

The Malay Proas on our Coast.

CRUISE OF THE FLEETWING.

FROM Mr. Alfred Searcy, Sub-Collector of Customs, we have received the following interesting particulars of the recent cruise of the Fleetwing steamer, which was chartered by the Government to take down the party of Customs officers, and Police Constable Stott, the latter going for the purpose of trying to effect the capture of the aboriginal murderers of the Chinese sawyers in Bowen Straits, reported in this journal a few weeks back.

Accompanied by Messrs. Pinder, Howard, Morice, Lewis, P.C. Stott, and Casop (interpreter), I left Port Darwin on the 11th March, at 12.30, in the steamer Fleetwing, 21 tons, commanded by Captain Duncan, and arrived at Port Essington the next day. Here we found the Sree Pas Sair, engaged in prospecting for shell, but Captain Chippindall reported that they had been unsuccessful. They had been in Bynoe Harbour, and had also tried portions of the coast on the way from there to Port Essington. While at the latter place P.C. Stott made every endeavour to induce the natives to bring in the murderers of the Chinese sawyers in Bowen Straits, but although great promises were made by the natives they failed, or did not try, to effect the capture.

Next morning, I had all hands and a number of blacks at work, taking in wood and water, and made a start at 1.30 p.m. I took Mr. Robinson and three natives on board here and left Morice in Robinson's place. By 9 o'clock we were well in Bowen Straits, and being moonlight, determined to proceed, at 1.30 a.m., all clear, Robinson acting as pilot. By day-break on the 14th we were off De Courney Head, by 8 picked up the South Goulbourn Island. We could see the Tor Rock which is many miles inland. It is a fine land mark, and stands out a great square dark mass. Having wind and tide against us, we did not make very good way and it was twelve before we passed between the South Goulbourn and Sims Islands. We were cheered soon afterwards by sighting

were cheered soon afterwards by sighting a dredging canoe and very shortly opened out two proas in a very nice and apparently well sheltered bay. I understand that this spot is a new camping place, the old one an island a little to the eastward having been washed away. We had to make a long round to clear the reef and eventually brought up near the proas at 2 p.m. in two fathoms of water. The masters, Rimba and Poi Nando, came on board. I had no difficulty with these men and they paid duties, etc., without a murmur. I saw here a native who some years ago was taken with several others to Papua where they were employed diving. From what I could learn, I think that it was a clear case of kidnapping. Next morning I started the men to work at cutting wood and hard work it was, the only available wood being mangrove, and a mangrove swamp is anything but a desirable place to work in. I also employed about 30 natives to assist in the cutting and carrying the wood to the boats. I was rather surprised that any turned up to work for the Malay camp was only a short distance away, but I fancy that it must have been the sight of the Kápalapi (steamer) that did it. The Macassars seem to have some peculiar customs. When they first come on the coast and before they begin trepanning they lower to the bottom a new plate which contains portions of the best food they have. According to the blacks, the previous night they had performed the ceremony of making wind apparently thinking it was time to shift their ground. I paid all the blacks liberally with tobacco and rice. We finished the wood by seven p.m., and I think all hands were satisfied. At 5.30 a.m. on the 16th we were away again, but did not make very good progress, it being four o'clock before we sighted Haul Round Island, and by the time we had felt our way inside the reef it was dusk, and anchored in 7½ fathoms. The reef extends for a great distance and at low water has a very ugly look. Right in the centre is a small sandy island covered with long grass over which, when we steamed in, we saw thousands of birds flying about. When the moon rose we

flying about. When the moon rose we thought we would land and look for a turtle, but no turtle was forthcoming. One of the black boys started running after a bird which he caught and then we all commenced the same sport, and in a quarter of an hour we had about five dozen. They turned out to be a small gull, and excellent eating they proved. It was great fun while it lasted, and we were pretty well drenched with dew before we had finished. The island must have looked lively for a short time; dark figures rushing about their hands full of birds. Every now and then a figure would take a dive into the grass with a yell "I've got another." From

the noise and fuss made by the birds, it was plain they were not used to such visits. By 11 p.m., we were on board again, well satisfied with the evening's amusement. At 6 a.m. we steamed under Haul Round Island and an agreeable surprise awaited us; three large stacks of wood close to the beach, which upon examination we found only wanted cutting in half. It had been cut by the Malays, and I should think that they had made all preparations to commence fishing, and then suddenly left. If they go back they will no doubt be surprised also to see their camp cleared of every stick, especially as they have to bring nearly all the wood from the mainland. This is not a favourite camping place, for the natives are awfully treacherous. Some time ago they killed the master of one of the proas, so next year the brother went there and pretended to start fishing. He managed to make friends with the natives, a lot of whom he induced to cross from the mainland to the Island, and then opened upon them with his two pounders. A few managed to make to the water, but the Malays were in the canoes waiting for them and finished them. We saw several fires upon the mainland, but no natives put in an appearance. After breakfast, we went on shore and carried four fathoms within two boats length of the beach. Found soakage upon the beach so I had two wells sunk to facilitate the

so I had two wells sunk to facilitate the watering. We walked about a quarter of the way round the island, and then struck across, when we found an old pad, which took us right into the jungle where everything seemed to grow most luxuriantly. It was very pleasant there; now and then you would come across a little glade and everything was cool and bright, the dew still being upon the grass and trees. The birds were very tame. In some of the old native camps we picked up shells which if found in the neighborhood most certainly indicate that pearl-shell is not far off. I think that if ever the land on the Liverpool River is taken up and shipping frequent it, Haul Round Island will be of some importance, as there is splendid anchorage under it. It would make a splendid depôt for pearl-ers or trepang fishers. Good soil for garden purposes, grass for sheep, and the jungle for pigs. There is no doubt that a few natives would have to be shot before such a settlement could be made safe. We found several tamarind trees there and a few cape gooseberries growing near the camp. We had all the wood on board by 12, 7 axemen and four or five men carrying to the boat, having made short work of the heaps. We caught some very fine trevalli during the afternoon. At 12 p.m. we made a start and the weather looked anything but promising but it cleared up soon after. Just after daybreak I put a towline over—one that I had procured from a Macassar at Goulbourn Island, and soon hooked a fine big fish. After playing him for some time managed to get him alongside. In my anxiety to get him on board, I jerked him on board rather violently, and his teeth struck my left hand, gashing two of the fingers right to the bone, I bound the cut up, having first put plenty of vaseline on the wound and in a week they had healed. The fish weighed quite 20 lbs., and was something like a baracouta. We caught another soon afterwards, and then a shark about four feet long took the hook we going at the time about five knots, but we got him on board. We ran in, and had a look at Sand Island, but no proas there, so shaped a course for the Crocodile Islands,

shaped a course for the Crocodile Islands, and passed through the unsurveyed portion of Castlereagh Bay by midday. We went as close to the islands as we could, but the water was very shoal a long way from them. By keeping towards the mainland there appeared to be any amount of water. At four o'clock we sighted Sandy Island, anchored under the lee of it at 6.30. We saw some tremendous sharks here. At 6 a.m. on the 19th we steamed into Cadell Straits, and anchored inside in seven and a-half fathoms, having had very deep water right in. A great number of natives were on Elcho Island and the mainland but appeared to be very suspicious of us; it was a long time before we could induce any of them to come alongside. The natives we had brought from Port Essington, like all the coast natives spoke Macassar, and I do not think that we would have succeeded in inducing the others to come on board if it had not been for them. At any rate, once on board, I did my best to make friends with them, and gave them tobacco, rice, &c. There is little doubt that they look upon the whites as enemies, especially since the duties have been levied upon the Malays, as they do not get the quantity of spirits they used to. It is a well known fact, however, that whites from the sea are far better received than those coming from inland. There was one very knowing youth on board—he had just returned from Macassar where I suppose he had been doing the *La Grande Tour*, and he informed us that he had three large bottles of immense pearls which he would bring if we granted his modest request—a request so modest that we might just as well turned back and fitted out afresh. He then gave us to understand that we were at liberty to cut his throat if he did not bring the pearls. He was informed that when he brought the pearls we would consider the question of cutting his throat—he never gave us the chance. No fear of the blacks parting with anything while Macassar men are on the coast. The natives said that a great number of proas had passed there, but their statements were very contradictory. The Malays always use the Straits

out their statements were very contradictory. The Malays always use the Straits never going outside. Several of the natives said they remember Cadell going there. After breakfast, we had to start at woodcutting again and I employed a number of natives but they soon got tired and crossed over to Elcho Island. I took every precaution against surprise, and saw that the men were properly armed. Just as we were taking off the last boat load of wood a large alligator came within a few yards of us but I did not allow anybody to fire as I did not want to frighten the natives. From what I saw and heard afterwards, however, they seemed to fully understand all about firearms. A fellow came up to me touched my revolver, moved his hand, and said "Boom, boom, boom." It had rained on and off all day and general indications showed that we were in for some dirty weather. At daybreak on the 20th made another start and it was blowing hard from the S.E. with heavy rain. We steamed down the Straits and had water from four and a-half to seven fathoms right up to patch shown by Cadell as one fathom, where we touched

lightly, but after waiting for some time and doing some sounding we managed to cross to the mainland side, and got into deep water again and continued until we got "half three," when the captain determined to anchor and do some more sounding. We had another try, and got down some distance until we approached the other one fathom patch, but not finding a channel had to run back into deep water and anchor. It now blew a gale and at times the squalls were terrific with very heavy rain. In a short time our bedding and clothes were pretty well soaked, and we had to continue in this predicament until the 24th, when the gale moderated. It was weary work, seventeen all told, in a small steamer. Just before we anchored we noticed on the north end of Elcho Island what at first looked to be a great volume of smoke rising rapidly, but upon closer inspection, it turned out to be flocks of birds. We

ing rapidly, but upon closer inspection, it turned out to be flocks of birds. We managed to make friends with the natives here and they visited us every day. The natives showed us the channel used by the Malays. It was more towards the mainland, whereas we had kept close to the island. The captain sounded and found the passage. On the morning of the 26th we steamed towards the mainland and got into the passage. We then felt our way through the Straits between the mainland and Alger Island the chart giving no soundings, but we found deep water, no bottom in seven fathoms. The Malays always used this passage and it saves a long steam for those making Arnheim Bay. We then shaped a course for Arnheim Bay and passed some fine islands, the scenery upon which in some instances was very picturesque. We ran into the bay and anchored some distance from an island on the west side, where Bapa Paloe was supposed to be anchored, a gentleman whom I was anxious to catch. We landed at the old camp on the island, and had a most disagreeable wade through soft mud and rotten shells and coral; to all appearance no body had been at the camp for years. It would make a fine picture. It was formed under some immense tamwind trees of a great age; the old fire place, being over grown with weeds and creepers and alongside the fireplace is the grave of one of the masters of a proa who was murdered there some years ago by the natives. At one time there had been a sort of a fence round it. One of my natives, "Moyout," by name, who was present when the murder took place, but who says he had nothing to do with it, tells the story. A blackfellow went on board the proa and demanded some tobacco and spirit. The master refused and then struck him. The man did not appear to take offence, but remained apparently friendly towards the captain and soon after tempted him to go ashore and thence into the bush where he was set upon by a number of natives and killed. They then went on board the proa, killed the cook and helped themselves to the stores.

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