

VOLCANOES AND EARTHQUAKES

by Jon Mayhew

Charles lay on the beach, enjoying the warmth of the sun. Around him the sailors and his servant, Syms, rested too, surrounded by barrels and boxes of specimens. They had spent the day in the jungle, collecting, observing animals and searching for fresh water but Syms had suggested they rest before rowing back to the Beagle.

In some ways, Charles dreaded going back. He wished he could stay on this foreign beach forever. As a small boy, he'd always imagined sailing ships to be big but the Beagle, which sat not too far out to sea, was tiny. The ship was a little bit longer than a cricket pitch and very narrow. Captain Fitzroy told Charles that seventy-five crew members lived on board, but it felt like twice that many. Since then, Charles had made things even more cramped with all of the animals, plants and fossils he'd collected.

"I don't want to get back on that ship, Syms," he said to his servant. "The sea never stops moving."

"Don't worry, sir, I..." Syms began to say, but then the ground beneath them lifted and, for a moment, Charles felt like he was back on the ship. The trees at the edge of the jungle shook as if a sudden gust

of wind had caught them. Then a wave, as tall as a man, rose up and threw itself onto the shore. The water splashed onto their feet.

“An earthquake!” Charles declared, jumping up.
“We must get back to the Beagle at once.”

They hurried to the rowing boats, which lay half in the tide, and clambered on board them. Soon, they were drawing up alongside the Beagle. Captain Fitzroy helped Charles out of the boat after it had been winched aboard. “Did you notice the earth tremor on land?” he asked, looking concerned.

“We did,” Charles replied. “It was only small but I fear there may be stronger ones soon. The earth has been restless since we saw Mount Osorno erupt in January.” Charles thought back to the day the Beagle lay anchored in a sheltered outlet as they watched plumes of thick black smoke stream up from the conical volcano. Glowing red lava had poured down its sides like water.

“We’ll sail on to the island of Quiriquina and see if we can dock there,” Captain Fitzroy said.

Charles went to his cabin, squeezing past boxes, barrels and trying to keep out of the way of the sailors, who were scurrying around the deck. The wind had picked up and Charles felt his stomach lurch. Ever since he had started the voyage, he had suffered from seasickness. He spent a lot of time lying down. He had work to do and specimens to examine, but the ship began to pitch and roll. He

lay on his small bed and thought about an idea that had begun to develop in his head about mountains growing out of the earth because of volcanic activity and earthquakes. Eventually, he drifted off to sleep.

They journeyed for over a week in seas that rose and fell. Charles tried hard to focus on his work and, when he became completely absorbed in an idea, he managed to forget the seasickness for a while. He spent hours studying the new creatures they had discovered and tried not to think about the sea or about the controversy that would surround some of his developing ideas. Charles' father wanted him to be a vicar, but Charles worried that some of his ideas made him doubt the truth about some of the Bible. For instance, as he had stood watching the volcano, he had wondered how mountains so huge could have risen from the seas in just six thousand years, which was the age of the Earth, according to the Church. Most of the time, though, his fascination for the new species he had discovered pushed any doubts from his mind.

At last, they reached the island of Quiriquina and tied up at the dock. Charles stood with Syms and Captain Fitzroy and stared at the devastation. The buildings had been flattened and some of the boats lay inland as if a giant had picked them up and physically thrown them there. Furniture and the beams from houses floated in the water.

"A huge tidal wave has hit this town," Charles whispered. "The wave we experienced must have just been the edge of this, bigger one."

Fitzroy nodded. "We must go inland and see if we can find any survivors."

They rowed across the bay to Talcahuano and beached the boat. Trees lay flattened on the ground and Charles noticed huge chunks of rock, covered in barnacles and sea creatures, scattered around. "These rocks come from the seabed," he muttered, prising a barnacle off the rock with his knife. "They must have been thrown up here by the undersea earthquake."

Huge cracks had been carved in the ground and the party picked their way through flattened houses, overturned boats and even huge fish that had been stranded high and dry by the tsunami. A few survivors came to greet them, explaining that many people had moved further inland but would return. Charles and his crew helped them as much as they could, but it was clear that it would take them months, if not years, to get back on their feet.

The journey back to the Beagle proved difficult; it had grown dark and the wind had picked up again. Charles, Syms and the others pushed the boat into the sea, but the waves grew stronger. They pulled on the oars, grunting and bellowing out their anger, yet every time they went forward, the sea seemed to push them back. Rain lashed down on them and

the waves splashed over the sides of the rowing boat. Charles' muscles ached with rowing but he knew he couldn't give up; the others depended on him as much as he needed them. They fought and pushed. After four hours of struggle, they finally managed to reach the Beagle. Cold and wet, they struggled aboard. That night, Charles slept soundly in his bunk, dreaming of England.