



"A MILE FROM SHORE WE RESTED FOR A LITTLE WHILE"

FISHING FOR STEAK AND EGGS

By ROBERT DEAN FRISBIE

Illustrated by Mablon Blaine

THE day was breathlessly hot. Ura, the diminutive chief of police on the Pacific atoll of Puka-puka (Danger Island), where I am a trader, steamed and sweated as he lolled from one door of his coral-lime house to another in a vain attempt to intercept the ghost of a breeze. At length he abandoned hope of finding comfort indoors and sent his numerous children in search of the three village policemen.

In the course of time they appeared and having consulted with their chief, they went off to their respective villages to cry the law of Ura: every man, woman and child was to go to the outer beach for a grand community turtle-hunt.

I was weighing copra when the Central Village policeman announced the event in front of the trading-station. Men and women rose from their morning slumber to stagger out into the blazing

sunlight. They blinked stupidly, rolled their tongues in their cheeks, scratched their heads, and still half asleep, turned to cross the islet to the outer reef. Hitching up a *parcu* and hanging a pair of water-goggles around my neck, I followed.

Community fishings are common occurrences on Danger Island. Periodically one of the villages rouses itself and issues a challenge to the other two to join in a fishing competition for rock grouper, snappers, bonito, albacore, flying-fish, turtle, or whatever kind of fish happen to be plentiful at the time. When the day's fishing is over, each participant takes his fish to the churchyard where it is counted and scored for his village. The winners celebrate, generally with a song and dance, and then the fish are divided equally among all the men, women and children of the

three villages. Finally the people go home to cook their fish, none too fragrant after a day in the full blaze of the Puka-puka sun.

Ura, being chief of police, could not, of course, lower his dignity by opening any trifling competition such as grouper fishing, where there would not be the slightest risk of any one being killed or maimed for life. With him it must be torch-light netting along the treacherous Arai reef, or best of all, because most dangerous, turtle-hunting. Although little Ura could not possibly bring in a turtle, he could at least send out his neighbors to hazard their lives, and personally accept the credit for a big catch.

Benny, my store boy, overtook me before I had reached the reef. He was carrying a piece of light native wood about four feet long and six inches wide. It was for me, he explained, to be used as a

head-rest while at sea, so that if I wanted to I could take my usual siesta.

On reaching the outer reef I was startled at the sight of the gigantic combers roaring along the serrations and knife-edges of coral; but Benny was not in the least alarmed. He flung my board beyond the breakers and without waiting for a lull ran confidently out to a spot where an immense comber was just curling to fall. In another instant he would have been crushed to death on the coral, had he not plunged headlong into the foam. I lost sight of him for half a minute, but presently he bobbed up beyond the breakers, smiling, and as happy as a porpoise.

I knew how he had done it, having seen the same thing done many times before, but I had never had the courage to attempt it myself. Benny had merely hurried out between breakers to a point where the undertow would carry him to sea, although the foam above him was rushing shoreward. After swimming with the undertow until nearly out of breath, he had brought himself to the surface with a few strong strokes.

While hesitating I heard a cackling voice cry, "Come on, rockpat!" It was old Mama, my cook. She hobbled industriously past, her breath coming short and raspingly. As unconcernedly as Benny she made her way across the reef and with a flutter of grass skirts, flopped into a billow of foam. A moment later she reappeared far beyond the break of the surf.

I hesitated no longer, for I imagined I could see old Mama laughing at me. I rushed out, threw myself into the next comber with suicidal abandon, and dived until my hands touched the coral. Then, to my astonishment—for I expected only to make myself ridiculous—

I found that I was being carried rapidly seaward. The foam thinned, disappeared, and, as I was wearing my water goggles, I could pilot myself through the fantastic forests of coral. There were mountains that seemed to be standing upside down, cañons wider at the base than at the top, dark caves from which slimy things stared, coral trees whose roots were spread out in the water while their boughs were imbedded deep in the sea, bottomless abysses, and colors such as we poor humans who live on land never dream of. A huge fish finned lazily, only a few feet away, and a shark eyed me as he swam gravely past.

On crossing a crevice in the coral I saw the head of a conger-eel, his cold bloodless eyes watching me as though deliberating whether or not to attempt such a large morsel. His fang-toothed mouth was quite large enough to have taken my leg. I had heard of men being seized by giant keptocephali and held beneath the surface until they drowned. Panic seized me and I swam frantically for the surface. Then of a sudden my fears vanished, for there was Benny at my side, grinning reassuringly. He had come down to see to it that nothing happened to the boss of his store. My confidence returned at once; I felt that I could have returned and kicked the conger-eel out of his hole.

The long swells and the wide hollows between them were dotted with heads, for most of the inhabitants of Puka-puka had come out. Little Ura, with a gorgeous red and yellow *pareu* about his loins was chattering away, ordering the young men of his village to catch many turtles for the honor of the chief of police. Mama was by no means the only old grandma present, for the octogenarians had turned out *en masse* from their huts and lean-tos and were paddling about, diving and splashing as unconcernedly as though they really belonged in the sea rather than on land. Some of them were buoyed up with pieces of wood such as mine, and they were so completely at home in the water that they actually dozed off for a few minutes from time to time, resting on their little supports.

On other islands, Penrhyn and Manihiki for example, there would have been much concern about sharks, but at Puka-puka no one pays the slightest attention to them. It is claimed that no one on the island has ever been attacked by a shark, and I know from experience that they treat these monsters with complete indifference.

My store boy and I swam leisurely along the reef. With our water-goggles adjusted we gazed at the fishes displaying their poly-



"HERE I WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PACIFIC, ABOARD A BRUTE I WAS AFRAID EITHER TO TURN LOOSE OR TO STAY ON."

chromatic scales to the sea world, as, with true Puka-puka languor, they finned from coral to coral. Presently Benny suggested that we swim a mile or two out to sea and hunt for a giant turtle. As is commonly known, these green turtles found in tropic seas live for a thousand years and weigh three or four hundred pounds. They have jaws capable of snapping a man's arm off with the ease of a shark bisecting a jellyfish. But it is not commonly known, I believe, that the tails of the males only— are their most deadly weapons.

Benny explained this to me as we swam leisurely seaward. The male's tail is much longer than the female's, and he has the habit of hooking it around anything that touches it, holding it in a viselike grip, and sounding. So, when a man is grappling one of the giant chelonia, if he allows his arm or leg to touch the tail, he is instantly caught, the tail hooking the limb and pinning it against the shell. Thereupon he loses his hold on the turtle's flapper, or fluke, while vainly trying to free himself, and is dragged beneath the surface to drown. For this reason, the man who alone brings in a male turtle is looked upon as a *toa* (a superman) by the people of the atolls.

A mile from shore we rested for a

little while, propped up on my wooden support. The water was like polished steel, and now we were far enough from the reef to be in the midst of the great undulations of the Pacific. When we sank into the long troughs the island would be lost to view below the oily backs of the rollers, and then it required but little imagination to believe oneself hundreds of miles from land. But the next undulation would raise us, showing the island ablaze in the sunlight, an emerald of dazzling beauty resting lightly on the bosom of the sea. Benny was explaining the method of catching the giant turtle.

"The easiest way is the most dangerous. You grasp the turtle by the skin at the nape of his neck, and then steer him ashore, riding on his back. This is seldom done with the male turtle for your legs come too close to his tail. If we find a female turtle to-day, you can ride her in this manner, but if it is a male, leave him to me. We hold the papa turtle by getting the right arm under his left front fluke; then, reaching up, we catch hold of the front edge of his upper shell. This too is dangerous, because, during the struggle the hands may come within reach of the turtle's mouth. That is how

King Pirato's father was killed: the turtle grabbed him, carried him down and drowned him. In either of these ways the turtle cannot sound, and, since he is very clumsy, you can easily guide him by jerking him from one side to the other. Now, Ropati, you take the mama turtle and I will take her husband. Ura will be surprised when he sees us coming in."

"But hadn't we better find the turtles first?"

"There they are," said Benny. "I saw them a long time ago, but being a white man, you are not supposed to notice such things."

Following his gaze, I saw what appeared to be two cocoanuts floating a hundred yards or so away.

"Grab her like this," said Benny, taking me by the scruff of the neck, "and steer her this way." He jerked me from side to side in a most unceremonious manner. "Swim close behind me and take the one I leave. We can surprise them because they are asleep."

We swam to within twenty feet of them, adjusted our water-goggles, and dived, Benny first, I following. They woke up and moved when, in a flash, Benny twisted his arm around the larger turtle's left flapper. Instantly I lost them in a cloud of foam. I

swam past, too excited to think of fear. The female was sounding, but her movement was so slow I soon caught up with her. Following Benny's directions, I caught her by the nape, wound my legs around her shell, and pulled upwards. She responded immediately, flapping to the surface in a panic, and just in time, too, for my lungs were bursting.

By the time I had overcome my excitement sufficiently to be aware of what I was doing, I found my pelagic
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"BENNY TWISTED HIS ARM AROUND THE LARGER TURTLE'S LEFT FLAPPER"

As we watched him he hopped slowly up to a plantain and began eating the green leaves greedily. In an hour or two he had wholly recovered from his "tight pinch," and we set down

another item in our nature book: "Plantain is the toad's antidote for snake-poisoning."

Verily, we are living in a wonderful world, full to the brim with interest.



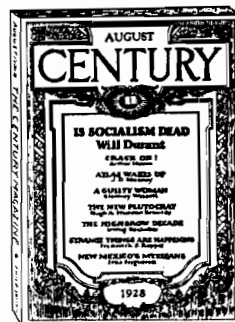
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(Continued from page 439)

Pegasus swimming mightily for the coast of South America, many thousands of miles away. I had lost my board, and at the moment I could see neither Benny nor the island, as they were behind me; and here was I in the middle of the Pacific aboard a brute I was afraid either to turn loose or to stay on. I was helpless and was about to loosen my hold when I heard Benny yelling behind me. He was telling me to turn the creature landward. For the moment I had forgotten his instructions about guiding; now, putting them into practice, my fiery turtle turned like a well-broken mare. A moment later, rising on the top of a swell, I saw the island before me and Benny, all submerged but his head, driving his papa turtle toward the reef.

The male turtle was swifter than the female, reaching the reef in about thirty minutes, while my chelonia needed a good three quarters of an hour; so Benny had his safely turned over before I arrived. I was glad, for I enjoyed the glory of coming in alone, and when, about two hundred yards from the reef, I met two pretty little water nymphs, it gave me a great thrill to hear the first shout:

"Aue! The white man has got a big turtle!"

They swam beside me, one on either side, and no Roman conqueror could have ridden the high horse with more vainglory than I rode my lowly Mrs. Turtle. As we approached the reef, however, I had grave doubts as to how my triumph would end. I now knew how to get out to sea but had not the faintest notion of how to weather the surf in getting ashore. But with my companions watching me I did not hesitate. I drove straight on, willing to get a good tumbling rather than be shamed.

It turned out to be both easy and exciting. A great sea lifted us high, and crashed down with a deafening roar, carrying us swiftly along on light foam as soft as eiderdown. As we were swept across the reef the turtle's plastron shell protected me from the coral. My two companions had no need for protection; they were as much at home in the surf as a pair of periwinkles.

Sitting on his turtle, with many flourishes and more lies, Benny told the people of Puka-puka how I had bravely grappled my ferocious brute, and how I had insisted on bringing in the male one, only he would not allow it. He added many marvelous details, in the true native fashion, for unless it is bragging about themselves, there is nothing in which Puka-pukas delight more than in telling of the prowess of their friends.

EIGHT turtles were caught that day, only one of which came from the people of Ura's village. The chief of police was mortified beyond words. He returned to his splendid coral-lime house, wrapped his head in a bundle of dirty rags, pleaded sick, and refused to be seen for three days. But on the fourth day he emerged, resplendent in blue trousers and red silk shirt, and summoning his policemen, he held a grand session of court to fine the villagers for straying pigs. All the pigs on Puka-puka stray all the time, and as every one owns pigs Ura had no difficulty in choosing his victims. Thus, Leeward Village, which had shamed him by catching more turtles than his own settlement, was summoned *en masse* and each man fined a shilling. So Ura's dignity was re-established. But the fines were a small matter, for at Puka-puka no one ever pays them.

The third of Mr. Frisbie's stories, "The Sea Afire," will appear in ST. NICHOLAS next month, with a cover in color that will give you some idea of this fascinating sport. And a sheaf of stories of life in the South Seas will appear in "The Book of Puka-Puka," to be published by The Century Co. in the autumn. Make a note of that, for they will be worth your reading.

EDITOR.