

HALB 7-1943

«AN ENGLISH CHARTER-PARTY IN THE TORRE  
DO TOMBO»

(a commentary on the foregoing)

Privileged by the courtesy of Miss Virginia Rau with permission to read her interesting account of the charter-party of George Fenner's vessel, the «George of Chichester» I was struck by her query «how came this personal document into Portugal's national archives?» The document itself Miss Rau transcribes in full, adding it to her article. Therein reference is made to the attacks so frequent at that period as between English and Portuguese ships, and she observes at the close:

— «Can it have been in one of these attacks that the «George of Chichester» was taken by the Portuguese?»

In the following paragraphs, which must be regarded as merely a footnote to the original find of Miss Virginia Rau, I have summarised a few particulars, gathered chiefly from Hakluyt, that to me make it reasonably certain that the vessel in question was taken after a sharp fight somewhere off Ilha Terceira on the 11th May 1567. Just what the «George» and her three consorts was doing in Portuguese waters is nowhere exactly specified but it is clear enough that this was no ordinary contract of affreightment for an everyday merchant vessel bound on a Guinea voyage. Indeed, as the charter-party states, her trading faculties are straightly limited to conforming in all things with the intentions of the expedition, which was made up of three named ships and a pinnace, or cock-boat, presuma-

bly intended for «boating» up the rivers when seeking cargo. For master George Fenner, going himself as admiral, or leader, aboard a ship named the «Castle of Comfort», whose sailing master was William Betts, had with him the «Mayflower», of whom was master Robert Courtise or, as we should write it nowadays, Curtiss. The «George», Fenner's own property and presumably representing his risk in the venture had «John Smith of Hampton» as master and Captain John Heywood also aboard. Probably a military man.

The full story of what turned out to be a rather unlucky adventure all round is too long to transcribe here. But there can be no doubt that its main intention was to follow the track of John Hawkins who opened up the trade in «black ivory» as between the Guinea Coast and the Spanish dominions overseas. Ivory, gold dust, musk, and Guinea grains would also be welcome merchandise but the account written by Walter Wren, who was apparently serving as purser on the «Mayflower», is not informative as to the make-up of the expedition. One can but suppose that Springham and Worsopp put up what was needed in the shape of trade goods and ships' stores, while George Fenner, who had already made earlier voyages to the Coast and is expressly described as knowing the business — in all likelihood he had been out with Hawkins — found the shipping. For his brother, Edward Fenner, is described as being captain of the «Mayflower», of which Robert Curtiss was master. It may perhaps be permissible to point out that at that period the «master» of a vessel was not of necessity in supreme command. His was the technical job of navigating, with the help of such seamen as he had signed on. And it is reasonably certain that Drake's orders under which the gentlemen were to haul, etc., with the mariners were at first by no means acceptable to the «lower deck»!

The little fleet left Plymouth on the 10th Dec. 1566, had a fairly fast passage across the Bay and down the Portuguese coast, being off Madeira by Christmas Day. They had lost sight of the «Castle of Comfort» but that did not spoil their festivities aboard «Mayflower», those of the «George» coming over and being «feasted with such cheere as God had sent us». Rendezvous had been arranged for the Canaries so they stood on SSE and four days later were off Santa Cruz, had

considerable trouble in getting a letter ashore owing to the state of the surf, but learnt that the «Castle of Comfort» had passed the port and would probably be found at Gomera. It was so, and the little fleet, after wooding and watering, sailed for the eastward to run down the African coast from Cape Blanco to C. Verd. and pick up what they could. Interesting but lengthy are the details; similar though to most accounts of early west coast trading; as always, the whites were astonished and shocked by the perfidy of the negroes! Parenthetically one may say that of all the European races who went a-slaving in West African rivers the most humane were by common consent the Portuguese. A fact not always noted in English history books!

On this particular occasion trouble occurred. Some seamen having been sent ashore as guarantees of good faith preliminary to trade were not released in due course, the blacks saying «that there was in the foresayde roade three weeks before we came an English shippe which had taken three of their people and until we did bring or sende them again we should not have our men although we would give our three ships with their furniture».

Most unreasonable! To make matters worse Fenner and his men had secured but little trade and scarce half a dozen blacks when they left the coast and made for the Cape Verd islands. There too the inhabitants apparently did not like the cut of their jib. Cannon shots were exchanged, after which «we departed towards the islands of the Azores». They anchored off Corvo, that westernmost land where to this day no inhabitant locks his door o' nights. For the good reason that there are no locks on the doors, such mechanisms being unnecessary. From there the «Castle of Comfort» had to let slip her cable hastily before a sudden squall. She ran out to sea, only to find on returning next day to pick up her anchor that it was gone. Together with a brand new cable, «new and never before wetted and better worth than £ 40». The writer ironically continues, «so we accompt ourselves much beholding to the honest Portugales!»

Flores, and Fayal, where they watered and revituated, lay on their route to Terceira, where they hoped «to pick up an anchor and cable from a Portugal ship». Only there, next

morning, lay «a great shippe and 2 caravels, «which we judged «to be of the King of Portugal's armada, and so they were». It was a running fight, with the odds heavily in favour of the Portuguese, now joined by yet more caravels. The wind was light and fitful and things did not look too good. So the «George», «after coming up to confer and minding to fall eastern of us and so to come up again, fell quickly upon the lee and, by reason of the little wind it was so long before she could fill her sails again. Hence both the shippe and the caravels were come up to us, and she, falling in among them made reasonable shift with them, but they got a-head of her so that she could not fetch us: — then 5 of the caravels followed her but we saw she defended herself against them all».

Maybe so, but that is the last we hear of the little «George». Nor are we told just how the «Castle of Comfort» and «Mayflower» broke off the engagement. Apparently they did so, for they made for Home and, after swopping 5 negroes with a Portuguese ship from the Brazils for a paltry 40 cases each holding 26 loaves of sugar, somewhere off the Lizard, they came into the Solent on the 6th June and from thence «we sayled to Southampton where we made an end of this voyage». What happened to the «George of Chichester» seems fairly self-evident. The fact of the vessel's own copy of the original charter-party now lying in Portugal's Torre do Tombo justifies the assumption that she became the lawful prize of her captors.

Not a profitable voyage this, for Fenner and his backers, but he probably had better luck next time. His name will be found in the supplement to the Dictionary of National Biography, whence we gather that he was not only well known in the Guinea trade but also shared in that early «Battle of Britain» known at Home as «The Spanish Armada» He was, according to one report, the sea captain who first reported Philip's ill-starred fleet off the mouth of the Channel, but as to this fact, reports differ. What is certain is that he shared in the great fight off Dunkirk and the record has it that Lord Howard of Effingham himself, England's Lord High Admiral, called to Fenner in the thick of the engagement, fearing that he was dropping astern; «Oh George, what doest thou? Wilt thou now frustrate my hope and opinion conceived of thee? Wilt thou

forsake me now?» With which words he, being enflamed, «approached forthwith, encountered the enemy, and did the «part of a most valiant Captain. His name was George Fenner, «a man that had been conversant in many sea fights». On this occasion Fenner was in command of the «Galeon Leicester», described in Emanuel van Meteren's account as being one of the five «best» or as we should now say «capital» ships directly under Effingham's orders. But that, as Kipling would have said, is another story. A story nevertheless well worthy of being re-read in all its several recordings at this present time, little though it may seem to be related to the luckless escapade of Fenner's «George of Chichester», now only recalled by an ageing document preserved throughout the centuries in Portugal's archives. George Fenner himself is presumed to have died in or about the year 1600.

*H. Hallam Hipwell.*

Sintra. 15 Decr. 1943.