

Turtle-shell at this time (even that of the green turtle, which was formerly unsaleable) has now acquired a value unprecedented in former years, for the reason of its being now the fashion to wear it not only in the form of combs, but in that of cuffs, bracelets, necklaces, and a variety of ornaments, not always carved as formerly, but, the shell being melted, they are manufactured by some stamping process.

In books on the Pacific Isles—and even in trade reports—one sees mention of “tortoise-shell:” it is a misnomer. There is no such creature to be found there, unless in the New Hebrides or Solomon’s, which I do not believe. There is a tortoise on the Galapagos peculiar to those islands, and of immense size, but his shell is like bull’s hide, and is of no value for any known purpose.

The hawksbill turtle, at a certain season of the year, feeds on the beche-de-mer. Where the one is found so is the other, and *vice versâ*. I shall have more to say of this when speaking of the latter animal, which is a valuable article of commerce, and at present in great demand.

In places where the hawksbill turtle are very plentiful, it is the custom of the savages to strip them of the valuable plates with which their back is covered. This is done by introducing a hot knife under the laminæ. The creature is then allowed to return to the sea, perhaps to be taken and stripped again on some future occasion. To some desert cays of the Pacific, such as Palmerston, Mopeia, Suwarrow, and Peregrino, men resort for the sole purpose of catching turtle (*i.e.*, the green species, no others being found there), and trying them down for the oil, of which a good-sized one will yield ten gallons. The price which they receive from traders is usually one dollar per gallon.

I have known beachcombers (that is to say, strolling adventurers who came there in boats accompanied by Polynesian wives) on Palmerston Island to have in a pen, or place walled in by stone into which the tide flowed, as many as forty great turtle at a time, which they fed on moss gathered from the coral reef. They could, had they chosen, have kept very many more, but they had no way of disposing of them, and no casks to contain the oil.

It has often surprised me that no merchant of New Zealand had ever thought of taking up Sunday Island for a whaling station. The anchorage is not secure at every season of the year, but more so than Norfolk Island. It is not large, being only twelve miles round, but much of it is very fertile, and the rest would support many goats or sheep. Not long since I was speaking to Captain Baker, of the “Bella,” a trader belonging to Opotiki, on this subject. He was born on Sunday Island, and agreed with me that it was remarkable that no New Zealand people had ever made a settlement there. Before these people elected to make a home for themselves upon this place, it was usual for whale ships to call and leave letters in a certain well-known place for one another. The first settlers (who came about 1840) planted vegetables and caught turtle, which they kept in pens for the supply of whale ships. (The turtle at this island are plentiful, and of great size.) They used also to cure great quantities of fish and mutton-birds, which they caught upon the rocks in vast numbers and at certain seasons. They were wont to say that whatsoever seed a man might scatter about the place would grow luxuriantly. A cooper of a whale ship, who had stayed on shore here for a time, emptied out his mattress as he was leaving; it had been stuffed with the heads of that kind of flag of which so much use is made to close the joints of the staves of casks. Among this were some seeds which grew and overran all the border of the little lake of fresh water which exists inland a short distance from the usual landing-place.

About 1861 there came to Sunday Island a slaver, on her way to Callao. She had on board over 200 Tokerau natives, among whom had broken out some disease of the typhoid nature. They were landed here and all died, as did about half of the unfortunate settlers and their children; the rest departed in the first whale ship that came along, fearing the pestilence, which seemed to have established itself upon their island. The last inhabitant of Sunday Island was one Covat, a man of strange experience, with a Samoan wife. He is now on the Fijis. He quitted his island home, on which he was very happy and had reared a fine family, in consequence of being frightened by a volcanic disturbance. In the early part of the year 1872, the water in the little fresh-water lake on Sunday Island began to boil furiously, which was followed by a column of fire spouting up from the middle of it. A whale ship in the neighbourhood, seeing the flame, bore up and took away Covat and his family, together with a comrade of the whalers, whom they landed two weeks before, his leg being broken while killing a fish. Thus the place became finally deserted.

In September, 1872, I landed there, having previously stayed some time upon it in the year 1869 (myself and my companions having then lost our vessel, which had foundered at sea 100 miles off this place two days previous). I found no one, and the place was much scorched towards the interior. All signs of volcanic disturbance had disappeared, with the exception of the dead trees upon the hill sides surrounding the little lake, and some black cinders and ashes which were strewed about the margin. All was becoming green again, Covat’s house was uninjured, and the banana trees had fruit on them. I saw no reason why a man should be afraid to stay here. It was a more fertile spot to all appearance than Rimatara where there are several hundred inhabitants.

XI.—BECHE-DE-MER.

All the lagoon islands of the coral seas, of a formation similar to that of the Paumotus, are famous for the production of beche-de-mer, which is one of the most important articles of commerce obtained in the Pacific. It is an old saying, “One half of the world does not know how the other half lives.” And, truly, it is very surprising to contemplate the diversity of the “little games” wherewithal to make money, inaugurated by men who “do business in the great waters” of the South Sea. *Par exemple*, there is a master mariner, known to me, who goes by the name of “the Dustman,” which happened in this manner: Certain of us, upon one occasion, boarded this man at sea, and being invited into the cabin found everything covered with a fine impalpable powder. It was everywhere—upon the deck, upon the table-cloth, in the glass tumblers, in the soup; the captain’s hair and beard were full of it; the black steward’s wool was encrusted with it, and his skin seemed to have contracted a drab colour; every man in the ship was the same. I thought of that saying in the Scripture, “Memento homo quod pulvis es, et ad pulverem reverteris.” “What the devil could it be?” we inquired of one another. Not guano, for it had no smell; not sulphur, for it was too light, and of the wrong colour. Ashes!