

## The Strange Voyage

by Thomas Wentworth Higginson

*[Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca sailed for Florida in June, 1527, as treasurer of a Spanish armada, or armed fleet. In Cuba they encountered a hurricane, which delayed them; but they at last reached the coast of Florida in February, 1528, probably landing at what is now called Charlotte Harbor. A portion of the party left their ships, and marched into the interior, reaching a region which they called Apalache, probably in what is now Alabama. Then they were driven back to the seashore, amid great hardships, losing one-third of their number before they reached Aute, now the Bay of St. Mark's. Near this they came to the sea; and here the narrative begins.]*

It was a piteous and painful thing to witness the perplexity and distress in which we were. At our arrival, we saw the little means there were of our advancing farther: there was not anywhere to go, and, if there had been, the people could not move forward, because the greater part of them were sick, and there were few that could be of any use....

The governor called them all to him, and of each by himself he asked his advice what to do to get out of a country so miserable, and seek elsewhere that remedy which could not here be found, a third part of the people being very sick, and the number increasing every hour; for we regarded it as certain that we should all become so, and out of it we could only pass through death; which, from its coming in such a place, was to us only the more terrible. These and many other embarrassments considered, and entertaining many plans, we coincided in one great project, extremely difficult to put in operation, and that was, to build vessels in which we might go away. This to all appeared impossible; for we knew not how to build, nor were there tools, nor iron, nor forge, nor tow, nor resin, nor rigging; finally, no one thing of so many that are necessary, nor any man who had a knowledge of their manufacture. And, above all, there was nothing to eat the while they were making, nor any knowledge in those who would have to perform the labor. Reflecting on all this, we agreed to think of the subject with more deliberation; and the discourse dropped for that day, each going his way, commending our course to God, our Lord, that he should direct it as would best serve him.

The next day, it was His will that one of the company should come, saying that he could make some pipe out of wood, which, with deer-skins, might be made into bellows; and, as we lived in a time when any thing that had the semblance of relief appeared well, we told him to set himself to work. We assented to the making of nails, saws, axes, and other tools, of which there was such need, from the stirrups, spurs, cross-bows, and the other things of iron that there were; and we said, that, for support while the work was going on, we would make four entries into Aute, with all the horses and men that were able to go; and that every third day a horse should be killed, which should be divided among those that had labored on the work of the boats, and those that were sick. The forays were made with the people and horses that were of any use, and in them were brought back as many as four bushels of maize; but these were not got without quarrels and conflicts with the Indians. We caused to be collected many palmettos for the benefit of the woof or covering, twisting and preparing it for use in the place of tow for the boats.

We commenced to build on the 4th, with the one only carpenter in the company; and we proceeded with so great diligence, that, on the twentieth day of September, five boats were finished, of twenty-two cubits in length each, calked with the fibre of the palmetto. We pitched them with a certain resin, which was made from pine-trees, by a Greek named Don Theodoro; and from the same husk of

the palmettos, and from the tails and manes of the horses, we made ropes and rigging; and from our shirts, sails; and from the savins that grew there, we made the oars that appeared to us to be requisite.

And such was the country in which our sins had cast us, that with very great trouble we could find stone for ballast and anchors to the boats, since in all of it we had not seen one. We flayed the horses, and took off the skins of their legs entire, and tanned them, to make bottles in which we might carry water.

During this time, some went gathering shell-fish in the coves and creeks of the sea, at which the Indians twice attacked them, and killed ten of our men in sight of the camp, without our being able to afford them succor. We found them traversed from side to side by the arrows; and, although some had on good armor, it did not afford sufficient protection against the nice and powerful archery, of which I have spoken before.... Before we embarked, there died, without enumerating those destroyed by the Indians, more than forty men, of disease and hunger. By the 22d of the month of September, the horses had been consumed, one only remaining; and on that day we embarked in the following order,—in the boat of the governor there went forty-nine men; in another, which he gave to the controller and the commissary, went others as many. The third he gave to Capt. Alonzo del Castillo and Andres Dorantes, with forty-eight men; and another he gave to two captains, Tellez and Beñalosa, with forty-seven men. The last he gave to the assessor and me, with forty-nine men. After the provision and clothes had been taken in, there remained not over a span of the gunwales above the water; and, more than this, we went so crowded, we could not move. So much can necessity do, which drove us to hazard our lives in this manner, running into a sea so turbulent, with not a single one that went there having a knowledge of navigation.

The haven we left has for its name La Baya de Cavallos. We passed waist-deep in water through sounds for seven days, without seeing any point of the coast; and at the close of them we came to an island near the land. My boat went first; and from her we saw Indians coming in five canoes, which they abandoned, and left in our hands. The other boats, seeing us go towards them, passed ahead, and stopped at some houses on the island, where we found many mullet and mullet-roe dried,—a great relief to the distress in which we were. After taking these, we went on, and, two leagues thence, we discovered a strait the island makes with the land, which we named San Miguel, from having passed through it on his day.

Having come out, we went to the coast, where, with the five canoes I had taken from the Indians, we somewhat improved the boats, making waist-boards, and securing them so that the sides rose two palms above the waters. With this we turned to travel along the coast in the direction of the River Palmas, every day increasing our hunger and thirst; for the provisions were very scant, and getting near their end, and the water was gone, because the bottles we made from the legs of the horses soon rotted, and were useless. Sometimes we entered coves and creeks that lay far in, and found them all shallow and dangerous. Thus we travelled thirty days among them, where we sometimes found Indian fishermen, a poor and miserable people.

At the end of this time, while the want of water was extreme, going near the coast at night, we heard the approach of a canoe; and as we saw it we waited its arrival: but it would not meet us, and, although we called, it would not return, nor wait for us. As the night was dark, we did not follow it, but kept on our way. When the sun rose, we saw a small island, and went to it, to see if we could find water: but our labor was vain; for it had none. Being there at anchor, a heavy storm overtook us, that detained us six days, without our daring to go to sea: and, as it was now five days in which we had not drunk, our thirst was so excessive, that it put us to the extremity of drinking salt water; and some of the

men so greatly crazed themselves by it, that directly we had four of them to die. I state this thus briefly, because I do not believe there is any necessity for particularly relating the sufferings and toils in which we found ourselves; for considering the place we were in, and the little hope we had of relief, every one may conceive much of what would have passed there.

Although the storm had not ceased, and we found that our thirst increased, and the water killed us, we resolved to commend ourselves to God our Lord, and venture the peril of the sea, [rather] than await the certainty of death which thirst imposed. Accordingly, we went out by the way in which we had seen the canoe the night we came there. On this day, we ourselves were many times overwhelmed by the waves, and in such jeopardy, that there was not one who did not suppose his death certain. I return thanks to our Lord, that, in the greatest dangers, he should have shown us his favor; for at sunset we doubled a point made by the sand, and found great calm and shelter.

So we sailed that day until the middle of the afternoon, when my boat, which was first, discovered a point made by the land, and, against a cape opposite, a broad river passed. I anchored by a little island which forms the point, to await the arrival of the other boats. The governor did not choose to come up, but entered a bay near by, in which were a great many islets. We came together there, and took fresh water from the sea; for the stream entered it impetuously. To parch some of the corn we had brought with us, since we had eaten it raw for two days past, we went on the island; but, as we found no wood, we agreed to go to the river behind the point, which was one league off. We were unable to get there by any efforts, so violent was the current on the way, which drove us from the land while we contended, and strove to gain it. The north wind, which came from the shore, began to blow so strongly, that it drove us to sea without our being able to overcome it. Half a league out we sounded, and found, that, with thirty fathoms, we could not get the bottom; but we could not be satisfied that the river was not the cause of our failure to reach it.

Toiling in this manner to fetch the land, we navigated two days, and at the end of the time, a little while before the sun rose, we saw many smokes along the shore. While attempting to reach them, we found ourselves in three fathoms of water; and, it being dark, we dared not come to land; for, as we had seen so many smokes, we thought some danger might surprise us, and the obscurity leave us at a loss what to do. So we determined to wait until the morning. When it came, the boats had all lost sight of each other. I found myself in thirty fathoms; and, keeping my course until the hour of vespers, I observed two boats, and, as I drew near to them, I found that the first I approached was that of the governor, who asked me what I thought we should do. I told him we ought to join that boat which went in the advance, and by no means to leave her; and, the three being together, that we should keep on our way to where God should be pleased to direct us. He answered me, saying it could not be done, because the boat was far to sea, and he wished to reach the shore; that, if I wished to follow him, I should order the persons of my boat to take the oars, and work, as it was only by strength of arm that the land could be gained.

He was advised to this course by a captain he had with him named Pantoja, who told him, that, if he did not fetch the land that day, in six days more they would not reach it; and in that time they must inevitably famish. I, seeing his will, took my oar; and the same did all who were in my boat, to obey it. We rowed until near sunset; but, as the governor carried in his boat the healthiest men there were among the whole, we could not by any means hold with or follow her. Seeing this, I asked him to give me a rope from his boat, that I might be enabled to keep up with him; but he answered me that he would do no little, if they, as they were, should be able to reach the land that night. I said to him, that, since he saw the little strength we had to follow him and do what he had commanded, he should tell me what he would that I should do. He answered me, that it was no longer a time in which one should

command another, but that each should do what he thought best to save his own life; that he so intended to act; and, saying this, he departed with his boat. As I could not follow him, I steered to the other boat at sea, which waited for me; and, having come up with her, I found her to be the one commanded by the captains Beñalosa and Tellez.

Thus we continued in company, eating a daily ration of half a handful of raw maize, until the end of four days, when we lost sight of each other in a storm; and such was the weather, that it was only by divine favor that we did not all go down. Because of the winter and its inclemency, the many days we had suffered hunger, and the heavy beating of the waves, the people began the next day to despair in such a manner, that, when the sun went down, all who were in my boat were fallen one on another, so near to death, that there were few among them in a state of sensibility. Among them all at this time there were not five men on their feet; and, when the night came, there were left only the master and myself who could work the boat. At the second hour of the night, he said to me that I must take charge of her, for that he was in such condition he believed that night he should die. So I took the paddle; and after midnight I went to see if the master was alive, and he said to me that he was better, and that he would take the charge until day. I declare that in that hour I would have more willingly died than seen so many people before me in such condition. After the master took the direction of the boat, I lay down a little while, but without repose; for nothing at that time was farther from me than sleep.

Near the dawn of day, it seemed to me that I heard the tumbling of the sea; for, as the coast was low, it roared loudly. Surprised at this, I called to the master, who answered me that he believed we were near the land. We sounded, and found ourselves in seven fathoms. He thought we should keep the sea until sunrise; and accordingly I took an oar, and pulled on the side of the land until we were a league distant; and we then gave her stern to the sea. Near the shore, a wave took us that knocked the boat out of the water to the distance of the throw of a crowbar; and by the violence of the blow nearly all of the people who were in her like dead were roused to consciousness. Finding themselves near the shore, they began to move on hands and feet, and crawled to land in some ravines. There we made fire, parching some of the maize we brought with us, and where we found rain-water. From the warmth of the fire the people recovered their faculties, and began somewhat to exert themselves. The day on which we arrived here was the 6th of November.

Source:

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