

A REPORTER AT LARGE

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TO THE MISKITO BANK



IN terms of distance from the nearest land, the remotest island in the Caribbean is Grand Cayman, whose nearest neighbor—the two smaller islands of its own group excepted—is the Isle of Pines, one hundred and fifty miles away to the northwest. The Isle of Pines belongs to Cuba, and the Cayman Islands are thought to be emergent peaks of a drowned mountain range extending from Cuba's Sierra Maestra westward across the Misteriosa Bank toward the Gulf of Honduras. To the south of the shallow waters that lie between the Caymans and southeast Cuba runs the formidable Cayman Trench, which in places attains a depth of well over four miles. Across this marine chasm, Jamaica lies one hundred and eighty miles to the southeast, and to the southwest, twenty miles more distant than Jamaica, lies Swan Island, on the continental shelf of Central America. Little Cayman and Cayman Brac, fifty-eight miles northeast of Grand Cayman, were first recorded on Columbus's fourth voyage, in 1503. Columbus was beating his way north from Panama to Hispaniola, and, according to the journal kept by his son Ferdinand, "upon Wednesday, the 10th of the same month of May, we were in sight of two very small and low islands, full of tortoises, as was all the sea about, insomuch that they look'd like little rocks, for which reason those islands were called *Tortugas*." Ponce de Leon confused these islands with the group now called Dry Tortugas, off to the west of the Florida Keys, and eventually Columbus's *Tortugas* came to be called the Caimans, Caimanos, Caymanos, Kie Manus, and Cayman Islands—all variations on the Spanish word "*caimán*," which means "crocodile." (The residents say "Grahm Cay-mahn" and "Little Cay-mahn" but "Cáy-man Islands" and "Cáy-man Brac." "Brac" is from the Old English for "cliff" or "wall" and refers to a high limestone bluff at the eastern end of that island.) Many authorities have questioned the early accounts of crocodiles on these far islands, and have attributed the name to the presence there of the rock iguana. But the American crocodile is a native of the

Isle of Pines, and a specimen was actually killed on Little Cayman in the nineteen-thirties. The species still inhabits the salt mangrove coasts near Cape Sable, Florida, and it is essentially marine; whether or not it has ever bred in the Cayman Islands, its occasional occurrence there would seem much more likely than not. Sir William Dampier, the great English navigator, who visited Grand Cayman in 1675, mentioned the presence of crocodiles on the surface at West Bay. Dampier was familiar with the animals of the Isle of Pines and could distinguish the crocodile from the alligator ("Both kinds," he wrote, "are called *caymanes* by the Spanish"); it is not likely that he confused the beast with the much smaller iguana, a shy vegetarian of dry inland habitats that was found throughout the Caribbean at that time.

Whatever its origin, the name by which these islands are now known is far less apt than the one given to them by Columbus. In the century and a half after his visit, the Caymans became a common ground for sea rovers of all nations, who came there for the sole purpose of hunting *tortugas*. The green turtle, which could be kept alive on deck, provided fresh eggs and nourishing meat in great abundance, and it is generally acknowledged as the single most important factor in the exploration of the Caribbean; while it made its nest as far north as Bermuda, it is traditionally associated with the three small islands of the Cayman group,

far off in the sparkling blue wastes south of the Tropic of Cancer. Here it visited each year from April to September, to haul out on the high white beaches and lay its eggs in the warm sand.

Apart from their turtles, the Caymans were considered worthless, and no country bothered to claim them until 1655, when England seized Jamaica from Spain. The British regarded the turtle cays as outposts of the larger island, and acquired them officially in 1670, by the provisions of the Treaty of Madrid. In this same year, the Spanish burned twenty houses at "Caimanos," less out of poor sportsmanship than in an effort to suppress the pirates, castaways, and other raffish elements who made their home there. The two smaller Caymans may have been attacked as well, for they are known to have been inhabited as early as 1661; that their population differed in character from that on Grand Cayman is doubtful, for after a general amnesty in 1700 they were immediately depopulated, and were not dwelt upon again until 1833.

By the time the first true settlers came to Grand Cayman, in the seventeen-thirties, the decline of the green turtle had begun. The turtles were so depleted that ships no longer came to Grand Cayman to hunt them, and the Caymanians themselves were scouring the south coast of Cuba and the islands called Jardines de la Reina, where the turtle fishing was eked out with brigandage. As late as 1798, Grand Cayman was called a "pirates' nest" by the Spaniards in Cuba, who appealed to Madrid to wipe it off the earth. Henry Morgan and Neal Walker were among the famous rascals who frequented the place, and Edward Teach, the notorious Blackbeard, once "took a small turtler" at Grand Cayman. A character in Sir Walter Scott's "The Pirate" describes it as a ruffianly place "where a brace or two of fellows may be shot in the morning and no more heard of or asked about them than if they were so many wood pigeons."

In the nineteenth century, the only marked change in island customs was the reduction of piracy to "the wreck-

PETER MATHIESSEN

THE NEW YORKER

1967

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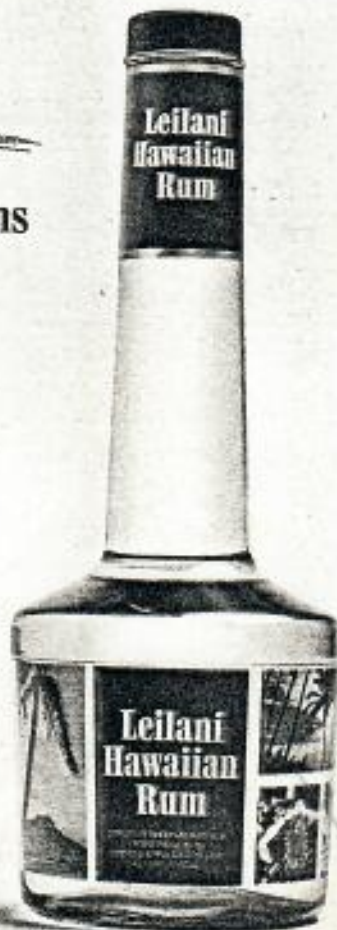
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The year of the Atlantis visit was an auspicious one for Grand Cayman, since it also witnessed the coronation of George VI. Since 1900, the sale of Cayman stamps to philatelists across the world had made the difference between lean years and fat, and the sale of a special coronation issue contributed handsomely to the construction of badly needed lighthouses, a library, and a small hospital. The war cut off the tiny flow of tourism but did not halt prosperity; many seamen of Cayman found berths on merchant ships, while at home the schooners could not meet the wartime demand for turtle meat. Other island products—boats, tortoise-shell, sharkskin, and a hard rope made locally from the young shoots of the silver thatch palm—were also selling well, and the total deposits of all Caymanians (there were 6,670 in 1943) in the Government Savings Bank rose from fifty-five hundred pounds in 1937 to nearly a hundred thousand pounds by the end of the war. Caymanian seamen still enjoy an excellent reputation on tankers and freighters, and as many as a thousand men, or one-tenth of the whole population, earn money for themselves and their families this way. The blessing is a mixed one, for there is a woeful lack of young men on the islands, but, in conjunction with good turtle years and a small but expanding tourist trade, the income sent home has made the Caymans far more prosperous than the majority of Caribbean islands. A poor stamp sale in 1949 caused the first budget deficit in nine years, but dependence on the sale of stamps has now ended. According to the Colonial Report for 1956, there was no island poverty at all. In 1960, the emergence of the Cayman Islands was given recognition by their first royal visitor: Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal reviewed an honor guard of Sea Scouts in Georgetown, was presented with a sharkskin purse, and opened a small fenced garden by the library, which is known today as the Princess Royal Park.

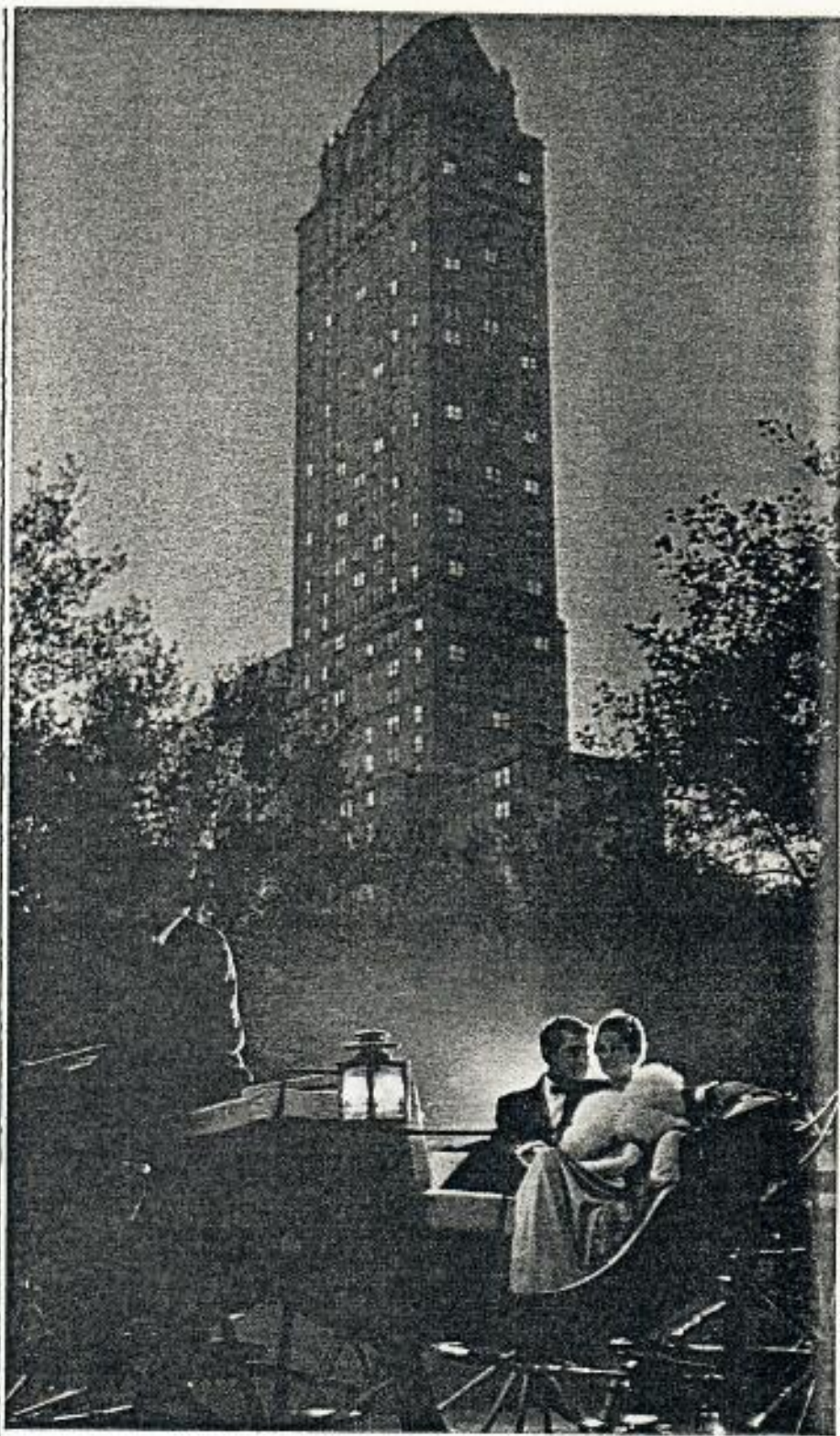
THE green turtles have been gone, of course, for nearly two centuries; nevertheless, it was the turtle that first brought me to Grand Cayman. As a boy stamp collector, addicted to geographies, I had specialized in islands, and a favorite stamp of the Cayman Islands portrayed a large *tor-tuga*. Later, I became interested in the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) as a vanishing species, one of the last of the

great reptile relicts from the age of the dinosaurs, and an ocean wanderer whose powers of navigation are even more awesome than those of birds.

"The Windward Road," an excellent book by Archie Carr, the noted biologist of the University of Florida, contains a fascinating story about a turtle schooner called the Wilson. In early 1942, when this ship left the Miskito Bank with her first cargo of the season, she carried on her decks five turtles being sent home by a crewman on the schooner Adams, which was still working the Bank. Each of the five was marked with this crewman's special brand. A few days later, there was a heavy norther, and when, about twelve days after that, the same crewman on the Adams caught one of his five branded turtles off Dead Man Bar, right where he had caught it two weeks before, it appeared that the twice-caught turtle was evidence of the Wilson's doom. But the Wilson had not perished in the storm. She was a swift ship, and she had made a swift passage to Grand Cayman, where the five turtles had been put in a water pen, or "crawl" (i.e., corral). Almost immediately, the crawl had been flooded by storm seas, and the turtles had escaped. The turtle in question, in not more than twelve days, and probably less, had navigated the three hundred and fifty miles between Grand Cayman and its own coral head on the vast banks off Central America.

This story of the Wilson had lodged itself in the attic of my brain, and was one of the reasons, one day in May a couple of years ago, that I changed a plan to investigate the island of San Andrés and flew away instead to Grand Cayman. I had never talked with anyone who had been to the place, which is for me the strongest sort of recommendation, and I was disappointed when I learned that although sea travel to the island, provided mostly by small trading vessels out of Tampa and Kingston, Jamaica, remained unscheduled, one could fly directly from Miami to an airport at Grand Cayman on more days than not in a given week. The journey, passing directly over Cuba, required about two and a half hours, and brought one in to the island's airport across a vast, mangrove-bordered bight called the Great North Sound. (Grand Cayman is twenty-three miles from west to east and eight miles at its widest, and the Great North Sound, six miles by seven, almost cuts it in two.)

In May, most right-thinking tourists have long since gone back north. From May to October, the island



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is subject to rain, humid heat, and mosquitoes so dense that local cattle have been known to smother from the congestion of insects in their nostrils; from July onward, there is also the threat of hurricanes. Having turned up without a reservation, I was fortunate to be sent off to the Beach Club, an airy, attractive place with separate cottages on the Six-Mile Beach, which sweeps in a graceful five-mile curve north from Georgetown along the island's western face; in the last decade, several hotels and houses have been built along it, but in its northern reaches it is all but empty. As I walked along the beach that night, a soft wind evoked the ghosts of the great flotillas of green turtles that once blew and sported in this limpid water, and hauled themselves, sighing, from the sea to bury their round white eggs in the moonlit sand. I returned to the bar and ordered rum, determined that I would sail on a turtle voyage before it was too late; the green-turtle fishery and the turtle boats, the way the world was going, would soon pass, and their passing would end an epoch, on Grand Cayman and throughout the Caribbean.

According to my barroom researches, three vessels still sailed regularly to the Miskito Bank and a few more journeyed there from time to time, but only one ship was still operating under full sail. The Lydia E. Wilson, to give the schooner I had read about her full name, disdained not only motor power but radio-telephone, fathometer, and even running lights—all the lubberly frills, in short, that are considered essential to modern sea travel. Unfortunately, the Wilson had departed a few days earlier for Nicaragua, and since a turtle voyage may last from four to seven weeks, there was no hope of her imminent return.

After looking around the island for a few days, I flew back to Miami, but in the next months I maintained communication with the island through the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. John Hatch, the American owners of the Beach Club, who notified Captain Cadian Ebanks, of the Wilson, that I would like to go along on a turtle voyage the following spring. Captain Cadie, as he is known, was perfectly agreeable, but in the course of the year he apparently persuaded himself that I meant to charter his schooner at a princely fee and sail in it, in solitary splendor, the length and breadth of the sunny Caribbees.

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tering the Wilson and that anything other than an ordinary turtle voyage was of no interest to me. But by the time I arrived, on April 4th, the Hatches thought it necessary to warn me that Captain Cadie had his heart set on a giant fee and there was no telling to what state of mind he had been brought by his disappointment. After so many months of planning, I refused to believe that the whole enterprise might collapse at the last minute, and early on the morning of April 5th I travelled up to West Bay in a rented car to try to get things straightened out.

West Bay lies north of Georgetown, at the far end of the Six-Mile Beach. Under tall almond trees, it is a tranquil place of broom-swept white sand yards—underbrush is rigorously suppressed, to discourage mosquitoes—colored with bright spots of oleander and hibiscus and bougainvillea. Beyond the village, a sea wall of dead coral stone called ironshore curves out around Northwest, Boatswain's, and Barker's Points toward a long reef that separates the sea from the Great North Sound. There is a channel through this reef that permits passage of deep-draft fishing vessels into the anchorages of the Great North Sound, and here I assumed the Wilson had been taken, for I saw no sign of her off West Bay. After asking directions, I drove through the village and followed a road that turned inland.

The country inland from West Bay is relatively high—a gaunt, bright countryside of limestone outcroppings and twisted trees. Except for buttonwood and mangrove in the swamps, the most prevalent tree on Grand Cayman is the gumbo-limbo, doubtless because its soft wood has no use; gumbo-limbos are reddish trees, and they stand like torches along the road, catching the sun in translucent copper peels of shedding bark. In farmland where the countryside has been burned over, the trees glow demonically in the black ground; juxtaposed with the gray bones of limestone karst, they give the landscape an infernal aspect that has caused one region of the island to be known as Boilers and another, not far from West Bay, to be called Hell.

Captain Cadian Ebanks lived in the part of West Bay that lay farthest from the sea. One reached his house by a long white crooked road stretching away, between cabins and stiles, over a crooked hill; there were cattle and lone horses in the fields, and white egrets, and many of the fields were fenced by walls of limestone cobble. The car bounced up a narrow lane

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between hill pastures and came out on a rambling knoll that overlooked the Caribbean. Between the house and the yard there was a cook shed, and a man stepped out of it as I drew up. I got out of the car. "Captain Ebanks?" I asked. He nodded politely, waiting for me to explain my presence. He was a short but broad and strong man in his mid-fifties, with the leather face and lumpy hands of fishermen the world over; he had a broad mouth and strange, small eyes that were wind-squinted and discolored by sea weather; his hair was iron gray patched with white, and his feet, with plenty of air between the toes, were thick and broad and brown. With a bold nose, and a face simultaneously wide and lean, Cadian Ebanks struck me as neither white nor Negro, and it suddenly came to me why this was so: to a degree unmatched by any Caymanian I had seen, the Captain looked like a full-blooded Indian.

When I stated my name, he began to laugh—a soft, sweet laugh that collapsed his face and caused him to bend and stamp his foot. Then he became grave again. Averting his eyes, he explained carefully that one of his sons, a merchant seaman, also named Cadian, had lately been in New York and had tried to reach me in order to determine my intentions in this matter; that since young Cadian had not found me, old Cadian had assumed that I was not coming to Grand Cayman. He acknowledged that I had written him that I would be away from home after mid-March, and it was also true—there seemed to be no questioning the fact that I was standing there before him in his yard—that I had arrived on the airplane of April 4th, as I had said I would. Nevertheless, he said—here he glanced at me slyly and began to laugh again—despite the fact that the Wilson had lain idle at Grand Cayman for three weeks, and although he had no real reason to believe I was not coming, he had decided to send his schooner off to Nicaragua two days before my arrival. She was expected back, he said, sometime in May.

The perversity of this seemed so enormous that I did not bother to protest; it was too late, in any case. There was no good explanation other than caprice, and we both knew it. Even so, he tried out one explanation, then another and another, speaking in a quiet voice, brow furrowed, toeing the warm ground, until, unable to contain it any longer, he gave way to an ultimate mirth that rolled up slowly from his belly until his body quaked with it and his eyes wept. It was, and



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is, the best laugh I have ever heard, and it was impossible to take offense; first, because a laugh like that one carries all before it, and, second, because he was also laughing at himself and at the hopelessness of the whole mess. I had to laugh myself, though I could just as readily have wept. Under the wide gaze of a number of children, who had approached to observe us in silence from tree limbs and other vantage points, we stood there wheezing in his yard. Then the laughter stopped. We stood around awhile, hands in hip pockets, gazing out across the ironshore toward Boatswain's Point. There was a strong easterly breeze, a fair wind for Nicaragua, and the whitecaps were collecting in long ridges on the sea.

"I be very sorry, mahn," Captain Cadie said, after a time. His regret was as sincere and unmistakable as his laughter. As if to recompense me for the lost trip, he drew back an old tarpaulin that covered five green turtles, lying on their backs under a mango tree. They were small specimens of two hundred pounds or less, and they had come from a new turtle ground he had discovered on his last voyage. In a few days, he would slaughter them for local sale. One of the turtles winked at me lugubriously, and both of us released a doleful sigh. I had vaguely dreaded the discomforts of the voyage—the stale food and water, the close quarters, and the villainous stench of a turtle schooner under the tropic sun—but now these matters seemed of small importance. A chance to witness something old and marvellous had been lost; it seemed inconceivable that a full-rigged schooner could operate even one more year, and the market for green turtles, like the green turtles themselves, could disappear. I told Captain Cadie that I would stay on a few days, now that I was here, and consider the possibility of making the trip the following spring. "Dot be best, mahn," he said gently. "We will go next year."

We shook hands, and I said that he should write to me in the winter if his plans changed or if there was something I could bring him in the spring.

"Well," he said slyly, not quite smiling, "you find a little place in your luggage, mahn, I might ask you to bring me a diesel motor for my vessel. I been thinkin' to put a motor in de Wilson. Might be I shorten her mahst. All dese motorboat, mahn—too much competition. So I been thinkin' with a motor, mahn, de vessel she run more correc'ly." I sensed that he was exerting mild coercion—applying my desire to go on his boat, and his boat



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alone, against whatever account we would have together in the future.

IN late February of the following year, when the Lydia E. Wilson sailed from Grand Cayman, many islanders came to the shore to see her go. For thirty years, the departure of the Wilson had attracted less attention than a shift of wind, for she was but one in a long line of Cayman schooners that for more than a century had sailed down to Nicaragua in pursuit of the green turtle. But this year the sad news had spread that she was bound for the Bay Islands of Honduras, where she would be converted into a motor vessel. The last and fastest of the Cayman sailing fleet came down that morning from the Great North Sound, I have been told, along the western shore, in the island's lee. She passed below Southwest Point under full canvas, and there the trade winds took her; she sped south, taut and lively, to the horizon.

On the eleventh of April, she returned to the island and dropped anchor off the quays of Georgetown. In the days following, Caymanians from all over the island came down to see her. They stood in knots along the pastel waterfront. Because they are a soft-spoken people, their reactions to the new motor vessel were polite, but there was real sorrow of a sort that had not been felt since 1958, when the sale of the schooner Goldfield to commercial interests in Colombia had reduced the sailing fleet to a single vessel. ("Many Caymanian eyes were moist the day she sailed away," according to the Colonial Report for that sad year.) All of the old fleet except the Adams and the Jimson—both converted to power years ago—had been sunk or sold; now the Lydia E. Wilson, too, had gone, and in the hearts of Cayman she would never be replaced by this rude craft with the single word "WILSON" lettered on her transom. Her tall spars had been cropped to half their height, and the stump of the mainmast no longer carried sail. The main deck aft, formerly clear, had disappeared beneath a deckhouse, still unpainted, which contributed to a new bulkiness in her lines.

Having arrived on Grand Cayman to join the Wilson on her first turtle voyage under power, I found myself regarded with commiseration, since I had never seen her under sail. Seth Arch, a boatwright who had helped to build her, said, "She were a pretty little vessel, mahn, make no mistake. Every frame in her mahogany, every

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one. And a fine sea boat." And Gleason Ebanks, a cousin of Captain Cadie, said, "She were like a wild horse, mahn—dot what she feel like! You got to hang on to her! Thirteen mile an hour—thirteen mile an hour, mahn. Dey weren't one of dem could touch her!" A sailor named Jim Rivers said, "I seen her average eleven mile an hour for two hundred twenty mile, all de way down to de banks." Jim Rivers would sail as mate on this first motor voyage; when I asked him if the motor wouldn't make his work easier, he merely shrugged.

The afternoon I arrived on Grand Cayman, Captain Cadie was occupied in removing a bent propeller shaft from the new Wilson—the first mechanical problem in the long history of his ship. Toward sundown, when his men rowed him ashore, his sharp eyes picked me out among the people on the quay, and he laughed sheepishly, turning his head away.

"So that's the Wilson," I said as I shook his hand. I said it disagreeably, for I was angry with him, and angry with myself for having counted on him.

"Doss de Wilson, all right," Captain Cadie said. He gazed at her. "Or it were." In vain, he struggled against laughter. "Well, how you finds her?" he asked, teasing me.

I said I'd find her a lot better if she had schooner spars instead of cargo masts, and he admitted that the masts had been cut too short.

"Mahn, mahn," he said, patting my shoulder shyly, by way of comfort.

He was sincerely pleased to see me—in large part, I soon discovered, because in return for carrying me to the turtle cays he intended to charge me a "fot fee." Having been overcharged down in Honduras, he said quite frankly, he had to cut his losses. Surely I could understand that. He squinted at me, not quite smiling. Captain Cadie knew that, having trailed his elusive vessel for two years, I was not likely to be stopped at the last minute by extra expense, no matter how unreasonable. But this situation was not yet as clear to me as it was to him, and, thinking to unnerve him, I went off with a show of disgust, remarking casually as I departed that if I decided to accompany him to the Miskito Bank I would let him know in a few days.

"Doss fine, mahn," he said, and waved. "Dot be just fine."

The day before the Wilson sailed, the Captain and I went up to the Cayman Arms, a bar that overlooks the harbor, and sealed our bargain, on his terms. When I remarked that for money like

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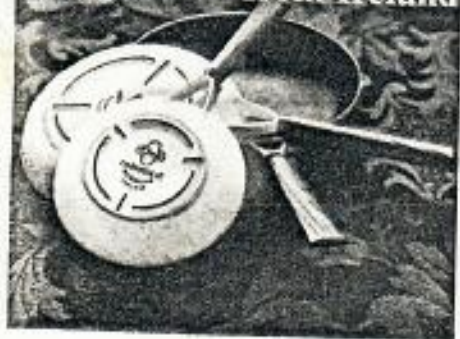
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that he'd have to feed me pretty well,
he said, "Mahn, I gone to give you
plenty nice fresh turtle meat."

I remarked that piracy was not quite
dead on Grand Cayman, and he agreed
cheerfully that it wasn't.

ON the morning of April 19th, I
brought my gear down to the
quay and went into Willie Bodden's
store to get a haircut. From the barber
chair I could see the Wilson: the last
supplies were going aboard. An old
turtle captain, frail and blind, was
seated in a corner of the store; he was
speaking to no one in particular about
the days when he could have bought
the entire length of the Six-Mile Beach
for next to nothing. "Hon say to me,
'Precious, dot land ain't never gone to
do you a bit of good.' I say, 'Hon, when
all my money gone and I am old, I still
have dot land.' Why, if I knew what
I know now, I could be a goddam
millionaire!"

The changes in the Wilson, I had
discovered, were only a small part
of the metamorphosis that was com-
ing fast to Grand Cayman. The first
time I had been there, two years be-
fore, the tourist had been such an in-
frequent beast that suntan oil was all
but unobtainable. But now there were
two supermarkets and a gift shop, and
the five-mile-long Six-Mile Beach was
being referred to here and there as
the Seven-Mile Beach. There were
water skis and rent-a-cars and, up in
Hell, a new night club with its own
post office on the premises, so that
tourists could send postcards with a cute
postmark, and someone had thought to
print pamphlets in praise of this tropic
isle "that time forgot."

A man from the Wilson's crew
came into the barbershop, extremely
drunk. He wished to sell back to Wil-
lie Bodden a supply of cigarettes he
had bought from him the day before.
Bodden returned his money without
comment, and the man went pitching
out into the sun.

An hour later, appearing aboard the
Wilson, the deckhand was drunker
than before, and he had a quart of
rum beneath his shirt. He was reeling
and shouting and getting in the way,
but Captain Cadie was patient with
him, taking hold of him occasionally
and setting him aside, like a store man-
nequin. Then the Captain found the
quart of rum, and flew into a rage.
Jamming his hand into the deckhand's
shirt, he wrenched the bottle out, shirt
buttons flying, and hurled it as far as
he could over the sea.

The crewman stared after the bot-

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He, then began to shake. "Listen, Captain Cadie, listen, brother, you gots to put me ashore," he said. "I can't sail with you now, Captain Cadie."

The Captain, without answering, propelled the man astern and into the deckhouse. He was already one man short—he had been unable to find a cook—and he did not intend to lose another.

I moved toward the bow, finding a vantage point out of the way from which I could observe the entire deck. As on most commercial fishing boats, the Wilson's deck was almost hidden by equipment. The bows were clogged with anchors, chain, and windlass, the stern cramped by stacks of scrap wood and hundred-gallon drums of fuel and water. Amidships, between heavy masts of spruce, was the small galley, lashed down on the open deck like a stray chicken coop. Two sailing catboats rested on their sides at the widest section of the vessel; to go forward on the Wilson, on either side, a man had to squeeze between a catboat and the galley. The rest of the deck—the Wilson was seventy-four feet over all and nineteen feet in beam—was taken up by deckhouse, bilge pump, hatch covers, and rigging. Belowdecks, the main hold was reserved, as it had been before the conversion, for turtles, but what had formerly been the crew's fo'c'sle (the men were now to sleep in the deckhouse) had become a storage hold and the after hold had been given over to the new engines.

For the first time in her long history, the Wilson was carrying an engineer, and as I watched the preparations for departure the individual thus titled climbed up out of the engine hold, wearing a T-shirt and floppy patchwork trousers that were both black with grime. This was Brown, one of two Negro crewmen brought north by Captain Cadie from Honduras. There has been a Cayman colony in the Bay Islands for more than a century, and English is still the language there, although Brown—with a sombrero and rawhide chin straps, gold teeth, and long sideburns—affected the style of the Central American *bandido*.

The second Honduran, Alfred Buttrum, known as Speedy, was diving repeatedly beneath the hull, adjusting the propeller to the shaft, which had been replaced after being straightened. The other men, all Caymanians of varying color, were stowing gear and food supplies: Jim Rivers, the mate; Carl Ebanks, a former merchant seaman; Lloyd (Leewell) Ebanks, a former crewman on the turtle boat Adams;



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Adonis Powery, a cousin of Captain John Powery, of the Cayman Venture, which had recently caught a green turtle weighing well over six hundred pounds; and James (Junior) Ebanks, aged sixteen, one of the Captain's sons. (The name Ebanks is ubiquitous on Grand Cayman, and Carl and Leewell were not considered kin, by their captain or by each other.)

By midafternoon, Captain Cadie had sent ashore for the last piece of gear, and he gave the command to start the engines. The crew went forward to weigh anchor, a task accomplished with the aid of a heavy old wood-and-iron windlass. This windlass had been forged and built in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, a famous fishing town and the home port of the Bluenose and other great schooners that rivalled the Gloucestermen on the Grand Bank. The similarity of the Cayman schooner to the nineteenth-century ships of the North Atlantic fisheries is very marked, since the schooner hull that came into use in Cayman forty years ago (when disappearing elsewhere in the world) was of Nova Scotia design.

By 4 P.M., the Wilson had left behind the green and pink pastels of Georgetown; she trudged down along the ironshore to Southwest Point. Across Red Bay, casuarina trees at Prospect, permanently bent, leaned away from the easterly trades, and frigate birds circled on the wind. The bones of an old wreck reared like a sea serpent in the choppy water. The day before, there had been gale winds, and they had moderated only slightly. The Wilson hoisted her stunted fores'l and her jib, to give her a few extra knots of speed; she passed beyond the island's lee and into the whitecapped night-blue seas of open ocean. In the wind, the engine noise was blown away astern, and, staring up at the sky and sails and rigging, I could almost conjure up the voyages of other years. But there was no way to put aside the vibration underfoot, or the diesel smell that came in eddies on the salt sea air.

Patches of sargasso weed sailed by, and the first flying fish, on translucent wings, skipped free of the bow wave and skidded away. An hour had not passed before Jim Rivers, washing his hands in some rainwater trapped in the port catboat, said to Leewell, "We headed sou' now, mahn. De land sunk out already." A tobacco bulge in Jim Rivers' cheek gave his face an odd mishapen cast. In that hat and faded knee-length dungarees, with bare feet, the mate looked like a sailor of some other century, while Leewell, in sneak-

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ers and clean khakis and visor cap, was a modern seaman, familiar with the comforts of merchantmen. Leewell peered astern. For all seamen, the disappearance of the land is a moment to be reckoned with, no matter how often it is experienced, and Leewell repeated wistfully, "She sunk out?" Jim Rivers nodded.

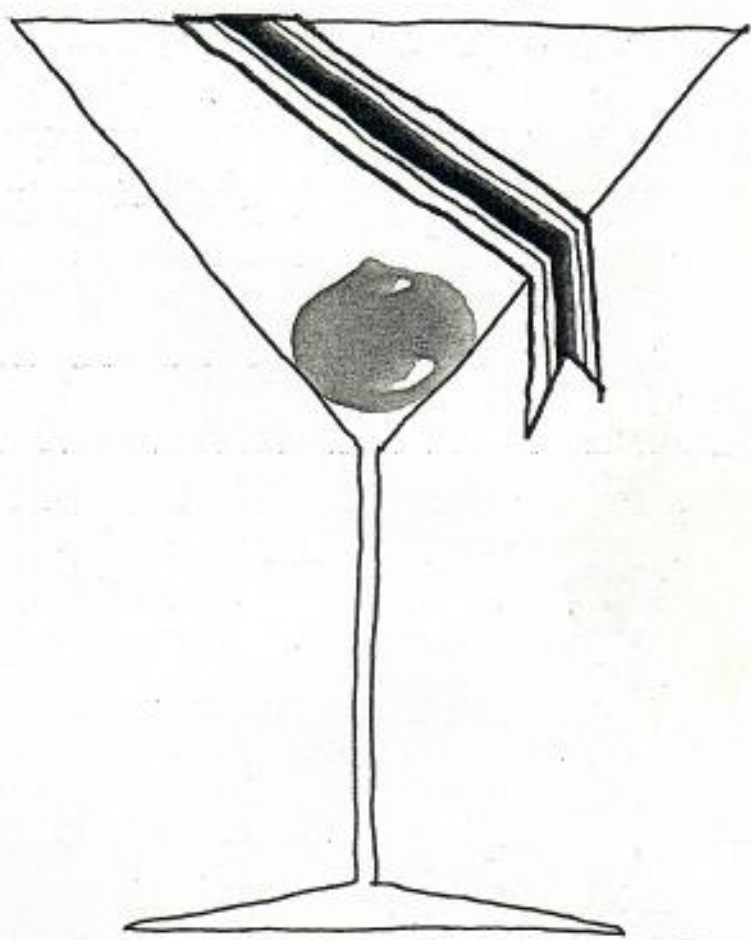
THE turtler's day begins and ends with daylight. At dusk, we ate a meal of rice and beans, coffee, and bread, and by nightfall all but the helmsman had turned in. Except for a bulb at the engine hatch, rigged to a generator, there was no electricity aboard the Wilson; the compass had to be read by a kerosene lamp stuck on the binnacle, which partially blocked the only door into the deckhouse. The wheel was directly behind the deckhouse, and the helmsman stared straight ahead not at the sea and stars but into the bunks of his companions, who had clambered to their rest over his compass box. Until a new wheelhouse was completed and the wheel moved forward, the Wilson's helmsman had to steer entirely by his instrument, and since no lookouts were posted on the open sea, he depended on the emptiness of the western Caribbean to protect the vessel from collision with unseen objects.

"Only those who have experienced a passage on one of them can conceive the awful discomforts of the long voyages," a veteran of the turtle boats wrote in 1909, and conditions haven't changed much since. Even someone willing to forgo clean water, good sleep, toilet, non-carbohydrate foods, and privacy might find a blind helmsman difficult to get used to, especially on a rough old ship that had leaking timbers and an open wood stove in the galley, and totally lacked such primary equipment as running lights, horn, fire extinguishers, and life preservers. Captain Cadie had bought himself a radio-telephone to go with his new deckhouse, but it had never worked. I asked him why he hadn't tried it out before he paid for it, and he said, "It had ought to work, mahn, or why in hell dey make it?" That first night, headed due south, he ordered the helmsman to line up the sternpost with the North Star, "to see if dot goddom compass be any good."

Because the deckhouse and its berths were small and narrow, without real ventilation, and because there were not enough berths to go around, I put my bedroll down outside on the small deck in the stern. Though this deck was

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roofed against the sun, it was poor shelter in a blowing rain, and often during the trip I had to jump up and hold my bedding high and dry under the roof until a squall had passed. The ship rolled so in the heavy seas that I all but deflated my air mattress, for otherwise I would be bounced right off it. But on deck I could stretch out full length, the air was fresh, and I could hear most of the conversation in the deckhouse. The men spoke of old turtles and turtle boats, of great storms on the Miskito Bank, of the barracuda and poisonous jacks that are caught off the Six-Mile Beach, and of the witchcraft called obeah, come to the Caymans from Jamaica. Adonis Powery was the chief authority on obeah, and spoke knowingly, that first night out, of grave-sleeping, tree knots, human hair, and the Book of Moses. "Mahn, you gots to kill five or six people just *learnin'*," Adonis said.

By daybreak, the wind had slackened, and high off in the west, toward Swan Island, a pink cloud caught the rising sun, which was still invisible behind low banks to the east. The color of the sun, when it appeared, was a bad yellow. The sun cast a hard gleam on the wet decks and turned the surface of the sea to a glimmering gray, like molten slag. Then it vanished in the shadow of an oncoming squall. "Dot's what we call fair-weather rain," Carl Ebanks said when the rain had passed. "After rain like dot we gets fair weather." Carl Ebanks was a thin, sad-eyed man who expected to be jeered at and teased; he would miss it if he were not. Scornfully, the Captain contradicted him, declaring that the wind would freshen and would blow just as hard as the day before. And by midmorning, sure enough, the east wind blew the crests off the mounting seas. Sky and sea were a wild, exhilarating blue, and all day long, despite the wind, the Wilson met bird migrants streaming north. The barn swallow (which may come all the way from Chile) was the most common bird; swallows landed on the ratlines, and took rainwater from small, vibrating pools on the upright fuel drums. Egrets passed, and a flock of golden plover, and other birds, too distant to identify; their paths were crossed by the noddy terns and shearwaters and boobies that are native to these seas. I spent most of the day up in the bow. All about, in the litter of gear and rigging, were the briny textures of weathered wood and rusted iron, the breath and smell of tar and caulking, thatch rope and damp canvas. On a bright, fresh day at sea,



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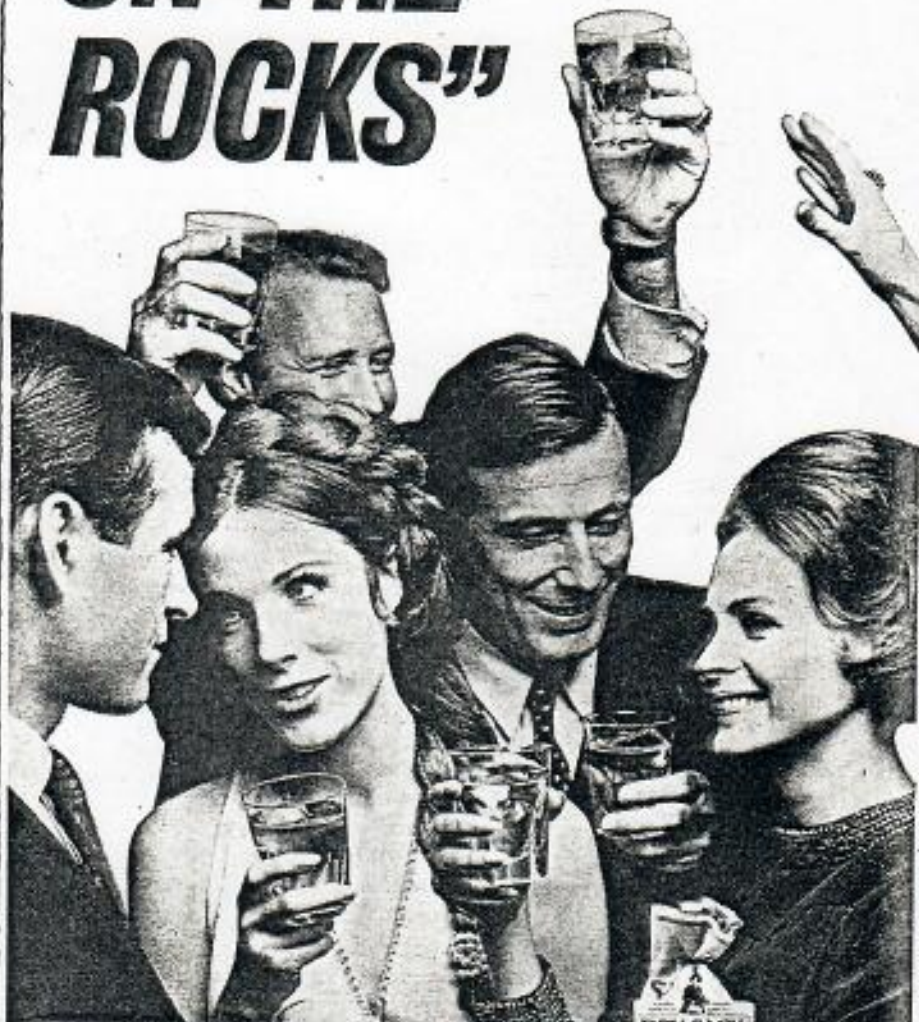
the ocean wind against your cheek and the tropical sun on your bare feet can restore childhood's sense of being at the center of time, with no time passing.

At noon, the Captain produced an ancient sextant and took a reading of the sun. Subsequently, crouched on knees and elbows, he located our position on a battered chart spread out on the deckhouse floor. "I right on de point, mahn, you see dot? Right on de point!" he said proudly, but, as it turned out, his watch had been off by nearly half an hour. By the time he discovered this, at twilight, the Wilson, though still a day's sail from the turtle grounds, had come up onto the outer edge of the Miskito Bank. Toward midnight, she would come abreast of Cay Gorda. The broad bank of the continental shelf, with its sub-surface reefs, rare islands, and broken pan shoals, is a notorious ships' graveyard, and the poorest sort of place to arrive at night for a ship not certain of its position. But anchoring now at the north edge of the Bank would mean a terrific beating from the sea, as well as the loss of a day's fishing later on; we sailed several miles off to the eastward, back to deep water, then headed south again.

I can't say that I slept well. In weather like that, with the arrangement of the Wilson's helm and the absence of lifesaving equipment, it was hard to put those lurking reefs out of mind, and my vague dread was not lessened when some rotten ropes lashing the boom let go and the great timber, swinging as the Wilson rolled, knocked off the pipe framing and the upright exhaust pipe of the starboard engine. The engine hatch filled immediately with diesel smoke, and for fifteen minutes in that stifling atmosphere the silent Brown worked to refit the pipe, moving lethargically through the gloom as if that poisonous place were his natural environment.

Speedy appeared out of the darkness and handed me a fresh naseberry from Cayman. "Dis a very fine little fruit," he said, gazing affectionately at the wrinkled object in his hand. Speedy was a small, strong, generous man, an able-bodied seaman all his life, with the fastest hands and reflexes I had ever seen; it was a pleasure to watch him work. He told me that in Roatan, in the Bay Islands, he owned fifty-five acres and three cows; when he had earned enough money for a few more cows, he would give up the sea. "Speedy got it made, mahn," Speedy said. "Speedy doin' fine. And I don't worry,

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mahn. I never worried yet. But I just had enough of de sea. I don't like something, den I move on. *Fahst*, mahn. Doss why dey call me Speedy. Coss I *fahst*, mahn. I move *fahst*."

Before daylight, the running lights of the first boat sighted since leaving Grand Cayman appeared. Captain Cadie decided that she must be coming out on the south side of Alargate Reef, and that we could enter the maze of reefs by the same channel. The Wilson turned south by southwest. At sunrise, she was on the Bank; the water turned swiftly from cold night blue to the opaque greeny blue of the outer shelf.

Some flying fish, drawn to the engine light, had come aboard the night before, and the Captain sewed the stripped white flank of one of them to a bare hook for trolling. "You fly too high, darlin'," he told the fish, "and you come to a crahsh lahndin'." We also trolled a bright white feather that I had brought along, and both caught fish. Jim Rivers spoke of a famous time, crossing the Bank, when they had hauled in three hundred pounds of albacore, jack, dorado, and bonito in an hour and a half, but today we settled for three or four big kingfish, a Spanish mackerel, and a scattering of barracuda. The fish came flying up out of the shining sea, flopping and skittering across the decks, among bare feet. What we could not eat was salted and set to dry on the galley roof, lending new flavor to strong galley smells that were already less than enticing. In the first days, in the absence of a cook, Speedy volunteered to do the cooking, and he was competent, as at all else, but he was subsequently replaced by Adonis Powery, who did not feel well enough to work as a deck-hand. Adonis, who suffered from asthma, was a cheerful sick man; an untended mustache, a visored cap permanently reversed on his scraggy head, and soiled, floppy clothes gave him a chronic air of coming all apart, and even the Captain, who was not fastidious, objected to the tag ends of Adonis's clothing always "lickin' down into de food." Essentially, the food was rice, boiled and reboiled, and garnished with whatever came to hand; there was also a heavy bread, baked on the ship, and a sweet dough, called johnnycake, that had an odd taste of chemicals. This chemical taste, which cropped up in varying strengths in all the food and was the main feature of the coffee, derived from a residue of diesel fuel in the drum containing our fresh water. Lashed to the mainmast in the open sun, this drum had a hole hacked in

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its upper surface; the sun added warmth to the aura of petroleum, and before many days the water was cloudy with some kind of milky scale.

The Wilson crossed the southeast corner of the Gorda Bank, headed west for the Half Moon Reefs. After mid-day, Captain Cadie spent most of his time aloft, changing our course every little while by means of hand signals to a man on deck, who would shout "Port!" or "Starboard!" to the helm. Off to the southeast, like a puff of green fuzz in the hot tropic sky, was Port Royal Cay, where in 1941 the turtle schooner Majestic, picking up "rangers" (men stationed on outlying cays with nets and catboats), went down in a hurricane with a loss of twenty-two lives; it was the Wilson, then under Captain Robert Ebanks, that took nineteen survivors home to Grand Cayman.

We sailed due west, along the long, white fringe of the Old Pointer Reef, then south again past Logwood and Half Moon Cays. In the afternoon, the wind blew itself out. The turquoise water in the lee of the broken reefs was quiet, and four dolphins came to play alongside the hull. The Captain, gleeful as a child, descended from the crossrees and ran up into the bow, grabbing a long, blunt pole as he went; after tying a light line to the pole, he practiced harpoon throws at the olive-colored creatures, which—seeming to know that the man, too, was playing—returned to be tagged again and again.

The crew lay around in the shade of the stern, enjoying the calm water; after two days and nights of constant bracing, it was a pleasure to feel limp. Here and there on the silky surface, a turtle floated, light as cork, and we saw a tawny shark. "Dis a bad place to go overboard," muttered Leewell, splicing rope. "We got shark here of de bigges' kind."

From Bobel Cay, where the ship dropped anchor, silent frigate birds came drifting out to meet us. The islet is a nesting place for bridled and noddy terns; the birds rose like mosquito clouds above the red mangroves and sea lavender and jennifer trees that have taken hold on the high ground. With darkness there was rain, but the bird shrieks, undiminished, came down to us on the east wind until the morning.

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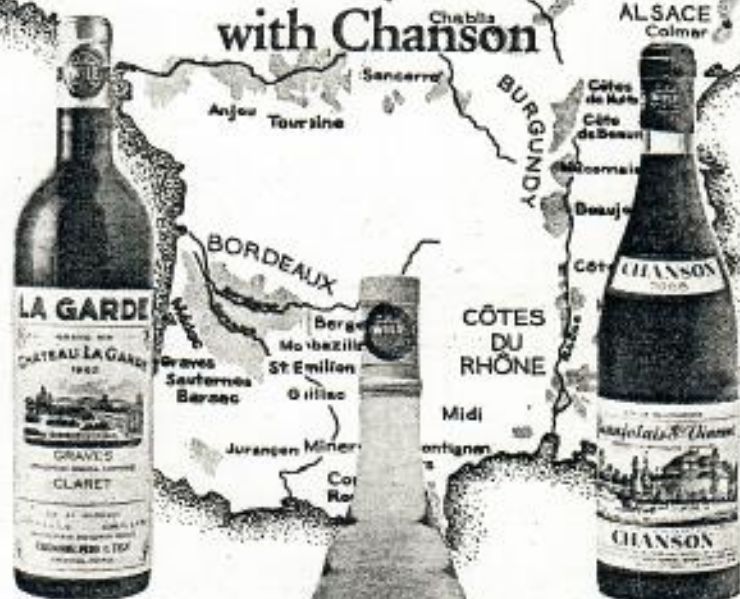
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port fees, they must pay a tax on every head of turtle. The customs officer closest to the fishing grounds is at Cape Gracias á Dios, which was named by Columbus, who found shelter in its lee after a stormy passage down around the Caribbean elbow of Central America.

The Wilson, too, arrived at the Cape after a stormy passage, but she found no shelter; the wind was blowing strong again out of the east. April and May are ordinarily fair-weather months, and Captain Cadie swore that this was the worst April he had seen in all his forty years of turtle fishing. We anchored, in a heavy surge, about a mile off the mouth of the Coco River, and I went ashore with the Captain, Carl, and Speedy in one of the catboats. The outpost at Cape Gracias is situated several miles up the Coco River, which is so shallow at its delta that at low water boats must be dragged across the bar. That afternoon, the tide was low, and, having struggled in across the bar, we were forced to walk and drag the boat upriver. The catboat had a substantial draft, and she was waterlogged; she seemed frail enough in the open sea, but in the river she was monstrous. Often, to progress at all, we had to carren her and haul her across the shallows on her side. Captain Cadie and Carl, old seamen from an island without rivers, were cursing the Coco River and Central America and the "goddom Spornish" into the bargain, but Speedy, who had experience of this coast, accepted the hard labor cheerfully; as for me, I was thankful for a breeze that broke the humidity and kept the insects grounded, and for the absence of leeches. The wild delta of vast flats and stranded trees was set against the silence of jungle walls, and there was a marvellous show all afternoon of migrant shorebirds hurtling back and forth among languid ibis, spoonbill, egrets, biguas, and exotic hawks of the tropical rivers. We toiled across wastes of shallow water, and at times the mud rose up over our knees. We rowed and sculled and poled, and we sailed a little in the channels, but we never got there. By mid-afternoon, we knew it was hopeless, and at twilight we gave up. It was dark before we crossed the bar again and saw that someone on the ship had been smart enough to rig a lantern.

The next morning, we failed a second time. On the way out of the river, we met John Powery and two crewmen of the Cayman Venture, which was clearing for Grand Cayman; their skiff was much lighter than our cat-

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boat, and Captain Cadie went upriver with them, but Powery couldn't find a channel, either. From where the catboat waited, just inside the bar, I could hear beleaguered human cries cursing Cape Gracias and the desolate river and the crazy winds of April.

Captain Cadie decided to register the Wilson at Puerto Cabezas, farther down the coast, and, having lost so much time in his effort to reach Cape Gracias, he felt justified in fishing along the way. We sailed directly for Edinburgh Reef (named, presumably, for a ship that came to grief on it; according to professional treasure hunters at Grand Cayman, there is scarcely a reef or shoal in the southwest Caribbean that is lacking its own wreck). At Edinburgh Reef, no land was visible—only irregular patterns of white surf. Even to leeward of the reefs, where the Wilson anchored, the water was rough and milky. But Captain Cadie rarely glanced at his chart, and he knew exactly where he was. There was good bottom on this spot—he gestured with his hand at the faceless sea—to hold an anchor. In a moment, he was shouting at his men to lower the boats.

Turtle nets are set and hauled from catboats, and each catboat has a pilot. The pilots, as the men most familiar with the turtle grounds and turtle habits, decide where to set the nets. For several days, the crew had been rigging nets and stacking them on the hatches; they had also built a stack of net buoys and "kellecks"—big chunks of fossil coral, used as anchors. (Nobody knew the origin of the word "kelleck." The Captain said that it came down from "the back-time people," who hadn't spoken English very well.) As soon as the boats were launched, this gear was loaded; within minutes, the boat masts had been raised and the sails spread. Jim Rivers was pilot of the port boat, and Captain Cadie, in the starboard boat, yelled out to him that he must set along the reef near the "white holes," as turtlers call the odd circular spots of open sand that appear among the walls of coral.

Junior Ebanks loitered at the rail, hoping to go along as catboat crew. Though he was a shy, soft-spoken boy who showed no sign of his father's raging energy, and suffered in brave silence from chronic seasickness, he obviously revered his father and longed to become a full-fledged turtler. But there was so much wind that the sails had to be reefed, and on the netting grounds the boy could not have pulled one of the heavy oars by which the boats were propelled. "I know you try,

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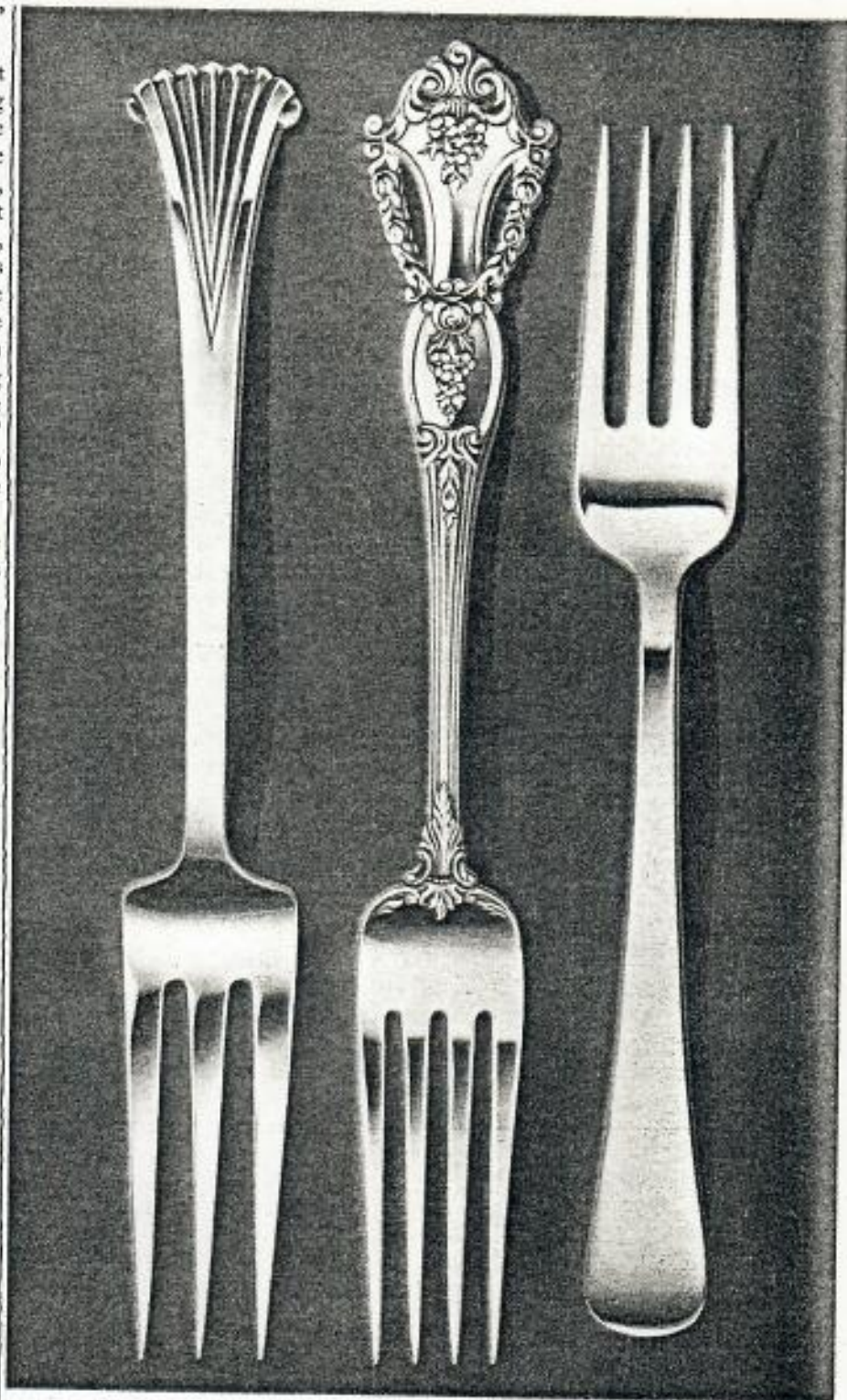


boy," Captain Cadie said, "but tryin' ain't de same as doin'."

Junior set the port boat free, and it scudded away downwind; in glittering green troughs, the gaff-rigged sail rose and sank like an ancient fin. In the starboard boat, which beat to windward, clipping along at a speed that brought the warm spray flying over the bow, Captain Cadie boasted joyfully of this fine boat which only yesterday, in the Coco River, he had cursed. Before long, he was cursing again, for Jim Rivers, off to the north, was setting his nets too far out from the reef. "He might have de luck to cotch one comin' and goin'," he said, "but dere ain't no turtle lives de night out dere in de bleak ocean."

During the day, the green turtle ranges widely, grazing on sea grasses and algae; at night it returns to a favored shelter under a coral head or reef. Nets are placed in likely spots, or "sets," and the nets are comparatively small; each catboat may set twenty-five or thirty every evening. Typical nets, such as the ones Captain Cadie used, will be forty-eight feet long, with a depth of fourteen feet, and will have a seventeen-inch mesh. Because of the large mesh, the nets are light. One end is secured to a log buoy of balsalike tropical "bob wood," which is anchored by a kelleck; the rest floats down the current like an underwater flag, changing position with the change in tides. The net carries small floats along its surface line, but the bottom line is not weighted, so the net hangs in the current at an angle; the idea is that a homecoming turtle, or a turtle rising to breathe, will strike the net and become entangled. A lightweight net that is free at one end encourages tangling yet permits the captive to carry the netting to the surface when it has to breathe. (A small turtle tangled close to the kelleck and forced to drag the kelleck toward the surface may tire and drown before the nets are drawn, though this is not common.)

Nearing the reef, we began to glimpse both green and hawksbill turtles on the surface, and the men yelled in anticipation of the next morning's catch. I had come far to see this sight, and I yelled, too. Two big greens were trying to mate, and Captain Cadie said that they were getting ready to move south to the Bogue and that the Wilson would trail the turtles southward through the cays. (Turtle Bogue, as the fishermen call a stretch of wild tropical coast in Costa Rica, was long considered the last great nesting beach for green turtle in the Caribbean, but



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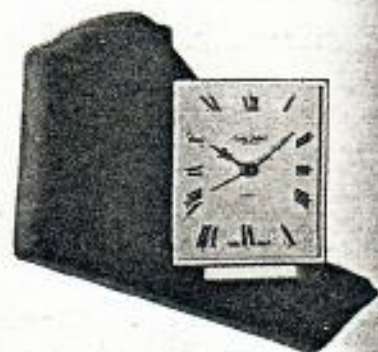
in recent years another great beach has been found on the shores of Mexico, not far from Veracruz, and there are also small nesting grounds in Quintana Roo and on the islets called Mona and Aves, in the eastern Caribbean. Occasional green turtles still nest in Florida, and possibly in the Bermudas; like Grand Cayman, Bermuda was an important nesting ground when the white man first came to the New World.)

We had reached the place where the Captain wished to set, and he swung the catboat up into the wind. Quickly, Leewell lowered the mast, and he and Adonis each took up an oar. Because the rough water kept them straining at their oars, I made myself useful clearing buoy lines and kellecks while Captain Cadie, guiding the oarsmen ("Easy on your side, Leewell. Pull best, 'Donis"), flung the nets out where he wanted them. "See dot coral head right dere?" The Captain pointed to a vague dark mass twenty feet below the surface. "Dot be a point-blank shot for turtle." I heaved the kelleck, and the boat moved on to the next set.

We worked north along the reef, setting the channels and the edges of ominous pan shoals that lay hidden just below the surface. Close to the reef, the sand had not been roiled and the water was clear. A shark, surprised, flicked its tail and slid away from us; it was trailing some small bonito, which zigzagged in pursuit of minnows. Where the bonito chopped the surface, the minnows sprayed into the air in silver showers all across the sunlit coral. Leewell grunted, resting on his oars. "Dis de onliest place I ever see bonito inside de reef," he said. And Captain Cadie said, "Keep her head up, now! You do like dot in dis wind, mahn, she walk away from you right back down to de vessel!" He pointed a gnarled finger at the Wilson, more than a mile away.

The sprays of bait fish, catching the sun, had drawn the hunting terns, which beat along against the wind, over our heads. Where the terns had come from, with no land in sight, was a mystery. The fish and the birds chased back and forth across the catboat's bow, the shriek of the terns lost in the booming of the surf.

AT daybreak, the wind was strong as ever, and, from the look of the gray skies to the eastward, it would blow hard all day. Captain Cadie got the boats off before breakfast to draw the nets, and on the way out he cursed his fate and all his men into the bar-



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gain. This drew a sullen protest from Leewell, normally a good-tempered man, but one full of pride in his experience as a turtler under Captain Allie Ebanks, of the Adams. Off by the reef, in the silver light, turtles were splashing in the nets, and Leewell grinned broadly. "See dot one flouncin' on de weather side?" he yelled. "And dere, and dere, dey two in dot other net!"

The Captain sighed. "Doss a god-dom loggerhead," he said. "But dot one's a turtle over dere." The starboard boat moved up among the nets, and the turtles sounded, then surfaced again, thrashing and blowing. There were more loggerheads than the Captain had expected, and one of them had towed its kelleck far downwind; to free it from the net, the men had to haul it aboard. The loggerhead, which is worthless, is a big rufous brute with a heavy head and jaws that can remove a careless finger. The hawk-bill, which is taken for tortoiseshell, will also snap if given half a chance. The port boat caught a big male hawkbill that morning, and while it lived the barefoot sailors gave it a wide berth.

The turtles came in over the side in the wet and gleaming colors of the sea; the green turtle's shell is a pretty amber, and its belly plate is a pale yellow, like bamboo. The morning's catch for the starboard boat was five—about half the number Captain Cadie had hoped for—and his feelings were mixed when the port boat, defying his prediction of utter failure, was seen to have in it three big greens in addition to the hawkbill. By the time this damned hurricane let up, he said, it would be full moon, when the rising turtles could see the white mesh and avoid it. I had to laugh at the intensity of his disgust, and, after a mean stare, he gave out an unwilling whimper, then a wave of laughter, which left his abused crew worse confounded than before.

We sailed back downwind to the ship at exhilarating speed. Caymanians move so beautifully in their small boats that they seem mere extensions of the wood and canvas, and Captain Cadie, in good spirits once again, brought his catboat alongside in one neat flourish of spray and sail. Junior caught a line, and the catboat leaped and fell on the seas that surged along the hull. I picked my surge and clambered up over the gunwale onto the hard, salt-cured deck. Looking down at the new turtles in the catboat, and at the brown faces and the bright turquoise sea, I had a feeling of affection for the Wilson; sail or power, she was still a turtle boat.

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three hundred pounds, and the rest were not much smaller. Each was hoisted to the deck by block and tackle, secured by a rope bridled to the base of both fore flippers. While it was still suspended, like a man hung by the armpits, all four of its flippers were pierced by a hot iron. Then it was lowered onto its back, and the two flippers on each side were lashed together by palm-frond strips run through the holes. (For ease of handling, and because its own weight would suffocate it out of the water, the turtle is kept on its back from the time it is dragged over the gunwales of the catboat until it is either slaughtered or released into a crawl.) Ordinarily, the mute and immobile package is then lowered into the hold, but because these first turtles would be crawled at Miskito Cay they were kept on deck, where they filled the last free space on the stern deck and in the passage along the deck-house. A wooden pillow was placed under each head, which otherwise would have hung down unsupported, and wedges were jammed under each carapace to keep it in place when the ship rolled; old nets and tarpaulins were thrown over turtles that were exposed to sun. After that, the captives were forgotten. The turtles kept their mouths shut, and breathed infrequently. The breath, when it came, was a gasp and sigh. But even these sad, weary sounds, along with the "tears" of lubricating fluid that squeezed regularly from the turtles' eyes, went unnoticed by the crew. Green turtles are gentle vegetarians that rarely bite, and the men stepped on them and around them as if they were part of the ship's machinery; the poor great creatures were as still and heavy as the fuel drums. But the green turtle's air of innocence is troubling, and now and then one meets a turtle's eye and recalls the swift thing that flew so gracefully in the ocean. I was especially apt to do this, since one turtle lay next to where I slept on deck; this one gasped and twitched continually, its eye not three feet from my own.

FROM Edinburgh Reef we sailed over to Cape Bank, which lies just north of the Honduran border and is claimed by Honduras. Like Edinburgh, this reef is barely below the surface, and there was no good shelter near the turtle ground. The Wilson, anchored, was laboring so heavily that swinging the boats over the side was difficult and dangerous; the boats were suspended from the masts, and, on this wide-beamed vessel, the recent shortening of



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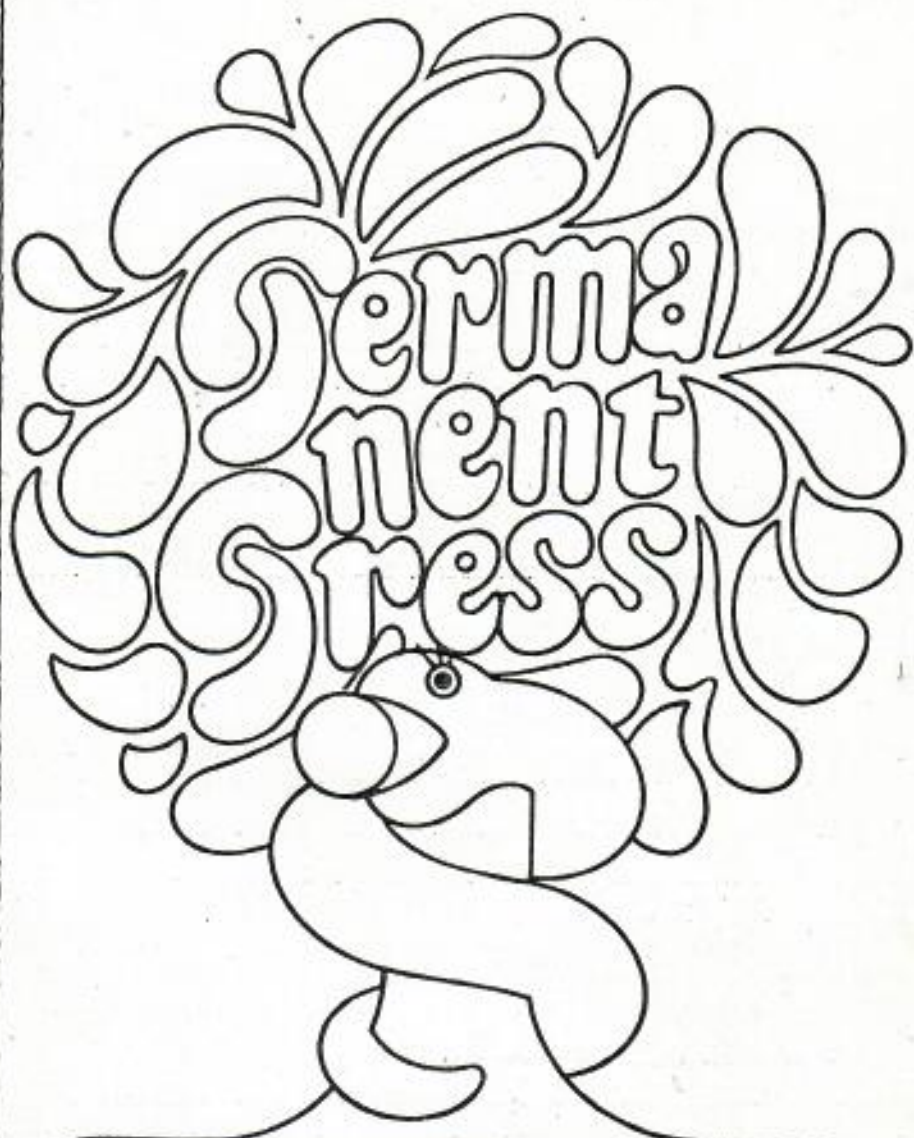
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The masts had much increased the angle of the swing. Once the boats were launched, the wind tore the starboard catboat's sails, which were rotten, and, attempting to set in the rough water, we broke an oar in the heavy chop, at which Captain Cadie, his exasperation mounting, ordered us back to the ship. But we had seen turtles all around, and Speedy and Brown, whom the Captain wished to train, insisted that we finish the set. Their willingness so tickled the Captain that he laughed all afternoon; his Honduran greenhorns, he told the Caymanians at supper, made the best catboat crew he had.

The wind did not slack off at twilight but mounted all during the night. Gale winds and a surly chop battered the ship, making such a noise that men talking together had to shout; the wind was no longer a stiff wind but something ominous. In this waste of shoals and reefs, where a dragging anchor could mean serious trouble, a man who felt no apprehension would be a fool, and Captain Cadie was up most of the night checking the anchor and taking soundings. He and I talked for hours before dawn. Leewell, who could not sleep, either, joined us. He spoke of a time when Cadian, then captain of the Jimson, had been demasted and blown by a hurricane all the way from Georgetown to Nicaragua. We talked awhile of the old ships and of the famous schooner regattas held at Georgetown just before the Second World War, which were won regularly by the Wilson. Captain Cadie said, "Yes, mahn, de Lydia E. Wilson beat 'em all. She were de las' one and de best."

I couldn't help asking the Captain why he had not left the Wilson's spars and sails intact, even if it meant running her as a charter schooner for tourists; my tone suggested my own preference for this solution. Leewell grunted enigmatically in the dark, and after a moment Captain Cadie said, in a flat, tired voice, "Well, she ain't as fast with motors as she were sometimes under sail, but she don't have to beat into de wind." He disregarded the tourist trade as something irrelevant to a turtle boat with a long tradition on the banks, and I began to see that he was right.

The wind had mounted now past thirty knots—an estimate on Captain Cadie's part that seemed to me conservative—and by daybreak the water was so rough that the Captain sent one catboat out to draw the nets, keeping the other at the ship in case of trouble. Despite my faith in Cayman seamanship, there was some question in



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my mind whether a leaky catboat with rotten sails should be sent out into a sea like that at all. But if this question came into the minds of Carl and Jim Rivers and Leewell, who were picked to go, they did not voice it. Clinging to the catboat's mast as the boat banged against the Wilson's side, Leewell and the mate were businesslike and tense, and shouted at Carl to hurry up; then the boat was free on the shimmering swells, the three men's black wind-tattered silhouettes high on the catboat's weather side as the wind struck her and she heeled and veered away. When good men go out without complaint to do a dangerous task, not in emergency but because it is part of their way of life, the sight is moving. Those of us left aboard said very little, but we all watched that boat. Even Captain Cadie, who was mending nets, didn't stray far from the rail all morning.

A mile away, the catboat dropped its sail, and then an oar flashed in the sun. Making its painful progress from net to net, the boat rose into view and fell away, swallowed for a half minute at a time by the green swells. Though the wind let up when the sun was high, drawing the nets took the better part of the day, and the men came back exhausted. "I ain't got no wrists left," Leewell said. "I like turtlin' as much as any mahn, but I don't like no kind of wind like dot."

A few turtles had been caught despite the weather, and the Captain decided to fish Cape Bank again. In the afternoon, we moved up along the reef, to westward, and set a white hole named the Maggie, for a turtle boat of another era. The Maggie White Hole is but one of many sets known to the turtlers by name; there is also the Wilson set, down south of Miskito Cay, toward London Reef. We set that afternoon along the pan shoals, right under the reef. One shoal had been laid bare by wind and tide, and a lone heron, like a warder, stalked across the last hard gleams of twilight. It was nearly dark before we sailed back to the Wilson. The wind had eased, and the anchorage was much more sheltered than the one of the night before, and Adonis had butchered the hawksbill and was serving it up in a kind of heavy stew. "De gold rush is over and de bum's rush is on," Adonis sang. Hawksbill meat is preferred to green turtle on Cayman Brac, where the tortoiseshell industry encourages this prejudice, but the rest of the world finds hawksbill meat a little strong. "When you eat hawksbill," Adonis said, "you know you eat somet'ing."



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This is also true of barracuda, the only other fresh food we had had in days, and the next morning, when it was discovered that the restless green turtle next to me had died, I overcame a natural distaste for defunct reptile meat and helped to eat it. Besides the marrow-like calipash and calipee, which are used in green-turtle soup, the multi-colored cuts of meat include the turtle steak, which, properly cooked, is almost indistinguishable from veal. The men assured one another that the turtle in question had not been dead long enough to bring harm.

THERE were a few turtles in the nets that morning, but the catch was disappointing. Rather than fight the weather any longer, we would head south to Miskito Cay and crawl the turtles, then go to the coast at Puerto Cabezas to register the vessel before proceeding to the turtle grounds at the Whitties and London Reef. By the time we got there, a change in weather might improve the fishing. Besides, the farther south we fished, the more likely we were to meet the great migrating fleets, for it was nearly May, and the turtles would be moving down to Turtle Bogue.

From Cape Bank the Wilson headed southeast across the Main Cape Channel, then south, past Outer Moheghan and Ham Cay, to the Marston Dennis Cay; off to windward, in the ocean mist, lay Dead Man Cay, where in 1941 five rangers of the Wilson lost their lives, in the same hurricane that sank the Majestic off Port Royal Cay. Twenty-seven turtles died that year—the greatest number since 1876, when a storm killed sixty-seven rangers—but hurricanes have caused death regularly on the low-lying, lightless reefs. The schooner Hustler, under Captain Caddie's friend Laurie Bodden, was also lost in 1941, near the Marston Dennis Cay; of the vessels that sailed in the great regattas, almost half have since gone down in storm, and the rest have been sold off or converted. The Adams, the Jimson, and the Wilson are the last of the fleet still sailing from Grand Cayman.

Forests of giant mangrove have taken root on the shallow banks of the Marston Dennis Cay. As the Wilson passed, she slowed her engines in order to "speak" the rangers on the cay. (This term of the old sailing days, when ships meeting in remote places and wishing to exchange news, mail, and conversation would "speak" each other, still has currency on Grand Cayman.) Sure enough, a catboat spread

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wings at the green walls, two miles away, and came flying down across the wind. The sea was still rough, but, rather than slack off on the sheet and give up speed, a man high on the side of the boat, in the instant before it must have capsized, scampered to the end of a plank shoved out as a makeshift outrigger, so that he seemed suspended in midair. On came the rangers, waving and yelling, careening in along our side, and then dropping sail and swarming aboard while the Wilson's men cried, "Come up, come up! Come up, mahn, and be hoppy!" The rangers were so glad to see new faces that they kept yelling even after they had come aboard. "You gone cotch turtle, mahn!" we were told. "Dey here as t'ick as sprat!" Then the rangers were off again, like birds, for they knew that the Wilson wished to make Miskito Cay before nightfall.

Miskito Cay is nearly as large as Grand Cayman, but, except for an acre of high ground where fresh water of poor quality may be obtained, it consists almost entirely of high mangrove. Apart from providing water, it serves chiefly as a place to pen turtles, which could not survive an entire voyage in the holds or on the deck; it is also a meeting place, and a place of refuge in time of hurricane. There is no harbor at Miskito Cay, but the ships come in close along the southwest shore and lash themselves as best they can into the mangroves. The cay is uninhabited except in turtle season, when a few Indians come out from the Miskito Coast of Nicaragua. To avoid the sand flies that infest these cays, the Indians build small shacks on rickety platforms of thin mangrove stakes, well off the shore. From where the Wilson anchored, not far west of the turtle crawls, we could see two small Miskito shacks. Downwind from the shacks trailed a number of small *cayucas*, or dugout canoes, which had brought these people thirty miles or more across the open water.

The Adams was anchored at Miskito Cay, and the crawl that Captain Cadie was to use still held the last of the Adams' turtles, which she was loading for the homeward voyage. When we went over to the crawl early the next morning, the catboats of the Adams were already there. Our crawl, like all the others, was a square pen formed by high mangrove stakes lashed together with thatch rope. A gate had been lowered on one side, where the catboats were tied up, and a big Indian was in the pen, up to his neck in water. Every few minutes, he would dive be-

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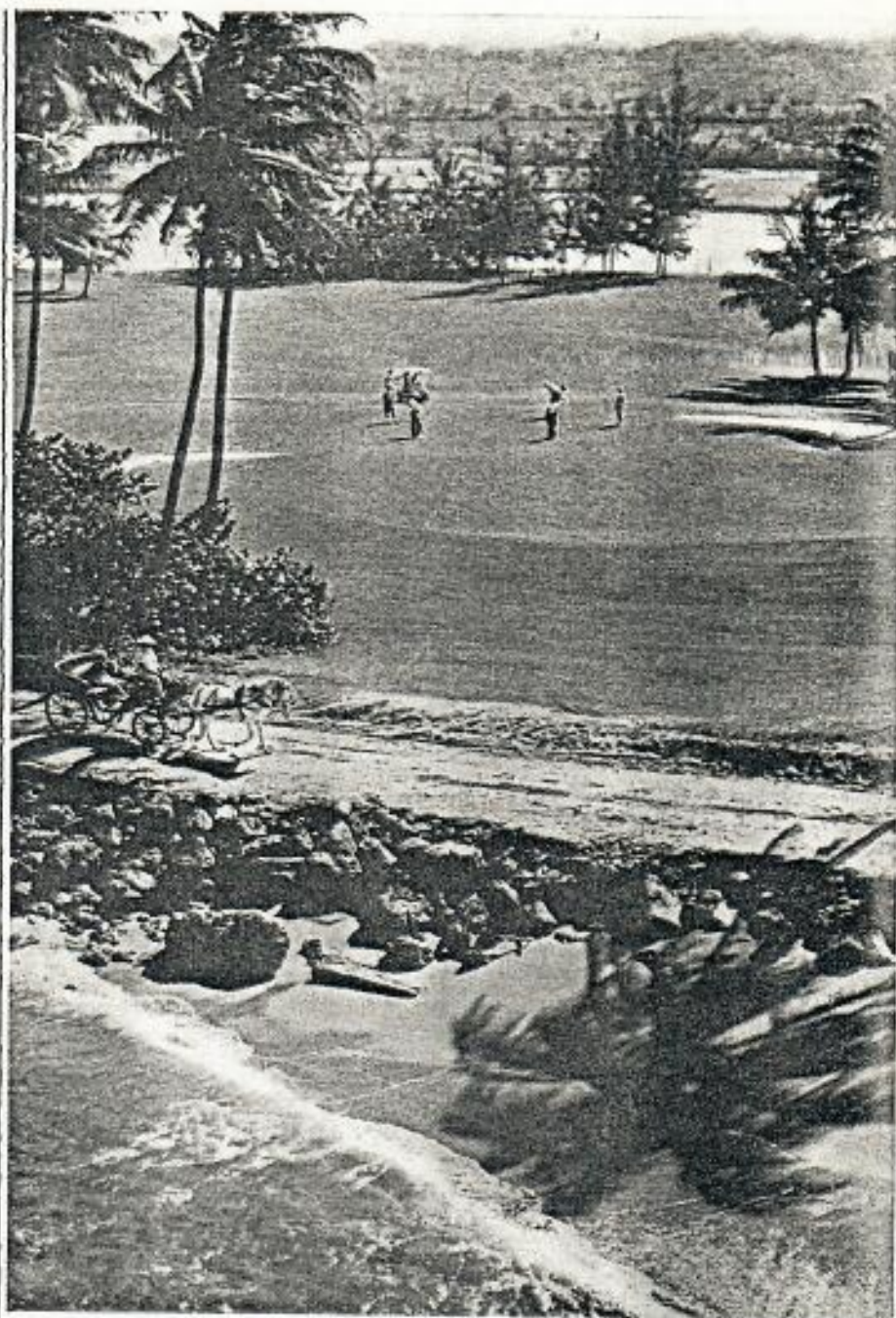
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neath the surface, where the great turtles milled, and, grasping one by the carapace behind the head, use his free hand to slip a loop around the base of a fore flipper. This loop was fastened to a line held by a crewman on a catboat at the gate; when the Indian surfaced, calling out, the men hauled the turtle in. On the biggest turtles—of three hundred pounds or more—the Indian rigged a bridle to both flippers, for otherwise the frantic creatures could not be managed; as it was, the whole pen was a turmoil of white water. Sometimes the diver would catch a second turtle while he was waiting for the loop to be thrown back to him; then he would lean back into a corner, holding the turtle upright in a bear hug. Like most Miskitos, the diver had the features of an Indian and the skin color of a dark-brown Negro. The type is native to that coast; from the Honduran department of Mosquitia, north of the Coco River, down along the Nicaraguan shore into northern Costa Rica. The racial admixture is not recent but derives from shipwrecked Guinea slaves of three centuries ago, who were absorbed by the aborigines along the coast. The diver was a powerful man, and pompous in his strength; his dripping head was fierce and grim, like the head of a dark sea god.

When our turtles had been crawled, we paid a visit to the Adams. The Alice M. Adams—to give her her full name—is a much larger vessel than the Wilson, being well over a hundred feet in length, but the two are very similar in their lines. Since the retirement of Captain Cadian's uncle Captain Allie, the master of the Adams had been Captain Allie's son-in-law, Chesley Parsons—one of the few modern turtle men I ever heard Captain Cadie speak of with respect. Captain Chesley was a heavy man with a patient voice that seemed simultaneously courteous and implacable. His boat was the queen of the remnant turtle fleet, and she had had a successful voyage, with four hundred turtles stowed already in her hold and a few yet to come. Standing at the hatch of the Adams, I peered down at the creatures. The turtles lay in vertical tiers, rack upon rack of broad, pale bellies extending aft into the gloom. Over the hold was rigged a canvas chute that caught the wind and funnelled it down for the refreshment of the cargo. "See dot?" Leewell spoke quietly at my shoulder. "Dey already lost dem pretty sea colors."

Captain Cadie got up suddenly from a colloquy with Captain Chesley, and we jumped back into our catboat. Lee-



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well shouted goodbye to his friends on the Adams, which would sail the next day for Key West if the wind moderated; Key West is the American market port for the green turtle, and the Adams supplies most of the green turtle that is eaten in the United States. We all shouted again as we sailed out past the Adams. Within the hour, we were rolling down along the Nasa Cays and the Alice-Agnes Rocks, headed west-southwest, on a following wind, for Puerto Cabezas.

Because of the trade winds, the open coast of the western Caribbean is almost always rough, and as there is no harbor at Puerto Cabezas but only a long ocean pier where freighters take on fruit and lumber, Captain Cadie began to curse the place even before it came in sight. The Wilson was not large enough to tie up at the high pier, and where we anchored the water was just as rough as he had prophesied—so rough that the launching of a catboat was a near disaster. By the time the boat had landed, on big swells that rolled beneath the pier, it was too late in the day to clear the vessel through the Nicaraguan customs, so that the Wilson had to labor through the night right where she was.

I had made a plan to leave the ship in Nicaragua, and the next morning I went with Captain Cadie to the customs house. He was snarling about time lost and about the "fot fees" that he would have to pay, but when the customs officer asked him how many life preservers his vessel carried his belligerence vanished and he struggled to hide his laughter. "Why, two," he said piously. "I t'ink."

We walked together back down a long slope to the pier. It was a fresh tropical morning, washed bright by night rains, and Puerto Cabezas, which is on an airy headland above the beach, was a prettier place than I had expected. But Captain Cadie was in no mood to linger, and he shouted angrily at a crewman who had taken advantage of the fine morning to get drunk. My shipmate was dragged from a tropical litter of dogs, roosters, fruit, and children at the pierhead and dumped into the bilge of one of the catboats. From the pier, I could barely see his head above the side as the catboat moved off on long swells toward the Wilson.

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