

Caldong

Peter R. Bacon

M Macmillan
Caribbean

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Introduction

This story is really meant for children, but I don't mind who reads it because it is mostly true. The events recorded here all took place in Trinidad recently, but I have changed the names of most characters to avoid any embarrassment to anyone.

Of course, a story writer has to make up some things, but just remember that Caldong is real and promise that, if you enjoy my story, you will go and see Caldong for yourself, one day soon.

P.R.B.

1

Arrival at the beach house

The small blue car sped along, its driver holding the wheel firmly in both hands and concentrating hard on the twisting Toco road, turning to the left and then to the right, up hill and down, on and on. It was more than an hour since they had left Port of Spain and the children were tired and uncomfortable. Since the rain had begun, as they were passing through Valencia, the journey had become unpleasant for, with all the windows firmly closed, it was stuffy in the car and the glass had misted over. Beverley sat on her mother's lap in the front seat watching the wiper blades moving back and forth, while Laura and Alan slouched on the rear seat, no longer interested in cleaning the windows to watch the scenery along the route. Mr. and Mrs. Williams had been chatting for most of the drive, but even they were quiet now and were looking forward to arriving soon at the beach house.

The village of Matura was deserted except for two dogs sheltering from the rain under the parlour steps, so no-one saw the car turn off the main road in to Rohan Trace. Coconut palms beside the bumpy dirt track dripped water from their drooping leaves on to the roof as Mr. Williams coaxed the car carefully between the flooded potholes. A fallen nut lying in the centre of the track banged noisily against the muffler as the car passed over it and Alan sat up, disturbed from his daydreaming, and peered out through his window.

'Nearly there,' said his father, then added cheerfully: 'At least the trace isn't any worse than when we were here last Christmas.'

'Thank Heavens the rain is stopping so you can at least see the holes,' his wife remarked as she wound down her window and let a draught of cool air in to the stuffy car.

They turned in through a gate on which hung a painted wooden sign with the words "Atlantic Waves" just readable, and drew up under the eaves of a small white cottage. The three children, no longer sleepy, burst from the car as it stopped, raced across the yard and disappeared down the flight of concrete steps which led to the sea. The other passengers got out slowly, with much stretching and groaning, tidying their hair and clothes, as grown-ups always seem to do. Without a single thought for the sea, they went inside the house to talk to George, the caretaker, who had opened the door for them. In spite of the rain all the windows stood open wide, to drive out the musty smell that gathers when beach houses are shut up for several weeks, and pillows and mattresses were airing on the bunks. The kitchen was well-stocked, the fridge full and a pile of fresh water nuts was stacked in a corner. It looked as if everything was ready for a refreshing holiday, even though mother would probably do as much cooking and cleaning up here as at home. Even so, she always managed to enjoy these times 'at the beach', mainly because the children were too busy enjoying themselves to be a nuisance.

Almost immediately Mrs. Williams set about preparing supper for her family. As she moved about the kitchen, collecting together everything she would need, she thought affectionately of her three children. In many ways they were alike, adventurous and curious, full of energy and mischief. But at fourteen Alan was just beginning to see himself as an adult, establishing himself as leader of the children's shared exploits and often feigning contempt for suggestions which his younger sisters made. Beverley, of course, *was* still a child, quick to laugh or to cry. Often her temper would flair up without warning, but could be soothed just as quickly, and as long as Alan included her in his plans she was happy to do what he wanted. Laura was only a year younger than Alan, and was often resentful of his attempts to order her around, but she was a quiet and calm girl and between her and Alan there was a close bond.

Mrs. Williams smiled to herself as she caught the sounds of the children coming back in from the beach, arguing lightly about who was the fastest swimmer. On the whole, she thought, they were just about the same as any other family.

After supper the children played a game of cards until half past eight, when they were packed off to bed, but Laura soon came out again, complaining about the mosquitoes.

'They keep buzzing in my ear,' she grumbled, 'and I've already got two enormous bites on my foot.'

'I told you to light a coil,' her father reminded her, 'as we couldn't bring all the nets with us.'

He took a box down from the top of the fridge and unwound a coil for her. This was placed on its silver stand on the floor and the bedroom was soon filled with a smokey smell. It wasn't pleasant, but it was much better than being bitten: the three youngsters felt more comfortable and lay watching the small red glow in the darkness.

About half an hour later the noises of teeth being brushed, the toilet flushing and windows and doors being shut announced that their parents were off to bed. The roar of the sea seemed to grow louder as the house fell quiet and the last light was switched off. Every few seconds there came a heavy thumping as a large wave struck the cliffs below the house, although at times this sound was lost among the noise of the wind buffeting against the windows.

Alan lay for a long while listening to the noises outside and the silence inside, unable to sleep. Eventually he sat up and drew back the heavy curtains. As he did this, Beverley turned over and asked:

'What you doing?'

'Nothing,' whispered Alan. 'Go to sleep.' And he continued looking out at the sea.

'What you looking at?' insisted Beverley. 'I want to see too.' She climbed across onto his bed. With a sigh of impatience, Alan held the curtain back further and together they peered into the night. Patches of smokey-grey cloud sped across the sky and disappeared over their heads. The sea surface glittered and shone with the reflected light of the moon, although they couldn't see the moon itself from the bedroom window. Beverley pointed to the flares on the horizon.

'Are those the oil wells that Daddy showed us earlier?' she asked. Her brother nodded.

'He says the drilling rigs are more than twenty-five kilometers out and all the gas that comes off when they find oil has to be burnt. You can see the big flares much better now that it is really dark.'

'Just think,' mused Beverley, 'those poor oil men are out in the sea all by themselves. I wouldn't want to be so far away from home.'

Alan wasn't listening to her anymore however. He had stopped gazing at the gas flares. Far down the beach something had caught his attention. Beyond the cliffs below their cottage the sand beach stretched

Exploration on the beach

It was Laura who woke them, standing between their beds, still in her pyjamas; she pulled Alan's ear and shook Beverley by the shoulder, telling them that it was morning, and time to get up if they wanted to explore the beach.

Alan jumped up quickly and started dressing, but it seemed that Beverley had changed her mind about solving mysteries before breakfast. She turned over in bed, muttering unconvincingly 'I'm coming too', but was still sleeping when the others crept out through the back door and tip-toed down the steps to the beach.

Once on the sand, Laura and her brother began to lope along eagerly, stopping only when Alan bent down to pick up a stick – a weapon to be used in their defence if they were suddenly attacked. As far as Alan could remember, the lights they had seen the night before had been just the other side of the small gully where a stream ran out over a patch of muddy-brown sand.

'There!' yelled Laura, pointing up ahead to where the smooth surface of the beach was obviously disturbed.

They started to run now in their excitement and soon reached the spot together.

'I told you,' said Alan. 'Just look at that!'

The sand was trampled and disturbed over a wide area as if someone had dug it up with a gigantic shovel. But what stood out clearly was a broad track formed from two curving parallel lines of marks cut deeply into the sand. It looked for all the world as if a large truck had driven out of the sea and travelled right up the steep beach slope.

'They must've had a jeep, or a tank or something with them last night.

I knew they were soldiers,' Alan said triumphantly as he examined the tracks with a growing sense of intrigue and adventure.

'But why does the track stop?' Laura asked, as if she was doubting her brother's conclusions.

'It looks as if there was a fight here too,' Alan said, without answering Laura's question. 'See how the sand is all dug up and thrown about, and look at those broken pieces of wood.'

'But why does the track just disappear?' persisted Laura.

Alan thought for a second, then ordered the girl to check and see whether the track went into the bushes, while he went to look further along the beach. Laura hesitated for a moment, annoyed by her brother's suggestion that he was in charge. But Alan had already moved away and she could make no protest. Shrugging her shoulders she turned towards the bushes and was soon engrossed in the search for clues. A few minutes later Alan and Laura returned to the spot where the track had ended, neither of them having found other signs of activity.

'It does stop here,' Laura insisted. 'How could a tank drive out of the sea and then vanish?'

'I don't get it,' Alan admitted, kneeling down to examine the sand more closely. 'But, tell you what! This place smells funny!'

'Sort of like fish.'

'More like oil. Like a gas station,' the boy said thoughtfully, 'and there's thousands of flies all about. Do you think these dark, sticky patches could be blood? Look at this stuff!' They both bent over to touch the sticky sand with their fingers.

Alan stood up and dusted sand from his knees. 'This is all mad!' he announced.

'You might have waited for me,' a small voice whined, and turning they saw that Beverley had joined them, still wearing her long blue nightie. 'I've been calling and calling all the way along the beach,' she added, and then, seeing that the older children didn't seem too interested, she asked, 'And what did you detectives find?'

'Something big came out of the sea last night. There were people here too, and it looks like there was a fight. But we can't find out where they went or where they hid the tank, or whatever it was.'

'Perhaps it wasn't a tank,' suggested Beverley. 'Perhaps it was a sea monster, which ate up all the people.'

'No monster could make tracks like those,' snapped Laura, too anxious to be able to treat it as a joke. 'Shall we fetch Daddy?'

'Let's keep it our secret for now,' said Alan, 'then tonight we'll keep watch again. Maybe they'll come back and we can sneak up and catch them!'

'Mummy says to come for breakfast,' the little girl announced, suddenly remembering her errand, 'and you can't keep it a secret, because I'm going to tell her all about it, because I think you're mean!' Beverley held up the bottom of her night clothes in both hands and fled along the beach towards the house. Alan chased after her, overtaking just as she reached the bottom of the steps. He grabbed out at her flying hair and pulled sharply. The girl tumbled backwards onto the sand with a loud squeak and struggled to free herself from the angry boy who had fallen on top of her.

'You mustn't say anything,' he yelled. 'Don't you dare! Don't you dare!'

'Alan!' Mr. Williams' voice rang out sharply. 'Stop that nonsense!' The two children stood up and looked sheepishly at their father as he started down the steps.

'Don't you dare,' hissed Alan to Beverley.

'Where have you all been?'

Laura joined them as her father continued. 'I told you not to go on the beach without telling us where you're going,' he said.

'We just went to collect some shells,' lied Alan, 'and we thought you were asleep. Beverley and I were just playing. We had a race to see who would be first up the steps, didn't we Bev?'

'Yes,' she said after a slight pause, 'but if you hadn't grabbed my hair, I would have won.'

Together they climbed the steps, Laura holding her father's hand and Alan walking in front with Beverley. As they reached the top, Alan bent to Beverley and whispered, 'Don't say anything.'

An enormous breakfast of hot rolls and cold ham was waiting for them and they all chatted noisily between mouthfuls. But nobody mentioned those mysterious tracks.

3

Edwards makes a sale

Gaston Lee-Tung had opened his store at Anglairs Road Junction just after seven and had been serving customers for nearly an hour by the time Alan and his father walked in. They had come to buy a newspaper and Alan wanted some fish hooks so he could try out his new rod in the rock pools near "Atlantic Waves". The Williams family always shopped here when they came to the beach house, as the store had almost everything imaginable. On the right, as you faced the long wooden counter, dresses, shoes, ribbons and toothpastes were stacked in glass-fronted cupboards, while the cases on the other side held cheese, sausage and the fresh bread that was delivered every morning. The long, green shelves behind the counter housed a variety of medicines, packages and tinned goods. As if this were not enough, iron pots and saucepans, balls of twine and a hundred other items hung from the beams of the ceiling, out of the customers' sight; they had been there for so long that many were thick with dust and cobwebs. The goods on display were supplemented by a never ending supply from under the counter or from the back room. From time to time, the assistants would vanish into one of the small rooms at the side of the shop, to reappear moments later, like actors entering from the wings of a stage, always carrying whatever items were needed.

The proprietor was assisted by his wife and several of his children, and all of them were needed to serve the crowd of men, women and children who jostled to attract their attention at the counter. The eldest son was in demand continuously as shoppers called out to him:

'Frank, ah wan't a bread.'

'Frank, look me here nah!'

'Frank, hurry na man, like you forget me o' what?'

'Frank, gimme a pong a' sal' fish, na!'

It was he who noticed the visitors waiting their turn and came across to them. No-one seemed to mind that the newcomers should be served straightaway; most people had time to spare in Redhead Village so they could wait for a while.

'So, you're back again?' said Frank. 'Staying up the road there?'

'Back again,' nodded Mr. Williams. 'Up at Rohan Trace for the weekend. How you keepin'?''

'Well, you see,' Frank replied, shrugging his shoulders, and both men laughed. 'What can I get for you?' he asked with a smile.

'I just want a Guardian, and could you keep one for me tomorrow and Monday?'

'You want to pay for all now?' queried Frank.

'Will do. And the boy wants a couple of small fish-hooks.'

As Alan was selecting two shiny hooks from the boxes that Frank placed on the counter, a loud noise came from outside. It sounded like a mixture of a sick cow mooing and someone learning to play a trumpet!

'What on earth is that?' Mr. Williams asked in surprise.

'Like they sellin' fish,' said a fat lady standing beside him. 'Must be jus' come up from de depot. If yuh wan' tany yuh bes' go fast.'

They paid for the hooks and newspapers and Alan followed his father out of the store. On the other side of the road, near the gas station, a tall fisherman stood behind a wooden table on which was spread an assortment of fish. As the two walked over to him, he lifted a pink conch shell to his lips and blew out the same awful noise that had attracted their attention a few minutes earlier.

'Wow!' said Alan. 'What a racket, just listen to that!'

'Yes, Chief,' the fisherman called to Mr. Williams. 'What fuh yuh today?' He waved his hand over the table indicating the colourful array of sea fish. 'All freshly catch last night. Kingfish two dollar a kilo, redfish three, dolphin and moonshine both two dollar, and dat is shark, but like yuh doh want dat!'

'Let's take that big redfish,' suggested Alan eagerly. 'You said we could have a barbecue tonight.'

'OK,' said Mr. Williams. 'Weigh that for me, please, but don't make it come up to too much.'

The redfish was slapped onto the pan of the round spring balance and registered two and a half kilos on the scale.



'Two an a half,' announced the tall man. 'Gimme seven dollars.' And the sale was completed.

Alan turned towards the car, holding the fish by its tail, but his father had stopped and was asking the fisherman about a large slab of flesh lying on the end of the table. In contrast to the light-grey shark meat next to it, this was dark, almost black and covered with a thick purplish skin on which were round, white spots. The whole slab must have weighed twenty to thirty kilos and was quite unlike any meat or fish he had seen before.

'What fish is this?' queried Mr. Williams.

'Caldong,' replied the fisherman and turned back to serve another customer.

When he had sold some shark and two kingfish, the tall fisherman came round the table and turned over the piece of dark meat, throwing it down with a loud thud.

'How much yuh want?' he inquired.

'I don't want to buy any, I just wanted to know what it was,' Mr. Williams explained.

'Is Caldong,' repeated the man. 'Caldong is de Leatherback, is a turtle they does catch in de sea. Is good. Is a good strong flavour.'

'Turtle?' asked Alan, poking it with his finger. 'Do you catch them near here?'

'I doesn't catch dem at all, at all,' the tall man explained, fingering the golden ring in his left ear, 'but odder people does catch dem. Las' night dey catch dis one on de beach right down so.' And he indicated the nearby beach. 'It was a big, big fella. Dey took most of de meat to Grande for de market, but I buy a little piece.'

'A little piece!' interrupted Mr. Williams. 'Why, it must have been enormous.'

'Yes, Chief, dey is big so,' the fisherman demonstrated by stretching his arms out full length, 'an' dey does have plenty meat.'

'I'd like to see one,' said Alan, almost in disbelief.

'If we go out tonight will we see one in the bay?' Mr. Williams asked the fisherman.

'Well, ah can't rightly say, 'cause I doesn't catch dem meself, as de regulation say you musn't take dem off of the beach. Anyhow, I don't tink it have any more on dis beach for de season.'

The fisherman returned to selling his fish, but as Alan and his father started to walk away, he called them back.

'If yuh want tuh see turtle, you best go to de depot at Toco, wey dey does catch dem wid net an' ting.'

'Oh, thanks,' said Mr. Williams, 'we'll take a drive up there right now.'

'No, no,' the man called. 'Yuh ha' to go early, 'about six in de mawnin. An' when you goes, ask fuh Ira, an' tell him is Edwards who send yuh. Is Ira Campbell you wants, 'cause he is de bes' turtle man in de whole island!'

Mr. Edwards turned his back on the visitors and went behind his stall.

As the Williams drove away he lifted the conch shell from among the fish and turtle meat and blew it loudly three times to attract more customers.

Laura burns the chicken

Plip, plip, . . . plop!

Water dripped from the ceiling into the metal basin on the bedroom floor. A brownish stain had spread over nearly a whole celotex sheet, which was sagged in the middle. Father had said the galvanise had lifted, but they couldn't find a ladder to get onto the roof so there was nothing to be done except try to catch the drips. Alan was sitting by the window while the rain lashed against the glass, as it had done for the last two hours.

'This is a waste,' he said to himself for the fiftieth time as he thought of the day spent indoors.

When they came back from the store it had started raining, and, apart from half an hour's sunshine around three o'clock, when they had snatched a quick swim, it had continued all afternoon. Now it fairly pelted down, thundering on the roof, driving in through the breeze-blocks and creeping under the back door. The tall palms on the cliff top swayed violently in the wind, but, behind a screen of falling rain, the sea was hidden and silenced.

After lunch Mrs. Williams had said that bed was the best place to be when it was raining, so the grown-ups had retired. Now it sounded as if they were about again; Alan could hear them talking in the living room. The children roused themselves and wandered out of the bedroom, all of them hoping that something would happen to overcome their boredom.

'Mum, if it clears up can we have a barbecue?' queried Laura.

'Let's have one anyway.' Mr. Williams suggested, stretching and peering out of the window. 'It's only going to rain for a little while

longer — the sky's much clearer over there. Anyway, we'd be O.K. under the shelter because it's dry there.'

'Suits me,' said the chief cook. 'I've put a chicken out to de-frost already. If I cut that up it'll be easier to barbecue and we can keep the fish you bought and bake it when Peter and Imelda are here.'

'Uncle Peter! I didn't know he was coming!' Laura exclaimed.

Mrs. Williams' brother was a favourite with all the children. Usually when the Williams family visited the beach house they tried to arrange for Peter and his wife to join them there. Peter would spend much of his time entertaining the children, whilst Mrs. Williams and Imelda took the opportunity to relax. Imelda often remarked that Peter was more of a child than any of her nieces or nephews, in spite of being a respected biologist. He always seemed to lead Alan and Laura into some mischief, reminiscent to Mrs. Williams of their own childhood; she had always trailed around after her brother, usually ending up covered in mud or bruises, but always happy. And even now she looked forward to his visits with the same anticipation as her own children.

She went into the kitchen and Laura helped prepare the food while Alan and his father went to organise the fire. After the last downpour the rain had already started slackening and they hurried across to the barbecue, which was on the seaward side of a small shed. In the oblong, brick fireplace they crumpled some sheets of newspaper and using thin, dry sticks, built a cone-shaped woodpile over it. Most of the wood they'd collected earlier in the morning was dry enough for burning as the corner of the timite roof covered the pile fairly well.

Alan bent down and struck a match, which was promptly blown out by the strong wind before he could get near the paper. He threw it on the fire and tried again, this time placing the match carefully right up against the fire before he struck it, but the yellow flame just licked the edge of the newspaper and died out. Alan raised the whole pile of wood and paper about six centimeters in the air with his hand and put the next match right underneath. The fire caught instantly with a noisy crackling as the flames greedily devoured the dry wood. The boy jumped back, surprised by his own success, and started throwing more wood into the flames.

After a few minutes the fire was going well, long flames leaping so high that they almost touched the palm leaves on the shed roof. Mr. Williams added some coconut husks and a few larger logs. One of these had been rotting on the ground and as it warmed up dozens of soft,

white termites scamped about trying vainly to get away from the fierce flames.

Laura brought out some plates and put them on a low wooden table. For a few moments she stood watching the fire, but she quickly ran back into the house coughing when smoke blew in her face. Alan's eyes were streaming with tears and he wondered if some of the wood hadn't been too young for a barbecue fire, where heat is more important than flames and smoke.

The big logs burned through in just over half an hour and now the pit was filled with glowing charcoal and ashes. Mr. Williams fetched the chicken and, using a long-handled fork, placed the pieces on the metal grill. Alan had propped this up on two large stones so it stood about ten centimeters above the ashes, where the chicken would cook best. By now all the family had come out and was sitting on the benches watching the chicken parts sizzling on the grill. Laura had taken a turn at being chef, rolling the legs and thighs over to cook them right through and dripping savoury sauce over them from a wooden spoon. Darkness had fallen quickly because the sky was so full of cloud, but the rain had stopped at last.

'It's lovely and cool now,' yawned Mrs. Williams. 'Looks like you'll be able to go for your walk after all. I hope it keeps fine for you.'

The chicken was turned and basted again while everyone enjoyed the smell - roasting meat and wood smoke. Laura speared a wing with the fork and found it was nearly ready; the juice that oozed out was clear and the meat soft.

'I like mine really brown,' said Alan. 'We should put on some more wood.'

'No,' his father stopped him, 'leave it as it is; we don't want too much flame. You can dish out the rest of the food and get some drinks ready, because this will be coming off just now,' he added.

'Let me have a try,' Beverley pleaded as she tried to take the fork from Laura's hand. 'Daddy, make Laura give it to me.'

'Stop that pushing. Oh Lord! Why you have to play about so!' said her father, reaching across to catch Beverley as Laura pushed her away from the barbecue. But he was too late, for Laura's arm banged the corner of the grill and it slipped off the stone. One end crashed down and sent both drum-sticks and a piece of thigh straight into the ashes.

'You see what you did!' exclaimed Laura.

'It was you,' screamed Beverley, 'I didn't touch it.'

Alan grabbed the fork away and lifted one piece from the ash, but before he could rescue the others they caught fire. Using the fork and a spoon Laura passed to him, Alan picked up the other parts and dropped them onto the grill where his father beat out the flames with a piece of newspaper. The unfortunate chicken parts were black and charred all over, not looking at all appetising. The two girls looked at them in dismay, both knowing who was going to have to eat them.

'Laura, that was very stupid,' scolded Mrs. Williams. 'I hope you like burnt chicken; perhaps that will teach you to behave yourself.'

There was an uncomfortable silence while the food was put out onto the plates. Beverley received her burnt drumstick and sat sulking at the end of the table. But once they started eating everyone cheered up and Mr. Williams began chatting as if nothing had happened. Trying to make a joke of the squabble he asked Laura if she was enjoying her 'chicken that nearly got away'.

'It's nice,' she replied, as she held it between her fingers and tasted it gingerly. 'It really is!'

'It's yummy! Have a taste, Mum,' Beverley called.

So it was that the burnt meat was passed round for the whole family to taste, and although they looked at it suspiciously at first, everyone agreed it had an interesting flavour. When Alan asked if he could drop his in the ashes too the dinner party was filled with laughter and adults and children thoroughly enjoyed the rest of their barbecue meal. When all the plates were emptied and all fingers licked clean, they sat and made plans for their trip out onto the beach. Mr. Williams wasn't sure whether the tide would be low enough for them to walk round the headland and this prompted Beverley to ask:

'How do you know when the tide is high or low?'

'You can look it up in the newspaper each day,' her father explained.

'But, Dad, why does it go up and down? My teacher was trying to tell us the other day, but I didn't get it,' Alan added.

'Humm, well, that's a difficult one for an engineer like me,' said Father, sipping the coffee Mrs. Williams had just brought. 'Let's just say that it's due to the moon. It's not really as simple as that, but it will do for tonight. Let's say the moon attracts the water in the sea and pulls it up a little way towards itself. So under the moon will be a high tide and away from where the moon is will be a low tide. Now the moon moves

round the earth, so when it's overhead here we will have a high tide. When it's over another country, it will be high there but low tide on our beaches. Do you follow what I'm saying? When you're older you can learn exactly why it changes from day to day, but that'll have to do for now.'

The fire was dying down steadily, little wisps of smoke rising from the few pieces of wood not yet burned. Mrs. Williams went to put the outside house lights on, so they could see to finish their drinks when a mangy, black and white dog slunk around the corner of the shed. The smell of the barbecue had attracted it from somewhere and it looked thin and bony, as if it only had meals when anyone came to stay at "Atlantic Waves". The children threw scraps of food to it and it chewed each one up as fast as it could and waited expectantly for the next.

'The moon should be out soon,' remarked Mr. Williams. 'It was very bright last night.'

'When we came last time it was really dark every night,' his wife remarked. 'Do you remember, we used candles and torches to see the barbecue?'

'Oh yes, it was dark,' agreed Mr. Williams. 'I suppose we must have had a new moon that time.'

'When you get a new moon,' said Laura, 'where does the old one go to?'

The grown-ups laughed.

'It's just a name,' Mother explained. 'The same moon is there all the time, but when it's big we say it is "full"; sometimes it's crescent shaped, then we say it's a "quarter moon" and when it is completely dark we call it a "new moon", because it is just beginning to grow big.'

'But why does it keep changing like that?' asked Alan.

Mr. Williams stood up as if he hadn't heard, stacked up the plates and suggested to the others:

'If we're going out, we'd better get on with it. We can talk about the moon as we go.'

Then, as they walked towards the house carrying the dirty plates, he whispered to his wife: 'That's one way to get out of answering difficult questions.'

They had decided earlier to walk along the bay where Mr. Edwards said a turtle had been caught the night before. Alan couldn't wait to get ready; the walk was a good excuse for him to look for anything that would explain the activity of the previous night. He hustled the others to

get on their sneakers and was the first one to go down the steps to the sand. Once there, the four of them set out at a fast pace, filled with the excitement of discovery, and left Mrs. Williams to look after the house and wash the stains of burnt chicken off the plates.

The sea monster

They walked along slowly in a group, with the two girls holding hands and talking quietly to one another. The night was still dark, as heavy rain clouds filled the sky and obscured the stars. Their eyes were becoming accustomed to the night gradually, but even though they could make out where the surf ran up the beach the logs and pieces of driftwood appeared only as faint shadows. Alongside them, the backbeach vegetation stood like a high, black wall, full of rustlings and swishings as the wind moved the palm branches. The children felt safer walking close to the water's edge and kept a wary eye on their darkened surroundings.

About twenty minutes later, when they had walked over a kilometer, Laura stumbled in some soft sand and fell face downwards. The others stopped as they too felt the change in the firmness of the beach surface and, while Mr. Williams helped Laura to her feet, Alan switched on his torch. Imagine his surprise when the light shone on a set of deep tracks, like those they had found the night before.

'They're here!' he said in great excitement, turning off his light. 'Hide! We must hide or they'll see us,' and taking Beverley's hand he started to hurry back in the direction of home.

'Hey! Wait Alan. What's the matter with you?' shouted his father. Alan came back to him hesitantly, pointing to the tracks.

'It's soldiers, Dad. We saw them last night. They're driving their tanks up the beach and hiding them in the trees. We musn't let them see us. Come on Dad, quick!'

His father laughed loudly and punched the frightened boy on his shoulder.

'Like you've been watching too much television,' he said. 'Those tracks weren't made by any vehicle.'

'What was it then?' asked Laura.

'Come. Quietly!' said Mr. Williams, starting off along the tracks. 'Pass me the torchlight.'

Together they followed the deep marks up the slope on to the dry sand of the beach crest. The tracks wandered for nearly fifty metres among the roots and driftwood until they ended in a large, round, black object. As the children stopped in surprise, the object raised its head and let out a long, throaty sigh.

'Phoo-rrr.'

'It's a sea monster!' cried Beverley, running back and clinging to her father's pants.

'Jees-an-ages!' cried Alan. 'What is that?'

'That,' announced Mr. Williams, like a conjuror, 'is a turtle. That, I think, is what Mr. Edwards calls "Caldong".'

'"Caldong"?' repeated Alan with obvious disbelief. 'But it's huge! The only turtle I've ever seen was the one that André had for a pet, and that was about this long.' He demonstrated with his hands.

'I've heard that sea turtles are much bigger,' said his father, 'but this is bigger than I expected too. We'll have to ask your Uncle Peter about it. He knows much more about animals than I do.'

'What's it doing?' asked Beverley.

'Let's take a look,' said Mr. Williams. 'I think it must be laying eggs.' Caldong was lodged in a depression in a patch of sand which had been disturbed quite obviously by the turtle itself. Sand had been dug up and thrown around in all directions and some had fallen on the turtle's own back. It was still now, however, except for the regular raising of the head and expelling of breath. The head was much bigger than a man's and had large, round eyes which pushed out as it stretched its neck, but sank back behind thick lids as the head was lowered down onto the sand. Between breaths she gave the impression of being sound asleep. Below the dark-coloured head, the skin of the throat was light and spotted. This was blown out like a balloon to form a fat bag when she sighed, which gave the turtle a big double chin.

The children were close enough now to see Caldong clearly and could make out the long ridges running down her back. Alan decided, as he walked round, that the back must be nearly two metres long; the animal appeared to be as big as a cow! In the torchlight it looked black and

shiny, but had white, spotted areas along the sides and pinkish patches around the neck and shoulders. The front legs were out at right angles to the body and almost buried in the sand, giving the impression that Caldong was holding on tight to the beach.

They all stood and looked at it in silence for a long time, Alan shining the light and examining every last detail. The turtle gave no sign that it was aware of them or was in the slightest bit worried by their presence, even when Laura bent forward to touch its back.

'But what's he doing?' whispered Beverley.

'I think he's asleep,' Laura remarked and poked it a second time.

'It's a SHE,' Father said. 'It's come to lay eggs, so it can't be a HE. Come and see this!'

The children moved round to where Mr. Williams was examining the turtle's tail end. The hind legs were quite different from the long, hard fins they had seen at the front. They were short and rounded, with soft, flexible skin and the youngsters saw that a hole was being dug below the turtle's stumpy tail. As they watched, the left flipper stretched down, dug out a small mass of sand, curled its tip into a spoon shape and lifted the sand, which was then placed at the side of the gradually deepening hole. While the first flipper rested on top of this pile of sand, the second one reached into the hole and dug sand from the side wall. Another mass of sand was lifted out and as it was placed onto the right side of the hole, the left flipper moved upwards and flicked away the sand it had dug out with its last stroke. These movements continued in a rhythmic, regular order; as one flipper raised up sand the other threw sand away, each limb taking its turn to dig.

After several minutes, the hole was more than half a metre deep, which was about as far as the rounded flippers could reach. Now they started to feel along the sides of the hole to shape it. The two girls smiled to each other as they watched the stubby finger-like ends of the soft flippers testing the walls of the hole, patting and smoothing it very delicately. They were both wondering how it could make such a beautiful job by touch alone, without once turning to look and see how the work was progressing.

Nearly half an hour passed while they watched the excavation work, until the turtle had produced a hole shaped like a light bulb, narrow at the top but swelling out to a round chamber at the bottom. Both flippers were now spread over the top of the hole to cover it completely and then Caldong stopped work.

Mr. Williams and the children waited to see what would happen next but, as Laura had suggested earlier, it looked as if the turtle had dozed off. For some minutes she remained absolutely still but then they became aware that every few minutes the turtle's body made slow rocking movements, as if she were straining her muscles.

'She must be laying her eggs,' said Mr. Williams. 'I wonder if we can see them if we lift up the flipper a little.' And bending down he took her left back leg and gently raised one edge. There in the bottom of the nest pit were about thirty white eggs!

'Oh, look!' cried Laura, kneeling down and pulling the flipper back further to uncover the hole.

'I want to see,' squealed Beverley. 'Let me see; Daddy I can't see!' And she wriggled between Alan and Laura to push her face into the entrance of the hole.

'Bev! If you put your little monkey-face right in there, *nobody* can see. You go on that side and let Alan hold the other flipper. Then we can all watch,' her father said firmly as he pulled her backwards.

As they shuffled into place and settled down, three more eggs dropped from below the turtle's tail and fell among the others. These were quickly followed by six more, then one and soon afterwards by a group of five or six. There followed quite a long pause, during which Caldong exhaled twice, but otherwise was still. The children watched expectantly, leaning forward in awe and hardly daring to breathe in case they disturbed the huge animal. Then the turtle strained again and another batch of eggs started to fall. Mr. Williams leant forwards, caught one of the eggs in his hand and held it up for the youngsters to see. It was round and white and glistening from a sticky liquid that covered it. As each child took it in turn they found that the shell was soft and leathery, instead of being hard like a chicken's egg as they had expected.

'It's like a ping-pong ball,' said Beverley and returned to watching the hole.

'But about twice as big,' suggested her father, 'and it's quite heavy isn't it?'

'Can we keep it?' asked Laura.

'What are you going to do with it?'

'Just keep it.'

'But what about the baby turtle inside? Don't you think we should put it in the nest so it can hatch with the others?' Father suggested.

'Oh, I s'pose so,' agreed Laura reluctantly. 'I don't want it to die.' And

she dropped it gently on top of the other eggs in the nest.

No more eggs had appeared for quite a few minutes and the big turtle wasn't moving at all. The nest was full, and on top of the main egg clutch she had dropped about half a dozen very tiny eggs. Egg laying was finished.

Caldong pulled her flippers out of the children's hands so suddenly that they cried out in surprise and Laura jumped to her feet. Sand was scraped from the sides of the hole and pushed over the nest with rapid strokes of the delicate limbs. Without seeing what she was doing the turtle tested the surface and packed it down with alternate movements, now and then rocking the body to put her whole weight into pushing the sand firmly into place. It was smoothed, patted and pressed with intricate care until, without warning, Caldong swept her front fins backwards and flung a thick shower of sand over her back.

Alan and Laura tumbled backwards, quickly covering their eyes, and Mr. Williams jumped to one side, brushing sand from his shirt. Beverley, however, was not so quick and was covered from head to foot with the flying grains. Before she could stand up properly, a second stroke flung sand into her face, just as she opened her mouth to scream. Spluttering and crying she stumbled from behind the moving turtle and her father reached out to pull her clear. Not sure whether to laugh or cry, they dusted themselves down and retreated to Caldong's lefthand side.

The turtle had finished covering up the nest and was now hiding the spot by throwing sand around on top. After every two or three throws she moved her whole body a few degrees round to the right and from time to time advanced a few pulls across the beach. The Williams family moved too, trying to watch but at the same time to keep out of reach of the spraying sand.

They had been so intent on this covering-up operation that the rain caught them unprepared. A few heavy drops falling from the driving wind preceded a short, sharp shower that left them cold and wet. It was over almost as soon as they realised what was happening and they started to laugh in their surprise. The three children ran across to where Mr. Williams was standing, shaking the water out of his hair.

'I'm soaked,' said Beverley, but before she could continue, the rain poured down again. They ran for the trees, where Father hugged them close to him under the shelter of a low coconut palm. The rain lashed against the trees with such a noise that they could hardly hear the surf.



Palms swayed and water dripped from their branches until it ran in long trickles down the trunks and off the leaf tips into the ground. Soon, despite the shelter, their heads and backs were soaked and water ran down behind their ears and off the ends of their noses. They clung together for five minutes, ten minutes, as Mr. Williams spread his arms to keep the rain off their shoulders. Never before had they been out in such a downpour and Beverley was increasingly frightened of the roaring wind and the fierce noise in the trees.

But just as Beverley was beginning to whimper with fear the storm stopped, just as suddenly as it had begun. The wind fell until it was no stronger than the gentle breeze of the early evening and the sea seemed to be moving even more calmly than before.

'Wow-ee!' said Mr. Williams, as they untangled their soggy bodies and crept gingerly out onto the beach. They felt really cold now and the little puffs of wind seemed to be creeping into all the dampest and chilliest parts of their bodies.

'That was dread!' moaned Alan. 'Those trees were a waste.' He walked along the sand shivering and miserable.

Caldong had gone! The rain-spattered beach was empty, except for the two clearly imprinted tracks, one coming up to the nest and the other leading straight down into the surf. The turtle must have completed disguising the nesting area while it was raining and it had returned now to the safety of the Atlantic.

The children searched the sea carefully for signs of the leatherback, but weren't really sure what they expected to see. Would she be swimming at the surface or did turtles dive under the water? Soon they decided that, whatever turtles did, it was impossible to see anything clearly in that water, swelling and tumbling as long waves rolled in from the distant darkness.

'She's been gone a long time,' said their father. 'Come on, we better get home and get dried out.'

'Not yet Dad,' protested Alan. 'There might be another one further along the beach.'

'But I'm frozen,' moaned Beverley.

'Let's walk on,' said Laura pulling her father's arm. 'We can't go home now. Oh Daddy, please.'

'I want to see one come out of the sea,' Alan said eagerly. 'We missed the first bit with this one. I want to see how they start to find the nest spot.'

'But I'm frozen,' Beverley shouted again. 'We saw a turtle already.'

Before Mr. Williams could give his decision, the rain started to fall, so 'Not again!' was all he said.

They all turned to look at the sky. Not a star was in sight, although somewhere the moon shone feebly behind thick clouds.

'We'll come tomorrow,' said Mr. Williams. 'Let's walk fast and see if we can get home before the next heavy shower.'

Then, not listening to further protests, he took Beverley's hand and set off at a quick pace for the beach house. Rain fell all the time they were walking home, occasionally stinging their faces when strong gusts of wind blew in from the sea. They were too miserable and cold either to protest about their father's decision or to discuss what they'd seen. They marched along with heads down and their clothes clinging to their backs.

Mrs. Williams knew just what to do with the "collection of wet fowls" as she called them, and when at last they sat round the long wooden table in dry pyjamas, drinking hot chicken-noodle soup out of plastic cups, they were bubbling with talk. Interrupting each other, or all talking at once, they told her about meeting Caldong, how big she was and how delicately she had dug the nest, how many eggs there were, and how the big beast said "Phroo-ah!", of getting sand in their hair, of finding the tracks and of how it had felt when they bravely touched her hard back. On and on, talking excitedly between mouthfuls, until Beverley got hiccups!

They all stopped talking in surprise and everyone started to laugh. It was then that Mrs. Williams, seeing that her baby daughter was about to cry, decided that there had been enough excitement for one day, ordered them to finish up their supper and go to bed.

'Can we go tomorrow?' asked Alan, as he kissed his father.

'Maybe. But don't forget we're going to the depot early, early in the morning.'

'I'll wake up,' said the boy. 'We taking the girls with us?'

'We'll all go. Goodnight son.'

Mr. Williams helped himself to another cup of coffee and leaned back in his chair.

'That was some beast,' he said, nodding his head thoughtfully. Then turning to his wife: 'You should have come with us.'

'An' get soaked to death. You mad or what?' Mrs. Williams replied as she stacked up the cups. 'I'm quite content to see their pictures in books.'

'If you'd seen it you wouldn't say that. It was really something.'
'Something what?' she asked.
Mr. Williams laughed, then replied seriously: 'It was like you. Really something!'

* * *

But in the bedroom Beverley was the only one who went to sleep. The two older children sat on the bed near the window, gazing wistfully out at the beach.

'So that explains our mystery,' Alan whispered to Laura. 'It wasn't a tank that made those tracks, but a leatherback turtle crawling up the beach.'

'Yes, I suppose so. But what about the lights we saw and all those footprints? We still don't know who those people were on the beach last night.'

'Nor what they were doing,' agreed Alan.

'If there was a turtle what happened to it?' said Laura earnestly. 'We know that ours crawled back to the sea tonight because we saw two sets of tracks.'

'That's right,' Alan cut in, 'but there was only one set of tracks last night, and they just stopped. We'll have to try to find out what happened to that turtle!'

'You should have asked that Mr. Edwards,' Laura murmured to herself. 'I bet he knows more than he told you and Dad. Keep a good look out at the depot in the morning!'

'You bet!' agreed Alan as he settled down to sleep. 'You just bet I'll find out what happened.'

6

Ira throws a harpoon

The boats were beached and the fish unloaded into the ice boxes before the sun was visible over Galera Point. Mr. Thomas gave the cargo a final check before the blue jitney pulled out of the depot yard, turned up the steep hill through the village and was lost to view. Skilled hands hung nets out to dry and, while motors and gas-tanks were carried to storage racks in the large shed, the fishermen took turns washing off at the pipe. Two or three of them went home for "tea", but most settled down to rest in the depot, stretching out on bench tops or in the dry boats which had been brought under cover for repairs.

Some of the villagers who came down bought fish and took it back straightaway, but others, arriving in two's and three's, stayed to chat with the men. By the time Alan and the rest of the Williams family drove up, some thirty people were idling in the depot.

The children hesitated when they saw the crowd, but Mr. Williams walked over to Thomas and introduced himself.

'Morning. Name is Williams, from the University. I came to see some turtles. A fella down by Redhead said we should check with Ira.'

'He not here right now,' said Thomas. 'He coming just now.' And he turned back to the task of balancing his scales.

'What exactly yuh want?' asked a small grey-haired man who was sharpening a knife on the concrete pillar.

'We want to see a turtle,' announced Beverley in a loud voice. 'That's why we had to get out of bed so early this morning.'

'We has turtle,' said Mr. Thomas, stepping from the platform and bending down to speak to the little girl, 'and if yuh hol' some strain I'll go fuh the key.'

'Where is the key?' Beverley asked as he started off.

'One of de boys have it. Yuh want tuh fetch it fuh me?'

'I'll go,' said Laura eagerly.

'Awright,' agreed Mr. Thomas. 'Pass dong de jetty and look for Philip, he's a kind of broko-foot fella, and axe he fuh it.'

Laura and Beverley ran off along the wooden plank jetty where Philip was easily found as he limped about spreading the nets to dry on the handrail. He returned with them, holding a bunch of keys.

'Show dese people de turtles,' ordered Thomas, who they now realised must be the depot supervisor. 'Ah comin' jus' now.'

They walked to the side of the main shed and descended a flight of concrete steps near the garbage cans, until Philip stopped in front of a low door. Removing the rusty padlock, he pushed open the door, which scraped along the floor with a harsh noise and banged against the inside wall. Philip stepped inside and beckoned to the children to follow him.

Alan went in first, but the shed was so dark that he could see nothing at all. Some thin lines of sunlight were stealing in through cracks in the boards and gradually he began to distinguish the outline of objects on the floor, looking like long iron-pots turned upside down. Suddenly he was aware of several pairs of eyes watching from the darkness and quickly jumped back to the doorway.

'Go right on in,' said Thomas, who had now joined them. 'Yuh doh want tuh see turtle?'

He went in, followed by Mr. Williams. Alan, drawing fresh courage from the presence of the others, moved further in and the girls squeezed into the small space left for them. Philip had been struggling to pull a bolt on a small ventilation window, which he now opened. As the light streamed in, eight turtles were revealed, lying on the stone floor, their round heads with protruding eyes stuck onto oval grey-green shells. One of the animals shuffled its feet and backed slowly into the corner, letting out its breath in a wheezy sigh. The others just lay and stared at the visitors and Laura thought how very unhappy they looked, shut up in this dark, smelly shed.

'Are they dead?' came Beverley's voice.

'No, no,' said Mr. Thomas, and he gave the nearest one a heavy kick on the side which sent it scrambling among the others. It climbed right over its neighbour's back and the two of them crawled away to the left until they stopped against the wall.

'Them's all greenback turtle,' cept dis one what is called "oxsbill",' announced Mr. Thomas, indicating one which was slightly smaller than the rest. It had a mouth with a beak like a parrot and its back was covered with sharp-pointed, shiny scales, instead of being smooth like the backs of the others. The supervisor continued his guided tour.

'Dis big turtle weigh four-hundred pong and yuh see whey a shark mus' a bit a piece o' de fin right out. We catch he Wens'day along by Tacaribe self. Allyuh see dis hole? Dat is whey de harpong go trough de back.'

'What's a harpong?' asked Beverley, but Mr. Thomas didn't seem to hear.

'Dese two little fellas we catch yesterday and dis one is a male see, for it have a long tail like a alligator. He could fight, oui! When we try to get im back tuh de boat he pull fuh so and we had was to stick he wid a nex harpong.'

'What's a harpong?' Beverley asked again, but the supervisor had turned away at the sound of someone coming down the steps.

'Who arksing fuh me?' a deep, rich voice said. A tall muscular man with a short, curly beard came forward into the light. He was wearing a faded blue shirt tied at the waist above tattered shorts, and was barefoot.

'Thomas, is good morning ah telling yuh, and you Mr. Gentleman, ah is pleased tuh make your acquaintance. Name is Campbell, an you is talking to de bes fisherman from Toco tuh Matelot. It ent have no-body who know de sea from all along, east tuh west, like me, not even Thomas, who could be me fadder. All o dese turtle here is mines. I catch every las one o dem, since Wensday gorn.'

The big man walked across the shed and patted one of the turtles, then, before anyone could speak, he continued.

'Dis big fella tink he smart too bad and he try tuh get away. But ah fix he good. When Thomas pull de line and bring de bull alongside, he dive dong and turn up so quick, that he bus out de line. Thomas tink he loss he, but ah fas like lightning an ah ready fuh he wid a nex harpong. Ah grab it up and stab it in de back, pow pow! An he ent going no-whey. What yuh say big boy? And he banged the turtle's head with a big, fat hand. 'So, de nex ting fuh you is de knife.'

Alan tugged the fisherman's arm as he stopped for breath.

'Mister,' he said, 'my sister wants to know what is a harpong, 'cause she hasn't ever seen one.' Alan hadn't either, but he didn't want everybody to know that.

'A harpong,' exclaimed Campbell. 'Yuh know what. I ent going tuh tell yuh, but ah will show yuh. Come nah!' and he bounded up the steps, shouting through the depot. 'Bring de harpong. Ah going tuh show dese chil'ren how we does ketch turtle.'

The depot sprang to life at this promised exhibition. An old turtle shell was brought from the beach behind the net shed and thrown with a 'clonk' on the ground. About thirty fishermen and villagers gathered in a circle around the shell. Shouts went up for a harpoon, amid rowdy backchat.

'Bring de big red one from me pirogue.'

'Listen nah man, allyuh use Joey own. It have a good stock, an it heavy fuh so.'

'It so heavy Joey cyar lif it by heself!'

'Allyuh shut up and lemme pass.' It was Ira, shirt off and pushing back the men with his great arms. There was no need for further talk, for he already carried his weapon and the show was beginning.

He threw down a short plank of wood and stepped onto this, making as if to start the motor of this imaginary boat.

'When we go tuh catch turtle, we ha tuh leave before it get light, an we does go far out, all by de big rocks an over by de reef an ting.' Ira swayed up and down as the imaginary swells filled and rolled under the boat. 'One man does keep de boat going slow an de motor revvin, just revvin, so as not tuh make too much ah noise. Me, Ah lookin out, watchin fuh de head.' 'Cause when turtle feedin he mus come up fuh air, and when he put he head out, ah mus see him. So ah watching hard,' and he placed his hand across his forehead to shield his eyes from the sun and looked all round. The onlookers shielded their eyes too and started to look about, turning slowly and swaying up and down in time with Ira and the make-believe waves.

'We see a turtle an we come up close,' whispered Ira, pointing to the shell lying a few paces ahead of him. 'He dive down an we waits fuh he tuh come fuh air. We waitin, we waitin.'

A chorus of fishermen chanted: 'We waitin too!'

Laura grasped her father's hand tightly as she wriggled with excitement and Alan looked at the gleaming steel point of the long harpoon as it was raised ready for the kill.

'He comin up,' yelled Ira, balancing on one leg and stretching to his full height, with eyes fixed on the empty turtle back. So intense were the watching fishermen that many were standing on one leg also and had an

arm raised as they followed Ira's every movement. There was a moment of complete silence.

'Aaaa- yee!'

The scream came from the big man as he suddenly lunged forward to hurl the weapon with all his strength straight into the target. Fifteen other arms went forward at the same instant and a loud shout rang through the depot, several of the minor actors losing their balance in their eagerness to be realistic.

But disaster struck! Ira's harpoon broke in two with the force of the throw, the wooden shaft crashing to the ground at the far end of the shed, trailing its rope behind. The metal point spun through the air and disappeared behind a pile of sweetdrink cases, without leaving so much as a dent in the old turtle shell!

This was not at all what the crowd had expected from the master fisherman and for a few seconds there was complete silence. Then a man's voice said quietly, 'Is so you catch turtle boy?'

The comment was greeted by hoots of laughter and the fishermen began jumping about and slapping each other with glee.

'So much style, an den he go an bus de harpong.'

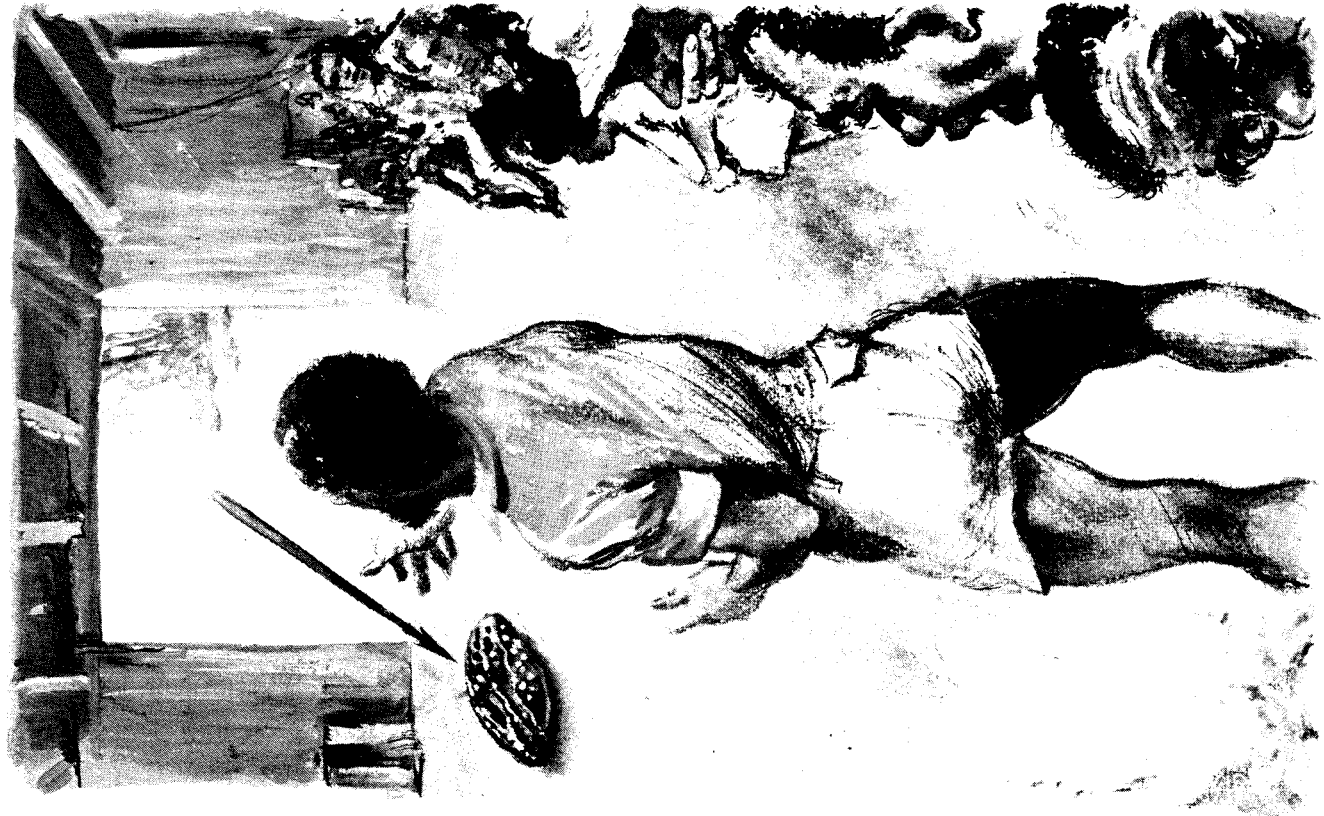
'Eh, ch. An de turtle was dead too!'

Two young men re-enacted Ira's mammoth throw, showing each other how the head had spun away, and Philip picked up the shell to look for signs of damage. Ira stood for a few minutes in the middle of the circle of jeering villagers, then angrily pushed his way through and stalked out of the shed. He turned at the doorway and scowled.

'Allyuh laugh nah. Ah ent know what happen dey, but ah tellin allyuh dat ah has eight turtle in dat shed dey. Ah catch dem all wid me harpong and none o you blasted jackasses ent catch one. You go see if ah ent sell alladem and allyuh ent getting one damn cent.'

He strode off towards the small shed and was followed soon afterwards by two or three men and some of the women with their shopping baskets. The other people slowly drifted back to their various jobs, leaving Mr. Williams and the children standing by themselves. Laura had been a little frightened by the clamour of laughter and angry voices but Beverley had no idea what had gone wrong and she still didn't understand how you caught a turtle with a harpoon.

As they turned to leave the depot, Ira Campbell re-appeared and walked across to them. He wore a broad smile as he spoke to Laura's father, showing that he had his good humour back again.



'Well you see, Boss. We had a little accident,' and he laughed loudly. 'Like ah have tuh go back to school wid your chil'ren and learn tuh throw spear again.'

He bent down and lifted Beverley high in the air.

'So, doux-doux, now yuh know what a harpong is.'

Beverley's only reply was a small, unconvincing nod; she was much too concerned about the precarious position she suddenly found herself in to be able to carry on any sort of conversation. When Ira finally put her back down she grasped her father's hand, determined that from now on she was going to stay firmly on the ground.

'If yuh wants turtle meat yuh bes go fas,' called Mr. Thomas as he joined them. 'They killin by de jetty jus now.'

Phillip passed them, dragging a small green turtle by its flippers, and Ira called to him.

'Give de Boss a few pong of de bes meat from dat one, an doh take de whole day.'

'Is he going to kill it?' asked Laura.

'Dey goin tuh kill alla dem,' replied Mr. Thomas, nodding his head.

'I want to see,' Alan shouted, running after Philip along the jetty. Mr. Williams followed with the girls, but they weren't as keen as Alan and stood on the outer edge of the small crowd.

The turtle struggled as it was turned over and two men were needed to hold it down, one to each front flipper. Philip took a long knife, which had obviously been sharpened just before, and bent over the animal. With a quick, sure stroke he cut its throat. The two girls exclaimed in horror as the crimson blood spurted out and dripped down the boards into the sea. Even Alan felt momentarily dizzy and clutched his throat with his hand as though to protect himself against the vicious accuracy of the knife. In a matter of minutes the belly was cut open, the fins and head removed and placed on the ground. Philip pulled out the liver and the heart, which was still beating, and then set about removing the long string of intestines. These looked like a huge snake as they slipped and fell about his hands. The back was scraped clean and the body juices tipped overboard. Another man washed the pieces under a tap and dropped them into the empty back which Philip held like a shallow dish. While this was carried to the boat shed an elderly man slit open the intestines, washed them out and cut them into short strips. When he dropped these in a pile, Alan was amazed to see them wriggle and squirm about, even though the turtle had by now been dead for

quite a time. The muscles and nerves must still be working, he thought as he pushed one piece with his foot.

Laura had pulled her father away from the jetty not wanting to see any more of the gruesome show and Beverley had hidden her face and run back to the car. As Alan came back towards them Ira walked across holding a chunk of dark red turtle meat on a sheet of gazette paper. The two men talked for several minutes before Ira departed to sell more meat and Philip started work on the second animal. Mr. Williams shouted his thanks to Thomas and called to the children to get in the car. But at that moment, Philip tossed the empty back from the turtle he'd just killed out onto the beach.

'Hey, I want that!' cried Alan, running to the edge of the jetty. 'Mister, can I take it?' he asked Mr. Thomas, who had turned when Alan shouted.

'Sure, sure, but there's bigger ones over de back dey.'

Alan jumped down from the wall and ran behind the depot. Two or three old shells lay there and as he went over to inspect them a corbeau landed beside the new one that had just been flung out. It folded its long wings and waddled across to see what morsels were left for its breakfast. Alan stopped and backed away from the ugly, black bird which eyed him suspiciously, its bald head on one side. Then, sensing that the child posed no danger, the vulture hopped forward and tugged at the edge of the shell, holding with one clawed foot and tearing a shred of flesh with its hooked beak. Two other birds landed in a spray of sand and started to squabble with each other for a place at the table, while the boy edged past them and picked up an older turtle shell. It smelled a little, but just think how smart it would look hanging on his bedroom wall! He would clean it up and give the top a good shine.

Holding his treasure high over his head with both hands, Alan scrambled back into the depot and placed the shell in the trunk of his father's car. As they drove away from the shed they overtook people carrying their purchases of fish and turtle and Beverley, fully recovered now that she could no longer see the turtle's blood, waved at all of them as if they were old friends.

By now they were beginning to feel hungry; they had only eaten a quick snack before leaving home. Mr. Williams was anxious to get the meat into the fridge while it was still fresh and the smell of Alan's shell was beginning to drift into the car, so they agreed to head for home right away.

Mrs. Williams greeted them as the car drew up outside "Atlantic Waves", but when Alan handed her the turtle meat she was less enthusiastic.

'Well, I'm certainly not cooking that!' she announced. 'If you intend to eat it you'll have to cook it yourself.'

'But it's supposed to be delicious,' insisted her husband. 'All you have to do is stew it up as if it were veal, season it lightly and serve it with rice or with potatoes.'

They argued until they got inside the house. Finally Mrs. Williams agreed to cook it, but insisted that she would not eat any. By this time the children had washed their hands and faces and were sitting at the table in the hope of getting a late breakfast. As usual, their appetites seemed to be totally unaffected by the morning's events.

Peter eats the stew

The remainder of the day was uneventful; in fact, the children did very little except take a long sleep after lunch and collect more wood to restock the barbecue pit. The turtle meat was prepared early in the evening and, as Father remarked several times, it really smelled very good.

Mrs. Williams, however, could not be persuaded even to try it, and had a slice of ham with her supper, but she dished out helpings of turtle stew to each of the children and twice as much for her husband. Mr. Williams started immediately, but the youngsters hesitated, their spoons hovering just above the plates of unfamiliar food. At last Alan dipped into his carefully and raised the spoon slowly to his mouth but at that moment Beverley started to cry!

'What on earth is wrong with you?' asked her father through a mouthful of food.

'That poor turtle,' she spluttered. 'I keep thinking of all the blood running out when they cut its neck off!'

Three spoons were lowered on to the table together and Alan and Laura glanced at each other.

'And of all the tubes wriggling along the floor,' Beverley continued.

'Shut up!' Mr. Williams snapped. 'Why do you have to mention that while we're eating?'

There was a long pause, then, 'Beverley,' said her mother softly, 'don't you want your dinner?'

'No thank you,' she sniffed. 'I don't like turtle any more,' and she pushed away her plate.

'Mum,' said Laura, 'I can't eat mine either.'

'Nor me, I don't feel well,' added her brother as he got up quickly from the table. 'I've still got this turtle smell on my hands from cleaning that shell.'

'Well, you are a smart crowd,' growled Mr. Williams. 'What are we going to do with all this stew?'

'It looks like Daddy's going to get fat,' said his wife. 'I told you we shouldn't have cooked the stuff.'

'Come back to the table, you two,' Father called, pouring the untasted stew back into the pot. 'Laura, help your mother bring some fresh dishes and get the ham from the fridge. All that nonsense about seeing a turtle killed! They kill animals to get hams too you know!'

'All right,' interrupted his wife, 'stop fussing and let's get something else on the table before we all starve to death.'

Nobody spoke as Alan and Laura followed their mother to the kitchen. Even Mr. Williams was looking at his plate silently, as though trying to convince himself to continue eating. Beverley was still crying softly, more now because of her father's harsh words than because of concern for the turtle. It seemed as though the rest of the evening would not be very lively, but suddenly a car crunched over the gravel in the driveway.

'Somebody's coming,' cried Laura, running to the door.

'Oh, no. What now?' sighed Mr. Williams.

'It's Uncle Peter,' shouted Alan, rushing to open the door.

He was followed closely by Beverley, whose eyes seemed to have dried suddenly, and by their sister. Together they escorted Aunty Imelda and a market basket filled with fruit into the house, while Peter parked his car.

'So, you made it,' cheered Mr. Williams, as hugs and kisses were shared round.

'We wondered whether you'd be able to come up this evening,' Mrs. Williams remarked as Peter came in, even though she hadn't really been expecting them until the next day. 'We were just going to eat.'

'That sounds like a great idea,' Peter remarked in his loud voice. 'Where do I sit?'

'You have to wash your hands first,' Beverley told him and when he returned after obediently cleaning up, Mrs. Williams explained about the meal.

'The children are having ham and potato, but I made some turtle stew in case you came up.'

The children exchanged surprised glances as Uncle Peter pulled a chair up beside Laura.

'Hey, that's great, what are we waiting for? I haven't eaten turtle in months. Come on Imelda, it's a good thing we came up early.'

Peter started on his meal without delay and the adults talked all the time they were eating. It wasn't long before the unpopular stew was finished by the two men, Peter having been helped to four full servings!

'That was terrific,' he exclaimed and, turning to the children, added, 'I'm glad you little monsters didn't guzzle it all up before I arrived.'

'We had quite a fight to stop them,' said Mr. Williams, winking at Laura, who smiled back sheepishly.

'So Al, what's been going on round here this weekend? Have you been enjoying yourselves?' This was Aunt Imelda, who was slowly finishing her supper. Unlike her sister-in-law, Imelda was small and a little on the plump side. The children liked her a great deal, even though she never played boisterous games with them like Uncle Peter did.

Alan started to tell her about the bathing, about going to the depot and seeing the turtles and the newcomers listened with interest, letting Beverley and Laura add little details as the story went along. When Alan mentioned seeing Caldong in the bay Peter interrupted to suggest:

'You should have gone further down the coast. Every time I've been out we've crossed the river and trekked along towards Fishing Pond. There's many more turtles on that stretch of beach, so you can be sure to see ten or fifteen in a night.'

'Will you take us there tonight?' asked Alan eagerly.

'Tonight!' exclaimed his father.

'I'm so full of turtle I couldn't walk five paces,' said Uncle Peter, patting his stomach contentedly.

'The exercise would do you good and get some of the fat off,' his wife remarked cheekily.

'Can we, please?' begged Laura. 'Oh Dad, please let's go with Uncle Peter.'

'Do you want to go out tonight?' Mrs. Williams asked her brother.

'I'm ready to go anytime,' said Peter, 'but not until my food has gone down a little way.' Then he added, 'But why don't we all go? We can make a camp and have a big party by the river.'

'Count me out,' said Imelda decisively. 'You can go with the children if you like, but we ladies are staying right here. We've got lots of ole talk to catch up on!'

'And if you're walking a long way Beverley had better not go,' added her mother.

'That's not fair!' shouted Beverley. 'Why should they go if I can't?'

'You're too young to go walking so far late at night,' explained her mother.

'But I'm a whole five years old,' objected the little girl, 'and I've stayed up late before, and I'm not tired, really I'm not.'

There followed a long argument, but it was decided eventually that Beverley would be allowed to go after all and that the two women would look after the house. Some drinks and biscuits were packed in a bag and Peter threw in a tin of sticking plaster, in case anyone got blistered feet. He checked that his cutlass was in the car with his sandals and, after a short rest when the grown-ups drank coffee, they set off just before eight o'clock.

The two women settled down to wash the dishes and to exchange gossip until the adventurers returned. As they went to the sink, Mrs. Williams held up Peter's dish and remarked, 'He wiped it so clean we hardly need to wash it up!'

The hunt begins

The group of adventurers turned onto a narrow, winding track leading steeply downhill. It passed through a coconut estate and led out onto Matura Beach a short distance from its northern end. Uncle Peter, at the head of his patrol, stumbled out across the accumulation of beach debris onto the soft sand and switched off his torch.

'Wow!' exclaimed Alan, as he took in the view. 'Just look at that surf.' 'Rough, eh,' grunted his father.

Long waves could be seen building up in the distance and rolling over in a mass of foam as they raced towards the shore. They broke on the sand with a roar and sped up the steep slope, sending a shower of fine spray over the children. The waves then retreated in a bubbling flurry to die, hissing loudly, under the new waves rushing in. Offshore the sea tossed in a confusion of movement, dark troughs mingling with white crests as if the waves bounced on a thousand trampolines. The noise was overpowering and the children could only stand and watch. What a huge, angry mystery the sea was when seen on a dark night!

'Let's walk down.' Peter broke the spell and moved off. 'Don't waste your batteries, we'll put on our torches when we think we've found something.'

'Where is our beach house?' asked Laura. 'Can we see it from here?' 'I doubt we can see it because it would be round the headland a bit, but it's over there to the north.'

'How can you tell which way is north and south, Uncle Peter?' puffed Alan as he walked quickly to keep pace with the long-legged man.

Peter stopped walking and, as the three children caught up with him, explained:

'All right now; you can tell by the moon or by the stars. You see that bright patch of sky, well, that's the moon coming up. So that must be east. If the moon is already up and high in the sky, you'd have to keep a check on it to see which way it moves, remembering that it always goes to the west. Now if there is no moon,' he continued, 'you would have to navigate by the stars.'

They all gazed high overhead at the sky where millions of stars displayed their lights, each one trying to outdo its neighbour's brightness.

'Magnificent!' breathed Mr. Williams. 'They always seem so much clearer out here away from the town lights.'

'All those stars have been given names,' Peter explained to the children, although Beverley wasn't listening now. She was writing her name in the sand with a pointed stick. But Alan and Laura drew closer to Peter as he continued: 'And they all have their own place in the sky. Once you know a few of them you can find your way about in the dark. That's how the sailors used to do it in the old days. Now, you see those four stars there in a diamond shape? Look, low down, just above the trees.'

'I've got them,' said Laura.

'That's the Southern Cross. So that means we are looking due south.'

'When are we going to look for a turtle?' asked Beverley, tiring of her game.

'All right, all right madam,' said Peter. 'That's enough about stars for now, let's keep going.' But he walked on beside Alan for some time telling him about the other groups of stars you could see between the patches of cloud.

Three times they came across turtle tracks and nests that had been made some days earlier, but after nearly an hour they hadn't seen a single turtle. Laura sat on a log and the others gathered round.

'Take a rest,' Mr. Williams suggested. 'It's warm out here tonight.'

'That's 'cause it's hard work walking on this soft sand,' Peter added, as he stood gazing at the full moon which had just appeared over the Atlantic.

'I'm tired,' moaned Beverley.

'Oh, nonsense,' said her father, encouragingly. 'We've only walked about half way, and you were the one who insisted that you wanted to come with us.'

'But there's nothing to see,' the girl persisted miserably.

'That's what you think.' This was Uncle Peter, who had come to stand behind her. 'If you look around, there's plenty to see.'

'Only sand.'

'Come, walk with me, hold my hand, and we'll see what we can find.'

Beverley went with her uncle in front of the others as they set off once again and was soon being introduced to some of the creatures that stay awake when most children are asleep in bed. They walked close to the water's edge and Peter stamped on the sand until little bluish-white sparks of light shone around their feet. Peter lifted up a handful of sand and showed them a small, jelly-like animal.

'That's a comb-jelly. You see how it lights up when I touch it? They swim about in the sea and if a fish tries to catch them they confuse it by flashing in its face. Look over there, where the sea is sparkling. That's what they call "Phosphorescence". Beautiful isn't it?'

They watched the crabs running across the sand and Beverley was told why they're called "Ghost crabs".

'You can only see them when they move, otherwise they are camouflaged by being the same colour as the sand. As soon as they stop moving they seem to disappear, just like ghosts. Alan, you'll never catch them like that,' he added as Alan ran around the beach after them.

Just before a deep gully with a small lagoon at its mouth, Peter's light picked out two greenish eyes near the top of the beach. As the other torches flashed on, a strange-looking creature wandered straight towards them. It could have been someone's pet cat except that the face was too pointed and the fur was long and sparse, and it stumbled over the driftwood as if blinded by the torches.

'There's a manicoul' their uncle cried in excitement. 'It's just out hunting for food.' But at that moment the curious beast must have sensed danger for it fled into the bushes.

Peter led them on a little way and stopped by an old fishing float, which had been cast up by the high tide. Leaning down he showed them some white-shelled animals.

'These are goose barnacles, you see their long stalk? They sit on floating objects like this and drift about in the sea. They stick onto boats too sometimes.'

'Will they die?' asked Laura.

'Not if we throw them back into the sea.'

A little further on again there were jellyfish lying on the wet sand, where the waves had left them stranded, and then there were beach fleas,

little shrimp-like animals that jumped about frantically when the children disturbed the piles of seaweed on which they were feeding. Beverley found the footprints of a corbeau, or some such large bird, and the remains of a dead fish. And apart from all the evidence of animal life there were four light bulbs, several bottles, some boxes, pieces of rope and an old canvass shoe to add interest to their beachcombing. So many unexpected things were discovered that Beverley reached the river without once remembering her tiredness.

During the dry season, when there isn't much water in the Matura River, a wide sand-bar grows across the mouth. When the rains come, all of it is washed away, but that night it was nearly half a mile long and the river cut a narrow gap through it to reach the sea. River water runs out at low tide but sea water floods through the gap as the tide rises and fills the long, banana-shaped lagoon behind the bar.

When they came to a halt on the bank of the river, there was deep water in the tide cut. It moved back and forth as fresh waves pushed into the river mouth and ripples of movement spread far back into the lagoon.

'Are we going to cross?' Alan asked doubtfully.

'Looks a bit dangerous to me,' said his father.

'We usually cross right here and go on to the next strip of beach,' Peter remarked as he felt his way carefully down the bank and stepped into the water, 'but it's a little deeper than I expected.'

He waded out into the middle of the river and the water soon came above his knees.

'Be careful!' shouted Mr. Williams.

A few steps further and Peter sank to his waist in the tumbling water. The next wave crashed into him and left him struggling to keep his balance as it raced through the cut, but he pushed on and scrambled up the opposite bank to safety.

'It's too deep,' he shouted back. 'The kids will never make it.'

'Pity to come so far for nothing,' Mr. Williams called back. 'Hang on a minute.' He turned to the children. 'Al, you all wait here for a while. Uncle Peter and I will go on a short distance. If we find turtles we'll come back for you. O.K.?'

'What are we going to do while you're away?' asked Laura.

'You can patrol along here and keep your eyes open for turtles. But stay together and don't go too far from this spot. If you see anything give us a signal, we'll be watching out.'

Don't be long, Daddy,' Beverley called as he prepared to cross the river mouth.

Apart from getting very wet, Mr. Williams crossed without much trouble, although the water current was moving strongly. Once on the other side he outlined his plan to Peter.

'We'll walk down for about half an hour, not more, and hope to see all these turtles you told us about. If we do, you'll keep guard and I'll come back for those three. The tide is going down now, so in a little while it will be shallower and we can cross back more easily.'

'Are you sure about the tide?'

'Oh yes. I didn't check in the paper but about this time last night I'm sure it was falling when we were on the other beach. They'll be alright by themselves, Alan will look after them.'

'O.K.' said Peter, 'I hope my luck holds and the turtles come out.'

The two men set off at once and were soon lost in the darkness. The friendly flashing of their torches could be seen for a long time but eventually grew faint and disappeared. Their luck didn't hold, for neither party saw any turtles. The children walked first one way, then the other, until they got bored waiting and returned to sit by the river bank. The adults walked further than they had planned, because they weren't prepared to give up easily, so it was well over an hour before they returned to find themselves cut off from the worried children.



9 Alan takes control

On reaching the river mouth they realised their mistake. An hour earlier they had crossed at this spot by wading through the water. But Mr. Williams had been wrong after all, for the tide had been rising and now deep water swirled into the river mouth across the sand bar. With each fresh wave, foaming surf carrying pieces of wood and coconuts rushed through the gap, sped up for fifty to sixty metres and having used up its energy splashed back again just in time to meet the next wave, which sent it boiling and foaming back up river again.

'Well,' said Mr. Williams, 'I was wrong about the tide.'

'Both of us were wrong,' said Uncle Peter. 'You were wrong about the tide and I was wrong to believe you!'

'But it's no use crying over spilt sea water. We'd better cross our river now that we've come to it,' remarked the older man.

'And that,' said Uncle Peter 'is the next problem,' and he dropped his cutlass and pack onto the sand and sat down on a driftwood log, repeating to himself, 'That is the next problem.' He sat silently for a few minutes, looking perplexed and then continued out loud: 'It would be suicidal to get in there with all those big logs splashing about and it looks pretty deep too. I don't think we should risk it. We'll either have to wait 'til morning or get home another way,' Peter added.

The children were too far away to hear all this above the noise of the surf and were standing looking with increasing anxiety at the now deep crossing. Behind the beach the lagoon glistened darkly and the deep Matura River was a dark line stretching into the swamp. For the first time since the turtle hunt began Alan felt frightened. What if the adults were stuck and couldn't cross until the tide turned? That might be hours

and it really was getting cold standing waiting. This was one adventure that Alan didn't really want to be in charge of.

The two men held a hurried consultation and finally Mr. Williams called across the river to Alan.

'Alan, can you hear me?'

'Yes,' shouted Alan above the noise of the waves. 'What are we going to do, Dad?'

'We can't cross at the moment, so we're going to pass up the track along by the river and get over the bridge at Vega. You had better start walking back. Take the girls and go to the car. Wait there for us. It's going to take us quite some time to go all the way round, so don't worry if you get there first, O.K.?''

'O.K. Dad, but what if we meet someone?'

'I don't think you'll see anybody at this time of night. But if you should meet any hunters, just hide in the bushes. Look after the girls.'

Beverley and Laura had heard the whole conversation and didn't at all like the idea of walking down the beach on their own. Alan didn't give them a chance to argue, but set off homeward without glancing back at his father, who was watching to see they were safely away. As soon as the three figures began to fade into the darkness, Peter took the lead and the two men set off into the forest along a narrow footpath.

All went well for the children along the first stretch of beach, where the flat crest was wide and almost free of driftwood. Then there was one short patch where the children had to clamber over a seemingly endless spread of tree-trunks, bamboos and tree roots cast up by high waves earlier in the season. Beverley stumbled once when dodging an extra strong wave that swept up the beach and loudly demanded to know 'Who put that stupid tree in my way?'. The bubbling surf retreated without answering her, so she kicked the log twice to teach it a lesson and ran to catch up with the others.

They stopped for breath some minutes later at a point where the beach slope changed suddenly. Instead of the flat strand, the sea was cutting right up into the coconuts. The stretch of beach ahead was marked by a low, steep sand cliff with coconut trees leaning out to sea as the waves undermined their roots.

'We can't pass there,' moaned Laura.

'We'll either have to climb up into the trees above the beach and find a path through the bush or we'll have to make a dash for it,' answered Alan, trying to work out how best to deal with the problem.

They all three looked at the bushes, dark and impenetrable. Could they ever get through that?

'We'll get eaten by a malibou,' wailed Beverley.

'It isn't a malibou, it's a manicou,' said Laura, 'and they don't eat people.'

'I'm not a people, I'm a little girl,' shouted Beverley, 'and I know I'll get eaten, I know I will, I know I will.'

'Nothing would bother eating you, you're too skinny,' snapped Laura.

'Well that's better than being fat,' Beverley retorted, forgetting her fear for the moment. 'My teacher said so. She said that when you're fat you get heart-ache and can't come to school. So I'm glad I'm not fat like you.'

Losing patience Laura turned on her younger sister and started calling her all the rude names she could remember. Within a few moments all three children were snapping and shouting at each other, completely oblivious to the dark night around them and the sea pounding ominously.

'I'll tell Daddy,' the little girl whimpered and the others remembered again that Daddy was a long way away and they were on their own. They stopped arguing and stood silently, until Alan took control again.

'We have to run for it,' he said. 'We're going to dodge between the waves, so get ready,' and he took Beverley's hand firmly. 'Wait for the wave,' he continued. 'It comes up, splashes into the trees and then, as soon as it starts to fall back, run hard. You'll have to reach that first tree stump before the next wave catches you.'

They stood watching as a wave crashed against the sand cliff, bubbled with foam and then started to sink, but before they could move a second wave pounded into the first, then a third and a fourth, until the whole beach slope was a swirling angry mass of dark water. Rolling in on top of this came an enormous breaker, which raced up the beach with a loud roar and threw itself against the coconut stumps. It seemed that all the water in the world was draining away as the surf was sucked rapidly out to sea.

'Run!' yelled Alan, and raced across the wet sand, dragging Beverley behind him. They ran for their lives, screaming loudly with sudden glee, heading for the dark outline of the coconut stump leaning far out from the sandy bank. Even as they ran, they heard the roar of the next wave as it built up ready to charge at them.

Alan reached the stump and scrambled up onto it with Beverley clawing her way to safety behind him. Laura followed closely, laughing in her excitement, and jumped straight onto the base of the tree just as the wave bore down on her. She was going so fast, however, that she missed her hand hold and went straight over the trunk to land on her knees on the wet sand below. She turned, grabbed Alan's foot with one hand and caught at the tree with the other, but the angry wave broke around her. For a few seconds Laura disappeared in a mass of foam and swirling sand and then the wave was gone, racing back down the beach slope having almost won the race against the three children.

Laughing and flicking water from her hair, Laura swung onto the coconut stump. 'I'm soaked. Look at me, I'm really soaked,' she cried, 'and my hair is full of sand; it's everywhere! The water was so warm, and it went up my nose and I must have swallowed buckets of it.'

Laura stood upright on the stump and wrung the salt water out of her shirt all over Beverley. As Beverley squawked in protest, Laura jumped from the stump.

'Come on!' she yelled. 'Let's go again.'

So they ran on again until more big waves raced towards them. Then they took shelter, holding hands tightly, or jumped onto tree trunks to escape a wetting. But by the time they reached the end of this worn away part of the beach they were splashing through the tops of the waves and thoroughly enjoying getting wet.

A few minutes later they reached a wider stretch of beach and, tired and wet, they flopped down on the powdery, dry sand, took off their shoes and emptied out the sand. They were much more comfortable now that their shoes were clean, but putting the wet socks back on felt horrid.

The wind had dropped a little and the moon was bright, high above them. As they lay resting, clouds blocked the moon from view and the whole beach went dark. Everyone turned and glanced upwards to see the offending cloud rimmed with silver as the moon hid behind it.

'Do turtles come out when the moon shines?' asked Beverley.

'Daddy says it doesn't make any difference whether it's dark or bright, they just come when they're ready to nest,' replied Alan.

'What about the daddy turtles, when do they come?' persisted Beverley.

'They don't,' said Alan firmly. 'If you had been listening earlier when Uncle Peter was talking you would know that after the male mates with

the female in the sea, the eggs start to grow inside the female. Then she comes onto the land to lay her eggs, but the male never comes out of the sea.'

'So he doesn't help her,' exclaimed Laura. 'Doesn't he look after the eggs at all?'

'The eggs are left in the sand. The big turtles don't do anything to them after they're laid, except leave them to hatch by themselves,' said Alan, rather enjoying this new role of teacher.

'Well I'm glad I'm not a turtle,' said Laura, standing up and dusting sand off the seat of her jeans. 'I wouldn't like my husband to go off and leave me like that.'

'Why do girls always talk such nonsense?' growled Alan. 'Turtles have been doing this for millions of years, so it must work out all right. Come on, we better get moving before you two get cold.' Of course the truth was that Alan was getting cold, but he wasn't going to admit that. He started to get up but before he could do so Laura shouted at him to keep still.

'Look, look there,' she whispered. 'It's Caldong!'

About twenty paces away an enormous turtle sat glistening wet on the sand. It just stayed there for what seemed like ages, while the waves broke over its ridged back, and it turned its head slowly, first to one side and then the other. The moon broke out from among the clouds, lit up the beach for a second and then disappeared again, but neither Caldong nor the children moved.

Reaching forward with her long front fins, the turtle slapped the wet sand and pulled her great body forward; once, twice, three times, advancing slowly above the level of the breaking waves. After the third pull, she puffed up her throat and let out her breath in a deep sigh.

'Phshaw . . .'

Having rested for two or three minutes, she pulled again for three strokes and then rested, puffing noisily. Pausing thus and crawling alternately she mounted the steep beach slope right opposite where the children sat motionless.

'It's huge,' whispered Beverley.

'Shut up,' hissed Alan. 'You mustn't disturb her. I think she's going to nest.'

Reaching the flat top of the beach, the leatherback paused again for several minutes, as if trying to remember what she had come there to do. Then she turned round in a complete circle and sat still once again. Every

movement seemed to require great strength and was accompanied by much puffing and by loud gasps. Soon she was off again and the children crept up behind to see where she was going. She crawled for several metres parallel to the sea over driftwood and beach plants until a large tree stump loomed up in front of her. All attempts to climb this failed, so the turtle turned round and retraced her tracks towards where the children were kneeling.

This time when she stopped, she rested for nearly five minutes, with her front flippers stretched out far to the side. The big eyes protruded from either side of her head and long sticky tears trickled down.

'Do you think she's gone to sleep?' asked Beverley.

In reply Caldong brought her long fins forward, but, instead of dragging the body as before she dung into the sand and flung it back over her body. This was followed by another stroke as she shovelled out sand to make a wide depression. After every two or three strokes she rested and then turned her whole body a few degrees to one side before digging again - digging, resting, turning and digging again, until she had been round in a complete circle and a huge cavity had been dug in the beach surface.

The turtle sat in this body pit with the top of her back level with the sand, and once again took a long rest. Alan and the two girls had come up close to her by now, and they just stared, without talking. Now they were beside her she looked really enormous!

The rest period went on and on and they waited anxiously for something to happen. Caldong lay with her fins dug deeply into the sand and her head held out rigidly in front. If they had only realised, while she appeared to be resting she was really very busy, for while her front fins were still, the smaller rear limbs were carefully digging a hole for the eggs. The children were so absorbed watching her great bulbous head with its bloodshot eyes and double chin that they never noticed the activity at her tail end!

The other thing that they failed to see was the six men walking slowly along the beach towards them!

10 Attack on Caldong

Laura walked around Caldong's other side and sat on a log, throwing down her bag and starting to tie the shoe laces that had been forgotten in the excitement of meeting this huge animal. While tying the laces she noticed a small, yellow glow bobbing up and down in the distance. Then she became aware of a second one which came on and moved across the beach for a few seconds before both of them went out. After a while, as Laura watched now with renewed interest, there was another flash, steady at first and then bobbing about, up and down, up and down. Suddenly Laura realised what it was!

'Lights,' she yelled, jumping up. 'Look!' And the others turned round.

'Torches!'

'People!'

'Hunters!' said Alan. 'They might be hunters, and they're coming this way.'

'But they'll see our turtle,' said Laura urgently. 'What if they kill it!'
'If they are hunters they'll take it,' said Alan. 'I hope they're not.'

They watched the lights in silence, but it was difficult to decide how far away they really were. What was certain was that they were coming towards the turtle which lay quietly digging her nest right out in the open.

'We have to get this turtle back into the sea,' said Alan thoughtfully. 'They mustn't see it.'

'I'm not worried about the turtle,' said Laura, 'but they might kill us too! I'm scared. Why can't we hide until they've passed?'

'Help me with the turtle first, then we can hide afterwards,' shouted Alan, and he started to push Caldong from behind.

'She's not moving at all,' puffed Beverley, as they all pushed at her back with both hands.

Caldong sighed deeply and rolled her eyes, but otherwise was as solid as a rock. All the time the lights bobbed nearer and nearer. Alan started to pull at the turtle's fin, but it was too hard and he fell over backwards as it slipped from his hands. Meanwhile, Laura was slapping Caldong on the head and telling it to wake up and get moving, but still she lay quietly, and now they could see the people in the distance silhouetted against the sand by the moonlight. They were walking in a group close to the waves, where the sand was hard enough to tread on without sinking, and two torches shone out directly in front of them as they searched the slope ahead presumably for turtle tracks. They were only a short distance away when Laura started beating the turtle with a piece of bamboo driftwood, but Caldong didn't move at all until Alan kicked her sharply on the shoulder. Then she took off along the beach suddenly with great strides, sand flying with each pull of her gigantic fins. She paused once, but as Alan raced up and landed a second well aimed kick, she turned towards the sea and headed down the beach straight into the surf.

'Get in the bushes,' screamed Alan as the others came up. 'She's going to get away. Hurry, before they see us!' And he took off into the coconuts with the girls in pursuit. They flung themselves on the ground behind some large stumps and peered out through the flapping leaves, panting for breath. The men walked into view and stopped by the line of deep tracks that Caldong had made on her arrival. The two in the lead turned and waited for the others to catch up. Then they grouped round and gazed at the tracks for several minutes without speaking.

'They're probably thinking that this is another turtle they won't catch,' whispered Alan, and raised himself to look at the spot where Caldong had gone down the beach a few minutes before.

'Oh, no!' he exclaimed. 'She's still there!' Sure enough, the great beast was still sitting in the surf. In spite of all their efforts she hadn't swum away.

As the children looked on in horror, Caldong turned slowly, paused and then started to crawl laboriously back up the beach. Thinking that the noisy disturbance from the children was finished and intent only on laying her eggs, Caldong was crawling straight towards the waiting hunters.

They saw her almost at the same time as the children and immediately

the whole beach was transformed into a scene of furious activity. The men threw down their belongings in an untidy pile against a log; one of them pulled out a long cutlass and ran to stand between the turtle and the sea. Two others moved quickly over to where an assortment of driftwood lay heaped on the sand and began pulling out some of the long bamboo poles. Three other men walked together towards the advancing turtle, talking loudly and waving their arms about. As Caldong reached the beach crest with a series of strong pulls, they stopped slightly to one side of her and one of them shouted to the others that they should stop talking. Suddenly the moon jumped out from behind a cloud and light sparkled over the dark back of the great sea turtle as she stopped for breath.

From their hiding place among the trees the children had their first clear view of the hunters grouped around their prey. The man who had given the order for silence was tall, well built and obviously used to good food, as his great belly pushed out from under a partly buttoned shirt. Dark pants rolled up to the knees completed his outfit; he was bare-headed and without shoes. A cutlass hung from the right side of his thick leather belt, and, as they watched, he drew the blade slowly out from the brown leather and tested the sharp edge with his thumb. Behind him stood a short, thick-set man wearing a white canvass cap and a dark shirt over short pants. His legs appeared far too thin to support his body and their inadequacy was further exaggerated by large boots.

The third man also wore wellingtons into which he had tucked his pants legs. He was sweating heavily from the exertion of the walk up the beach and his bare chest glistened in the moonlight. A broad-brimmed hat was tilted back on his head and a large knife was stuck in his belt. Obviously much younger than the two men who stood beside him, he gazed at Caldong as if astonished by her size. By now the two others had joined the group, carrying long bamboos which they had succeeded in dragging out of the drift pile. Both men wore beards and their hair fell long from under peaked caps. Wearing short shorts and white sneakers, they had shirts open at the top but both tied in a knot at the waist in the way that fishermen often dress. They were so much alike that they could have been twins.

The sixth man, who stood lower down the beach slope, was tall and thin and held a heavy cutlass in his hands. He was barefooted, but wore long pants and had on a T-shirt with more holes in it than cloth. Behind one ear, in which a small earring glittered, the hunter carried a cigarette

which stood out clearly against his dark curly hair. Alan peered closely at this man, disturbed by something vaguely familiar about him. Turning to Laura, he asked her in a whispered voice whether she knew who the man was, but before she could answer, he suddenly remembered the scene outside the store at Anglais Road Junction and the noise of a conch shell being blown harshly.

'It's Mr. Edwards,' he exclaimed. 'But he said he never hunted turtle on the beaches. He said it wasn't allowed!'

As Alan watched in surprise, the man moved quickly, running up to the resting turtle and bringing his cutlass down fiercely on the animal's left shoulder. Caldong sprang forward with a clumsy lurch and turned to face the sea. The short man jumped in front of her and kicked the side of her head with his booted foot. This, and a second chop from the tall man, made her turn back and start to scramble higher up the beach with strong pulling from her fins. It was surprising to see how fast she moved, dragging her great bulk across the beach with sand flying backwards at each stroke. The hunters ran after her, with "Fatman" shouting to the others to bring the wood, and the two bearded warriors fumbling along as they tried to get their bamboos under the turtle.

The scene had been suddenly and horribly transformed. The quiet calm of the dark night was shattered by the fierce attack of the hunters, and by the frantic turtle's attempt to escape their blows. The three children recoiled in shock, Beverley whimpering with fear as the group of men came nearer to their hiding place.

Right in front of the children Caldong's flight was halted by a large tree trunk lying embedded in the sand. She tried to turn and was chopped across the back. Lurching round she attempted to climb over the tree, but as she lifted her great bulk "Fatman" grabbed one of the poles and shoved it under her belly. Eager hands grasped a tree branch and forced it beneath her, while the other bamboo was pushed under her back legs at the same time. Caldong puffed and struggled and the three men heaved while "Smallman" clasped her left fin and hung on with all his strength. "Tallman" threw down his cutlass and took hold of a short, thick piece of wood that looked as if it had been polished by the waves. He jammed one end of this under the turtle, near her hind limbs, and placing his shoulder under the other end added his strength to the fight. Caldong went over on to her back with a crash, the men sprawling on top. The turtle was trapped.

Trapped but not yet defeated, however. Caldong now began a frantic

struggle, rocking from side to side and flapping her limbs in an attempt to get off her back. The long curved fins beat the ground with loud slaps and sand flew off them in all directions. She puffed and blew and twisted her head, the huge eyes pushing out of their sockets as she pressed back against the soft sand. But she was fighting in vain. For centuries men have thrown turtles onto their backs to prevent them from escaping. Once they give up struggling, they stay alive for many days. When sailing ships plied the Caribbean they were provisioned with green turtles so that fresh meat would always be available. These turtles were laid upside down on the decks with their flippers tied together and were thus disabled but kept alive. Had Caldong known it, she was struggling against a tried and proven technique from which there was little chance of escape.

"Fatman" had jumped clear when Caldong fell, but "Legs" was not so fast. He struggled to his feet beside the flapping leatherback, spitting sand and dusting it from his hair and eyes. As he stood up one of the flailing fins gave him a sharp slap across the thigh and he sat down heavily again, shielding his face against the flying sand. "Boots" and the other "twin" freed themselves, jumped out of reach of the turtle and pulled clear the bamboos. Only "Tallman" stayed where he was, on his knees by the turtle's tail, watching the unfortunate beast, with a sadistic smile which stood out like a scar across his face.

'So Caldong, girl, wha' yuh go do eh? Yuh better say yuh prayers, oui, because soon as ah ketch meself ah going to have a little fun wid me knife.' He got up slowly, dusted his pants and crossed to where the others were standing. 'Well fellers, like I tell yuh, tonight de moon was jus right. Remember ah say 'bout nine Caldong would left de sea, and now is half pass nine.' He slapped "Boots" on the back and said, 'So, boyo, yuh catch yuh fus turtle. How yuh like all dis excitement, eh?' 'It so strong, ah didn't tink it would fight so,' replied the young man. 'It nearly get away from all o'we, yes. Yuh goin tuh kill it now?'

'Well we ent go let it go,' said "Fatman", as he wiped the sand from his cutlass against his pants.

'Bring some leafs and spread dem on de sand right dey,' the older man said to no-one in particular. 'And, Ralphe, fetch de pan.'

This last was addressed to one of the "twins", who took up the pitch oil tin they had brought with them and stood it on a nearby log. "Legs" was already cutting branches from the palms and passing them to the other "twin" who laid them one on top of the other on the flat sand.

All this time Laura, Alan and Beverley had been watching in complete silence, frozen into immobility. But now Laura suddenly clutched at Alan's arm and shrilly whispered:

'We've got to stop them. They're going to kill her. Come on.'

'No,' hissed Alan, grabbing her. 'You mustn't let them see you, they might kill us too!'

'I'm scared,' sobbed Beverley. 'Don't go Laura. Let's hide here until they've gone.'

'But it's horrid, we've got to do something. Oh, if only Daddy would come.'

'It's too late,' said Alan, pulling the others back behind the sheltering palm branches. He knew there was nothing they could do but watch as the battle began afresh.

"Fatman" ducked under the fins and grabbed one, struggling to hold it down. "Boots" took his cue and caught at the other limb. It struck him twice before he secured it, once knocking off his hat and the second time drawing blood from his upper arm. As they held down the two arms, "Tallman" stepped forward briskly and with a practised stroke chopped Caldong deftly across the white throat. Blood spurted from the wound and splashed over his bare feet. Once, twice, three times more he cut before the head rolled free. He picked it up in one big hand, marched down the beach and hurled it out across the surf. It spun over and over through the air before crashing into the sea and being swallowed by a foaming breaker. When the wave fell back the head had vanished.

Alan stood up abruptly and stared at the sea in disbelief. He had seen dead animals before, but never had he felt the wave of sickness that now flooded over him. Only a few minutes earlier Caldong had been a huge, gentle beast nesting in the sand. And now . . . He looked again at the foaming waves and sank back into a sitting position, only half aware of the conversation between the hunters.

'Why yuh throw it in de sea?' questioned "Boots" as "Tallman" returned.

'You aint want it watchin yuh while yuh chopping up de body,' replied "Tallman". 'If yuh want it yuh best get it out fast.'

He took up the long knife which "Boots" had dropped on the sand and returned to the turtle. All this time what remained of Caldong was struggling and twisting, the small hind flippers padding fruitlessly in the air. "Tallman" stood over the upturned animal and cut the belly right down one side. "Fatman" sliced the other side and together they lifted



up the thick belly skin as if they were taking the lid off a box. This was handed to "Legs" to place on the coconut leaf mat and then, after much chopping and cursing, "Fatman" cut off both front fins at the shoulder and, with "Legs" helping, carried these onto the belly plate.

A few minutes later the butchers had laid several large chunks of bloody meat beside the heart and liver and thrown many of the unwanted pieces onto the sand. "Legs" lifted the meat and placed it in the tin, along with a handful of eggs which he took from inside the carcass. One of the "Twins" cut off the small back legs and placed them, still dripping blood on a nearby log. He was obviously keeping these for himself.

One by one the hunters went down the beach and washed in the sea, "Boots" smelling his hands and scrubbing them four times before being satisfied that they were clean. Then they all collected their weapons and hats and walked off along the beach in the direction they had come, carrying the tin and the flippers between them. The whole operation had seemed to take only a few minutes. Nobody spoke as they packed up and set off. Perhaps there was nothing to be said. Certainly Caldong hadn't thought so; apart from her heavy puffing, she had not uttered a single sound.

Beverley fights back

It was some while after the hunters left before the children emerged slowly from their hide-away in the trees. Alan was holding Laura's hand although he couldn't remember when he had first taken hold of it, and Beverley followed them, sobbing softly in the darkness. They walked out onto the sand and stood looking at the remains of the big turtle. Even though they had seen the hunters at work, they were not prepared for the horrible sight which greeted them. There were pieces of turtle everywhere and the sand was wet and stained; a strong, disgusting smell hovered everywhere. All round them the beach surface had been trampled and dug up during the battle that had taken place. The wide tracks cut across the sand and ended at the dark upturned back, which lay like a long dish filled with multicoloured tubes. In the bottom of this dish, nearly a hundred eggs floated in the sticky body juices.

'She didn't even have time to lay,' said Alan quietly to himself. 'Why couldn't they have waited until she'd finished? Then at least her babies would have been safe.'

'I think we should put the eggs in a nest for her,' said Laura. 'Uncle Peter said they do that in Cuba when they catch turtles in their fishing nets. Let's bury them far away in case the hunters come back to look for them,' she suggested.

'The nest she started digging when we found her was over here,' Alan called. 'This must be a good place,' cause she chose it herself.'

Down on his knees he dug sand out of the hole until it was deeper than his arm. Then they took the eggs out of the carcass carefully, a few at a time, and placed them gently in the hole. They took only those eggs which were big and round and covered with white skin and left those

which were just skinless spheres of orange yolk. There were more than a hundred of these and Alan wondered if they would have been laid later in the season, as they were obviously not ready without their shells. When the hole was nearly full, they piled sand on top, pressed it down firmly and threw leaves and sticks over it so that it was well disguised. There was nothing more they could do.

'I'm cold,' shivered Laura. 'We should go on home now.' And she walked over to Beverley who was still crying as she gazed at the remains of the slaughtered turtle.

'Those men were so horrid,' the young girl sniffed, 'I hate them! The turtle didn't do anything.'

'They killed her because they wanted turtle meat to eat,' Laura explained, putting an arm round her shoulders and starting to walk her along the beach.

'Well, why didn't they take all of it?' Beverley persisted. 'Why did they leave all those parts of her?'

'It was a good thing they left some eggs though, at least they won't be wasted.'

'You don't know that they will ever grow,' Beverley continued to argue. 'If Daddy had been here he would have chased away all those men and then we could have watched her lay properly.'

The talk died gradually as they walked homeward. Alan had guided them down to the water's edge where the sand was firmer, but even so they dragged their feet and stumbled from time to time, feeling tired and miserable. Laura and Alan were too exhausted to do anything more than plod on dispiritedly, neither of them able to shake off the memory of all that they had just seen and heard. Beverley took to stamping on the strands of sargassum weed that littered the beach, and kicking the remains into the sand. Every heap of weed she squashed was accused of being a 'horrid hunter' or an 'ugly fat man'. Her battle against the never-ending army of burstable weeds caused her to drop slowly behind the others, who were intent only on getting back to the car.

'Come on, Beverley,' shouted Alan. 'Keep up with us.'

'Leave her,' advised Laura, 'she's a bit upset. Let her play by herself and she'll catch up if we get out of sight.' And she increased her pace along the glistening sand. The moon was shining brightly now and they could see right along to the headland at the north end of the beach.

They were aware suddenly of two figures moving towards them, and of the simultaneous flash of light as two torches were switched on. Then

came a series of short flashes repeated over several seconds in the recognition signal they had agreed earlier.

'It's them,' yelled Alan and started to run along the sand. Laura sped after him, splashing through the water as the waves rolled up and splattering across the wet sand as the waves retreated. The two adults approached rapidly with their torches full on, Uncle Peter walking ahead of the children's father.

'We thought you were lost,' Peter cried as the children raced up. 'We've been waiting for you by the car.'

'We had to hide,' gasped Laura. 'Some awful men killed our turtle.' And, with Alan's help, she blurted out the whole story.

'It's a good thing you were hiding,' Uncle Peter told them. 'Those hunters can get very nasty if you try to stop them.'

'Isn't it wrong to kill these turtles Uncle Peter?' queried Laura.

'Oh yes' he agreed. 'In fact it's against the law.'

'Then the fishermen at the depot were breaking the law too?' asked Mr. Williams as he put his arm round Laura's shoulders.

'No, not really,' Peter explained, after noisily blowing his nose. 'You see, the fishermen are allowed to catch the adults out at sea, but not the young ones, and they catch so few of them that it really does very little harm. Real fishermen are usually very careful to make use of every part of the turtle, so nothing gets wasted. Besides, turtle fishing gives them a little extra cash which they all need. But it is wrong to kill turtles when they're nesting on a beach, because this means that all their eggs are lost too, so there are no babies growing up for the future. What I hate also is the way these fellows waste so much of the meat and eggs when they go out poaching at night. I'd like to get my hands on a few of them and turn them over to the police. Anyway, don't you worry about it, 'cause I'm sure that many other turtles will come to nest when there are no hunters about.'

The children were at last beginning to calm down and their father changed the subject by telling them how Peter and he found a log bridge over the river and had come out onto the Toco Road about two miles from where they'd parked. By walking briskly, they had reached the vehicle about ten o'clock and had been surprised that the youngsters weren't waiting for them. They stopped just long enough to unload their packs and to drink some of the hot coffee Mrs. Williams had prepared and then had come onto the beach again.

Soon they were all laughing and talking while Uncle Peter gave them

something to drink from his thermos. Father fussed about their being so wet, especially when Alan sneezed three times in succession, and suggested they went up to the car straightaway. It was then that they discovered, to their great surprise, that Beverley was missing! In all the excitement and talk, no-one had noticed her absence.

'She was right behind us,' pleaded Laura. 'She was following us when we saw your lights and started running.'

Father was already on his way along the beach, flashing his torch rapidly. Uncle Peter and the two children ran to join him, straining their eyes to pick out Beverley's small figure on the moonlit sand. It was so bright you could see right past the big lagoon, along to where the grove of royal palms stood above the gully, but Beverley was nowhere to be seen. They quickened their pace, the two men well ahead now, using their torches in spite of the bright moon. Peter shouted that they should look for her footprints in the sand, but this was not so easy. The beach slope was covered with tracks made by the children and the hunters earlier in the evening, but most of these went the other way. However, close to the water's edge they soon came to the spot where Alan and Laura had begun to run on seeing the adults, and here they found Beverley's prints, two lines of holes, showing marks of the toes on tiny bare feet, and here a spot where she had squashed a pile of weed. They all turned and sped back, following the tracks which continued in a straight line for about fifty paces. Suddenly, the prints turned up the beach and the men leaped up the slope with big strides, the two youngsters at their heels.

Beverley was sitting on the sand holding a small, black object in her hands and talking to it softly.

'Bev!' yelled her father, in his relief. 'What the France are you doing?' 'I've found a baby turtle,' replied the child, 'and I found it all by myself.'

Sure enough, the tiny object struggling between her fingers was a miniature version of the great Caldong. As they crowded round she placed it carefully on the sand, an oval, black body about five centimeters long covered with lines of white dots and bearing long dark fins which it flapped like the wings of a bird. With strong movements of its front fins the hatchling crawled off straight towards the sea, bumping over twigs, rolling down sand hillocks and scurrying across patches of smooth sand. The children crawled after it on their hands and knees with Beverley shouting words of encouragement to her new-found toy. It

almost fell down the beach slope in its urgent haste to enter the Atlantic and the children cheered as it sped towards the surf.

An advancing wave met it head-on and hurled it back up the beach, but it turned over quickly and set off again. The next wave met it and bowled it over to end on its back nearly two metres further back. It flipped onto its belly after two tries and crawled off towards the sea in time to meet yet a third wave which picked it up and lifted it back up the beach slope. As if it were used to playing snakes-and-ladders, it advanced again, but this time instead of being washed back by the force of the sea, a retreating wave caught it up and it disappeared into the dark ocean.

'He's gone,' squealed Laura, 'he made it!' Turning in excitement to her sister she added, 'Where did you find it?'

'There's lots of them. I found a whole nest full,' explained Beverley. 'Come on. I'll show you!' She ran over to the sand bar by the lagoon and flopped down on her knees.

About twenty hatchlings were crawling about and, as the others gathered round, Beverley pointed to a patch of disturbed sand. There a small head was looking out from a hole and was soon followed by one fin and then another, as the hatchling dug its way out from the nest below. It wriggled clear, paused for a few seconds and then set off to join the others in their scramble for the safety of the ocean.

Over the next half hour they saw what seemed to be a never-ending stream of young turtles leave the nest, until at one point over fifty of them could be seen crossing the sand together. The children screamed with excitement and ran about among the fleeing hatchlings. Beverley was helping those that got trapped behind pieces of driftwood and when one fell right over after negotiating a steep dip in the sand surface, she picked it up, brushed off the sand, kissed it on the nose and told it not to cry because it wasn't really hurt! Alan's contribution was slightly more practical; he collected a handful of the wriggling black objects and released them in the sea where he had waded up to his thighs. These swam off and were lost to sight almost immediately, so he ran back to collect more. Laura sat by the nest until she was satisfied that no more would come out. Then she proudly announced that she had seen eighty-four of them, not counting those that might have left the nest before she started watching.

Eventually the children joined the two men, who were sitting on a log watching the fun and games. The last hatchling was off safely on its



ocean journey and three young faces glowed with happiness and exertion.

'It doesn't matter about those nasty hunter men killing our turtle,' announced Beverley, 'because my babies will soon grow up and come back to lay their own eggs on this beach.'

'How do you know they will come here?' queried Alan.

'Don't ask stupid questions,' sniffed Beverley. 'I found them, so I know what they are going to do.'

'I'm glad they're safe,' Laura remarked.

'Yes,' said her father, 'that's the important thing.'

'As long as we can protect the eggs and the young ones there will always be turtles for us to watch,' smiled Uncle Peter. 'I think you children have done a good night's work after all.'

But Alan shook his head.

'It's not good enough though,' he remarked. 'Caldong is dead and the hunters got away. If only we could catch them.'

'Al's right,' said his father, 'but how do we do it?'

'I think I know,' Alan announced triumphantly. 'What is Mr. Edwards going to do with the turtle meat in the morning?'

'He'll probably sell it,' remarked his uncle.

'And that's when we'll catch him,' said Alan. 'Come on, I have a plan!'

12 Caldong is revenged

Two hundred pounds of leatherback turtle meat was spread out on the rickety wooden stall and lay dark and bloody in the early morning light. There was no fish yet, as the local boats were still unloading their catch, and so fresh turtle was all that Mr. Edwards had for sale. The stores on the opposite side of the road would open their doors in a few minutes and people were arriving already in twos and threes, but none of them bothered to approach the fisherman as he stood talking to "Boots".

About half an hour earlier Mr. Williams had driven up to the junction, dropped off the three children beside the gas station and roared away towards Toco, with Uncle Peter beside him. Now Alan stood with his hands sunk deep in his pants pockets watching every move that Mr. Edwards made. Laura held Beverley's hand as they stood behind their older brother feeling a little unsure of themselves. When the tall fisherman yanked the remaining meat out of the pitch-oil tin and placed it on the table they glanced at each other as if to say, 'That used to be *our* turtle, big, strong and alive. Just you wait!'

The minutes went by slowly as the sun began to shine down fiercely on the gradually waking village. When there were about thirty people idling around the store front, Mr. Edwards blew three shrill notes with his conch shell. It was time to sell his wares. Almost at that same moment a blue car screeched to a dusty halt in front of the stall and three figures climbed out — Mr. Williams, Uncle Peter and a policeman!

Alan led the two girls across to the stall, where they stood to one side as the policeman spoke to the fisherman. The whole crowd of villagers, sensing some entertainment, quickly gathered round the little group.

'What ya sellin here?' Constable Paine demanded.

'Jus some fresh shark and ting,' said Edwards, nervously fingering his earring. 'Is ya want ta get some or what?'

'That's not shark,' Uncle Peter called to the policeman. 'That's the turtle meat I was telling you about.'

'Ah tellin ya dat is shark,' shouted Mr. Edwards. 'What ya know bout dat, boss?'

'If he say is shark, den is shark. Edwards is a fisherman, so long, so he should know what is shark, oui!' That was "Boots", speaking out in support of his partner.

'Well,' continued Uncle Peter, looking hard at "Boots", 'I'm a biologist, so I should know something about it too. I say it's turtle. Ask any of these people here, Officer, and they'll tell you. That is Caldong meat!'

'Is so, is Caldong,' an elderly man with a stick called out and several others nodded their heads in agreement.

Mr. Edwards was taken aback. Stepping behind his stall he called "Boots" and muttered to him to keep his mouth shut. Then the tall man bent down and examined the dark meat as if he were seeing it for the first time. Turning with a wide smile he spoke again to the policeman.

'It mus be me eyes is gettin bad an ah ent seen too good. Is right you is right, it lookin like it could be some Caldong ah got der.'

'So, where you get it?' demanded the policeman as he started to write in a ragged note book.

'Some odder fellers done sell it ta me dis mawnin. It was dark, so ah ent see dem too good, and it lookin like dey tricked me. An it jus slipped me ta arks dem dey name.'

Laura started to say 'That's not true', but Alan hissed to her to keep quiet. He wasn't ready yet to join in the argument. Anyway, Uncle Peter stepped forward at this point and took hold of the policeman's arm.

'I think he killed that turtle himself last night,' he said slowly, 'so you should charge him, Officer.'

'Ah ent kill no turtle,' objected Edwards, 'an ah don't like for ya ta say dat. What ya know bout dat eh? You see me kill any Caldong on Matura Beach? Come talk na, or is jus bad-talk ya making?'

'All right now, hold some strain there, Mr. Fisherman,' ordered the policeman, coming to stand in front of Uncle Peter. 'Now you tell me. Did you see dis man kill any turtle or not?'

'No I didn't,' said Peter.

'And you, Mr. Gentleman, did you see?' continued the officer.

'No, I didn't either,' the childrens' father admitted.

'What ah tell you,' Mr. Edwards shouted triumphantly. 'Dey accusin me of all dis an dey ent prove nothin. Not one of dem see anything.'

'But I did,' Alan said loudly.

Edwards stopped his jubilant shouting and swung round on the group of children. This was the moment Alan had been waiting for. Edwards had been so busy telling lies that he hadn't even noticed the boy with his two sisters. So now that all eyes were on them, the three youngsters stepped in front of the stall and Alan spoke again.

'I saw you kill Caldong,' he continued.

'So did I,' added Laura. 'We were hiding in the trees watching you all the time.'

'I was there too,' Beverley added, her voice squeaky with embarrassment, 'and we saw you chop up that poor mummy turtle.'

'You were with some other men,' said Alan, 'and that man walking away there was one of them.'

The policeman called "Boots" and told him to come back 'for a few minutes.' Alan told the crowd of villagers his whole story while the policeman tried to keep notes. But Alan was so excited that he talked too fast and the policeman was glad when he finished by saying, 'I knew Mr. Edwards would come here to sell his meat, so my plan to trap him here has worked.'

Poor Mr. Edwards just shifted nervously from foot to foot, saying to himself, 'Fancy being caught by a kid. I never even knew they was watching us.'

'Ah think as how we'd better take a walk to de station, Mr. Edwards, and your friend der,' the policeman remarked as Alan finished. 'You's all know de regulations bout catching turtle out of season as well as ah do. So you'd better explain all dis Caldong meat to de inspector.'

'Do you want us to come too?' Alan enquired, happy to know that it was all over.

The officer spoke to their father in reply.

'If you'd all come in later to give a statement, I'd be glad for your assistance.' Then he turned back to Alan, patted him on the head and said, 'Thank you, young feller. You did a good thing to speak up against dat man. The fishery regulations is for de good of all of us, but he too chupid to see dat. See you later in the station with your father, and perhaps you can tell me more about how turtles does make their nests.'

As the meat was loaded back into the tin and carried off towards the police station, Alan thought sadly of the dead turtle. What a pity he couldn't stay another night and search for turtles on the beach again. As he climbed into his father's car to return for breakfast at the beach house he wondered how many more turtles would come.

13

Nobody was there

That night, as Alan and the rest of the family lay in bed at home, far from the silent beach, Caldong came out of the sea to nest. She was a large leatherback with few spots on her very dark skin and one flipper torn where a shark had attacked her some years before. This was the first time she had nested for this season on Matura Beach, although she had been there two years before, during June.

When she crawled ashore the beach was deserted and the sky clouding over once again to leave only a few stars winking at her. By the time the last egg was dropped and the whole clutch covered with sand, the moon was sinking low in the western sky behind the tree line. Turning towards the sea, the old turtle took one last look around and gave a long sigh, as if to say, 'How boring this nesting business is. So many times I've nested here and it's always the same ... no fun, no excitement, just sand and surf and sky and stars.'

She pulled herself back to the surf and swam off into the dark ocean. By early morning the tide had wiped out all the tracks, leaving the beach smooth and clean when the new day broke. Nobody ever knew she had been there!