arrived from the cutter. I then returned with him and overtook the other two white men, who were 15 miles off in Trepang Bay. We all then walked to where the cutter was waiting in Knocker Bay, Port Essington."

It will be thus seen that the party have lost everything. Robertson, we understand, was the owner of the boat, and therefore he is the greatest sufferer. Mr. Sinclair lost most of his things when the boat went to pieces, and the remainder (including some clothes, a watch, and revolver) he lost in crossing a stream shortly before returning with Smike to the cutter.

To Captain Marsh, of the Flying Cloud, great credit is due for his perseverance in this undertaking, and to the natives there ought to be some substantial reward given at the earliest opportunity.

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