

"AN ACCOUNT BY MASTER PEDRO SERRANO OF EIGHT YEARS SPENT AS A CASTAWAY ON THE SERRANA KEYS IN THE CARIBBEAN SEA, 1528-1536"

Translated from an original document found in the Archivo General de las Indias in Seville, Spain, by Robert F. Marx

TO COMPLY with your Grace's command, I have undertaken to give an account of my being cast away, and if perchance the style is not as good as my will to serve your Grace, lay it to my lack of reading and writing and let my will serve instead.

I left Santo Domingo on Saturday, Palm Sunday eve, in the year 1528, in the ship of Pedro de Sifuentes, the pilot of which was a person named Portogalete. We stopped at the town of Hiquey to take on a cargo of supplies for the fortress of Margarita, because the ship in which I was going carried cannon,

powder, and munitions for said fortress. We stopped at Porto Rico in the island of San Juan, and there we remained for five days, and thence we set out again on our way. And on the following day we landed at another port in the island of Santa Cruz to lay in a supply of water. There two war canoes came out to meet us, each with sixty Indians in it, more or less, with their bows and arrows, and in consideration of the fact that those Indians have a very poisonous herb, we put back out to sea and they pursued us for two leagues, and so we lost them

and continued again on our voyage. The winds were not very scarce and at the end of five days we reached the island of Piritu which lies thirty leagues to the westward of the pearls, and our pilot was unable to recognize the land, and we doubled back towards the west, coasting Tierra Firme, and landed on the island of Guaimacaran, because we were distressed by the lack of water.¹

We did not find it on this island and we went back to Tierra Firme to a port in which there was a town of warlike Indians, and we were in a hiding place

PEDRO SERRANO: THE FIRST ROBINSON CRUSOE

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT F. MARX

LYING IN THE WESTERN Caribbean, about 200 miles off the coast of Nicaragua, is a dangerous coral reef shaped like a horseshoe, with five small cays sprinkled on it. Very little of anything grows on these cays and very few people have ever heard of the place—Serrana Bank. Yet four centuries ago, it was the setting for an almost unparalleled feat of human survival, on which many scholars believe it possible that Daniel Defoe based his famous book, *Robinson Crusoe*.

One day, while researching in the Spanish archives, I came across a fascinating account written by a seaman named Pedro Serrano. In 1528, he had been the master of a small vessel which was wrecked on an uncharted reef in a storm. The vessel quickly broke to pieces, but Serrano and others on the ship managed to reach a small barren, treeless, waterless and deserted cay close by. The rest of the unlucky survivors could not stand the rigors of life on the tiny islet, so except for one young boy and a man who soon died they built a raft and took to the sea, never to be heard from again. At first naked as the day he was born, Serrano managed to survive on the cay for eight years, until he was rescued by a passing vessel.

There was no water on the cay—except for some brackish water he found in wells he dug and what he could get during occasional brief rains—so he drank the blood of turtles, seals, and birds. For two months, he had no fire and ate his meat and fish raw. Then, one day, he dove on the wreck site and found a flint from which he was able to strike a spark.

During the third month, two survivors from another ship wrecked nearby managed to reach his cay. Eventually, one of them, along with the boy, left in a boat and were also never heard from again. With his new companion Serrano erected two stone towers; on top of one they kept continuous fires burning, hoping to signal some passing ship. After they were rescued and at first carried to Havana, the excitement must have been too great for his companion, for he died soon afterwards. Serrano, however, reached Spain, where he became a great celebrity. Wearing the garment he had fashioned out of sealskins, and with his hair and beard almost reaching his knees, he was taken all over Europe to the various royal courts where the tale of his experiences aroused great interest. He managed to live for many more years and finally died in 1564 a very rich man.

Little did I realize, after reading this intriguing account, that I would one day end up on the same cay, having to survive in about the same manner as Serrano had.

In 1963, I organized an expedition for the main purpose of locating several treasure galleons known to have sunk on Serrana Bank in the seventeenth century, but also with the hope of finding Serrano's wreck. This expedition turned out to be like a Broadway comedy: my divers wouldn't dive because they claimed there were too many sharks around; everyone was so sure the others would try to steal any treasure discovered that I had a rugged time trying to prevent bloodshed; and several of us were injured when a large wave threw our diving launch on the reefs and smashed it to pieces. The final blow struck when most of the crew mutinied and demanded we head for home.

After this fiasco, I decided the only way to locate the wrecks I was after was to do it on my own. Rather than go to the expense of taking a vessel from the States down to Serrana Bank, I decided to use the nearest point of civilization—Providencia Island, about 100 miles to the southwest—as a stepping

where we remained all of one night. The next day at dawn there came out to meet us eleven war canoes with their bows and poisoned arrows, and they came on board demanding hatchets. And one of our men, whose name was Bautista Genoves, thinking that they were peaceful, got into one of their canoes, and they, seeing the said Bautista in their canoe, left the ship and set out towards land, and I took an arquebus and filled it with flints and fired on them after they had shot many arrows at us, and I killed the chief of the Indians and two others. And most of them from fright at the shot threw themselves into the water, and some swimming and some in canoes they were soon all on land. And up to the present nothing has been heard of the said Bautista.

We departed thence and went to a deserted port where we took water at the mouth of a river. Thence, seeing that the pilot did not know what he

was doing and had no knowledge of where he was, we agreed to turn back to Santo Domingo, whence we had come, and we landed on the island of Arriba which belongs to the factor of Santo Domingo, and there the pilot left us, for the said Portugalete was no less than that, and he deserted us because of the poor supply of food in the ship and the poor account he had given of himself.²

So we, seeing that we could not have the said pilot, set out on our way to Santo Domingo without the help of anyone to direct us, as we were all novices in the art of the sea. At midnight on a Saturday in the middle of the gulf we were suddenly struck by a tempest that carried away both our masts and all the sails, and the ship opened so that a great quantity of water entered in it. We sailed before the wind wherever it and the sea might carry us, and at the end of six days, on Wednesday night, we struck on the shoal of

La Serrana, the storm not having abated in all that time, and we did not see the island, because it is so little. While the ship was going to pieces thus on the shoal we saw the whitening of the sand, and I remembered to take a powder horn that I had in my box and a steel in my mouth, and so I jumped into the sea and swam to the island.³

I left the powder and the steel on the shore and returned to the ship to see if I could help anyone, and after I arrived the ship broke in four pieces and all the people were on one piece. I tied together all the ends of rigging I could find and with them made a long piece and went ashore with it, and all came on shore by means of it. And with the high tide of the night the sea carried away the ship so that on the next day at dawn we did not see it. From the ship nothing had been taken off except the powder and steel, as I have said, and for lack of a flint, which I could not bring off, we ate raw meat

stone. I would have a boat drop me off at Serrana, set up camp there for a few months, and, with a small skiff, search the bank for the wrecks. I managed to convince a friend from Texas, Jon Kalb, to do it with me. (At this time the bank was claimed by both the United States and Colombia, but in 1972 the United States relinquished all claim and it is now solely owned by Colombia, although Nicaragua and Honduras have both announced it is theirs.)

Southwest Cay, which was where I felt certain Serrano had lived, is about a quarter of a mile long and several hundred feet wide, with the highest point not over twenty feet high. At one end was an unmanned lighthouse and at the other two solitary coconut trees. There was very little vegetation of any kind, and the white sand was so hot it burned our feet, even through the soles of our shoes. From driftwood we erected a hut, much in the same manner as Serrano had done. The only other inhabitants on the island were several thousand booby birds, millions of pesty crabs, and large loggerhead turtles which came ashore at night to lay eggs.

Our first goal was to prove definitely that this was the cay on which Serrano had lived, and within a few hours after setting up camp, we located the base of the two stone towers he had built for signaling passing ships. Before the day was out, we had also found the site of his hut, or possibly that of some other unlucky souls who might have been forced to live there. Under a shallow layer of sand we discovered thousands

of fish, turtle, and bird bones, as well as crude tools made from conch shells, fishhooks made from bones, a rusty piece of iron, and a flint stone—which may have been the very one Serrano mentioned finding on the wreck. The remains of his ship were only about three hundred yards offshore, mostly covered over by coral growth. Using sledgehammers, chisels, and crowbars we managed to recover many artifacts: a big brass bell, dozens of brass door hinges and handles, and a large silver crucifix—all of which was being carried to a newly built church on the island of Cubagua off the coast of Venezuela. We also found eleven cannon and hundreds of stone and iron cannonballs which were being transported to a fort on Margarita Island, besides hundreds of other artifacts which one normally finds on shipwrecks of this period. At the time this was the oldest shipwreck ever discovered in the Western Hemisphere. [More recently Marx has discovered two of Columbus' ships lost on the north coast of Jamaica in 1504.]

Elated with our find, we then began to systematically search for other wrecks on the thirty-odd miles of barrier reef which encompass the bank. By the end of the first week, when the fishing boat which had brought us to the island had returned, we had located six other wreck sites, including the vessel which had been lost during Serrano's stay on the island. The boat brought bad news: Jon Kalb's father was sick and he would have to leave immediately for the States. The captain of the boat offered to leave one

of his men behind with me and promised to come back in a month's time to check on us and bring fresh supplies and water.

My new companion was named Aldo, and he claimed he was a great cook and diver. About an hour after the fishing boat had departed, out from behind a sand dune walked another of the vessel's crew. He was a boy of seventeen, named Bandido, who was AWOL from the Colombian army. Rather than face being arrested when the boat reached port, he jumped ship to stay with us.

As it turned out, Aldo not only could not cook, but he was no diver either. The first time we went out in the skiff, I said I wanted him to dive with me. He claimed he didn't use diving equipment, and on his first and last dive, he jumped overboard head first, right on top of a coral head only inches below the surface, and split his head wide open. However, I soon had Bandido diving like an expert.

After our first day together on the reefs, I decided to use a metal detector to search for buried treasure, about which I had also obtained information in the Spanish archives. Within a minute's walk from our hut, we stumbled across a human skull sticking out of the sand. Both Aldo and Bandido went into hysterics, running back to the hut screaming at the top of their lungs. Actually the cay was covered with human bones, no doubt from many persons who had been shipwrecked on the nearby reefs and died on the island. Aldo and Bandido were convinced the cay was haunted, so they built fires all around the hut and, playing my portable radio full blast, sang lustily

for almost two months and drank the blood of the seals and sea-cows that came to the island.⁴

As some thought that that life was sterile, as your Grace will see, they determined to build a raft, and we all built one out of timbers from the wreck which the sea had brought to the island. After they were lashed together with

sealskins and cords of the same seals, three got on the raft and three of us stayed behind, two men and a boy. Four days after those on the raft had left, one of the three who stayed, whose name was Moreno de Malaga, seeing that there was no water or fire, and that it was the month of August (for up to that time we had been delayed, as I have

said above), began to eat his arms, and from several bites that he gave himself he died raving.

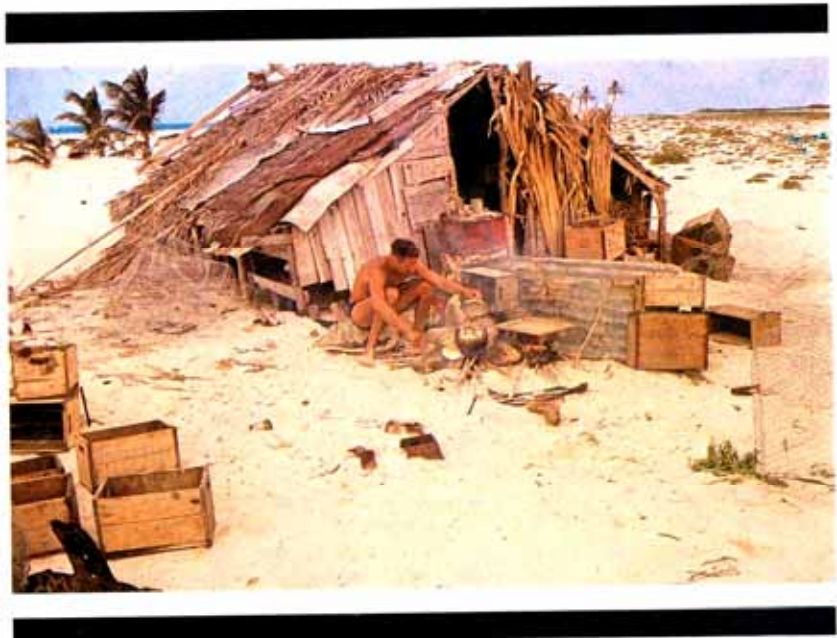
When I saw that my companions had left and that another had died and that only the boy was left for a companion, I made shift to find some remedy by which I might sustain myself. And so I began to dig with tortoise bones in



ROBERT MARX CUT DOWN ONE OF THE TWO COCONUT TREES WHEN HE BECAME SHORT OF WATER. (BELOW) THE AUTHOR, COOKING, IN FRONT OF HIS HUT ON SOUTHWEST CAY, SERRANA BANK.

all night long to scare the ghosts away.

By the end of the third week, when we had covered about half the length of the barrier reef and located eighteen promising wrecks—by which time I had finally convinced them that there were no ghosts around—we heard on the radio that Hurricane Cleo was heading in our direction. At first, I was not alarmed; I was sure that the fishing boat would come for us. But after a few days, when the storm was getting nearer and not changing direction, and the boat was not in sight, I really got worried. I could receive on my radio but couldn't transmit, so I finally decided the only way to get help was to put out the light on the small



various parts of the island to see if there was any water, and because the land was so little in the midst of the gulf I found the water everywhere as salt as that of the sea. I drank this water several times mixed with the blood of seals. And in this time it never rained so that I might be succored by water from Heaven. And I made shift, in case

it should rain, to dig pits in the sand, and I took many sealskins and lined the pits, and when God willed it should rain, which was in the month of October, I caught some water in the pits and in a few snail shells of the sort that there are called cobos.⁵ The water in the pits lasted a very short time, because it sank in the sand. When it rained

I was so eager to drink that I jumped into the water in such fashion that I cut my arms and legs very badly, and the remedy I found for it was to mix the water with blood.

For two months after landing on the island I was without fire, and seeing that winter was coming and that I could not support myself without fire,



VIEW OF SOUTHWEST CAY, SERRANA BANK, TOWARD THE LIGHTHOUSE ON THE WESTERN END OF THE CAY. (BELOW) BANDIDO INSPECTING A CAPSTAN FROM AN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY WRECK EMBEDDED ON THE REEF.

lighthouse and hope that a passing vessel might report its absence to the U.S. Coast Guard, which would investigate.

This worked in reverse. The fishing boat was within sight of the light when Aldo climbed the tower and placed an empty 55-gallon drum over it and the vessel soon got lost. When she finally reached us two days later, huge hurricane swells were breaking on the cay and we had to run for it. The storm changed course at the last minute, however, and things weren't so bad after the swells stopped rolling.

Several days later we headed back to Serrano, but only Bandido came back with me. Living on the cay was really

I set about making a raft no larger than just necessary to sustain me, and I went to the place where the ship had sunk and I made an anchor out of a stone to tie the raft in a fathom and a half of water, and by diving several times I found a pebble with which I made fire. And I was in such a state that only the mercy of God and the fire restored my life to me, and the boy who was with me was in such a state that I, fearing that he might die, and he, from seeing me as I was, were both very fearful of losing one another, because at this time the death of the one who should remain alive was certain. After I had got the fire I made fires every night, so that if by chance some ship should pass it would see us by the fires.

And on another very small island, which is to the leeward of where I was, there were two men from another ship that had been lost, and they, seeing the fires, came on a raft to where I was, and they were with me five years. And in this time we set about making a boat with timbers the sea brought, and by swimming we captured the timbers and made our boat in this manner: I with my companions built a forge and bellows from the sealskins, and in the place where the ship had gone down I made a saw with some iron things that we were bringing to the church of Cubagua,⁶ and of them we [also] made nails. And after our boat was done, with its sails of sealskins cured as best we could, we embarked, the said companions, the boy and I, and sailed away thinking we might be able to reach the island of Jamaica.

And I, when I saw myself on the sea and saw that the boat was of pieces and without tar, being greased only with seal fat blackened with charcoal, I thought at once that it was impossible to save ourselves in it, and I had them bring the boat to land, and one of the men from the other island and I got off, and the other and the boy who was with me went away, and nothing has been heard of them to this day, and the weather was adverse to them.

And so when my companion and I saw ourselves thus, we made some small boats of sealskins and in them we sailed about the shoals, which are twelve leagues long and all very shallow; in the deepest part, I say, there is no more than a fathom of water on these shoals. There are seventeen of them all covered by sea except five. I have sent word of this to the chief pilot of His Majesty at Seville, as it is very necessary for the safety of vessels. And I have shown Francisco Gutierrez, who makes the navigation charts, how one can pass through them, in case one is by chance found among them, for there are three channels by which to pass through in which there are five fathoms. From our sealskin boats we made soundings everywhere from island to island to see if we might not find some pieces of sunken ships, and we never found anything.

We ate the turtle eggs that we found on those islands, and the seals, which were the same fare as on our island. Our sleeping was done in the same skins, and at times we would be a month and more without returning to our is-

land. At this time my companion and I decided to build two towers, one on the south side and one on the north, out of stone with no mortar, and these were sixteen fathoms around and four high, with their stairways, and we climbed up there to watch the sea. On one of them we put wood and other things to make smoke so that we might be seen by some vessel if by chance one passed. We built a pond with 22 fathoms of wall to take fish, and [all] this stone we took out of the sea, for on the island there was only sand. We also took out stone by which we made salt. We made a house covered with skins where we took shelter, and our clothing and bedding were of sealskins. During five months of the year we dug turtle eggs from the sand close to the sea. These we dried and prepared to eat, and we found them good for the winter. Sometimes we ate the sea crows⁷ that came there, and when we did not, there was nothing else except some roots of a plant that seemed somewhat like greens.

Three years after the others had left, and eight years since we had come there, God permitted that we should be rescued, and one day, on St. Matthew's eve at noon, we saw a ship under sail, and we made a very great smoke on one of our towers. And when those on board the ship saw us they lowered a boat and the master and the sailors landed, and the master, whose name is Juan Bautista Jinoves, a citizen of Triana, took testimony by a notary of everything he saw. Thence we came to Havana where it was the will of God

fabulous. We would dive all day, searching for shipwrecks and shooting a few fish for dinner. And when the sun wasn't so hot, we would search for artifacts and treasure on the cay. We unearthed the remains of more than 200 human skeletons and many interesting artifacts, but only one silver coin dated 1617.

One of the methods we used to search the reefs for shipwrecks was to tow one another by a line behind the skiff. This is more or less like trolling for big fish, only in this case we were the bait. One day while towing Bandido I suddenly saw a massive shark fin cutting through the water straight for him. Realizing there wasn't enough time to stop the boat and pull Bandido aboard, I gunned the engine at full speed, made a quick U-turn, and headed right for the shark, running across its back and cutting it with the propeller which broke off. Bandido, seeing what had happened, swam like lightning for a coral outcropping sticking

above the water and climbed up. Meanwhile, the shark, which was about sixteen feet long, charged the boat and tried to tip it over while I pounded the beast on its head with an oar. The large amount of blood pouring out of the shark's back attracted other sharks and soon there were as many as twenty in a feeding frenzy circling the boat and Bandido's coral refuge. At first they just circled and watched the one I had wounded attack the skiff. Then, as though on a signal, they all charged the wounded shark, three times larger than some of its smaller attackers, and in minutes there was nothing left of it.

When I was finally able to row over to pick up Bandido, he was in a near state of shock and screaming like a lunatic. He swore he would never dive again and two days later he boarded a passing fishing boat and left. Deciding to remain alone on the cay and continue my search for more wrecks, I made arrangements

with the fishing boat captain to come back in a month's time to pick me up. The first few weeks were some of the happiest and most peaceful days of my life. The weather was good and I continued locating other shipwrecks and digging up more objects on the cay. I wasn't lonely at all. The days were full of adventurous work and in the evenings I amused myself by listening to the radio and considering myself lucky to be so far away from the rat race and world turmoil.

One day when I was about ten miles up the reef to the east of the cay, I spotted a vessel anchored near the island and decided to rush back and see who the visitors were. A squall struck soon after and it was several hours before I reached my cay. The mysterious vessel had already departed. Whoever they were I never learned and it was just as well for their sake. They had taken every single possession in the hut, along with several

that my lord, Don Pedro de Alvarado, the adelantado [governor], was, and he noticed our manner of dress and was informed by the master of our life, and he forthwith received us as his and provided us with necessities, and he supports the other in the Indies and me in Spain, as Your Majesty sees.

This is not so extensive as I could wish, because it was impossible to retain a just remembrance of everything without writing it down as it happened. Receive, Your Majesty, the will I have served you and the remembrance I will keep of it wherever I be. I kiss Your Majesty's hands.

One thing I forgot, and that is, that what caused us the most pain and torment was the crabs and sea snails, because at night we could not prevail against them, and we protected ourselves with skins, and most of the time we [had to make] day of night and night of day.

Once being fatigued by thirst, for we had not drunk for three days and on this account we did not speak to one another except each one praying to himself, I was seated in the shade of our hut making a fishhook and complaining to our Lord, saying that I had been naked and barefoot for eight years in that desert where there was no means of support, and that would He please to take me from this world, or to a Christian country. And in my suffering I said: "Since God will not deliver me, let the devil deliver me and there I shall die." That night I got up to urinate and I saw him against the hut in a worse form than he is painted, with a very

hooked nose, and he was breathing something like smoke from his nostrils and casting fire from his eyes, and his feet were like those of a griffin, and his tails like a bat's, and his eyes like a man's, and his hair very black, with two horns not very long. I called to my companion who was lying down in the hut and we took a cross that I had made of cedar and with it we walked over the whole island and never saw anything, only later, two weeks afterwards, I got badly frightened at night, and I saw nothing, but only heard footsteps. Twice I was frightened at night seeing nothing.

Your Majesty must know that the white of the turtle eggs, one or two weeks after they are laid and then put under ground, turns to water, and with that water I lived five months in the year. We kept rainwater also in seal-skins put in pits, and also in small snail shells, and also in thick beams hollowed out. And we had salt by taking stones out of the sea and filling their hollows with water and when it dried it turned to salt. And when it stormed we could not catch fish, so we took sea crows, of which there are many, and we made them give up the fish they were carrying to their young, and we ate them too.

In order to supply ourselves for the winter, for two months, April and May, we dug turtle eggs and washed them and set them out to dry, and with these we supported ourselves [for] seven months of winter. We also had a tank of stone without mortar which we watched at night in order to take the

fish that were in it. The seals came in January to bear their young and we ate the young, and we took the milk they had in their teats and put it in small shells, and we cooked it also in the snail shells and ate it. The taste of it was very bitter. And we put their skins under water and after three days they were free of hair and out of them, when they were dry, we made breechcloths, jerkins, and capes with hoods. We dug three wells and we always found the water salt, and when it rained we did not dare drink it without mixing it with the water of the wells, because it caught me in all my joints; because it was raw and I was used to salt it harmed me. During this time I was twice sick, and both times I fell sick it was in August.

The End

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. During this period the port of San Juan was called Porto Rico and the island of what is now Puerto Rico was called San Juan. Santa Cruz Island is St. Croix, one of the Virgin Islands. I have no idea where Piritu and Guaimacaran islands were. When Serrano refers to the "pearls" he might mean the islands around Margarita off Venezuela where pearls were being obtained in those days. Tierra Firme was the Spanish Main or north coast of South America and the Isthmus of Panama.
2. Arriba is Aruba Island. "Factor" here means under the jurisdiction of Santo Domingo.
3. Serrano uses "gulf" several times when he means the Caribbean Sea. Although he refers to the shoal on which he was wrecked as La Serrana, it had no name until after he was rescued and it was named in his honor. The "steel" he refers to was used for striking and making fire.
4. At one time there were many seals throughout the Caribbean but they are extinct today. "Sea-cows" are probably manatees.
5. Probably conch shells.
6. An island off Venezuela.
7. Sea crows are booby birds.

drums of fresh water, and then burnt it to the ground.

It was then I found myself, more or less, in the same state as Pedro Serrano had been 400 years before. My total possessions were a swimsuit, fins, mask, knife, and a shovel I had left at the spot where I had been digging the evening before. The skiff was also all but useless, since my visitors had carted off the gasoline. I first set about collecting all the driftwood and brush I could find and built a small lean-to against one of the two coconut trees. By then, I was so thirsty I felt dizzy. Believing that there was no fresh water on the island, I decided to try to get some of the coconuts down from the trees, but both were over 100 feet high, and I couldn't climb them for more than twenty feet before having to give up. I then decided to dig up some turtle eggs to quench my thirst. They killed my hunger, but only made my thirst worse. I had no other alternative but to

chop down one of the coconut trees. With only a diving knife and a shovel, I worked for more than twelve straight hours before the tree fell, netting me 23 coconuts.

The next ten days before I was picked up by the fishing boat ran smoothly. I dug up turtle eggs, dove for conch shells—both of which could be eaten raw—and quenched my thirst with the coconut milk. On the fourth day when I ran out of coconuts, I considered chopping down the remaining tree, on which I counted more than thirty, but decided against this move, as it was the only high feature on the cay (the lighthouse was only twenty feet high) that a boat could use in the daytime to sight the island. This was the day I made my most important discovery of the whole expedition: water. While digging in the sand fairly close to the sea for turtle eggs, I hit water two feet down. Thinking it was salt water, I decided to drink some anyway, since my thirst was so great and I knew from

my experience on the *Niña II* voyage that seawater was not harmful if taken in small doses. To my great surprise, although not completely fresh, it was fresh enough to taste like champagne to me.

When the fishing boat arrived, I felt a bit depressed that I had been rescued so soon. Actually, after locating the freshwater source, I figure I could have lived there for months and enjoyed it. The same morning the boat arrived, I had found a striking flint on the cay—and was preparing to make a fire to roast several lobsters I had caught by diving. Over all, the expedition was a success. I had located the shipwrecks I had set out after, and would come back at a later date to excavate them. I had retraced Pedro Serrano's footsteps more thoroughly than I had expected to do, had a marvelous suntan, and had lost about twenty pounds of the blubber that adventurers like myself get from long periods of inactivity.