

The Young Darwin Diaries – Part 2

Previously: On his maiden voyage as naturalist on HMS Beagle, the Young Darwin is unprepared for the challenges he faces. He has Visions - Exotic, Mythic, and Erotic. But are they something more than delusions..?

Darwin wakes to find the Beagle speeding southward into the Atlantic at a ferocious rate.

17/3/32

The Crew stands by as the Eagle slices through the waves. How can this be? Our sails are furled. There is no driving wind? Yet still we race... Then suddenly we stop and everyone falls over. We pick ourselves up and groan. A flock of gulls shrieks to mock us.

“Hello, Charles,” says a soft womanly voice. “Quite the sleepy head, aren't you? We haven't been introduced so forgive my familiarity. I'm Sandra.”

Am I still dreaming? No, I am awake... For there, rearing up before me, is a massive grey head like the side of a mountain. It shivers. And a tiny eye winks at me. If it had eyelashes I'd fall in love.

“Sorry,” whispers Sandra. Who is clearly a Sperm Whale. “That's me chatting away and dropping the tow rope. I'm not to be trusted, Darlings. Better get the harness out. And a seat for Charles.”

I watch as the Crew lower a plank onto Sandra's back and carry over cables, cushions, and a parasol for me. The cables are passed over her Great Head and into her mouth while the seating is placed on top of her Cranium. “Climb aboard, Charles,” she says. “Let's get acquainted.” And we do, talking for hours of many things as Sandra tows the Eagle southwards. But talk about what?

For example she insists that British maritime dominance, “Certainly isn't due to Pluck, Rum, Whatsit, and the Lash, as some would have you believe. No, it is the good luck that your Captain and his ship saved me and my family from extermination by ruthless fishermen. We have helped the Eagle ever since. Not that we approve of your oil habit. There are plant alternatives you know.”

I understood that, and the thought stays with me. But I didn't understand her comment: “By the way, Charles, you look completely mushed. It suits you.” But before I can get her to explain what that means we are in the Pacific and the night sky is ablaze. “Volcanoes,” says Sandy. “I must leave you now. I have a mating to go to. But you do good, Sweetie. And if you ever get in difficulties blow on this.” She flicks a flute made of hollowed bone for me to catch. Which I do. And it saves my life.

Progress up the west coast of the Americas is much slower without Sandra's powerful tail flukes. It also has a unique timeless quality after the ship's calendar blows away. I daren't ask the Captain to let me check his log. What type of Science Officer would I look like?

The same type who falls overboard stretching to see the looming Galapagos Islands through a dusty telescope. The Eagle sails on much faster with me floundering behind.

I fear drowning... Yet arrive before the Eagle! Due to Sandy's Flute. I hesitate to interrupt her mating. Yet it isn't the flirty Macrocephalus herself who answers my call but an armada of giant turtles, all heads a-bobbing. They smoothly form a viaduct from me to the nearest Island and I walk there over a line of Stepping Shells. To find...

A Party! All sorts of creatures are waiting to meet us. A huge pot is bubbling on the beach. “No Missionaries,” laughs Queen Turtle. “You weirdos are our guests.”

I lose count of the members of Linnaean taxa who are dancing with each other. And with our crew when they catch up. Everyone is having a good time.

Except the Chaplain.

He won't dance but goes about asking those who do: "When did the Creator make you? Where are you from?" "From here same as you," they tell him. "No no no," he says. "Where are you really from?" "All life is One," they tell him.

He turns away and shakes his head to say, *These beasts are dumb*. But when he asks an Ape in a yellow check waistcoat the same question, the Creature throws its cigar and glass of port down, picks up the Chaplain, and runs off with him. "Help! Help!" cries the Chaplain. But no one does...

As Dawn breaks Man and Ape return hand-in-hand. The Man puts on his Chaplain hat to perform the Anglican Marriage Service, removing it in order to make the Groom's responses. The Ape merely grunts, whether from incapacity or bad temper is unclear. But they do leave together in a shower of multi-coloured seashell fragments. Her name, it appears, is Therese.

A few months later a familiar shape appears in the deeper waters beyond the Archipelago. Two turtles ferry me out to where Sandy waits for me.

"You've been busy," she laughs. "Hopping from island to island. I hope you kept your notes safe. I've been busy too..."

She rolls over to show her swollen belly. "Don't you be sad, Charles," she says. "It could never have worked between us. But we'll always have Tierra del Fuego. Time to go now."

"But we understand each other so well," I tell her.

"That's the effect of the Mushrooms. They're special. Magic, even. Their spores and offspring are everywhere on board the Eagle. But the effect will wear off when you get home."

"I hope it doesn't."

"So do I," says Sandy. "Come on. Join the ship. When you get back just tell the truth about what you saw. Well, maybe leave out the mushrooms. Now don't cry for me, Mr Darwin. It's the Way of the World. Let's take in a show on the way." So we do...

The fullest of full moons makes the Glacier shine. Three ledges stretch along the side supporting three ranks of Galapagos Penguins. Sandra and her family raise their heads from the water and chant a mournful Introduction. Then one by one the Penguins begin to dance on the spot Their black-shod feet making an irresistible clacking sound. Then they sing...

In Olden times our Ice was solid
But now it's all soft and squalid.
That's how it flows
Everything goes!

And humans who once respected Nature
Now act as if they hate Her.
And it shows.
See! Everything goes!

And everything that used to sing for you,
Soon won't do a thing you.
'Cause we know
You'll kill kill us for dough!

After repeating each verse one line of Penguins dives into the water. Until there are none. Sandra and family wave goodbye. We sail on for home with a heavy heart and a tear in the eye.

Now I am back in Kent I must edit this section thoroughly. Could get myself in big trouble...

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