

NETTIE PALMER

AMONG THE CAYS: CORAL ISLANDS IN EMBRYO¹



Without knowing much of the Great Barrier Reef, anyone living on it or in it, comes gradually to understand that it is not a single continuous wall. Yet that was the way it had appeared to my very naive intelligence before I saw it. I seemed to see a great sheet of shallow and fairly still water dotted with islands extending a tremendous distance up the coast to Cape Yorke. Ten miles, or was it 20 or 50, out from the mainland that rather shallow water met a barrier, a reef wall of inconsiderable height but vast depth, almost as deep as the water of the ocean that is kept out. This little coral island, Green Island, off the coast near Cairns, has its own vast and irregular reef about it, the size and depth of the lagoon varying on the lee and weather sides. The lagoon at high tide, and especially in rough weather, appears almost to be one with the deep sea, yet there are never any serious breakers on the island beach, for these are all stayed by the existence of the reef. Green Island, then, with its trees charted as 64 ft high, is a little tussock of verdure in the midst of a coral table, and beyond it, when the lagoon is golden brown, and shallow at low tide, we see at most parts the dark blue of the contrasting ocean waters. So we say to some learned fisherman who calls on us in rough weather, "How far out is the Barrier Reef itself" and he replies "This is part of it." Then we ask him more questions, and he sits down on the sand and draws a plan of the Reef in these parts as he knows it and submits to it. "Here's the island with its reef and near it, along the north, there' another reef in a curve like this and it runs right over to the reef that's

round Oyster Cay. And there's another reef towards the south-east in a half-moon shape and ..." The mind begins to whirl with circles and half moons. So we understand that there is not continuously deep sea round the environs of this island, and that it is not for nothing that the fishermen's boats are flat-bottomed. We understand too, that while this honeycomb of reefs is immense, the flat coral islands that emerge upon it here and there are the merest and rarest incidents. The attractive knobs on the reefs, emerging several miles apart and hardly dignified as yet by the name of island, seem to be what ours was before its mass of trees had turned it into the likeness of a flat fern basket drifting on the waves.

AN EXCURSION

Those other islands are wide apart. Standing down on our beach you can never see the nearest one called Upola Bank; it is below the skyline. Standing on our tiny cliff in calm weather and with the sun favourable you see Upola Bank on the skyline, a squared mound of dazzling white, giving the illusion of a white island palace going down as into the Bay of Naples. We know that beyond Upola Bank is Oyster Cay, something a little nearer to an island, and there are others, - Little Upola, Little Oyster Cay, with the reef linking them all. There came a fine day. When I say "fine" I mean that it had the fineness of sky-blue silk and the stillness of stone. We were going over to Oyster Cay, fortunately in a little low motor-boat. From a high-decked launch you might well miss something of the intimacy of this curious labyrinth with its few features and their shifting values. We were to pass near Upola Bank, but not land there. As we set out Upola seemed the farthest limit of the world, though indeed we had heard rumours of Oyster Cay as of Borneo. From or level on the water at first we could not see Upola unless we stood up. We could see our island for a long time, even when its whole sloped beach had disappeared. In the charts its trees are marked 64ft and that height might be increased do-day.

We passed over a reef for an acre or two, the scarcely touched coral pools making complete pictures of a sheer beauty that the too much visited islands have lost. Suddenly the reef would cease, and we would find ourselves looking into the opaque blue of deep sea water. Or we were interrupted by a sudden shout, "Whale, a whale!" And there she blew, fortunately far off on the skyline, fountains of her own spouting, a whirl of spray, and the enormous black silhouette, changing from one figure to the next almost in an instant, until there came the plunge and the disappearance. Where will she rise? In a small boat you don't ask that question. You just sit marvelling at the whole phenomenon. It is as if an island of pure shining ebony suddenly appeared on the skyline, and then vanished. Sometimes you see the vast black triangles of the flukes, sometimes the profile of the great body, sometimes the spume

as "she blows". All is incredible, an irruption into the smoothness of life as we know it. And it is these leviathans that man has gone forth through the centuries to take by force.

THE BECHE-DE-MER FISHERS

Not very far from our motor-boat, at different points in the still water, beche-de-mer luggers, handsome two-masted craft, were anchored, their men working from dinghies more or less near the lugger. The two rowers in the dinghy never stopped, backward and forward, as the other man stared down through his box-telescope and then got his tackle to work on a big 'fish'. No diving, unless he struck a patch where there were a good many together. Do those lugger-boys take whales into their ken, as they anchor for days or row to their diving-grounds? A fisherman said to me yesterday that whales were easy enough to discourage. "If you see one rather near just bang a stick on a kerosene tin and it'll shoot off."

Whales east and west, luggers at intervals, our island just a low fringe of green against a high mountain many miles beyond it; Upola Bank, steep, with a green top, on our left; a lugger near it, and Oyster Cay still out of sight in front. It was like being in a net, with an enormous mesh. At last we saw the next knob in it – Oyster Day, steeper than our island but with no tree on it, only a curious flickering shadow high above it. We noticed then what had been absent before, many seabirds flying over us – dark terns, seagulls, light terns. Were they escorting us to Oyster Cay or warning us to keep off? We still moved forward over water through which we saw the many-branched corals in blue and mauve, and bright fishes emerging from caverns, beneath. Oyster Cay was near now, and the shadow stretched 30 ft over; it was full of noise. This, then was the seabirds' hatchery of which we had heard so much. We waded shore breathless with excitement.

The tiny island, a third the size of our own, is covered at the top of its steep, sandy cliff by a coarse, matted grass. Under the tufts of this grass wherever you stepped were colonies of young, shy sea-birds, humping themselves forward away from your feet. Above in the sky, hovering and swooping, were colonies of parent birds, calling, but not screeching, as they do when they swoop for fish. At times, we are told, there are myriads of birds there, the island top crammed with eggs. In a way we saw it better when the birds were fewer and the eggs almost all hatched out. But we mean to return, probably to camp for a night or two, spreading a tent-fly over some poles, and, above all bringing water with us. It would be possible to be frightfully marooned on such an island, where the bird inhabitants seem to have no need of water. On Oyster Cay there are no palms that might retain water in the sockets of their fronds or give us coconut

milk to drink and no other trees have gained a footing. If we were to bring some seedlings from our island and if they escaped the seabirds' claws and grew up, and dropped seeds and grew some more trees like them, wouldn't that be pushing Oyster Cay forward through the centuries at a faster rate than it ought naturally to go?

ENDNOTES:

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RON PRETTY

HALF LIFER

Looking out, he could see half the screen and hear
none of the sound track. Figures disappeared
off the edge – cowboys in search of Prestor John

or lovers falling off the edge of their world.
Night after night from his balcony he watched
the silent half world reveal itself: kings guillotined,

lemmings crowding into the silent dark of evening.
He never asked what films were showing, preferring
his own truncated narratives, the demi-monde

of his own imaginings. He watched the one-legged spy
half falling into a trap and found a way to ensure
the double agent won. He found a way to love

the Amazon with half a breast as her fiery arrows
disappeared off the screen and on to his balcony.
So he built his fantasies, living his half life all night.

When the screen went dark, he watched
the constellations spinning their destinies
out to the edge of space and the life beyond.