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Cook Islands

she digs a round hole to the surface of wobbles clumsily out. At his heels or, better, his slippers — is a second, and a third, and so on, all the little wiles marching in single file to the slows, where they dive happily in. In the tragedy begins, for there is no soul daintier than a baby turtle, and every sea creature seems to be waiting for the feast. Of the hundred or more by turtles that leave the beach, not many will succeed in getting as far as the end, where a dozen more will be gobbled up by spotted eels. The moment the rest of the little company are through breakers, the large fish outside swirl to them, devouring them, usually, to the last turtle.

When I think of the innumerable senses of the young turtle, I marvel at any of them escape to reach maturity. But some do, of course, for old Father Turtle makes due allowance for casualties. She lays from four hundred to six hundred eggs yearly, so that, in the course of five hundred years, a few of her two hundred and fifty thousand offspring are bound to survive. There are thousands upon thousands of eggs in a female turtle; some are casters of just-forming eggs no larger than a pinhead, and from these they grow in size to the fully developed ones. The smaller ones are a great nuisance, but somehow, with me, half the pleasure in eating them is lost when I think of the thousands of embryos lives I am destroying through the food of my molars.

It is a law on Puka-Puka that sail-boat and turtle belong to the entire population. When only one turtle is caught and shared among the five hundred and fifty-odd inhabitants, the individual portions, one would suppose, must be small. But they are larger than the uninitiated might think, for of an average green turtle's three hundred

pounds weight not ten pounds are wasted. The Puka-Pukans eat the flippers, shell, and tail, while the head is given to the man who catches the turtle. The hard bony carapace and plastron shells are considered the most delicate parts, and the result is that when the turtle feast is over there is hardly enough refuse left to fill a hat.

II

Old William and I dug out one hundred and six round white eggs that day, each about the size of a hen's egg. The fully developed eggs are not particularly palatable, but quite good enough for a meal on Frigate Bird Islet. William decided that this batch had been laid two days earlier, so that we might expect Mrs. Turtle to return in a little more than a week. We would lie in wait and catch her by the simple process of turning her over on her back; then go to the north side of the islet and light the signal fire which would inform the rest of the Puka-Pukans across the lagoon that a turtle had been caught, whereupon they would all paddle joyously over for the feast.

The following eight days passed as I should like all days to pass for the rest of my life. I swam in the lagoon with my water goggles on, looking down on the fantastic peaks of submarine mountains, watching the gorgeously colored fish swimming in and out of caves and crevices among the coral; or I would lie on the beach and sleep, or wander idly through the groves inland, listening to the lonely cries of the sea birds. Each day I grew stronger and soon reached that stage of health where one derives the keenest delight from the mere fact of being alive.

On the eighth night old William and I walked the beach during high tide, but old Mrs. Turtle failed to appear; so we

MRS. TURTLE LAYS HER EGGS

BY ROBERT DEAN FRISBIE

I

FOR the past four years I have lived as a trader on the atoll of Puka-Puka, in the South Pacific, but it was only recently that I became personally acquainted with the midnight ramblings of Mrs. Turtle. I had been dangerously ill from ptomaine poisoning, so I decided to close the trading station and take a two weeks' vacation on Frigate Bird Islet, one of the three islets which, with the reef and the lagoon, comprise the atoll. It is contrary to the local tabus for anyone to visit Frigate Bird Islet except during the copra-making seasons, when the whole population moves; but as I am a white man, and had been very ill, the village fathers generously consented to my sojourn on Frigate Bird for the purpose of convalescence. Furthermore, it was then November, the season when the turtles come ashore to lay their eggs, and I had promised the natives to lie in wait for one.

Taking with me an old retainer called Uiliamu (William), I paddled across the lagoon and was soon comfortably settled on Frigate Bird Islet, in a grove of tall puka trees. There the wind moaned with a pleasant dolorousness and innumerable sea birds were blown about the sky, settling from time to time on their perches in the tops of the trees. Frigate Bird was also a favorite nesting place for the rupes, island doves whose cooing is as lonely-sounding as the music of the wind in the branches of the puka trees.

Half an hour after our arrival on the islet, old William returned in great excitement from a reconnoitre along the beach. He had found a turtle track only a few hundred yards from a little thatched hut. I followed him to the spot. It must have been a big turtle, for the track was a good three feet wide and ploughed deep into the sand.

Looking at the trail she had left behind her, I wondered that there was any of these great turtles left in the sea. The natives of all these islets know, of course, that a turtle lays her eggs every ten or twelve days, on five or six occasions during the months of November and December. So, when a trail is discovered, one has only to lie in wait during high tide, and Mrs. Turtle may be caught when she returns to lay another batch of eggs for which she will lay her successive batches within a few hundred yards of the first one.

I have read that a turtle is very clever in hiding the spot where she lays her eggs, but this is nonsense. From the shallows to the upper beach she leaves a track behind her as plain as an ironed tank's, and the spot where she lays is hollowed out much like a bird's nest, the sand being heaped over the eggs to the height of a foot or more. After the eggs are deposited and covered, she wobbles straight back to the reef, leaving another trail so plain and deep that, failing to see it, one would stumble into it.

When the eggs hatch, the first to

returned to our little hut in the puka grove and went to sleep. William said that mother turtles seldom cross the reef at low tide, but this is not an invariable rule.

An hour later I awoke, as completely refreshed as though I had enjoyed a long and dreamless night's sleep. William was snoring at the other end of the hut, and I heard an owl's shear-water squawking a discordant love song to the moon.

I rose and crept out of the mosquito net, thinking that perhaps Mrs. Turtle might have stolen a march on us and might even now be fashioning the nest for her eggs somewhere up the beach. Sure enough; I had not gone more than a hundred yards along the shore when I came to a freshly ploughed track from the shallows to the shore brush. I halted and listened.

The water in the outer shallows lay steely-calm halfway to the reef, and the shadows of branching coral were outlined with striking clearness. But the first tiny wave of the incoming tide was moving shoreward, a wall of water about a foot high, jet-black in the moonlight save for flashing points of spray that rose and subsided as the tide wave foamed gently across the shallows to break with a faint hiss on the sandy beach. A moment later it was on its way back to the reef and soon the shallows were calm again, although the water was a few inches deeper than before.

I seated myself on the sand near Mrs. Turtle's track and gazed into the shadows of the shore brush. Once I thought I saw a dim ungainly shape moving there, and several times heard the crackle of breaking twigs as she broke through the bushes.

She rested for several moments, and then I heard a sharp scraping noise followed by the patter of sand against the foliage. I rose, crept close, and turned

the light of my flash lamp into the bush. At my feet, so close that I might have touched her, was a green turtle weighing at least three hundred pounds. She turned her head to stare at me with cold passionless eyes; then with a deliberate, almost haughty motion she again turned, and without paying the least further attention to me went on with her work.

I sat down and placed my flash lamp on the ground so that the light was fully upon her. I expected her to move away, but she did not, and the natives have told me that once a turtle has started to dig the pit for her eggs nothing can frighten her away. The eggs must fall and she will proceed, oblivious of everything, until she has them nested.

There was something solemn, almost religious, about that midnight labor so beset with danger. I watched with a feeling akin to awe, as though I were eavesdropping at an esoteric rite. What, I wondered, did old Mama Turtle make of my flash lamp? Was she aware that death awaited her only a few feet away, that she would never again cross the reef to plunge into the cool sanctuary of the sea? If so, she gave no evidence of the fact. More than likely she was the stoic she appeared to be, a fatalist whose hundreds of years of experience had placed her above worrying over the vicissitudes of life and the fear of death. The light of my flash lamp was merely another of those strange phenomena turtles must expect on dry land. I wondered about all sorts of things as I watched her—a man will harbor curious thoughts in the wee hours of a moonlight night on the remote beach of an uninhabited islet.

She had already started digging her pit when I first approached her. She used her hind flippers, the right and left ones alternately. With one she would reach to a spot under her tail, scrape

away about a handful of sand and gravel, and, cupping the bottom of her flipper, bring the sand to the surface and deposit it. The other flipper would then be swung into the hole, while with the first she would brush away the sand already brought out. This was done by scraping the flipper vigorously across the ground, and it was that sound I had first heard after discovering her track.

She worked automatically, for evidently she must dig her pit in the age-old manner or not at all. It was interesting to observe that, though one flipper was shorter than the other, when the hole became too deep for her to reach bottom with the shorter one she still went through the motions of scraping, cupping, and brushing the ground where the sand should have been. This somewhat lessened my opinion of Mrs. Turtle's wisdom.

When the pit was as deep as she could make it—about twenty inches—she dropped one hundred and fourteen eggs into it, filling the excavation to within three or four inches of the surface. Then, working both her hind flippers at once, she scraped the sand into the pit, patting it down firmly and pushing it under her until she had a mound a foot high over the eggs. Then she put her powerful front flippers to work for the first time. Reaching out, she scraped them across the ground so vigorously that a shower of twigs, sand, and gravel went flying into the air. This was done,

I suppose, in an effort to cover and conceal the spot where the eggs were laid—an entirely futile attempt. Half of the first shower rained on me, with such force that I moved away at once. Deciding that I had seen enough of Mrs. Turtle's private affairs, I moved some distance away to sit on the beach near her track. For ten minutes longer I could hear her flinging the sand about; then she was silent.

I must have waited a full hour longer, for the moon had dropped Arai Reef, and I could see the foam and spray where the long smooth combers humped their backs and bro over the sunken reef. Venus had risen and in another hour the puka tree would be outlined in the first light of dawn. Twice I flashed my light in the bush, only to see Mrs. Turtle lying motionless, resting after her labor. Presently I nodded, and dozed in the midst of a series of disjoint reflections.

I was roused by the sound of something dragging over the sand. It ceased the moment I looked up. The stood Mrs. Turtle, perfectly still, no more than ten feet from me. I was directly in her path; all I must do was to walk up to her, get a firm hold on her carapace shell above the tail, and turn her over—but there was plenty of time for that.

I watched her for fully ten minutes then, of a sudden, she breathed. It was a raucous respiration, startlingly loud in the still night air. It may have been that my long exposure under the moon's full light had given me the Puka-Pukans call 'moon madness' however that may be, it occurred to me that old Mama Turtle was an exceedingly likable, human sort of creature. Therefore I decided to have a little confidential chat with her.

Although at first the sound of my voice startled me a little, I explained to Mrs. Turtle the foolish risk she has taken in coming to an inhabited island to lay her eggs. 'In your hundreds of years,' I said, 'you should have learned that only the loneliest sand banks are safe for you, and that your greatest danger is from an encounter with man.' 'And now, madam,' I went on with a little flourish, 'see what your lack

of foresight has brought you to! To-morrow you will be split in two — *razaji-ake*, as the Puka-Pukans say — and eaten to the last corner of your shell. You will have ceased to exist. For many hundreds of years you have flopped across the reefs of lonely atolls, ploughed up the beaches, and laid your hundred eggs. For centuries you have paddled with dignity and deliberation about the seven seas, dining on the choicest turtle grass and contemplating the starry firmament through long tropic nights. All these centuries you have escaped being made into soup for aldermen's dinners; you have escaped the ropes and spears of savages; and most amazing of all, at about the time when William the Conqueror crossed the English Channel, when you hatched out on some remote and moonlit tropic beach such as this, you escaped your enemies in the sea and by some freak of chance managed to grow to maturity, safe from all sea creatures, only now to be unceremoniously flopped over by a mere South Sea trader.

'Outside the reef old Papa Turtle is waiting for you. When he rises to breathe he gazes shoreward, wondering what is keeping you so late. But he will never see you again. He will wait beyond the reef for a few days, and then, doubtless, paddle off in search of another mate. To-morrow your body, from the tip of your nose to the end of your tail, will be crushed between the jaws of five hundred hungry savages. What a forlorn end to a life of adventure such as yours!'

Again Mrs. Turtle breathed hoarsely, and this time she struck her flipper on the sand, as though annoyed that I

should keep her waiting. I rose and, stepping behind her, grasped her shell. I made a feeble attempt to turn her over, but she was very heavy, so I did not try again, for I was willing to believe that I was still weak from my recent illness. She waddled with stately deliberation down the beach, while I stood where I was, watching her. When she had nearly reached the water I called after her: 'Madam, I will give you three pieces of advice: Dive deeply and at once whenever you see a ship, boat, or canoe. Never go ashore at an island where you see fires at night. And above all, avoid man, your greatest enemy.'

Old Mama Turtle wobbled on without so much as a glance back. A moment later she flopped gracelessly into the water and I saw her no more. Dawn was at hand as I walked back to the puka grove. Old William was still asleep.

When he awoke he soon discovered the turtle track and my own as well, and all that day he would not speak respectfully to me. He knew at once what had happened, but he was unable to account for my strange behavior. Why, if I were unable to turn the turtle over, had n't I called him? There was really no satisfactory reply to be made to that question. The next day when we returned to the main island William told the story, and I was in disgrace. For a week not one of the village fathers would consent to buy so much as a popgun from me, or a bag of marbles. Nevertheless I am glad that I acted as I did. And if old Mrs. Turtle is capable of emotion and reflection, I am sure she is glad, too.