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Opening extract from

Charles Darwin

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We are at sea once more.
Mr Darwin's nets and trawls are everywhere, hanging over the side of the ship. He spends hours poring over his books, staring through his microscope, and making reams of notes, but something happened this afternoon that brought him up on deck in a hurry. We came across a shoal of porpoises. There were hundreds of them leaping over the waves, often jumping clean out of the water. There were times when you would think they could fly. They entertained us for many minutes, criss-crossing the sea in front of the bow. We were disappointed when they finally let us be.

There was some excitement when we arrived in the harbour of Buenos Aires. A guard ship fired on us.



This was a sign of things to come. When we reached Bahia Blanca, we discovered that there was a lot of fighting between the Indians and an Argentine general, a ruthless man called de Rosas. It seems his army is set on exterminating the Indians. It is said they are even prepared to massacre women in cold blood.
War or no war, Mr Darwin is continuing his studies of the land, the plants and the animals of South America. He has been very fascinated by the local ostrich, the rhea. The horsemen, or gauchos, catch these flightless birds by flinging two balls held by threads. Mr Darwin had a go at the bolas, as it is called. He swung it round his head just as he had seen the gauchos do. Unfortunately, he hadn't got the hang of the contraption and managed to trip his own horse in the process!
The gauchos roared with laughter.
They said they had seen men catch all kinds of animals, but nobody had ever caught himself before. The incident was embarrassing, but it didn't put Mr Darwin off hunting. The ship's crew have dined on fresh tuna, turtle, shark and barracuda. We have also eaten deer, ostrich and armadillo. Sometimes I think Mr Darwin prefers eating nature to telling its story!

One of the first land creatures we came across was the seagoing iguana. This creature swarms in its hundreds over the rocks. The iguana is very tame. It will put up with being prodded and poked. Mr Darwin even picked one of them up, swung it round his head and threw it into a rock pool. It just picked itself up again and waddled back to where it had been lying, settling itself back down as if nothing had happened. Mr Darwin threw it back into the rock pool. When the creature returned a third time, he repeated the operation. Once more, the iguana plodded back to its place. Mr Darwin concluded that, whereas European lizards have learned to fear man, these iguanas have failed to develop that hereditary instinct themselves. The iguana saw the side of the rock pool as a safe sanctuary so it kept returning to it, even though Mr Darwin insisted on dumping it back in the pool. I am not sure Captain Fitzroy would agree with Mr Darwin's theory. He seems to distrust radical, new ideas. But Mr Darwin doesn't seem to have made his mind up firmly about his view of life on these islands, so I don't think there will be any major arguments such as there were early in our voyage about slavery.





Some while later we came across the island's biggest inhabitants, the huge Galapagos tortoises. We had been trudging through the weedy vegetation when we came across a kind of path between the cinders and the cacti. Turning up one of these paths, we finally met a pair of tortoises face to face. They must have weighed at least two hundred pounds each. To hungry sailors that means two hundred pounds of meat, of course. Many of these tortoises do end up in the pot, but not the pair we encountered that particular day. We were more interested in them as living creatures. As we approached, one was eating a cactus. The other gave a grumpy hiss and walked away. I tried riding its back but, though the tortoise didn't seem at all concerned or even aware that I was perched on its shell, I was unable to balance and kept slipping off and landing with a thump on my bottom. Midshipman King also had a go at riding the tortoise, but he ended up sprawled in an embarrassed heap just as I had.