



From The Archives

Our series of extracts from Mrs Gill's book *Six Months on Ascension* continues with a description of a walk from Mars Bay. The book is an account of her time with her husband's 1877 expedition to observe the Transit of Mars, from where Mars Bay gets its name.

One cloudy afternoon towards the end of September we discovered, in the course of our evening ramble, that a rough path led across the little tongue of land which I have already described as lying to the south of us. Ever since coming to Mars Bay I had looked at this forest of lava, and wondered whether it might be possible by any means to penetrate it, and so reach the twin bay on the other side. But the needlelike rocks were not encouraging, and it required some practice in clinker walking, before we could make up our minds to attempt it. However, on the afternoon in question we resolved to explore, and set out about 4 o'clock in a spirit of enterprise, and armed with our alpenstocks.

We entered the rocky forest at what seemed the most accessible point, close to our shore, and then tried to steer eastward. After clambering a few yards, we noticed that in some places the sharp points of the rocks were broken off, and the hollows filled up with them, "just as if it were meant for a road," we remarked, never dreaming that this was other than chance. But as we proceeded, it became clear that a road had actually been made here; shadowy indeed, and we often lost it, but only to find it again at another turn. The discovery affected us with something of the scared surprise that Robinson Crusoe felt at sight of the foot-prints on the sand.

For the first time I saw beauty in Ascension. Grim and joyless, but grand and majestic, were these gloomy rocks, trimmed round the base with delicately-tinted coral, their sternness veiled in feathery foam. Millions of shell-fish covered the lower rocks, among which lurked

lucid pools, lined with the wonderfully-constructed homes of their inhabitants.

While poking at a lovely shelf of pink coralline in one of these grottos, trying to dislodge it, I felt my stick suddenly pulled from my grasp. Thinking it must have got fixed among the stones in some way, I was about to put down my hand to disengage it, when to my horror I saw some ugly slimy tentacles wind themselves round my trusty staff, which was now the prey of a cuttle-fish. There was not the slightest occasion for it, of course; nevertheless, I screamed. This was no devil-fish of Victor Hugo dimensions; but so hideous was the creature, that disgust, not terror, possessed me. David, ran quickly to my assistance. "Only an octopus! We have seen many of these before."

"Yes, but only baby ones, who looked innocent enough to be gorged with crabs; this is a monster – a fiend!"

We stood watching him. Clearly my stick was not to his liking, for by-and-by he gradually unwound himself from it and sank sullenly down among the coral, looking, as before, like a tuft of harmless seaweed. How I congratulated myself on not having trusted my hand under water! Had I done so, and had I been alone, I doubt not that this monster of ugliness would have cost me at least a limb, for I fear I should have lacked the strength and presence of mind to fling him off at once, before the "suckers" had seized firm hold – the only chance, I believe, of freeing one's self without hurt. David wished to secure our big octopus for future contemplation, and aimed at him a strong blow, hoping by chance to touch his vital part, but he only touched his spleen. Immediately on finding himself attacked, the creature emitted an inky fluid, which turned the clear pool dark as Styx, and under cover of this he made his escape, much to David's disappointment, and to my relief.

The museum is open every Saturday from 10:00 to 12:00. We have an extensive stock of books, t-shirts and many other mementoes of the island.