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Voyage Through Paradise

*The story of a small boat passage through
the Society Islands*

By
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With a photographic log by the author

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unfailingly up-chuck lunches of pink squid. The bushes were full of adult male frigates left to guard the young while the mothers flew to sea for the squid which they hijack from other birds. Some of the males were so slow to rise from the nests that we caught them by the wings and let them go again in a din of squawking.

Near the frigate rookery we encountered a young octopus in a rock-bound pool. He was about four feet between tentacle tips. We studied him for an hour and marveled at his constant change of shape and mastery of protective coloration. He was so frightened, he tried all manner of ruses to get away. He could flatten out and become the exact color and texture of the sand, or turn purple and pink and sprout barbs to become part and parcel of the coral. Sometimes he streamlined himself and rocketed across the pool with incredible speed—again, he would execute a sort of eight-footed gallop and charge the water with murky coloring. When one of the natives suggested spearing him for supper we suggested that the creature, having been frightened nearly to death, had earned its freedom.

Not far from the octopus pool, Harry made a discovery that was another highlight of the day's wanderings. Gently rolling to and fro in a lagoon basin was a corked bottle with a message inside. The scrawly note which we extracted read:

H.M.S. Dunedin, 100 miles from Nuka Hiva. If found state where and when and mail to E. C. Elliot, Dunedin, New Zealand.

The bottle was 600 miles from its starting point, which is a fair indication that currents are strong in the South Pacific.

We thought Mr. Elliot's note was a bit abrupt—no "please" or "thank you" on it. And it assumed that there was a mailbox on every coconut tree. Hazel thought that perhaps a copy of Emily Post was the thing to mail to Mr. Elliot. But the message was faithfully dispatched some months later by mail steamer from the Cook Islands, and we hoped it would bring joy to Dunedin.

About halfway home the boys again beached the canoes. They walked us across some fringing reef to a section of outer beach piled high with the pieces of an ill-fated treasure ship. Many years ago, in the island's sketchy past, a three-masted schooner, the *Retriever*, was deliberately run upon the reef and wrecked here. Her cargo, the story goes, consisted of two and one-half million dollars in gold and silver

bullion, plundered from a South American church vault and brought thither for safe burial.

Odd bits of teak planking, railing, and companionway much rounded by the elements were strewn over a half-mile radius, high and dry among the palms. As for the treasure, we could only see that a number of people had taken stock in its existence. So many great pits were dug by the curious, down through the years, that portions of the atoll looked like the outskirts of a Colorado mining town.

→ Back at the "village," the eggs safely delivered to Etera, we turned our attention to Roo's turtle-conservation program. In the lagoon shallows more than a hundred baby turtles are kept in floating cages as part of a turtle-propagation idea begun by Roo several years before. The plan is roughly this: for every turtle a native raises to maturity and sets free, he is allowed to send another away to the Papeete market to be sold and credited to his account. As all natives participate in the scheme, all share equally in the sales.

At turtle time (only in November, Herr Luckner notwithstanding) men hide along the outer beach night after night and wait for mother turtles to clamber in over the reef. Sometimes they wait two weeks without seeing one, sometimes they spot a dozen in their first week's vigil. Always their job is to lie completely hidden until eggs have been laid, for the eggs are the important thing, and killing the female turtle is rarely attempted.

Turtle eggs are about the size of ping-pong balls, and 150 are often laid at one sitting. Staking the claims, even after having witnessed the egg-laying procedure, is difficult, because a mother turtle is a great pantomimist and will go to no end of trouble to disguise the caching of her embryonic young. Often she will waddle several hundred yards along the high beach, digging a series of dummy holes and going through the motions of laying, just to throw interlopers off the track. These fake mounds not only fool the men but, around hatching time three months later, hundreds of hermit crabs encircle them in wait for the tender, spiderlike turtles they hope to intercept on the dash to the sea.

This dash of the newly hatched turtles to the sea must be the most pathetically one-sided struggle in the world. (If they could only be taught to dash to the inner lagoon instead!) Should any manage to out-

rank the gauntlet of big red hermit crabs, the odds are 100 to one they will be snapped up by sea birds before they have traveled 10 feet; should a lucky one reach the water, the chances are one in 100 he will swim safely past the waiting sharks. All South Sea killers can sense turtle time, and today man is apparently the turtle's only true friend. Thanks to man, 100 lagoon-raised Mopelia turtles are set free each year—turtles formidable enough, by virtue of their 10-inch backs, to hold their own.

Fisherman-in-chief of Mopelia was Atau, a stocky old fellow who was able to produce on short notice any fish delicacy demanded. He could gather a sack of lobster, moi, or cavelli in just about the time it takes an American housewife to roll a wire basket through an A. & P.

Helping Atau with his fishing chores each day was one way in which we tried to prove ourselves useful in the community. To him, of course, the procedure was routine—to us it was an experience far removed from any "duty" we had ever before performed.

Early one morning, after an especially piquant breakfast of bird's-egg soufflé, garnished with grated coconut, coffee, and canned jam from the *Viator*, Atau armed the three of us with spears as well as the usual short hooks and lines. Then he led us around the mainland to a section of the outer lagoon where scarcely a foot of water covered about an acre of flat sandy bottom. This we came to know as Shark Pond, and it offered thrills aplenty. Here, medium-sized sharks came to sun-bathe in the tepid shallows. It was claimed that since nothing over five feet in length could swim with ease at this depth, we were safe from man-eaters.

Atau's heavy iron-barbed spear flew with deadly accuracy. Any black triangle of fin within 25 or 30 feet of his throwing arm was as good as a trophy of the hunt before he even wound up to throw. The sharks were quite lethargic in their movements until they became aware of what was going on—then they really tore up the water around us. They rarely came very close, but to us, at any distance, they seemed horrific. After Atau had thrown about a dozen upon the beach, he set about slitting their bellies. From each sleek white paunch slid a bucketful of tiny, bright-colored lagoon fish. To emphasize his antipathy for the wolves of the sea he tossed them back for eager brethren to devour.

When is a shark really dead? We thrust a spear handle into the

mouth of one whose belly had been slit, and the jaw closed with a bang. Three double rows of teeth clamped themselves into the wood, to snap off like brittle glass and remain embedded as the hardwood pole was wrenched free.

Nothing to do but work and play. And on Mopelia the workers were never too tired to play. Every evening, to the accompaniment of a dozen pairs of hands beating the hard-packed sand at the lagoon's edge, dancers outlined against the starlit sky wove rhythmic patterns upon the beach. Sometimes the steady thump thump thump—thump thump thump of hands smiting the earth was augmented by light tapping on blocks carved from coconut trunks. On other occasions the muffled sound of a heavy drumstick made of braided husk fibre could be heard beating a tattoo on a section of galley oven salvaged from the *Seeadler*. This soft boom, mingled with the far-away thud of the surf on the outer reef, cast a spell of primitive enchantment around the silhouetted dancing figures, making us forget that they were the everyday personalities we had grown to know so well.

Each afternoon a fleet of miniature sailing canoes was launched in the near lagoon and, like so many happy children, the entire citizenry of the isle scampered around, watching and participating in the races. The little ships were beautifully carved, and with their brightly colored *pareu* sails they made a flamboyant splash of color as they darted about, heeling against the steady trade wind.

Then one day we had one of the most surprising experiences that could possibly happen to Americans far from home. We knew the night before that something was astir, because Roo had come aboard *Viator* as we were making our nightly check-up and winding the chronometers, and asked if he could borrow the ship's flags. He also wanted a revolver and a Very pistol.

"Captain, I am sorry to bother you for these things—and I am sorry I cannot tell you why I need them. There will be a committee come to wake you all at dawn tomorrow and then you will see."

We couldn't imagine what our friend was planning. The three of us watched him paddle ashore with the things he had requested, and for a long time we sat talking and gazing at the twinkling stars before we climbed into *Okay* and started for the beach. All was so quiet as we pulled the boat up at the lagoon's edge we might have been alone.



Turia's house has picture windows opening in every direction yet not a single pane of glass to be cleaned. Okay, our outrigger, is drawn up on her white coral sand.



The inside of Turia's house, with its ever-fresh hibiscus blooms and tasteful furnishings, has a decorator's touch. The roof of pandanus is a masterpiece of handicraft.

Turia of Moorea was the most-traveled belle of the Society Islands. She had been abroad many times, spoke excellent French and English, yet preferred her home-made thatch bungalow on the shore of Papetoai Bay to anywhere else in the world.

