

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

"WELL," SAID the man in the uniform of blue, "what can I do for you?"

"Ha," I said. "Well—er—as a matter of fact—um—I've been sent out here to interview the *Sphenodon Punctatum*, or tuatara."

He composed himself somewhat after two minutes. The one at the zoo had died. But he thought a chap at the Dominion Museum could help.

So I went to the Dominion Museum. "Have you a live tuatara?" I asked. "Too right," they said (in effect), and took me down in a lift to an open-air basement. They led me over to a straw-strewn case with a glass front.

"It's in there—sleeping. It sleeps all winter, and a good deal of the summer, too."

"Go on. What do you feed it?"

"Little squares of cow-beef. It doesn't eat in the winter. But when it's on it's tucker, it'll eat 2 oz. of raw meat a fortnight."

"Water?"

"It likes water. Swims in it. Lies under it. Changes its skin in it, too, once a year, starting from the top of its back and peeling down."

"Where did you trap him?"

"On the Chickens Islands in 1934. Only 10 in. long then, but now 1 ft. 8 in. And it's not a him, she's a her. She laid ten eggs once, and that's the only way you can find out their sex. We preserved the eggs." (I hoped the tuatara wasn't listening.)

But I needn't have worried. A lot of straw had to be pulled away before they found the tuatara. A dusty brown, not the usual olive-green, she resembled a very fierce and dangerous lizard, or a diminutive dragon. A ridge of skin, planted with small, muddy-white quills, ran from

the back of a V-shaped head to where the tail began. This tail, almost as long as the body, looked just as if it had been cut from a miniature crocodile and gummed into place. Four stubby legs, each with five fingers ending in pointed claws, were planted firmly in the straw. The eyes were large, and round, and cold. They seldom blinked, and when they did a sort of film passed across the pupils, which were vertical—like those of a cat.

I didn't like her eyes. Still, that interview . . .

"Do you mind leaving us alone for a minute?" I asked. We've got something rather personal to discuss."

"As you wish," they said. But she's never spoken to us, ever. Still, you can try. If you want help, just bawl out." And off they went.

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Without a blink she watched me bring out paper and a pencil. I leaned forward, carefully, and saw something approaching a gleam come into the cold mysterious eyes. At the same time I believe an almost benign expression passed over that crinkled countenance.

"Oh, tuatara," I said, "what do you know?"

And then she spoke. It was an old, tired voice. A voice of long-rotted leaves. A voice with old, decayed moa bones in it. A faded voice whispering:

"The game's crook. Can't you let a joker alone?"

"Well," I said, "I was expecting something much better from you, the oldest living creature and New-Zealander. Something like: 'Things aren't what they used to be in Two Million B.C.'"

"I was only trying to be modern," said the tuatara, "and that's a mighty effort for a person who comes out of the Triassic Period, three hundred million years ago."