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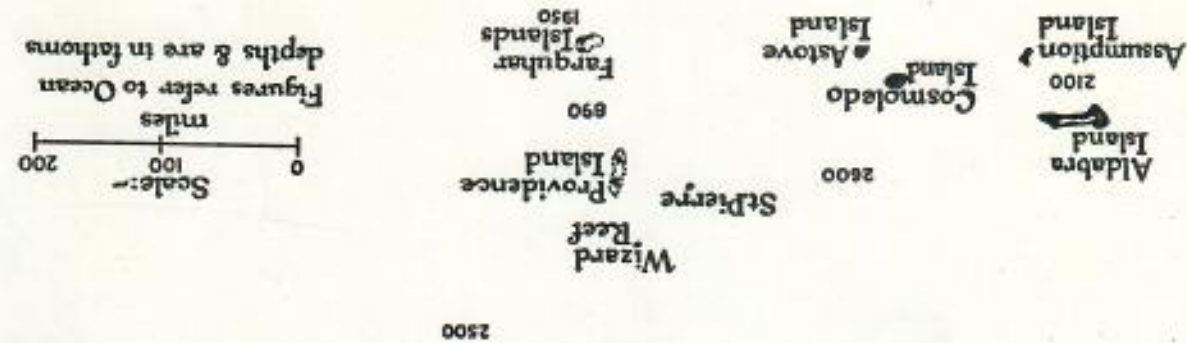
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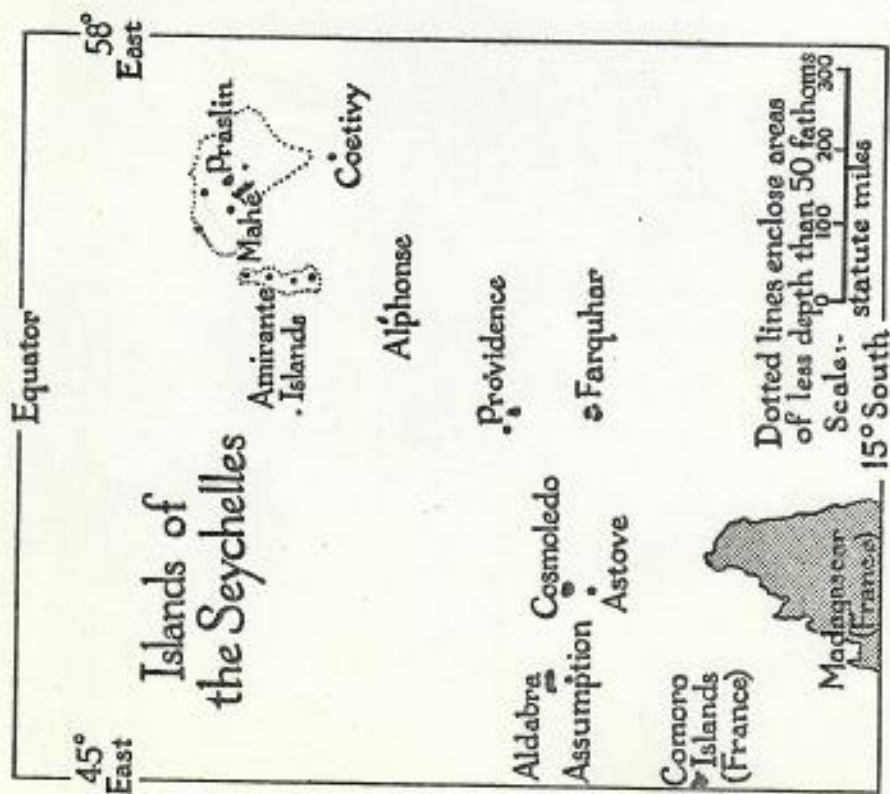
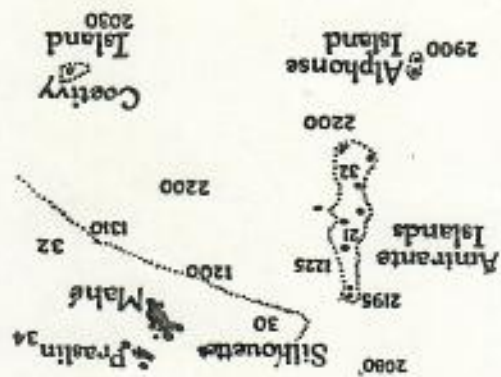
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Islands of
the Seychelles

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shell other than a few trochus, of a type not suitable for commercial acceptance. The seaward edge, where it abutted the reef, proved impossible to examine underwater, since the rising tide brought swirling eddies and vicious cross-currents. Anyway, the surf on the reef itself was far too heavy to penetrate and it was obvious that our idea of getting through that way would have to be given up for several days until the weather grew calmer.

Not meeting with the rest of the fishermen, I was wondering where they might have got to when a tremendous clamour arose from over the low brow of the sandbank. Seconds later, an enormous number of seabirds rose up from behind its shelter, screaming with rage and fear. Like a whirling dust cloud they formed a huge inverted cone of dark wings, twisting and turning, concentrating their fury and despair upon something that remained hidden from me by the intervening hillock. I scrambled up the slope, knowing full well what I should find, and hoping that I could reach the scene before too much damage had been done. Sure enough, there they were, my missing group of fishermen, and already they had half a dozen or so limp, feathered bundles dangling from their hands. Before I got to them several more birds were literally 'plucked from the air', as they clamoured and beat around the men's heads.

Like many native peoples the Seychelle Creole is supremely indifferent to animal suffering and it is his own ceaseless butchery that has resulted in many of the islands being denuded of all wild life, save for those forms which are completely inedible. To the end of our acquaintanceship these fishermen could never fathom my continued intervention in what was to them 'fair game', and this strained our friendship to near-breaking point on many occasions. Had we been on a restricted or monotonous diet it would have been a different matter, but they would grab or club any bird simply for the sake of it, leaving the pathetic corpses to litter the ground.

Golette Island seemed to be incorrectly named, for there were few if any Sooty Terns to be seen, the whole sandbank being covered with little brown Noddies (Macao in Creole). These would remain squatting on the ground, which was here covered with tenacious creeper-grass, until we were almost on

them; then, with a plaintive 'peep' take to the air. Once aloft, our presence which they had hitherto virtually ignored seemed to offer a new and intriguing perch and they would do their best to alight on our heads and shoulders as we walked. It was at such moments that the fishermen would grab them and wing their necks. One thing I noticed at once. Any man who carried a dead or flapping bird became the immediate target for a thousand feathered protests, and his progress was marked by a swirling mob of Noddies. Once the men had put the bodies down and moved on a few yards the birds promptly forgot whatever it was that had excited them and even the ruffled bodies lying on the ground grew scant attention. A man by himself was not cause for alarm, although he might strike at other birds as he went. Their own dead were similarly ignored. But woe betide any man who picked up a bird, whether alive or dead. Instantly he became a target for every Noddy within sight, their plaintive 'peeps' turning to harsh and strident alarm-notes and their soft flutterings becoming desperate and reckless lunges.

By the time we had walked across the sandbank to where we had left the pirogue, I had managed to make all the fishermen release those birds that they held and which were still alive, and discard the bodies of those they had already killed. Luckily, the Noddies had not as yet started to lay or else my men would have done a hundred times as much damage.

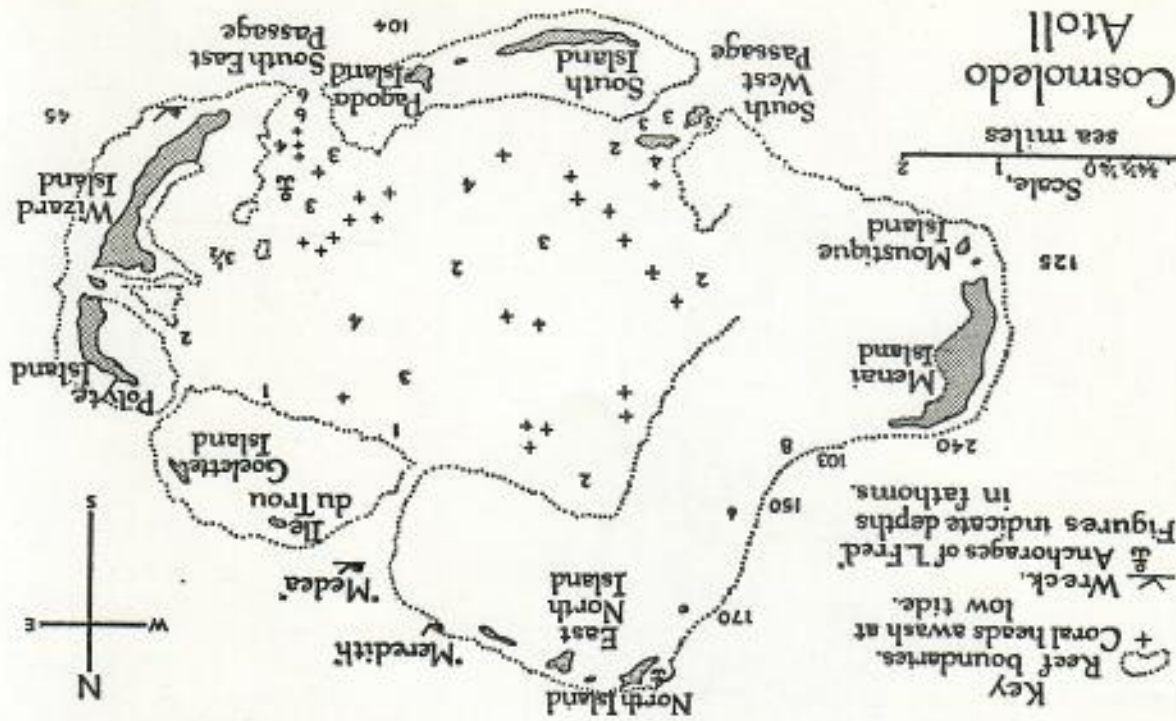
The next day the weather was, if anything, worse, and we gave up all idea of doing any serious work. Harvey took advantage of the strong breeze to go back to the settlement in the sailing dinghy and collect some bread which the manager had promised to bake for us. For the first hour or so after his departure I busied myself about the ship, then growing bored, decided to paddle over to the long islet behind which we were anchored, and look around.

South Island, as it is named, presented a completely different aspect from Ile Golette. Low bushes lined the beaches, behind which coco-palms and casuarinas grew in jumbled profusion. The whole island, however, had the appearance of having been under heavy shell-fire at some time during the past few years. Many palm trunks were snapped off or uprooted. Casuarinas were twisted into weird shapes and the ground beneath them

any conditions. In a small sailing schooner, overburdened with four tons of equipment and carrying twelve people, it seemed even more formidable—particularly since our destination was a small atoll, so low as to be invisible from a distance of eight miles and totally deficient in beacons, buoys, light-houses or other landmarks, and around which powerful and uncharted currents were known to sweep. Moreover, it was my first trans-ocean voyage in command of any vessel, and I was extremely conscious of the fact that these men knew nothing whatsoever about navigation and had placed themselves entirely in my hands. Under the circumstances I felt justified in diverting slightly from our direct route in order to call at Alphonse Island, which landfall, if successfully attained, would give the crew a little proof of my capabilities and give myself a check on the performance of the compass, my estimation of the oceanic drift and the accuracy of my sights.

Emboldened by the fact that our arrival at this island went off according to plan, and bolstered up by the very careful note I had made of the concealed pass in the reef on our previous visit in the *Maréauin*, I decided to enter the lagoon without waiting for the pilotage of Alphonse's manager, Gendron, whose pirogue was already on its way out from the settlement. Sending Joseph to perch up on the bowsprit to watch out for any coral heads in case we left the main channel, I put Ti-Royale in charge of the engine and took over the wheel myself. As we turned in towards the reef with its solid line of breakers I looked around at the rest of the crew. The exuberance they had displayed on first sighting Alphonse had now changed to marked anxiety as they realized what I was going to attempt, for 'La Passe des Morts' has an almost legendary fame throughout the Seychelles. But it had to be this way. If they were to obey without question in the weeks ahead, they must have complete confidence in me. As it was, they were well aware I knew comparatively little about sailing and the mere fact that we had arrived at Alphonse, perhaps by chance, would soon be forgotten. But going through the channel at Alphonse without a pilot they *would* remember; and if I could not do it I certainly had no business taking them down to Cosmoledo.

As the breakers drew close under the bow the crew were all far too concerned with the proximity of the reef to bother about



the central portion. At the far end, along the rocky spur that ran out into the sea to join the reef, lay a belt of screw pine and some pemphis. Among their roots large scarlet and black land-crabs strutted importantly, and in the matted branches the Boobies and Frigates had their nests. I had read that the Frigate Bird is a relative of the Pelican, but to me it always looks far more like a type of oceanic kite. It has the same puff-chested appearance, the same scimitar wings, cranked sharply backwards at the elbow joint and the same kite-family forked tail, which opens and shuts scissor-fashion in flight.

The Frigate leads a glorious life, and is aptly named. All it does is to lie await aloft, until it spies a gorged Booby homeward bound. Then down it sweeps and chases, bullies and chastizes the poor Booby until the latter, in disgust, obligingly disgorges its flying-fish lunch on which the Frigate then pounces. And the Booby never learns one simple fact by which it could escape this fate! The Frigate always hangs high above the reef-line and never fails to intercept the Booby it has marked down, because the full-fed Booby always flies in *low*, right down on the water, in an effort to sneak under the vigilant airborne footpad. A Booby that is not gorged flies in at any level and is never molested, nor even looked at. If only the laden Booby would do the same, instead of acting suspiciously and arousing immediate interest, it would get away with it.

Yet the full-fed Booby must fly low, obeying his natural instincts and the Frigate catches him every time and so the comedy goes on. It is only due to the fact that the Booby far outnumbered the Frigates that the baby Boobies ever get fed at all for, as it is, sooner or later the Frigates are full of Booby flying-fish and let the parents fly in to their nests in peace.

On this northern islet of Cosmoledo all the Frigates, Boobies and Terns showed the same lack of fear towards humans as I had already witnessed in other remote islands of the Seychelles. The Frigate chicks in particular were very interesting. At birth they were as snow-white and as powder-puff-like as the Boobies and only distinguishable by the vicious little hook on the end of their beaks and by their feet which lacked the webbing of the Boobies. At a later stage the long sprouting forked tail became obvious and the dark flight feathers lent further distinction. Some of these chicks were perched in the most precarious

TURTLE HUNT

By the end of the week we had scoured the whole of the northern coast and had over a ton of shells to show for our labours. Sunday was a rest day, to allow us all to recover from excessive exposure to sun and salt-water and to give our cut hands and scratched feet a few hours in which to heal. I let them practise with the aqualungs, but only for half an hour as I thought it better if they stayed out of the water altogether. Mostly we lay around the deck and slept and ate. Some went fishing in the dinghies, whilst others played cards or dominoes.

That first Sunday I went off alone, ostensibly to explore the lagoon, but my real intention was not that at all. Having watched all week the Boobies and the Frigate birds that had their nests on the islet in front of our anchorage, I wanted to see them at close quarters. If the others knew I was going ashore they would naturally want to come as well, but this I could not allow, as they would be bound to filch eggs, knock down sea birds, break off branches for firewood and otherwise behave in a slightly vandalous fashion and this must not occur, particularly since the lessee had warned us against trespassing.

Once in the lagoon I turned up inside the islet out of sight of the *L. Fred* and soon found a little bay in which to beach the boat. Ashore the old pungent island smell that I liked so much assailed me and the feel of the warm earth under my bare feet was infinitely reassuring.

This islet was different from many I had been on previously in that there had been at one time an obvious attempt to cultivate Sea Island cotton and now these tangled and withered bushes, each bearing its flecks of cotton wool, covered much of

places and it was difficult to see how the egg from which they came had ever balanced on the bare and slippery branch on which they crouched.

On the inside edge of the islet, the one facing the quiet lagoon, other birds had their homes. There, snowy egrets stalked about, their heads hunched down on their shoulders, looking like little old men marching up and down with hands clasped behind their backs, engaged in serious contemplation. On the rocks at the water's edge Oyster Catchers stood in small groups, their black-and-white livery out of place in the general colour-scheme of greens, browns and blues. Far out in the lagoon shallows, stood tall creatures whose upright figures I first took to be those of men, but which turned out to be Goliath herons, hunting for crabs and small reef eels. All the time around my head twittered the ever-restless forms of the Terns, glossy white save for their little black caps and beaks. Bees were there on this island too, and their heavy 'bumbling' seemed strange against the noise of the distant surf. Before returning I plucked some green fronds from a casuarina tree, the young live tips of which I added to the curry that evening as an added source of vitamin 'C', much to the amazement of the others who would have carefully picked them all out again and thrown them away had I not been watchful.

According to Joseph we had not even begun on the Green Snail of Cosmoledo as yet, for the most prolific reef areas by far were those that lay on the south-west side of the atoll near the main island of the group, and it was there we sailed at the beginning of our new working week. I was sure that not many would remain for us in the shallows, since these were easily accessible to the labourers, who had merely to walk across a wide stretch of reef-flat from the settlement. However, I knew that the shell colonies which fed the reef here and which must lie nearby, would be untouched somewhere in the deeper water and it was on our eventual discovery of these hidden colonies that I relied.

Full of confidence of the outcome of our standard pattern of organized underwater research, I was absolutely unprepared for the sight that met my eyes on entering the water there. As soon as I looked round the sea-bed I knew that something once again was radically wrong. In place of the clear water and

organized reef pattern of the atoll's northern reef, here lay gloom and murk and desolation. Once again, as at Farquhar, huge coral masses had been uprooted from the bottom and all around lay the piled debris of dead coral. In places great canyons had been formed, their fissures choked with clouds of drifting sand, the wearing-down process of the sea upon dead coral rock. Here and there drab growths of fleshy seaweed, such as I had grown to loathe, struggled for survival in the wilderness of decay.

Once again, a valuable shell-bearing portion of the reef had been destroyed by some vast destructive force. The damage seemed identical with that of Farquhar, yet I had found no record of a cyclone having hit Cosmoledo in the past decade. Whatever it was, it was no use expecting to find any shells along this side of the atoll and I signalled to the rest of the divers to remain in their dinghies. To make sure of this bareness, however, I stayed in, tracking the whole reef face, zig-zagging to cover different depths. In mid-morning I sent all the dinghies back to the ship except my own. By midday I was tired and when I finally quitted the water at three it was with the dubious satisfaction of knowing that no Green Snails were to be found at any place on that nine-mile stretch of the reef in any depth whatsoever. Back on board I did my best to cheer up the others, but it was a pretty dismal crew that went to bed that night.

The next day produced similar results and by the evening I knew that some diversion must be found to combat the dismal 'cafard' that had set in as a result of two consecutive days of failure. The Seychelles Creole does not have much stamina in times of defeat and will soon sink into a useless apathy if allowed to. This was particularly noticeable amongst the young divers and I was thankful that all the diving attendants were older and more mature men who did not respond quite so readily to a temporary setback.

There was one thing that would get them out of this, I knew. A turtle hunt! And the meat would be a welcome change in diet. The average Seychellois fisherman goes completely crazy as soon as he sees a turtle. Just as many foreigners cannot understand a certain class of Englishman's grim pursuit of the fox, so to an outsider the Creole's enthusiasm for turtle-hunting

seems similarly mysterious. True, one can eat a turtle, which is more than can be said of a fox, but even if this were not so I am sure that all my crew would have been just as fervent.

Accordingly that evening I took the *L. Fred* in through the narrow pass that lay on the south-east side of the atoll and which led into the confines of the lagoon. Here, on waters glassy calm, we anchored for the night and the work of preparing for the hunt began.

The psychology of turtle hunting is very interesting and arises from certain inflexible instincts which the reptile possesses. During the months following the south-east monsoon hordes of Green Turtles stream northwards from the Mozambique channel, bound for the lonely islands of the Seychelles and the remote coasts of Northern Kenya and Somaliland. The Green Turtle is used in all turtle food dishes and is consequently sometimes known as the Edible Turtle. The Hawksbill Turtle is a much smaller beast and is only of value because of its shell from which 'tortoiseshell' is made. There is nowadays little or no demand for this product and consequently, the Hawksbill enjoys a far less perilous life than of old.

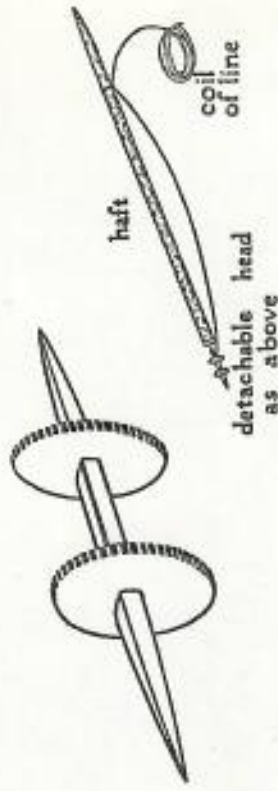
The cumbersome turtle cannot climb rocks or steep slopes and thus its laying ground must be flat sandy islands, or coral atolls along which sandy beached islets are interspersed, and it is off such places that the courtships and matings take place. Most of the Seychelles islands other than those composed of granite are ideally suited to the turtles' requirements.

On arriving off the chosen island, the male turtle cruises around the reef, feeding on turtle-grass seaweed to make up for the semi-starvation of his pilgrimage. At frequent intervals he surfaces, craning his head out of the water periscope-fashion, and having a good look round. If he sees another head similarly engaged he paddles off to interview the newcomer, and should it be another male a cumbersome fight may ensue, or else each Romeo will disappointedly look elsewhere. When at last the long-sought-for females arrive there is a great to-do. There is nothing bashful about a turtle. A brief introduction and then the happy pair will interlock their flippers and waltz sedately round on the surface while mating takes place. Owing to there being many more males than females, a mating couple will often be surrounded by a ring of six or ten envious

males awaiting their chance to carry on the courtship where their lucky rival leaves off.

The actual catching of the turtle is limited to four sets of circumstances, the harpooning of the male turtle when on the prowl in search of other turtles or coming to the surface with his head raised high; the harpooning of male and female or both during the act of mating; the harpooning of the turtle when feeding on the bottom or resting on the sea-bed; and finally, by overturning the female on land after she has laid her eggs and is on the way back to the sea—this is known as 'turning' (hence to 'turn turtle').

The harpoon used by the Creole is a highly specialized weapon based on a great deal of practical experience. It has a slim wooden shaft about six feet in length, to which is coupled a 'push-fit' and detachable metal head of curious shape:



The idea is this. A swimming turtle has the back plates of its shell relaxed and loose. The harpoon, on striking the carapace of the turtle, sinks in and the first ring breaks through the shell, allowing the point to penetrate a little way into the muscle. Feeling this the turtle instantly locks his plates together as a definite reflex action—but too late. This merely prevents the second ring from passing through the shell and the harpoon head is now securely locked within the turtle, one metal ring on either side of the carapace. Away goes the turtle, pulling downwards with all its might, and towing in its wake the canoe of the harpooner, to which it is now attached by means of the line linked to the metal head. At this stage, the loose wooden haft pulls out and floats to the surface to be recovered later. The reason for this is that were the harpoon in one solid piece

the turtle could use the haft as a lever against the coral on the seabed to tear out the head from its shell. As long as the turtle pulls away, its carapace muscles are locked tight, anchoring the head of the harpoon firmly within. When the turtle surfaces, however, the hunter must be quick to slacken off all tension on the line for at the moment of inhalation those muscles relax and the barb will otherwise pull out.

Eventually the tired-out turtle is brought alongside and hauled bodily into the canoe, where it lies wheezing on its back, harmless and immobile. Much has been written about the cruelty of keeping turtles in this position, but in actual fact it is the only humane method—if kept they must be—for when lying the right way up on a hard surface the weight of the carapace is such that the lungs are crushed down and the beast suffers great difficulty in breathing and may eventually even die of suffocation. Turtles cry as well, great glistening tears that ooze remorsefully out of their luminous dark eyes and which they sniff up their nostrils, causing them to snuffle in a most pathetic manner. This again is not so sad as it may sound, for the turtles' eyes are designed to see under water and these 'tears' place a layer of liquid over the eyeball which enables them to focus correctly when out of the water. A turtle, even on such a happy and natural occasion as when shambling up a beach to lay its eggs, weeps profusely and sighs in a most distressing fashion.

But to return to our preparation for the hunt. No one bothered to listen to the wireless that night. Harpoons were assembled, and the hafts shaved and whittled down to conform to the various harpooners' exact idea of balance and proportions. Lines were made up to the required length and carefully coiled down ready in each dinghy. Rations in the form of kegs of water and hard biscuits were similarly placed and there were long arguments as to who would go in each dinghy and which of them would have the key position as harpooner.

At first light tea was already brewing and the dinghies ready with their outboard motors. There would only be room for nine, so I gave up my place to Ravile and Teddy, out of pure laziness, gave his to old Ton Pierre. As the sun came over the blue-rimmed horizon the three little engines broke the lovely silence of the still lagoon with their infernal cracklings and the

whole party buzzed off, leaving Teddy to sleep, Wyn idly to pluck the strings of the guitar which now badly needed retuning, and myself to overhaul the engine of the *L. Fred* and to think out our next move.

It was dusk before the distant gnats' hum of the outboards announced their return and by the time they had drawn alongside it was quite dark. Cosmoledo, in the past, used to yield over seven thousand turtles a season, but slaughtered in these numbers the poor brutes have been largely annihilated and are now comparatively rare. For this reason I had forbidden the hunting-party to take any from within the lagoon, on the land or even on the reef. Consequently the three they had succeeded in catching that day represented a highly satisfactory total.

To get the three-hundred-odd pound giants on board entailed the use of a block and tackle. On deck, grotesquely straddled on their backs, I examined them. One proved to be a female and since the other two would be sufficient to provide us with meat for a week at least, and also because females were so much rarer, I ordered her to be set free. Unceremoniously dumped over the side with a mighty splash, she stoically swam down to the sandy bottom for a well-earned rest, and we could see her dark silhouette spread out on the sand floor that gleamed palely in the moonlight. In the morning she was still there, but after feeding on a patch of turtle grass nearby she swam off and we saw her no more. Her back plates would soon grow together over the small hole left by the harpoon and the half inch deep cut in her flesh where the point had penetrated would heal in a few days.

That night we fed well. Turtle meat I had eaten previously had come from animals kept long in captivity and in, as I now realized, very poor physical condition. But this! It was tender, succulent and full-bodied, yet completely lacking the slightly reptilian tang I had come to associate with turtle. The best cuts came from under the centre of the carapace, the 'plastron', as it is known in Creole. I had not realized how monotonous a diet of fish could become and the savoury aroma that came from the cook pot during the preparation was almost too much for our jaded palates and eager nostrils, and we stood around—a ragged throng—sniffing hungrily.

Before we went to bed we started preparing the calipee. Previously I had wondered how turtle soup was made and had presumed that the necessary turtle meat was salted and dried before being exported to Europe. Now I discovered that the meat played no part in this but that the main ingredient were segments of the carapace, cut and prepared in a special way and termed 'calipee' or 'calipash', depending upon whether it came from the underside or the upper portion of the shell.

After the turtle oil had been removed the two halves of both shells were hacked with an axe into strips, the size and shape of which were determined by the natural divisions of the carapace. The under-shell of the turtle proved to be much more flexible and also thinner than the heavy upper armour and differed, too, in its colouring—being a pale mustard yellow. All of this under-shell was cut up and then put into a large boiler, which the crew had prepared out of an old fuel drum. From the upper carapace only the curling edges and side plates were taken, the rest of the saucer-shaped shell-casing being jetisoned. These pieces were added to the cauldron and the whole left to boil for several hours, after which the water was drained off and the strips, now much reduced in size, were tipped out on the deck. When these had cooled off I picked one up to examine it. Under the boiling the shell had altered, becoming rubbery and glutinous, and the small, flat, bony plate that lay within was now easily extracted. This left a chunk of yellowy, green-black substance resembling nothing so much as a curly fragment of motor car tyre.

During the next few days all these strips were laid out on deck until judged to be sufficiently sun-dried, by which time they had taken on the same consistency and near indestructibility of tractor tyres! This, then, was the famous calipee and calipash from which the 'Soup of Kings' was made. From a large turtle, perhaps only two and a half pounds' weight of this material might be obtained, which is one of the reasons why it commands such a high price.

This interlude of the turtle hunt had completely changed the outlook of the crew. Overnight they had become keen and eager again, all traces of despondency had vanished and it was a cheerful group that set off shelling in the dinghies the following morning. Once outside the lagoon we turned and con-

tinued on around the south-eastern corner of the atoll, which we had not as yet searched. Almost at once we found Green Snail, at first singly and then becoming more numerous. It was Conrad who stumbled on the colony this time and nearly passed right over it without realizing the fact.

On this portion of the reef in comparatively shallow water, perhaps only twenty feet down, the limestone 'plating' on which the coral grew had been torn and 'stretched' laterally (perhaps by submarine volcanic action) leaving deep fissures with heavily and constantly undercut stratas of rock which gave a 'puff-pastry' appearance to the sea-bed. It was within these crevices and under each successive lateral overhang that the shells swarmed. Once again, they had taken on the same algae growth as here covered the 'plating' and this made them difficult to pick out. But they were there all right, hundreds of them!

Since these pockets lay along an extended portion of the reef the divers were spread out over several hundred yards, each taking on a section which we de-marcated with little coloured buoys, whose vivid reds, oranges and yellows showed to their best advantage in the clear blue water. These we had made out of sealed and empty cannisters of cigarettes, to the bases of which we attached miniature reels from which a weighted nylon line ran out to moor the little markers to the bottom.

Here, too, we made the first use of the shell-nets, for it was impossible for the boatman to cover the activity of both of his charges simultaneously. The ring-nets were dropped open on to the sea-bed near the shells and the diver did not then bring his catch to the surface each time, but rather piled the snails into the bag before returning to the surface. In this way each man would have a netful containing twenty or thirty shells all ready for his attendant to hoist up from the bottom into the dinghy as soon as he had returned from serving the other diver. This proved very successful and it did away altogether with the not unhumorous sight of a diver frantically treading water but so loaded with an armful of shells that only the top of his head was above the surface and he was thus unable to call the attention of his boatman to his plight.

As it was, Andrea, Sadi and Joseph were always hard put to keep up with the constant demands of their charges and soon grew to be amazingly accurate in placing the dinghies along-

side the surfacing diver. This was no easy matter, for if they misjudged the position either the divers would break the surface yards away and waste considerable time and energy in swimming across to them and, moreover, risk losing sight of other shells they had just marked down on the bottom; or else, if the boat were exactly over the spot, the diver would come up with a bang right underneath it. When this happened all the shells would drop down again, the diver would have a very sore head and the attendant a further cursing. On the whole it was easier to be a diver than a boatman!

By mid-morning we had cleared up this small colony and went back to the *L. Fred* which had followed us out from the lagoon and now lay a little way off. Our haul again proved to be a little more than three quarters of a ton of good shell, which was most encouraging and the others were all very pleased and excited. But I was not so sure. True, we now had collected two and three-quarter tons of good shells but we had just about covered the entire periphery of Cosmoledo atoll and these results, though satisfactory, were considerably poorer than I had hoped for.

However, I now knew almost exactly where to look for colonies of these snails, since the latest find confirmed my previous assumptions. All colonies were contained within an area which had definite physical boundaries beyond which the shells found difficulty in passing. Such places might be made artificially, as within the wrecks we had discovered; or naturally, as in the fissured reef we had just worked. These places must have adequate currents to disseminate food and spat and must contain balanced proportions of light and shade. Furthermore, such coral growths as might occur there must not be of too luxuriant a nature, otherwise the shells could not travel about in search of food. I knew all this, but now it seemed as though this knowledge might have come too late, for once we had completed the exploration of Cosmoledo's reef, where then?

All our information was based on this one atoll which had not given the total yield of shells we had anticipated, owing to the unsuspected and still unexplained area of underwater destruction at the very place we had expected the best results. I could see that very shortly I would have to make another decision,

and I knew that it must be correct first time—otherwise the crew would not continue searching endless and unknown reefs in a vague hope that we *might* be lucky, but would want to return to Mahé to spend the money they had justly earned. While we had tea and a few cubes of lean roast turtle, I studied the maps and current charts in an effort to correlate my findings with other localities. In this I was constantly disturbed by Alice who, full-gorged on her beloved shell meat, sought the shade offered by my body, pushing, grunting and squealing until at last I was forced to put my books away and scratch her back.

By one o'clock we were back in the water and were beating on northwards along the eastern edge of the atoll. Shells here proved very few and far between, the coral gradually giving way to sand and turtle grass, and it was hereabouts that the three turtles had been taken the previous day. Along this side of Cosmoledo lay some of its most extensive islets, two of them, Polyte and Wizard, being over three miles long. Arriving empty handed at the quarter-mile wide pass that separated these two I thought that we might as well have a look at the edges of the reef flanking this channel. No sooner had we entered the pass, however, than we met with an exceedingly strong current coming from the lagoon with the now falling tide.

It was pointless our all battling against this, so I left the others to return to the ship, with the exception of Ti-Royale whom I judged to be the strongest and the most dogged swimmer of them all. We two struggled on into the gradually shallowing and narrowing funnel. In various little crannies and backwaters along the coral slopes we saw numbers of Green Snail but the current was too strong for us to dive and we contented ourselves with noting the most promising areas, resolving to come back again at slack water the next day. Eventually we had worked our way about half a mile in and now Polyte and Wizard islands lay directly on either side of us. Ahead, we could see the raised 'sill' beyond which the channel must grow wider and deeper again as it led into the lagoon, and we knew that once past this bottleneck the going would be considerably easier.

Suddenly, from dead ahead, up over the sill came a turtle—going all out, flippers thrashing madly. Neither we nor it had

time to alter course and carried on by its own velocity and considerably aided by the powerful current, the turtle shot between us and disappeared from sight in a flash. Before we could recover from our astonishment an enormous grey bulk loomed up in its wake. I had an instant's vision of a head as broad across as a fair-sized table and three huge fins—one vertical and two slanting outwards and downwards on either side of the vast body. I tried to pull to one side but I was far too slow. I felt a tremendous buffet across my knees, a swirl of water and something hit my head like a thunderclap, shattering the glass of my face mask.

By the time that I had groped my way to the surface the shark had vanished on down the channel. According to Ti-Royale, who had pulled a little to one side following the turtle's passing and had thus avoided a similar collision, the shark—which he judged to be about fourteen feet in length—had swept by paying not the least attention nor diverging in the slightest from its path. Ti-Royale saw my shins hit the brute just below its mouth, which was luckily shut, and it was the leading edge of one of its pectoral fins that had slammed against my knees. As for the blow on my head, this he was unable to account for, since the shark's body had been between us, hiding the rest of me from sight, but he guessed that it was probably caused by a side-flip from its tail. At this stage, however, I was not very interested in his explanations for my head was buzzing like a hive of bees and I was busy picking fragments of glass out of my beard!

After this incident, by mutual and silent consent, we turned back downstream and Ti-Royale led me (since underwater I was now blind) out of the channel and back to Joseph. Once there, we lost no time in getting into the dinghy, thinking that if the turtle had got away, a hungry shark of that size might possibly return to investigate those two queer fish which it had passed in the defile. As it was, it was two rather subdued and very frightened 'fish' that returned to the *L. Fred*.

With Polyte and Wizard islands our tour of Cosmoledo was complete and obviously it would be pointless to remain at that atoll much longer. True, we might pick up a few more shells if we went over the ground once more, but the effort would not be worth while and the divers would soon become restless with

such poor rewards. By now they were just on their mettle and it would be a good time to try elsewhere. But it had to be the right spot, good shelling grounds first time, otherwise the whole crew would be clamouring to return to Mahé.

The next morning, while they were all engaged in restowing the gear and arranging our load to trim the ship correctly for sea, I set out in a dinghy to have a last look at the pass we had tried to force the previous day to make sure that the far side of it, which we had not yet examined, did not house any worthwhile colonies. To do this I motored up and down the channel pausing now and then to examine the reef below the surface by means of a glass-bottomed box. There was nothing there and after an hour or so I turned back, convinced that Cosmoledo concealed no colonies of Green Snail shell which we had not already discovered and plundered.

It was pleasant cruising down that narrow channel back towards the *L. Fred* which lay at anchor in the lagoon beyond. In order that I might study the reef more closely and yet be in a position to avoid any coral-heads I stood right up in the bows, steering by means of a turtle spear lashed to the tiller of the outboard. Idly watching the reef unfold beneath the dinghy, I was thrown completely off my balance when without any warning whatsoever there was a tremendous jolt and the dinghy momentarily stopped dead. Picking myself up off the floorboards I turned round to see the outboard motor canted right up on its hinged mounting, propeller in air, coughing and spluttering. My first thought was that I had struck a hidden coral-head, but that was absurd for I was in relatively deep water and would have seen any such mass from my position in the bows. Puzzled, I went back to see to the motor. It seemed all right and, having disengaged the clutch, I lowered the propeller into the water again, let in the clutch and opened up the throttle.

Hardly had I done so and the boat was barely moving forward again, when there was a swirl in the water just astern and a second later a tail, a great glistening back and an enormous dorsal fin broke the surface. I gazed at this apparition in astonishment and then my hair stood on end. From out of the water rose the most devilish-looking head I had ever seen! It was a good yard across, flattened, wedge-shaped and horny-

looking, with fixed and staring eyes as big as golf balls faired into its extremities. This whole reared up to display a down-curving mouth that seemed to be full of three-inch spikes.

With a sickening 'chopping' sound the head sank back again as these jaws were snapped shut. The motor jumped right up from its mounting and fell forward, pushing me down once more on the floorboards. This time it had stopped and no wonder. The Hammerhead, for that was what it was, had gone and I never saw it again. Judging from the number of teeth it left splintered around the propeller boss and shaft it must have had even more of a shock than I.

Back on board, having rowed the rest of the way, my story did not arouse much comment. Apparently it was not unusual in the Seychelles for Hammerheads to strike at the propellers of small craft, presumably being attracted by the bright, whirling discs as other fish are to metal trolling spoons. What with our encounter of the previous day and now this incident, I judged it was high time we left Cosmoledo and as soon as the dinghies were loaded, we raised anchor, sailed out of the lagoon and set course to the west.

ALDABRA

OUR destination was Aldabra Island.

Looking through the Pilot Manual I had come across a reference to a large wreck which was supposed to lie on the south-eastern side of this island and which was reported as being moderately intact and partially visible at low tide up to a few years ago. Moreover, the current charts showed a constant and powerful oceanic drift flowing permanently from Cosmoledo towards Aldabra.

I had no idea for how long the freely swimming Green Snail spat could live or be carried, but I thought that the colonies of Cosmoledo might conceivably have engendered similar groups on this other island that lay a mere seventy miles away. And what more likely place for a new colony than within a large wreck? But for all my theories and deductions I knew very well that it was only a guess. There were too many unknown factors, too many gaps in the evidence, and when all was said and done no one could really predict what lay beneath the sea there.

Aldabra, unlike Cosmoledo whose atoll-ring only partly succeeds in breaking the surface, is a very substantial affair, some twenty-three miles in length. Although technically an atoll it has the external appearance of an island, for the land rim is well-nigh perfect with only a few narrow channels through which the sea may enter the land-locked lagoon. The whole terrain at some time in the past has been raised above the level of the surrounding ocean, so that its rocky foundations form fifteen-foot high cliffs which encircle its coastline. To speak of Aldabra being 'raised' is probably incorrect since all indications are that the sea itself has receded fifteen feet,

probably during one of the glacial periods, leaving Aldabra high and dry.

Owing to the extremely rocky and barren terrain only one very small portion has ever been cultivated and that on the north-west side, diametrically opposite from where we proposed to work. If any shells were there I knew that they would be untouched, for the island was virtually impenetrable even from the lagoon, where thick mangrove swamps formed a barrier to anyone seeking entry to the land rim from that side. No paths existed and the only way to reach any of the tiny sand bays along its coastline was to sail right round from the settlement.

Aldabra! The name had a magical ring, perhaps on account of the obvious similarity to 'Abracadabra'! The Pilot Manual had it that the word is a corruption of the Arabic 'Alhadra' (the Green) and was supposedly bestowed on it by some long forgotten constellation of stars and was so called on account of its navigational significance. No one really knows. Aldabra has always been Aldabra and its discoverer remains unknown.

As we drew closer and the long line of stark cliffs grew more distinct, 'the Green' seemed the last possible name for this jagged coast. We passed to the south of Cape Hodoul, a sinister rock promontory on the eastern tip, named after a notorious local buccaneer. Here, the current drift which I had thought might have propagated the shells divided, one limb passing on either side of the cape and this division was made apparent by the many rips and overfalls which violently disturbed the surface of the sea.

Great shoals of tunny clove the waters, wallowing after the gonito which strove frantically to escape, leaping desperately into the air to do so. Flying fish, too, skimmed the surface but there was no safety in flight for many of them, since the sky above was mottled with clouds of Boobies, while over the dark cliffs hung squadrons of watchful Frigates, awaiting to pounce on the Boobies in turn! I made a mental note as we passed that a locality so obviously rich in food might well house Green Snail and would be worth trying at a later date.

According to the chart the wreck of the *Glen Lyon* lay on the reef itself, some eight miles further along the southern coast and it was this spot we now sought. Arriving there we saw no

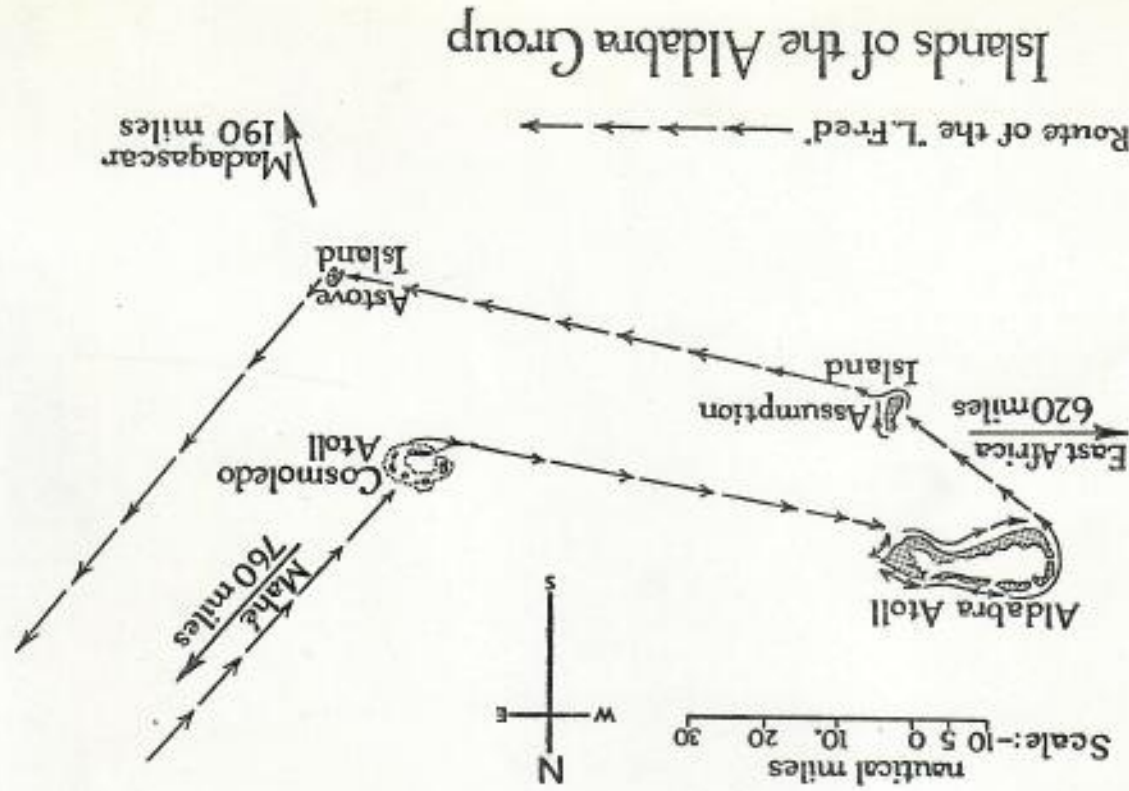


sign of a 'conspicuous wreck' at all, until the quick eyes of Andrea picked out two objects that looked like large coral boulders cast up on the reef flat. He was quite right, they were not boulders but portions of a rusty boiler—the wreck—but definitely not conspicuous. By now it was nearly dusk, so, having marked the spot, we continued on a little way to take up our moorings in a small bay that offered some slight protection against the uncomfortable swell caused by the current.

The next morning, back again alongside the *Glen Lyon*, it was only on entering the water that the true size of the wreck was made apparent to us. The twisted debris and shattered fragments of the eleven thousand ton hulk were scattered over a wide area. Here the sea itself had a strange metallic bitter taste, 'brassy' and unpleasant, caused no doubt by minute particles of rusted iron and verdigris. This derelict, unlike the *Meredith* whose red rust framework had shown up bright and vivid in the clear water, was totally covered by slime and the whole presented a leprous and blotched appearance. On account of this verdigris the water was opaque and the sunken ship only partially visible, the major portion hidden from the diver by a cloying fog whose smoky tendrils coiled about the twisted wreckage in ghostly fashion. But we took no heed of the sinister scene for here were Green Snail again, even as I had hoped, ranged in lines along each metal cornice and clustered within every dark opening.

Within a matter of minutes the mad scramble was on, each pair of divers selecting an area of wreckage and clawing their way down through the grey mist, groping around and, on returning to the surface, unceremoniously dumping their armful of snail on to the floorboards of their attendant dinghies. As the divers thrashed around, so the fog grew thicker, clouds of grey sediment covering everything until all of them looked prematurely aged, their faces ashen and their hair plastered to their skulls in piebald patches.

Soon the dinghies were loaded and I sent word back with them to bring us cotton singlets and heavy gloves, for already we were covered in scratches and cuts from blundering blindly into the jagged ironwork and barnacle encrusted superstructure. Thus protected and the initial fervour having died away, we made better progress. We knew now that here there were enough



On our way back to the *L. Fred*, the episode now safely over, the young men went through a violent reaction that took in each case one of two forms. Either they felt unutterably tired and just dropped off to sleep sprawled on top of the heap of shells they had collected, or else they became almost feverishly talkative, giggling and laughing inanely at the slightest thing. Anyway, they had earned a holiday for the rest of the day. Once on board and our adventures accounted to the incredulous crew, we sailed back to the anchorage, where we had a feast of turtle and rice, sweet potatoes, tinned fruit and condensed milk, cheese and hard biscuits and as much hot, sweet coffee as we could wish for. After this we all slept, leaving the cleaning and sorting of more than a quarter of a ton of hard-won shells until the evening.

On the following day we went back to Cape Hodoul. The sharks were still there, still as nonchalant as before, but nevertheless after two hours' diving we had to give up. It was not only the sharks that beat us but the current, for now we were working right alongside the promontory and the closer we got to it, the more violent became the swirling water. Eventually, penetrating too close, we were caught up in a particularly vicious eddy that took hold of the three boats and those of us clinging on to them, whirled us around and took us willy-nilly past Hodoul's jagged rock-spur and several hundred yards out before dying away.

As we were first sucked into this tide-race I pushed Donald and Teddy, who were with me at the time, back into their dinghies, but I stayed on to have a quick look at the sea-bed as we went swirling across it. In the path of the main current the limestone terraces had been flattened completely, no algae were to be seen and only a few patches of ragged weed clung grimly to such scant shelter as was afforded by the almost levelled sea-bed. No sharks nor other fish swam there, presumably having more sense than to bother with such a wilderness. Only once did I see a Green Snail and that one was bowling head-over-heels, tumbling down the slope, dragged from its precarious hold by the surging water.

For some unknown reason the far side of the cape, once away from the current, presented an entirely different type of terrain. Deep sand pits alternated with craggy rock columns, the whole

obviously unsuited to our snails and in fact we did not find any along that coast at all. Once again we were back on the schooner by mid-morning and although there still lay a large quantity of shells as yet untouched in the neighbourhood of Hodoul Point I could see that they would remain there, for we could not safely bring up any more, lying as they did in deeper water still and with even stronger currents passing over them.

Once again the problem arose as to where to look next and this time there were no more clues. All we could try was a systematic search along the entire coastline and the only way to ensure that the crew held their interest in the work was by allowing them as many diversions as possible, chief amongst which would be the inevitable turtle-hunts, for here at Aldabra there were many more turtles than at Cosmoledo, owing to these distant coasts being so many more miles away from the labourers' settlement.

To conserve our efforts against the time when we might need them, only one diver on each boat now entered the water, so that our searchline was reduced to three swimmers, the 'spares' resting in the dinghies, keeping a lookout for turtle and awaiting their turn to take over the work. On the *L. Fred*, Ravile, Wyn and Ton Pierre now motored off down the coast each morning to await our arrival at some prearranged spot and do some line fishing in the meantime. In this fashion we were able to cover some four miles of new coast each day.

Working thus westwards along the fringing reef on the south side of the island we found relatively few shells, but nevertheless at the end of the day each dinghy team had usually managed to collect one full sack. It was hard, monotonous work and the skin of our backs soon became scaly and cracked with the constant and alternating exposure to sea and sun. By now all the divers had lost considerable weight and we were rapidly approaching the peak of condition.

Each day we would sight dozens of turtles and usually one or other of the boats would be successful in harpooning one, frequently venturing right into the surf during the chase, oblivious of the possibility of staying in the boat and losing all the equipment! At such times I would stand aghast as the whole team was at times entirely hidden from sight in the middle of foaming breakers and crashing surf, but more by luck than skill

they always came out unscathed, often bearing their prize with them.

Every day also, we divers met more and more turtles under water, for by now the breeding season was well advanced and fresh arrivals were constantly increasing the numbers that spent the daylight hours roaming the reefs in search of a mate. On seeing us the amorous and perhaps short-sighted creatures would hastily swim right up, hoping to find a new spouse, but in this they were disappointed and would content themselves with circling us wistfully at a few yards range.

If one let one's arms hang downwards and outwards limply in the water, kicking one's legs in parody of a turtle's movements, the lusty males would rush up with obvious intent, completely ignoring one's evident lack of turtle attributes, and press home their suit to the point where one was forced to flee to the sanctuary of the dinghy. Conrad, in particular, having a peculiarly graceless and froglike movement in the water, was always being chased and on one occasion we were all reduced to hysterics by his being 'blockaded' in his boat by an enormous bull, who must have been very short-sighted since he continually tried to embrace the youth each time he entered the water! In deference to this gallantry we did not harpoon the old bachelor but left him to find a more suitable mate. The episode considerably shook Conrad who, for a long time after, could be made to swim for his life without a backward glance by someone shouting, 'Conrad! Conrad! Tortue derriere ou!'.

One thing that was very noticeable was the number of turtles of either sex who were missing flippers, usually one of the hind ones. These, from the scars remaining, had obviously been bitten off by sharks and many of them were freshly wounded. Once, I even saw a female who had lost both rear flippers and one of her front ones as well, but she got along remarkably fast, scooping at the water with her remaining flipper and craning neck far to one side out of her shell to offset the uneven thrust. Of all meat, sharks prefer turtle and a hook bated with the flesh or offal of this reptile will succeed when all else has failed and the brutes ignore all other lures.

Towards the end of each day the turtles would hide themselves away under ledges of coral or shelves of rock, within cave or crevice, in an effort to find safety from the night-prowling

Tigers, Hammerheads and other such marauders. Only at full moon would the turtles continue with their love-making throughout the night and then only within the comparative safety of shallow water. Even this did not always provide the necessary security as we ourselves saw.

One evening Ravile and Ton Pierre, bored and wanting a change, borrowed my electric lantern and set off in a dinghy to scour the sea-bed to see if they could find any turtles at rest in the shallow water that lay between the fringing reef and the shore. Paddling silently along, the beam of the torch sweeping the sand-floor beneath the bows, they heard a violent commotion in the water not very far off. A turtle was thrashing wildly about, somewhere out there in the darkness. Perhaps a mating pair! Discarding all idea of stealth they rowed hard towards the noise, which was now close by the shore.

Running the boat up on to the sand, Ravile carrying the torch and Ton Pierre the harpoon, they ran along the beach towards the floundering. In the beam of light they saw a turtle, half in and half out of the water, struggling desperately to free itself from something that had hold of it, something whose back was awash and whose large dorsal fin rose three or more feet into the air! Not knowing quite what to do, they stopped and at the same instant the turtle tore free and scrambled madly up the sandy ramp that led up the beach. It was almost clear when the Tiger Shark surged up after it, jaws champing futilely behind its fast escaping prey. Such was the fury of the brute that by lashing the shallows into foam with its powerful tail it succeeded in driving its heavy bulk right out of the water, up on to the ridge of sand, where the weight of its body was supported by the two pectoral fins splayed out like stunted arms on either side of its gross torso.

In doing so it undermined the soft sand, causing the turtle to slide backwards down the slope right into the horrible armed mouth. The shark lunged again and this time its teeth did not close on the empty air but on that mangled hind flipper, this time higher up. As the ugly monster squirmed obscenely in the sand in an effort to wriggle back into the water Ravile and Ton Pierre closed in. Ravile dropped his torch on the sand so that its beam shone downwards along the sloping ground directly at the turtle and into the cold gleaming eyes of the Tiger Shark be-

yond. He then grabbed the turtle by its two front flippers in an effort to pull the poor creature free. At the same time Ton Pierre reversed his harpoon and beat the Tiger on its upturned snout. Nothing coming of this, he proceeded to jab the butt into the beast's eye which continued to stare at him coldly and without any expression whatsoever until he had reduced it to a sightless white cavity. Only then did the shark let go and then only to turn and snap ineffectively at the harpoon haft. Finally, with a terrific muscular contraction, the brute succeeded in swinging round and half slid, half wallowed back into the sea, covering the two fishermen with sand and drenching them with water under the furious lashings of its tail. There was a swirl, a few wavelets lapped the edge of the sandbank and then it was gone into the night.

Ravile loaded the turtle into the dinghy and brought it back to the schooner where we butchered it to put it out of its misery. It was a female and within the abdominal cavity we found strings of unripe eggs. These were all of yolk, were round, about the size of chestnuts and connected one with another by means of a transparent skin of placenta-like structure. Washed in sea-water to remove this membrane they were dumped in a saucepan and boiled. Dipped in salt and eaten hot they tasted sulphury and, unlike a bird's egg, contained a large amount of fat. We found them both rich and extremely indigestible!

Aldabra, amongst other things, is one of the only two places in the world where the Giant Tortoise is found. The other locality is the Galapagos group, off the western coast of South America. These Giant Tortoises present something of an evolutionary problem. They are relics of a long past age, about the only living 'prehistoric' animal left. They breed very slowly and live for many hundreds of years. Yet the age of Aldabra itself has been geologically determined as not more than three thousand five hundred years. If so, how do all these tortoises come to be on the island, for there are literally hundreds of thousands of them roaming the barren wasteland and desolate sandhills of this southern part of the atoll. By all accounts they must have been there for millions of years, but by geological evidence they cannot have been. Where then do they come from?

It is hardly likely that they were brought deliberately to Aldabra, since the only other place they inhabit, Galapagos, is separated from it by two continents. Another possibility is that these creatures once inhabited the supposedly sunken continent of Lemuria, which may have joined southern India with Madagascar. The catastrophe that removed the land mass (and which is thought to have elevated the Arabian peninsula), may have destroyed all its living creatures save these Giant Tortoises which, secure in their armour plate, survived the eruptions, storms and other elemental furies, floated on the ensuing flood waters and remained as oceanic floats until some of them were carried in by waves and currents to the beaches of Aldabra. That theory again, is rather improbable, but I wanted to test one particular aspect of it and to do this I first had to capture a Giant Tortoise.

I had not far to look. Clambering up over the eroded rock cliff that surrounds the island I came to an area of low sand dunes whose desolate slopes were partially covered by a species of Marram grass. The ground here was carpeted with what I took, in my ignorance, to be donkey droppings, and it was not until I came across a group of Giant Tortoises peacefully grazing away in a hollow, that I realized that it was they who were responsible for these mounds of dung. That these tortoises would be big I had known, but I was totally unprepared to see just how big. In the herd I first saw there was an old grandfather of more than five feet in length, the arch of whose back would reach near table-height. I crept up to them very carefully expecting that like other tortoises they would withdraw into their shells. But not a bit of it! One or two looked up and regarded me steadily and tolerantly. Walking right among the group produced no result at all. I might as well have not been there. They saw me, looked through me, ignored me. I began to doubt my own existence and felt rather like a small boy wandering unannounced into a conclave of bishops.

A few were asleep and here again their behaviour was odd. A normal tortoise draws in both head and feet, 'shuts its door' so to speak, and then sleeps. Not these giants. They sprawled out, all four legs straddled and yard-long necks extended along the ground. They were as relaxed and unabashed as ancient tramps lying drunk under haystacks.

I sat down on one and it simply marched off in high dudgeon carrying me along with it. Rapping on the shell produced no response other than a turning of the long reptilian neck and a cold unblinking stare. Annoyed, I shouted at it. No reaction whatsoever. I grabbed hold of a sinewy hind leg but was forced to let go as my tortoise stamped off. Only by jumping up and down as hard as possible on top of its back could I make it withdraw into its shell and then only for a second or two, after which it came out again and strode off in a huff.

The truth of these untortoise-like actions is that the Aldabra tortoises have nothing to fear; no enemies exist for them. If they leave their heads out while they sleep, nothing is going to attack them. Their shell, which used to be a fortress into which they could retreat when danger threatened, has now become a useless appendage which they are forced to carry around with them.

I still had to kidnap one temporarily to try my experiment and this was not so easy as I had imagined. Even a small one, the size of a suitcase, was extremely heavy and the only way in which I could carry it was by lifting the creature up on my head and balancing it there upside down, holding the edges of the shell with my two hands. Thus burdened I set off back to the beach but had not gone more than a few steps when I was confronted with a calm, imperious face staring into mine!

My hostage, by craning its neck as far out as possible and then by leaning backwards (that is, downwards in its present position) and turning its head through a half-circle, was able to bring itself face to face with its captor. Under the circumstances I would not have been surprised to have had my nose snapped at, but my tortoise was far too subtle for that. Having regarded me steadfastly for a minute or so the face was withdrawn and I continued in blissful ignorance of what was about to take place.

Then I became aware that something warm was trickling down my back and drenching the backs of my legs! I gingerly lowered the little horror to the ground, whereupon it marched away smugly towards a nearby patch of grass. The damage was done now anyway, so ignoring the possibility of further such occurrence I picked up the tortoise again and this time tucked

it under my arm, a position less vulnerable to its retaliations than my head.

Once on the beach I waded out waist deep in the lagoon and then gently put my charge into the sea. With all its weight I was confident that the tortoise would sink like a stone and thus ruin the theory that these animals had floated up from a now-submerged continent and had drifted in safety around the Indian Ocean before reaching Aldabra. But lo and behold, it floated. In fact, it barely drew any water at all, only the soft under-carapace resting lightly upon the surface, leaving the head and neck completely clear. Even the legs were hardly immersed and only the tips of each bent foreleg served to act like rudimentary oars as it tried vainly to walk away.

Not satisfied with this, I tried to hold the little creature under for a moment to see if it would continue breathing and thus choke, as might happen in rough weather. This was easier said than done, but eventually by sitting on the top side of the shell I forced the tortoise below the surface. I waited for a few seconds, watching for any signs of discomfort, bubbles or kicking movements. Nothing happened and feeling cheated I let it bob up again, whereupon it floated calmly about breathing perfectly normally.

Down I pushed it again and this time found a little coral overhang under which I thrust it. With it thus locked in position I was free to duck under myself and have a look at the long-suffering reptile. Blearily through the watery medium I could see it resting there motionless, its small eyes unwinking. A tiny bead at each nostril showed that water had not entered those orifices and moreover, that the creature was holding its breath. During the next five minutes I made several similar observations and then, thinking the point well enough proven, took the tortoise back to the beach. One thing was certain, these Giant Tortoises would take a great deal of drowning, a point in favour of the theory of continental inundation.

One last thing remained. I plucked some green seaweed off the bottom and proffered it. The little tortoise examined it coldly, then gravely took and ate it all. In a similar manner then, might it be possible for these tortoises to feed on drifting seaweed if afloat for a very long time.

Before going back to the spot from which I had taken it I gave

the tortoise a thorough bath to clean out the sand and encrusted dust from within the creases and folds of its whimple. Afterwards I brushed out the salt crystals with a switch of grass in case they might cause irritation. On the return journey there were no unpleasant incidents and I left my reptilian guinea-pig where I had found it, but now stoically lapping up a bird's egg which I had found and broken by the simple expedient of cracking it on its horny nose.

The other tortoises were all in the exact positions in which I had left them earlier. The biggest one still had half a blade of grass protruding from its mouth. At what point in the past it had ceased eating I did not know, nor when in the future it might continue. I had an eerie feeling that this sunlit clearing was somewhere out of time. That here the sun would never sink and that if I stayed there for what seemed like one short hour I should return, like Rip van Winkle, to find the *L. Fred* long since rotted to dust and my crew already dead and forgotten.

A heavy silence permeated the air and not even the weird lost cries of strange birds away in the thickets of pempphis seemed real. A white Ibis stalked among the sleeping giants, its grotesque struttings brought into sharp relief by their immobility. No breeze stirred the grasses here. A vivid green lizard crouched motionless on a flat stone by my feet; its hard agate eyes, extended tongue of jet and metallic sheen of skin made it not a thing of flesh and blood, but a lifeless exotic bauble, a fit inhabitant of this lost world into which I had inadvertently stumbled and in which I had no place. Shivering a little, in spite of the sun, I got to my feet and left that haunted clearing, unconsciously tip-toeing in order that my unwanted presence might not be noticed.

It was my habit each morning to get up before daylight and watch the sunrise. There was a reason for this. I knew that during the night many large sharks came close to the beaches in search of turtles and I wanted to ascertain the exact hour of their return across the reef out to the depths. Every day as soon as there was sufficient light I would spend an hour or more watching the sea-bed from a vantage point on the bowsprit. Eight fathoms down, the beginning of each day came far later than it did on the surface, and not until the sun was well above the horizon would any fishy activity begin in the coral jungle

that lay below our keel. But the night prowlers returned to the safety and darkness of the abyss before this. As soon as the pale lead light of the pre-dawn lay upon the sea you might see their shadowy silhouettes pass, slinking like giant alley-cats, fur-tively and silent, back over the reef, to curve down in a last smooth arc and disappear from sight.

If several species of shark frequented that portion of the reef off which we lay, they usually sought the deeper waters in the same order. First would pass the Nevez Pointe, slim pencil shapes, then the blunt and pig-like Requins des Sables and heavy Tiger Sharks, finally, long after the others, came the Hammerheads, wagging horny heads with each roll of their sluggish bodies. The Nevez Pointe cruised past travelling fast, just below the surface, their eyes showing up orange in the dark sea. The Tigers lumbered along hugging the bottom, preferring to cross the smoother reef portions than wind in and out of the coral heads, while the obscene Hammerheads wallowed in the mid-depths, travelling at a slower speed than the others. In every case the last big shark had left the reef within the first hour after sunrise. But just to make sure I waited for another whole hour before we started the day's diving.

Similarly each evening we left the water in good time for the four o'clock deadline and I had reason to be glad that we did so. One afternoon, Sadi's dinghy sprang a leak, with the result that his divers, plus their shells, were loaded in the back of ours. The five of us, our shells and a turtle that Joseph had caught proved too much for our boat and before long we were baling furiously. Seeing it would be impossible to make the *L. Fred*, which was waiting for us two miles further on, Teddy and I left them and swam ashore, to walk along the beach until level with the schooner where we waited for a dinghy to pick us up. Soon it was past five o'clock and growing impatient I decided not to delay any longer but to swim the half mile back to the *L. Fred*. Teddy, the ever lazy, would not come, preferring to lie comfortably in the shade until rescued. As it transpired, he was wise.

Leaving him I set off on my own. By now the sea was already growing murky and opaque with the approaching dusk. All colour had gone save a drab autumn green. Most of the coral fish had already retreated into crevices and holes and the reef seemed strangely empty. In the shallows a solitary Hawksbill

turtle took to instant and panicky flight on seeing me. The shadow of a Booby bird crossing overhead made me start nervously. There was a tension of fear about the place. This reef that had been alight with colour and quick with friendly movement a few hours ago was now 'on edge', withdrawn and deserted, waiting for the night, silent and afraid even as a great primeval forest might await the onset of darkness.

Something white flickered in the gloom ahead. It was the under-surface of a small shark, perhaps three or four foot long, curving up to meet me. It passed close over my shoulder, swung round and cut in again. Normally a baby of this size would have taken to flight, but now with the dusk it was no longer the timorous infant of the daylight hours. It stayed with me for several minutes, only disappearing when a slightly bigger specimen suddenly materialized. This one also came straight at me, zipping close by my flank at the last second. In a flash it was back and continued to 'buzz' me in this fashion until finally I chased it off by diving directly at it and trying to tweak its tail as it swung away.

By now I was past the shallow reef lip and the coral that lay below was no longer visible, lost in the obscurity of the under-sea nightfall. In the intervening two hundred and fifty yards between the reef and the *L. Fred*, I was bounced by three more sharks. Not one of these was more than six feet in length and all were of the common White-tipped variety that were usually so timid in the daytime. But this was not the daytime and already their hunting instincts were roused. A man swimming on the surface would be taken for a queer type of turtle and I could see they thought me just that by the nature of their approach. In each case they appeared from dead ahead and came straight on in. A turtle on meeting them would have swung round, banking steeply to get away with all four flippers thrust out for quick acceleration. A similar quick turn on the part of the shark and it would be in the best possible position for attack—slightly behind, below and to one side, with the nearest portion of the turtle an outstretched hind limb—no doubt the reason so many turtles lacked one or both rear flippers.

Luckily, I was not a turtle and did not play the game according to the rules at all; but like any turtle I certainly heaved a sigh of relief when I felt the *L. Fred's* solid deck beneath my

feet! Those had been comparatively baby sharks. In another half hour their bigger relatives would arrive to scour the reef for the night's food and that would be a different matter. From then on I was doubly careful that no one entered the water before eight in the morning and that we all quitted it by four in the afternoon. We were after shells, not accidents.

ASSUMPTION

WITH the coming of the *Argo* our material position changed overnight, for from this moment on she was on continuous charter to us and accompanied us everywhere as a mother-ship. This meant we had decent places to sleep, no more bug-ridden clothing, hot food and other people to talk to.

Le Gros Soula, in spite of his apparent cantankerousness, produced marvels for us on his galley stove: turtle done in new and strange ways, fish with good sauces, fresh bread and puddings; for on the strength of the initial load of shells I had ordered as many provisions and extras as I could think up, knowing how we should need them by the time the *Argo* next saw us. As a result of that earlier decision we now lived well.

Captain Calais, in particular, thrived. A great lover of turtle meat he would eat three pounds of steak at a sitting and then confess sadly that he was no longer capable of managing the six he could swallow as a young man. Day by day he grew rounder, redder and more like an advertisement for a well-known baby food. He told me that in his youth he had suffered from the 'turtle sickness', as did many Seychellois who came to work on the outlying islands. When I asked him what that was he said it was difficult to explain, except that when one began to eat turtle meat in quantity one did not care for any other food. Just turtle, the meat, the green fat, the gravy and perhaps a little rice. Nothing else. Morning, noon and night, only turtle. Then eventually, one's hair fell out and one's skin erupted and one became very sick. Many had died from it in the past.

All at once I realized to what he was alluding. Scurvy—the

old scourge of the sailing ships when long voyages and no refrigeration made it impossible to preserve fresh fruit or vegetables. Scurvy, essentially a lack of Vitamin C—but here in the Seychelles where there was any amount of that vitamin in the fresh coconuts, the pawpaws and the pumpkin, the people still fell victim to it and blamed it on the harmless turtle!

Although now we had more comfort and better food and might have been expected to be more cheerful and exuberant, the reverse was the case. The work went on and each day our total of shells mounted. Each day we had more reason to be elated and yet we were not. Perhaps it was simply because by now words were unnecessary, we knew the work too well, we drove ourselves too hard and so the shouted commands and exclamations that had accompanied our diving previously were now superfluous. But our silence was more deep-rooted than that. There was a hardness about us now, a selfishness that had settled on us with the coming of the *Argo*. The bad characteristics of each person became more evident and the good seemed strangely absent.

Amongst the divers Albert started poaching on his neighbours' preserves and helping himself to the other teams' underwater 'stockpiles'. Donald took to hiding any fresh discoveries from the rest, passing over good areas deliberately, then sneaking off back again and working quietly on his own later, when the others were busy elsewhere. Sadi lost his temper frequently, claiming his two charges were not working fast enough. Ravile became morose and Wyn more foolish.

In spite of the improved diet all the divers continued to lose weight. Previously, if a small shark or barracuda appeared on the scene we paid it scant attention. Now we deliberately harried any such intruder, gaining spiteful satisfaction in making it flee. At the least incident frayed tempers would explode into open fury.

One place where we moored every evening for a week was inhabited by a very large Hammerhead shark. Early morning would see this particular giant scull lazily past our schooners, right on the surface, coming away from its nocturnal reef wanderings. Each evening would see it rolling in again, head wobbling obscenely from side to side as it searched for prey. In consequence of these regular appearances I was particularly

up in the middle of the night to heat up some turtle meat for our valiant captain when he cannot sleep because of the rolling. Oh no, not me!

To all this Calais paid not the slightest attention, merely waiting for the innate rumblings to die away like distant thunder. When all was quiet he turned to his two lieutenants, spread wide his arms in a gesture of appeal, and said, 'Come, children. Now, let us have a little bit of advice from you on this pressing matter.'

'Now the bloody fool asks us!' screamed Soula to Coletto. And then turning to Calais, 'I don't know, Captain Calais, I don't know. I am only an ignorant cook, not like your esteemed self. But if you anchor over there you can bloody well cook your own meals for the rest of the trip. How would you like that!' and he spat deliberately on the deck.

'Enough, enough. Tut, tut. Some advice please, my friends, my old shipmates. Please.'

'Well,' said Soula, somewhat mollified and in a quieter voice. 'Now you are actually asking us, how about over there?' He pointed in the opposite direction, towards a little sandy bay. 'You remember in '32 Coletto, how we sat tight there in the old *Ziphora* for a whole week? No rolling, No dragging.'

'That's right,' said the squat bos'n, 'and the fishing's good there too and we'll be sure to get a turtle there tonight with this moon and that should please old fat-guts!'

'That's better, my children,' broke in Calais. 'Now we are getting somewhere.'

Then turning to me he announced calmly and in all seriousness, 'Oh, Mr Travis, I have decided to anchor up there, in that little bay, after all!'

— But there came an end to it and one morning I realized that there was nothing further to keep us at Aldabra. The shells were not exhausted, but we were. Mentally as much as physically.

Still obsessed with the idea of filling both vessels to their very limits I decided to sweep the other two islands that lay in the vicinity, hoping that the change of locality might act as a tonic to our jaded enthusiasm. So we set course southwards again, but only for half a day's sailing, since Assumption

Island lay a bare twenty-five miles away, just over the horizon.

Although so close, Assumption has nothing in common with Aldabra. No atoll this, but a true island. No jagged rock surface here but extensive sand dunes. The earth is not poor and arid, but rich with guano. In previous times Assumption earned its various owners large fortunes from these deposits, but nowadays a Government embargo rests upon the remaining stocks as a precaution against the island being turned into a barren dust heap, as has happened with other similar islands. Consequently, though there are still labour lines, storage sheds and rain catchments for six hundred people or more on this three-mile long stretch of land, it is run nowadays by a manager and a scant twenty labourers on a 'care and maintenance' basis.

In its heyday the sandy beaches of Assumption had provided wonderful laying grounds for Green Turtle too, and in the past as many as four hundred were 'turned' in one night on their egg-laying pilgrimages. Now the turtles have practically vanished, fewer than thirty a month being seen off its shores during the season. The Seychelles Government has placed an embargo upon the killing of these reptiles here also, but in all probability this measure has been taken far too late ever to result in a reintroduction of the turtle to Assumption in any numbers.

It was here that Cousteau filmed much of 'The Silent World'; for in his many voyages throughout the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the Mediterranean and the Red Seas he was unable to find any place having the same clarity of water and such extensive and colourful reef-life as that which he found at Assumption. It represents one of the finest submarine sites in the world, and yet we drew no benefit from it.

For us, Assumption was just another reef along which to search for Green Snail shells. The corals, the fish, colour and shade, we saw not, nor remembered. For us, Assumption was the island where the whole expedition nearly came to grief.

Towards the end of our work there the weather began to deteriorate with massive banks of heavy clouds lining the horizon to the east and fitful gusts of wind that blew from every quarter of the compass. At night lightning flickered incessantly in the distance and the growling of thunder could be heard above the noise of the breakers.

ASTOVE

At Astove again we met with a type of island differing from the rest of the group. We had been first to Cosmoledo, a true atoll, then to Aldabra, the barren and unique 'raised' atoll. Assumption was a mound of guano built up on the underlying sand and now this island proved to be a volcanic crater. All these four islands lie within an area seventy miles long by twenty-five wide, far from any other land mass, and yet the four have nothing in common.

At Astove we were met by the manager in his pirogue and invited ashore, but first we had to moor the schooners. This was not so easy for, owing to its peculiar geological structure, this island has no anchorage. On the western side, facing the settlement, a narrow coral shelf extends for about a hundred yards outwards from the shore, the water being not more than two feet deep. Then, absolutely abruptly, the reef fringe stops as though cut with a knife and in the space of a yard the bottom drops from two feet to several hundred fathoms.

Later I stood on the extreme edge of this shelf and looked down over it. The cliff was actually overhanging in most places, undercut by the strong currents that run parallel to the shore and which never cease. Ships loading island produce often have to sail up and down outside all the time, while the cargo is carried out to them in pirogues. We were lucky, for when we arrived the wind blew from off-shore, so that the administrator was able to lay a buoyed cable from the settlement across the reef out into the deep, and we lay strung to the end of this, tethered like goats to the island itself.

This sheer submarine precipice continues right along the western side and, although there is a shallow sunken bar

extending out from the north-west, the vicious currents and tide rips across it that arise from the deep trench alongside render an anchorage there impossible. On the eastern side of the island the water is too shoal and the perpetual breakers that pound its coral shelves prohibit the use of that portion in other than flat calm conditions. Without assistance from the shore it is virtually impossible to land on Astove which is the reason why it has only been inhabited in recent years, although the island itself is rich.

I had read previously that there was an old anchor lying on the reef off the north-west edge, but when questioned about this the manager said that nothing had been seen of it for many years and that he supposed it had been washed away. Now, although many ships have been wrecked upon the reefs and islands of the Indian Ocean few really old wrecks remain, for under the pounding of successive monsoons even the large iron ships soon break up and older wooden vessels have been battered into pulp and scattered abroad long since. Consequently no one was more surprised than I when I stumbled across a sixteenth-century hulk.

Teddy and I were working the submerged spit on the north-west side, across which the tide raced and the current swirled. Because of this we had to work close in along the shore where the going was less difficult and it was there I first came upon a fragment of the old wreck. It was an ancient cannon and lay on a little sand-floored pocket in some fifteen feet of water, completely uncovered and intact, just as though it had been dropped within the last five minutes instead of having lain there for nearly four hundred years. Like any good story-book cannon it was slightly bell-mouthed and had a projecting knob at its breach end. Poking gently at the crusty exterior with a knife I prised off a flake of metal which proved to be iron, not bronze as I had hoped. Measuring it by means of hand-spreads, it worked out as slightly over eight feet in length with a muzzle diameter of ten inches and a bore of about four, although this was difficult to assess, since the barrel was largely blocked with silt and coral. As I was poking about trying to clear it a startled Butterfly fish shot out and hovered anxiously nearby, as I peered down into the recesses of its sanctuary. No sooner had I left this end of the cannon than in it darted again, periodically

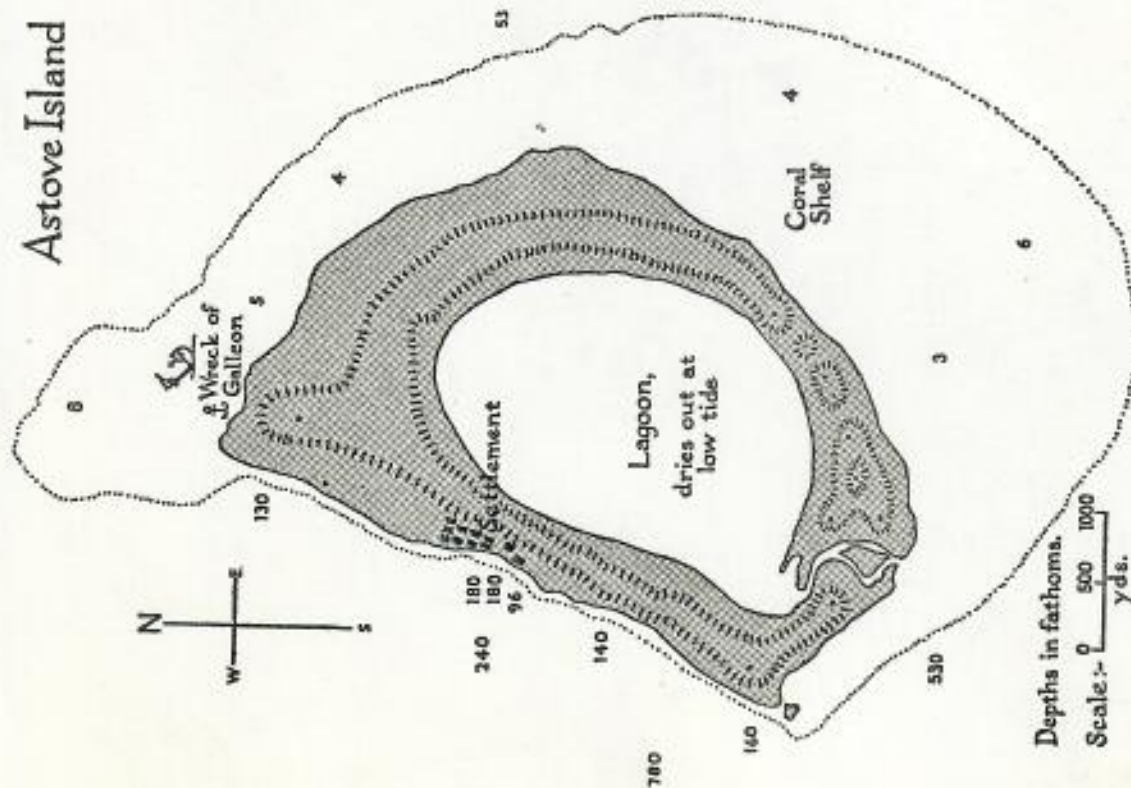
popping out to peer at me over the muzzle lip in an anxious fashion. The touch hole was completely sealed and the foundry and proof marks which were customarily engraved upon a piece were likewise obscured.

Before very long I came across another cannon and the remains of a large anchor. The cannon was identical with the first, while the anchor was unusual in that its stock appeared to have been stressed with flanking baulks of timber, fragments of which still remained bolted to the rusty iron. One of the arms had been torn off and the other had lost its fluke. Through the crown was fastened a massive ring bolt. Presumably this was the anchor that had once lain on the reef itself and which had been dragged back down into the sea by some storm.

A little further on there were two more cannon and near them a beam of timber, wedged between two mounds of coral. Twenty yards away I found another pair of cannon lying one on top of the other in a coral fissure. These were so heavily encrusted that it was difficult to recognize them for what they were and had I not been on the look-out for such remnants I would have passed them by.

By now I was in deeper water and the current was such that I could make no progress against it. Moreover, the wind was rising and scudding black clouds had begun to race across the sky. With few shells and with underwater conditions rapidly becoming impossible I signalled Joseph to collect Teddy and then pick me up. While he was away on this errand I had a further look around the area and discovered the main wreck, a skeletal outline of timbers amongst which were scattered additional cannon. But here I could not dive at all, the current proving far too strong, and so was prevented from making a close examination.

Two days later we were at work along the eastern shore, for by now the wind had swung round to the north-west and our side of the island was therefore relatively sheltered, although there still remained an unpleasant swell and the going was heavy, with only isolated pockets of indifferent shells to show for the labour of our aching limbs. At eleven o'clock we had our customary morning break for tea and biscuits, which I took on the *Argo* so that I might discuss our next move with Captain Calais. Already I had mentally crossed off Astove as unlikely to



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