Chapter Nine

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*Volcanic Narborough lies in the black*
*jaws of Albemarle like a wolf's red*
*tongue in his open mouth.*

—Herman Melville: *The Encantadas*

Everybody knows Herman Melville wrote that whale of a tale, *Moby Dick*, yet few know of another work which is no less a masterpiece, though much less on word count. The shorter story takes its inspiration from Melville's visit to the Galápagos whaling ground aboard the *Acushnet*. Were it not for his presence on the ship's roster, both the vessel and its crew would have long since become just one more unwritten page in the history book of forgotten voyages. But thanks to Herman, the *Acushnet* lives on as that most famous whaler of them all, the *Pequod*. And some fifteen years after that little tale was told, the Galápagos Islands became the setting for a short story written in ten sketches which Melville called *The Encantadas, or, Enchanted Isles.* Its author does not get high marks as tour leader, for he has rearranged both the islands and their history, perhaps to suit his story line, perhaps because he didn't spend enough time there to get his facts straight. But no matter; he is neither first nor last to take artistic liberties with enchanted ground. We must leave such matters as dull geography to more-learned authorities and just depend on Melville to convey to us the mood of the place.

In setting that mood, many sketches begin with a few lines borrowed from Edmund Spenser, a sixteenth century poet who might have died wealthier if his *The Fairie Queene* had been retailed to the public by the pound. Melville is in fact one of those rare people who gives evidence of having actually read the damned thing in its entirety. Either that, or he had the extraordinary good fortune to stumble across just those passages that might have been written about Galápagos. For example, Sketch First begins with this from Spenser:

> That may not be, said the ferryman,
> Least we unweeting hap to be fordonne,
> For those same islands seeming now and than,
> Are not firme land, nor any certein wonne,
> But stragling plots which to and fro do ronne
> In the wide waters; therefore are they hight
> The Wandering Islands; therefore do them shonne;
> For they have oft drawne many a wandring wight
> Into most deadly daunger and distressed plight;
> For whosoever once hath fastened
> His foote thereon may never it secure
> But wandreth evermore uncertain and unsure.

It's rather doubtful that Spenser knew the Galápagos legend—of the enchanted place where landfalls "were but shadows and no Reall Ilands." That, according to the Spaniards, if we are to believe our old diarist and buccaneer friend Ambrosia Cowley. But when he wrote "shadows and no Reall Ilands" was he more under the influence of Spenser than of Spaniard? Perhaps. Melville reminds us that when the buccaneer named a little island after himself, he wrote that "My fancy led me to call it Cowley's Enchanted Island." Melville ignored the fanciful allusion to a great city served up by Cowley, or perhaps by the editor as his journal was prepared for the press, and seeks another explanation. Says Melville, "… as all the group is deemed enchanted, the

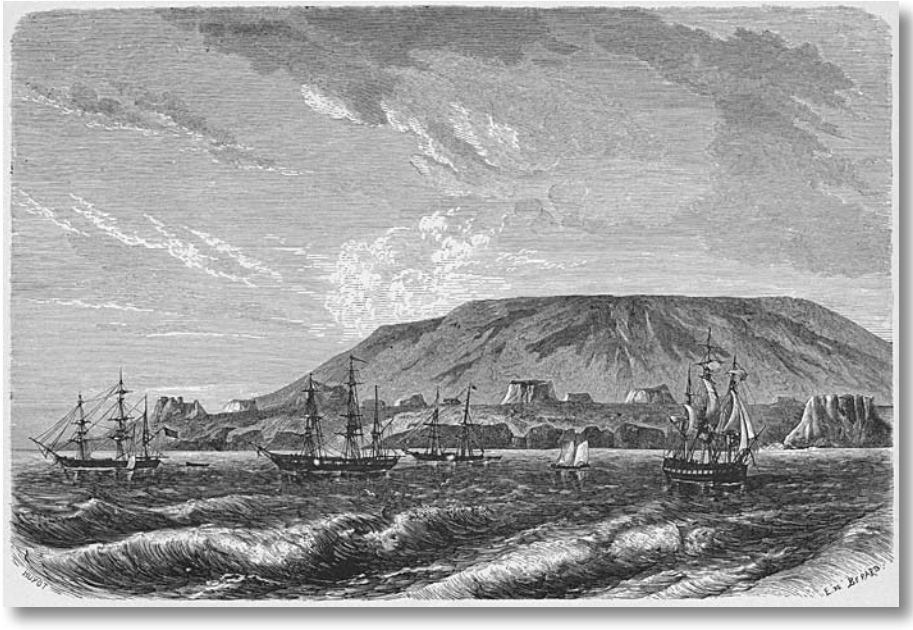
reason must be given for the spell within a spell involved by this particular designation." And then he offers us the reason; that is, *his* reason for this particular designation:

> That Cowley linked his name with this self-transforming and bemocking isle, suggests the possibility that it conveyed to him some meditative image of himself. At least, as is not impossible, if he were any relative of the mildly thoughtful, and self-upbraiding poet Cowley who lived about this time, the conceit might seem not unwarranted; for that sort of thing runs in the blood, and may be seen in pirates as in poets.

If Ambrosia counted such a poetical personage as Abraham Cowley in his immediate family circle, then perhaps he had read *The Fairie Queene* (voluntarily?) in the days of his youth and before setting out on the long voyage into the great South Sea where—and again, just perhaps—a Spenserian influence insinuated itself into his journal. But Spenser or no, not all of Cowley's literary conceits made their way to the printed page, where shadows were replaced by simple description:

> Thereupon we stood away to the Westward, to try if we could find those Islands which the Spaniards calls Gallappagos or Enchanted Islands, when after 3 weeks we saw Land, …

The journal's "shadows and no Reall Islands" treatment is certainly the more poetic, and we may wonder why Melville didn't pick up on it, especially since the tone further supports his speculation on a familial link between Abraham and Ambrosia. Probably, because he knew nothing of it. Melville did his work long before the day of the photocopy, and may have never seen anything but the book.

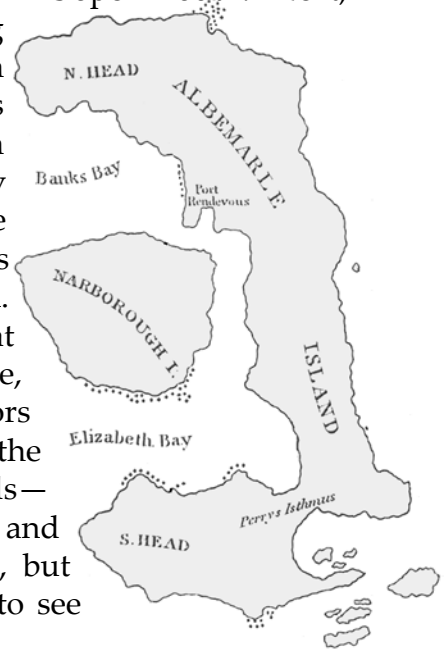


From Sketch First: "At one period, large fleets of whalemen cruised for spermaceti upon what some seamen call the Enchanted Ground. This was off the great outer isle of Albemarle, away from the intricacies of the smaller isles." Jules Huyot's 19th century engraving of Albemarle Island shows whalers cruising upon Melville's enchanted ground.

The first two sketches continue the mood set by the introductory verse, of a place held under a spell, where desolation and despair are the order of the day, and of every day. And we are to proceed with some caution through these pages, for Melville warns us that "I know not whether I am not the occasional victim of optical delusion concerning the Galápagos." As we shall soon see, Melville was certainly no occasional victim of geographical delusion within his enchanted world. Yet the real world must wait—as it has already waited for a century and a half—for someone to write a better description of the place. Melville's own description continues with two sketches devoted to one landmark—the high stone tower known to all, both then and now, by the title of Sketch Third: "Rock Redondo." Redondo rises from

its oceanic bed to a plateau some 250 feet above the surface. It is a cliff on all sides and there are no landing places. Yet for those willing to suspend belief, Melville escorts them to the summit, and, "How we got there, we alone know." But the view is good from atop this aviary of ocean, and our guide points out a few places of interest, both seen and unseen by those with lesser vision.

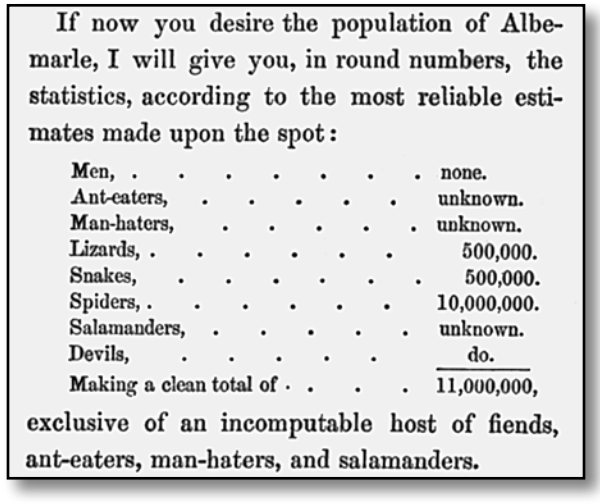
Nearby, "Volcanic Narborough lies in the black jaws of Albemarle like a wolf's red tongue in his open mouth." Next, he takes a census—perhaps having a bit of fun at the expense of a certain unnamed naturalist—and reports the population of Albemarle in excess of some 11 million generally unpleasant creatures. Then he repeats himself: "Albemarle opens his mouth towards the setting sun. His distended jaws form a great bay, which Narborough, his tongue, divides into halves." Modern visitors may wonder about black jaws and the red tongue of a wolf. These islands—better known today as Fernandina and Isabela—are of course neighbors, but it would take some imagination to see them through Melville's eyes.




Above: Did David Porter's chart give Melville the idea of a volcanic Narborough lying in the black jaws of Albemarle?

Our attention is now directed to the distant Abington Isle, where "I doubt whether two human beings ever touched upon that spot." Today, human beings are not permitted to touch upon that spot, but in Melville's day the island was frequented by whalers in search of dinner. The nearby Isla Marchena, known to Melville as Bindloe but not mentioned, might have been a better choice for his remark. It was not

visited by whalers, and when two human beings eventually did touch it, they didn't live to tell the tale. But that's a story for another chapter.



If now you desire the population of Albemarle, I will give you, in round numbers, the statistics, according to the most reliable estimates made upon the spot:

| | |
|---|---|
| Men, | none. |
| Ant-eaters, | unknown. |
| Man-haters, | unknown. |
| Lizards, | 500,000. |
| Snakes, | 500,000. |
| Spiders, | 10,000,000. |
| Salamanders, | unknown. |
| Devils, | do. |
| Making a clean total of | 11,000,000, |

exclusive of an incomputable host of fiends, ant-eaters, man-haters, and salamanders.

Melville's population "statistics" as they appeared in the 1856 edition of *The Encantadas*. Any resemblance to a distinguished predecessor may not be coincidental.

Ere quitting Redondo in Sketch Fifth, Melville introduces us to someone we met here in a previous chapter—none other than Captain David Porter of the Salem frigate *Essex*. But the introduction is brief, for Melville has reserved the last two sketches to tell us more about the Captain. There, and indeed in all the remaining sketches, he recounts tales based, however loosely, on historical facts which, with one exception, can be tied to two islands. But perhaps for the sake of expanding the enchanted horizon, Melville distributes them around the archipelago, setting each tale upon its own island.

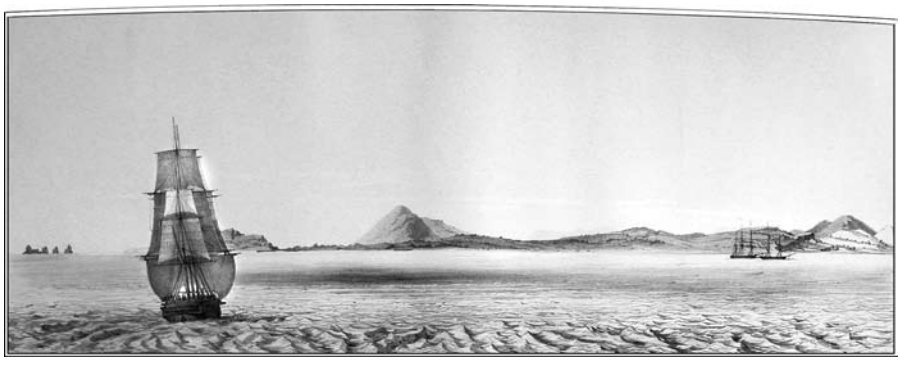
Sketch Sixth tells of "Barrington Isle and the Buccaneers." Melville finds the isle "well sheltered from all winds by the high land of Albemarle" and much favored by an earlier visitor:

> "I once landed on its western side," says a sentimental voyager long ago, "where it faces the black buttress of Albemarle. I walked beneath groves of trees—not very lofty, and not palm trees, or orange trees, or peach trees, to be sure—but for all that, after long sea-faring, very beautiful to walk under, even though they supplied no fruit."

The "sentimental voyager" was James Colnett, who actually wrote "At every place where we landed on the Western side, we might have walked for miles, through long grass and beneath groves of trees." This delightful place was "sheltered from all winds by Albemarle Isle." But this is not Barrington Isle. Colnett was referring to James Island, whose western side does indeed face Melville's "black buttress of Albemarle." Barrington is far away, quite removed from the shelter of Albemarle. In fact, none have landed on its western side, which is itself a buttress against all visitors. In speaking of it and of another island, Colnett remarks "We did not land on either of them." Neither did Melville.

Sketch Seventh takes us to Charles Island, now ruled by a certain Creole adventurer from Cuba. Melville forgets his name but dubs him the "Dog King" in recognition of the pack of hounds His Majesty keeps for protection. According to the tale, the Creole had fought valiantly for Peru and received title to the island in recognition of his services. This version of history must have raised a few eyebrows in Guayaquil and Quito, for then as now the islands were the property of Ecuador. And the Creole adventurer from Cuba was in fact a Southern gentleman from New Orleans—José María Villamil, now an Army General in the service of Ecuador.

According to Melville, His Majesty populated his kingdom by issuing a proclamation inviting subjects to "take ship for the promised land." In fact, Villamil did issue an invitation

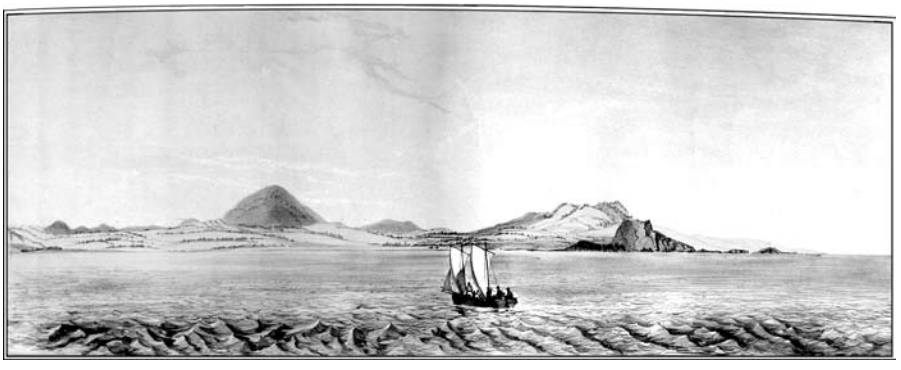


Charles Island at about the time of Herman Melville's visit.

of sorts. After being appointed territorial Governor (nice, but not quite the same as King) by Ecuador, he proposed to a group of soldiers that they come live on one of his islands. Now this was surely an invitation they couldn't afford to refuse, for these were troops soon to be placed at the wrong end of a firing squad as penance for mutiny. Given this opportunity to stay alive just a bit longer, Charles Island was indeed a promising land.

It's puzzling that Melville played so fast and so loose with the facts behind this fiction. Surely he knew Galápagos was no territory of Peru, and in his day General Villamil was still very much alive. One wonders if he read *The Encantadas.*

In the next sketch we encounter another island which seems real enough at first. The title of Sketch Eighth, "Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow" would seem to identify the place known today as Isla Santa Cruz. But it doesn't. The sketch begins "Far to the northeast of Charles' Isle, sequestered from the rest, lies Norfolk Isle." The island with this name actually lies due north of Charles, not far away at all, and certainly not sequestered from the rest. The sketch tells of the death of two whose hastily-built raft of logs sailed "just without a long reef with many jagged gaps, running parallel with the shore, about half a mile from it." There are such reefs near the Santa Cruz shore, but no such logs *on* the



From Abel du Petit-Thouars' 1841 voyage of the *Venus*.

shore, or anywhere for that matter. And a few pages later, the Chola widow walks across the island on a morning. People have died trying to cross far shorter distances on Norfolk Isle. It usually takes a week or two for death to find them.

Well then, where does one find Melville's Norfolk? Nowhere perhaps, but in the mind of its creator. And where does one find his inspiration for the Chola widow? Perhaps only on his own Norfolk.

Sketch Ninth begins with another lesson in Melvillian geography:

> Southeast of Crossman's Isle lies Hood's Isle, or McCain's Beclouded Isle: and upon its south side is a vitreous cove with a wide strand of dark pounded black lava, called Black Beach, or Oberlus's Landing. It might fitly have been styled Charon's.

The vitreous cove is now a popular tourist site on the island southeast of Crossman. But this island was known to Melville and others of his day as Charles, not Hood's. The wide strand of pounded black lava is still known as Black Beach, but it's on the island's northwest coast, not the south side.

And now David Porter returns to help finish up the tale. The Captain's *Journal* apparently found its way into Melville's library, where he read the report of events that had taken place a few years before Porter's own arrival. The Captain of the *Essex* had learned of the strange Patrick Watkins, ex-seaman and later gentleman tiller of the infernal landscape who had until recently scratched his existence out of Charles Island by offering fresh vegetables to passing ships in exchange for demon rum. But Melville had shown us Charles Island in a previous sketch, so he took the liberty of moving Watkins to a different island, and into a sketch named "Hood's Isle and the Hermit Oberlus." Other than that though, Melville pretty much lets Porter tell us the story.

Porter reports that Watkins, who had taken to calling himself "Fatherless Oberlus" (in Galápagos, everyone's a poet), quit the island a few years before he showed up. But the captain was intrigued by his story and jotted down this second-hand description:

> The appearance of this man, from the accounts I have received of him, was the most dreadful that can be imagined; ragged clothes, scarce sufficient to cover his nakedness, and covered with vermin; his red hair and beard matted, his skin much burnt, from constant exposure to the sun, and so wild and savage in his manner and appearance, that he struck every one with horror.

Melville the story teller offers his third-hand description of the horrid hero:

> His appearance, from all accounts, was that of the victim of some malignant sorceress; he seemed to have drunk of Circe's cup; beast-like; rags insufficient to hide his nakedness; his befreckled skin blistered by continual exposure to

> the sun; nose flat; countenance contorted, heavy, earthy; hair and beard unshorn, profuse, and of a fiery red. He struck strangers much as if he were a volcanic creature thrown up by the same convulsion which exploded into sight the isle.

In comparing these two passages, we might say that while Porter's description is good, Melville's is better. Porter gives us prose; Melville, poetry. And never mind that neither of them had met the man.

Captain Porter was also told of a note found in this wretched creature's abandoned hut, in which an indignant Watkins/Oberlus cries of injustices done him by recent visitors, and then concludes:

> On the 29th of May, 1809, I sail from the enchanted island in the Black Prince, bound to the Marquesas. Do not kill the old hen; she is now sitting, and will soon have chickens.
>
> (signed) FATHERLESS OBERLUS.

Not only does Melville edit Porter, he edits Oberlus as reported by Porter, then adds a postscript followed by a variation on a theme that has been circulating since Aesop.

> Today I sail from the Enchanted group in the good boat Charity bound to the Feejee Isles.
>
> Fatherless Oberlus.
>
> P. S.—Behind the clinkers, nigh the oven, you will find the old fowl. Do not kill it; be patient; I leave it setting; if it shall have any chicks, I hereby bequeath them to you, whoever you may be. But don't count your chicks before they are hatched.

Melville reports that the bird was in fact "a starveling rooster, reduced to a sitting posture by sheer debility." And never mind that neither man had met the bird either. But then—a bit closer to truth, if not quite there yet—he follows Porter in reporting that Oberlus departed the island with a few others and arrived not at the Marquesas or the Feejees, but at Guayaquil, and alone. Both writers speculate that the others were sacrificed as the water supply grew scarce. Neither writer speculates on how one man with a gun could stay awake in a small boat long enough to do away with the entire crew.

The Oberlus sketch also opens with a borrowing from Spenser, this one selected to fit Watkins perfectly.

> That darksome glen then enter, where they find
> That cursed man low sitting on the ground,
> Musing full sadly in his sullein mind;
> His griesly locks long grouen and unbound,
> Disordered hong about his shoulders round,
> And hid his face, through which his hollow eyne
> Lookt deadly dull, and stared as astound;
> His raw-bone cheekes, through penurie and pine,
> Were shronke into the jawes, as he did never dine.
> His garments nought but many ragged clouts,
> With thornes together pind and patched reads,
> The which his naked sides he wrapt abouts.

Melville borrowed Spenser's description of a "… cursed man, low sitting on the ground" to introduce his "Hood's Isle and the Hermit Oberlus" sketch.

Finally, after drawing and embroidering so heavily on Captain Porter without making direct mention of him in the text, Melville reveals his source and brings the sketch to a close with an explanatory note:

> Note.—They who may be disposed to question the possibility of the character above depicted, are referred to the 2d vol. of Porter's Voyage into the Pacific, where they will recognize many sentences, for expedition's sake derived verbatim from thence, and incorporated here; the main difference—save a few passing reflections—between the two accounts being, that the present writer has added to Porter's facts accessory ones picked up in the Pacific from reliable sources; and where facts conflict, has naturally preferred his own authorities to Porter's.

As for Melville's "reliable sources," not a few humor-impaired scholars have spent not a few hours trying to track them down. But of course these "authorities" don't really exist; Melville was simply having a bit of poetic-license fun with the reader, a point not grasped by those who can't—or won't—read between his lines. And even if Melville had relied on some long-vanished authorities, he could have picked more reliable ones than he did. Besides that, Porter was a stickler for details; Melville wasn't. As a reliable though somewhat less than poetical source, Porter always wins.

The Captain also left us his report on a nameless seaman, whose departure from Charles Island was noted in verse on a white board perched atop a desolate tomb. Porter recorded the epitaph "more on account of the extreme simplicity of the verse, and its powerful and flattering appeal to the feelings, than for its elegance, or the correctness of the composition:"

> Gentle reader, as you pass by,
> As you are now, so wonce was I;
> As now my body is in the dust,
> I hope in heaven my soul to rest.

Melville concludes his tale of *The Encantadas* with something which he tells us was " … found in a bleak gorge of Chatham Isle." Not so. He "found" it—some of it, that is—on a bleak page of Porter. But it reads a bit better for having passed through Melville's pen.

> Oh Brother Jack, as you pass by,
> As you are now, so once was I,
> Just so game and just so gay,
> But now, alack, they've stopped my pay.
> No more I peep out of my blinkers,
> Here I be—tucked in with clinkers!

After bringing William Cowley, James Colnett and David Porter into *The Encantadas,* it's intriguing to speculate on why Melville did not turn to the work of William Dampier, whose *New Voyage Round the World* is often cited as one of the finest travel books ever. The book was surely well known to him, as it is to us from a previous chapter.

Perhaps there's a good reason why Dampier does not put in an appearance. In writing *The Encantadas,* Melville has generally improved on the work of his sources, who were sailors first, writers second. In the latter category they were often adequate, sometimes good, but never great. Dampier though was an indifferent buccaneer, a good navigator, and a superb author. Melville may not have wanted to try his hand at improving on another master.

It's not certain that Melville visited some of the real and the unreal islands of his *Encantadas*. But wherever his feet actually did fall, the experience must have been profound. Sketch First contains a description that has yet to be surpassed by any who would dare describe the islands.

> It is to be doubted whether any spot of earth can, in desolateness, furnish a parallel to this group. … Cut by the Equator, they know not autumn and they know not spring; while already reduced to the lees of fire, ruin itself can work little more upon them. The showers refresh the deserts, but in these isles, rain never falls. Like split Syrian gourds, left withering in the sun, they are cracked by an everlasting drought beneath a torrid sky. "Have mercy upon me," the wailing spirit of the Encantadas seems to cry, "and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame."
>
> … the Encantadas refuse to harbour even the outcasts of the beasts. Man and wolf alike disown them. Little but reptile life is here found:—tortoises, lizards, immense spiders, snakes, and the strangest anomaly of outlandish Nature, the aguano. No voice, no low, no howl is heard; the chief sound of life here is a hiss.

Again Melville is out on his own, bending his facts to suit his fancy: that sound of a hiss is more often than not drowned out by an assortment of whistles, shrieks, barks and bleats, honks, chirps, grunts and groans as the Galápagos menagerie goes about the business of the day, which mostly has to do with mating and meals.

Perhaps Herman passed by after lunch.

> Overleaf: "… concerning the peculiar reptile inhabitant of these wilds—whose presence gives the group its second Spanish name, Gallipagos—concerning the tortoises found here, most mariners have long cherished a superstition, not more frightful than grotesque. They earnestly believe that all wicked sea-officers, more especially commodores and captains, are at death (and, in some cases, before death) transformed into tortoises; thenceforth dwelling upon these hot aridities, sole solitary lords of Asphaltum."

From Sketch First: "The Isles at Large."