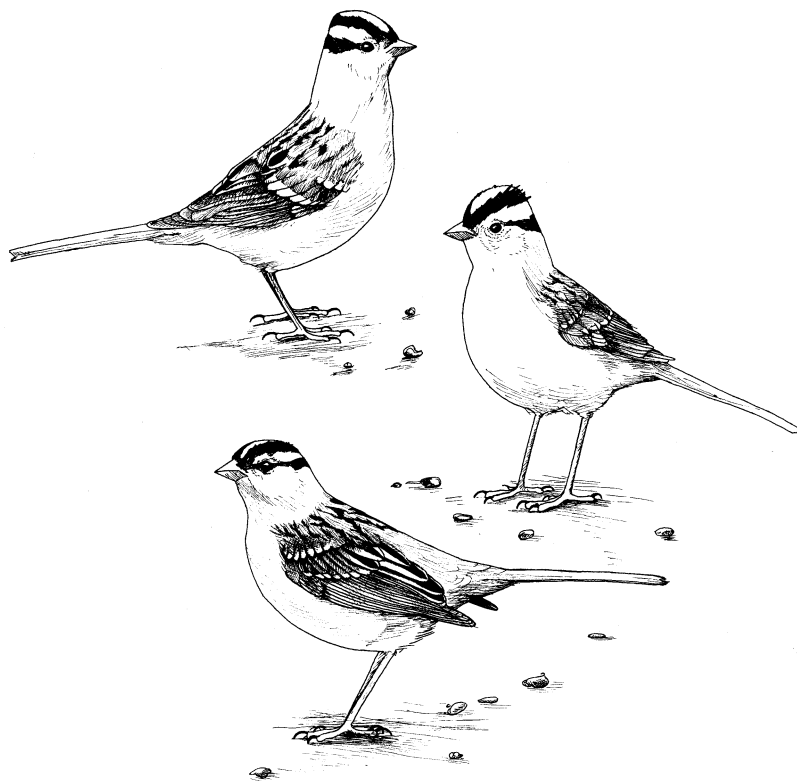


The Scarlet Tortoise Expedition

by Jane Gibson



Prologue 1: dome-estic

Captain Hunt walked the last mile. He could have hired a horse, but it had been tiresome, riding so far in a coach, and he needed to stretch his legs. Breathe some fresh air. Take in some peace and quiet. It turned out to be a good decision. The little wagon road led him gently into the hills, giving pleasing prospects of grassy fields, woods just touched with the colors of autumn, patches of blooming goldenrod and aster, a small herd of brown cows grazing in the distance. He had been feeling jangled, weary of the constant noise and dust of travel, irritated by the incredulity and sometimes scorn he so frequently encountered when he answered the inevitable questions about where he was going and why—as if it were so unbelievable that a person would care about righting a wrong!—but as he walked steadily along in the warm late-afternoon sunshine, free of these annoyances, his spirits began to rise. He had weathered plenty of disappointments and dead ends over the past three years, but even though he sometimes felt as if he were on a great big wild goose chase all over Oregon Country, following every possible lead in his search for information about

Scarlet Tortoises and where they might be found, he wasn't licked yet, not by a long shot, and he would not allow other people's doubts or disdain to undermine his determination.

The place he was looking for was not hard to find. Just as the man in the settlement had described it to him, a big old oak marked the right-hand turn into the lane, and at the end of it stood a little cottage, with a broad low wooden porch in front, a yard bright with flowers, and an unpainted weathered-gray picket fence all around. Someone had lined up some rocks to the left of the porch, planted a vine behind them, and trained it up the cottage wall. Captain Hunt went through the gate, closing it behind him, and on up the front walk. Some little birds that had come to a handful of crumbs flung out onto the ground chirped and flew up into a lilac. He stepped up onto the porch, went to the front door and knocked. As he stood there, he saw a little calico face peek out at him from under one of the chairs that stood companionably around. A moment later it shyly withdrew. Then footsteps approached from inside, the door opened, and a small man with bright eyes and thick unruly gray hair looked out and said, "Well, howdy, stranger. Who are you, and where did you spring from?"

"Good afternoon. My name is Captain Hunt, and I am looking for Mr. Asa Belvedere."

"You have found him," the man said. He spread his hands out to each side in a slightly theatrical gesture, a humorous look on his face. "He stands before you. Asa Belvedere in the flesh."

"How do you do. I believe we have an acquaintance in common. Hervin Starbird. He told me about you. I have a letter here—" Captain Hunt drew it out of his left coat pocket.

"Oh, yes, yes, good old Hervy," said Mr. Belvedere, cordially reaching for Captain Hunt's right hand instead of taking the letter. "Any friend of Hervy's is a friend of mine. And how is he keeping these days? I haven't seen him for quite a spell."

Captain Hunt allowed his hand to be taken in a warm but light clasp. "Mr. Starbird is in good health. He desired me to send you his greetings. He hopes to get out here to see you some time before winter. But do not take my word for it. Here." He held out the letter.

Mr. Belvedere took the folded square of paper and turned it over and over, looking at the inscription on one side and the amber beeswax seal on the other with evident pleasure. "A letter. Well, well. This is something. I do not often get a letter. It is as good as a present." He broke the seal, unfolded the letter and read in silence for a few moments. "Yes, I see. Yes, yes. He vouches for you, of course. Yes, I shall certainly help you any way I can. Well, I shall save the rest for later. It is a nice long letter." He carefully folded it back up into its original configuration and tucked it away in a pocket. "And he is coming to visit, you say. That is good news. It'll be good to see

him. Yes, indeed, that is something to look forward to. Well, now. So you are Captain Hunt. Are you in this new-fangled navy we keep hearing so much about?"

"No."

"Just as well, in my opinion. You know, my brother Sol was a sailor, but I don't know if you'd know him, a young man like you. He was probably before your time. He was before the navy's time, too, for that matter. I do not see your rig anywhere. Do you have a horse that needs tending?"

"No. I walked."

"Oh, I see. It is a very pleasant walk on a day like this, is it not? I often walk in, myself, when I need something or other. And then Jeb Turner brings me and my groceries home in his wagon. But you are quite a fair piece from water, are you not? What brings you out into this neck of the woods? Would you care to come in and sit a spell?"

"No, thank you. Actually I am interested in tortoises," said Captain Hunt. "I understand that you have one."

"Yes, indeed, I have one, all right. Yes, indeed. And he's a big one."

"Is it a Scarlet Tortoise?"

Mr. Belvedere rubbed his chin. "Well, no, he isn't. I wouldn't have said he's scarlet at all. No, that's one word I've never thought of in connection with him. No scarlet on him anywhere. No color but just plain brown. Grayish brown, I would call it."

"It could still be one. They are not actually scarlet themselves."

"Well, in that case, I can't rightly say. He's a tortoise and that's about all I know. Would you like to see him?"

"Yes, very much. If I may."

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Belvedere. "And please make yourself at home. Would you like to put your bag inside?"

"No, this will be fine," said Captain Hunt. He slid one thumb up under the strap of his leather carryall, lifted it over his head and set the bag on a chair.

"Come this way," said Mr. Belvedere. "He is right round the back here, in the back yard." He stepped off the side of the porch onto a little brick path and led the way around the cottage, and Captain Hunt followed. Despite telling himself not to get his hopes up too high, he could not help feeling excited at the prospect of potential discovery now that he had found his quarry. He was just a few moments away from seeing what could be a Scarlet Tortoise! Although the chances were that it was not. At the end of the side yard, which was as full of flowers as the front, he followed Mr. Belvedere through another gate into a large back yard of close-cropped grass with a few green shrubs here and there.

"Be sure to shut that behind you," said Mr. Belvedere. "Make sure it's latched. Yes, that's good. Thank you. Now let's just take a look around. Likely he'll have found

himself a patch of sun. He likes to come out at this time of day. Yes, there he is, right over there.”

Mr. Belvedere headed toward the far side of the yard, and Captain Hunt went with him. As they rounded a leggy hazelnut bush he spied a large domed shell resting on the grass.

“Hey, old fellow,” said Mr. Belvedere as they walked over to it. “Hey, Bumber! Hey, Bumber! He knows his name, you see. Yes, I have a visitor for you! Come all this way just to see you!”

The shell roused itself. A leathery head peered up at them. Captain Hunt looked the animal over keenly. “May I touch it?” he said.

“Yes, go ahead. Just be gentle. Don’t knock on him. People act like they’re solid, but they are alive in there and they can feel just like we can. How now, Bumber? Yes, he likes to get rubbed, just like this.” Mr. Belvedere leaned down, picked up a little stick and ran it gently back and forth on the tortoise’s neck. “I always use a stick. I’m respectful of that mouth. Very respectful. I like my fingers. I don’t believe Sol used a stick. But he was a more venturesome fellow than I am. Yes, indeed. Quite the adventurer.”

Captain Hunt was not interested in administering rubs. He was interested in the shell. Scarlet Tortoises had a particular pattern of little ridges, repeated on each scute of their carapace. He leaned over and ran his hand over it. Unfortunately the top was quite worn, smooth and almost featureless. “Where did it come from?”

“Oh, Bumber here is a world traveller. Yes, indeed. Sol brought him back from his last voyage. I gather they had him on board for meat, but according to Sol they had a good fast run at the end, and they didn’t eat him before making port. And Sol took a fancy to him, and he brought him on home. He had him for years. And then when Sol died, God rest his soul, I brought Bumber here. His daughter did not have a place for him, you see. And she is just so busy with all those children. So he lives here with me.”

“Do you know where he was procured?”

“Well, as to that, I can’t rightly say. Sol might have told me the name of the place, I suppose, but I don’t recall.”

It was too bad the shell was so worn. It was hard to discern any pattern at all. But it looked like there was more texture on the lower part of the carapace. Captain Hunt knelt down on the tortoise’s starboard side to examine it more closely. He stared intently, feeling for the little ridges with his fingers, peering from different angles as he tried to get the light right. He leaned even closer. He could just make out... He felt a rising excitement as he looked at it. He could almost swear...yes. Oh, yes. Yes! This was it! At last! He had found a living Scarlet Tortoise at last! He was actually touching it!

His skin prickled all over, as if in the presence of some awesome mystery.

He sat up. "You definitely have a Scarlet Tortoise here," he said calmly, wary of betraying his inner elation at this most marvelous moment of his long search.

"Is that a fact!" said Mr. Belvedere. Naturally he did not exhibit any elation himself, but he did sound interested, even pleased. "How can you tell?"

"You have to look closely at these little ridges. See this pattern right here? This is the sign of the Scarlet Tortoise."

Mr. Belvedere, showing a somewhat unexpected agility, knelt down next to Captain Hunt and peered at the shell in turn. "Oh, yes, I see. Yes, I have often admired that pattern, without knowing what it meant. It stands out better when the sun is low. Well, well. A Scarlet Tortoise. Do you hear that, Bumber? You are a Scarlet Tortoise. We have found your lost tribe."

"No, actually you have not," said Captain Hunt. "I am sorry to inform you that this is the first living Scarlet Tortoise I have been able to find. The rest of them are dead."

"Dead! Oh, dear me! That is too bad! So Bumber is the last of his kind! Well, well! What a day of surprises this is turning out to be!"

The tortoise made a little moaning sound.

"Yes, I hear you, Bumber," said Mr. Belvedere. "He's just wondering where his treats are. He likes to have a snack at this time of day. I've got his dinner all ready. I'll just go get it." Mr. Belvedere set down his stick, got to his feet and walked over to the back porch.

Captain Hunt stood up, took a step back and gratefully contemplated this creature he had been trying so hard to find. So here it was. Here was a living Scarlet Tortoise at last. He felt a deep pleasure at this wonderful discovery, like an ocean swell under the keel, buoying him up.

A few moments later Mr. Belvedere returned with a large sheaf of flowers and greenery.

"Here you go, old fellow," he said, separating a handful of leaves, leaning over and setting them down on the grass in front of the tortoise. "There, you see. He smells them. He's got a very keen nose. Yes, people think they are dull and stupid, because they move so slowly. But he is not stupid, not at all. He need not be like a human being to think. No, indeed. You see he does not need special food. Unlike me. I only eat the apples, but he eats the leaves." His bright eyes looked inquisitively at Captain Hunt. "So tell me. What happened to all the rest of them?"

"Sailors ate them." Captain Hunt paused. Then calmly and deliberately he added, "Including me." This was a bitter thing to have to say, but it was the truth.

Mr. Belvedere displayed no inclination to cast blame, however. "Dear me," he said mildly. "That is too bad. All of them?"

"Yes. They are, or were, island dwellers, and they reproduce slowly. They are no

longer to be found anywhere in their known habitat.”

“I see, I see.” Mr. Belvedere gazed perceptively at Captain Hunt. “And you want to bring them back.”

“Yes. I do.”

Mr. Belvedere leaned over and laid a spray of goldenrod in front of the tortoise, and it slowly got its mouth around some of the flowers and began chomping methodically. “You must be remarkably fond of them,” he said.

“No, I am not,” said Captain Hunt. “Actually I do not like them much at all.”

Mr. Belvedere lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “You don’t?”

“No. They are so trapped in their shells. So clumsy. So slow. So awkwardly built. I hate to watch them struggling around trying to do things. They seem to be the very personification of frustration. And their eyes are messy. And so are their mouths.” Captain Hunt gazed down at the specimen in front of him with distaste. “No, I do not like them much at all.”

“Dear me,” said Mr. Belvedere again. “Well, then, in that case, why do you want to bring them back?”

Normally Captain Hunt responded to this question by stating that it was the right thing to do, but Mr. Belvedere radiated a warm genuine open curiosity that somehow inspired him to risk a corresponding openness. He thought for a moment and then said, “Years ago, when I first visited Fin Olley Island and saw the Scarlet Tortoises, it was spring. The place was like a garden. The grass was short, approximately this high—” (he held up thumb and forefinger an inch and a half apart) “—and extremely dense and springy, and it was embedded with tiny flowers of all colors. It was like a carpet underfoot. And the redcups were in bloom. That is a tree that either flowers from its roots right at ground level or drops sticky red pollen from its canopy. The ground under many of these trees was red with small cup-shaped flowers growing up from below, flush with the surface like inlaid jewels.”

“My, how beautiful that must have been,” said Mr. Belvedere.

“Yes. It was. They were clustered so thick along the roots that you could have mapped them. And the trees that did not have flowers had feathery red structures growing from the branches that were continuously releasing sticky little flakes of pollen, which turned the ground under them red. If you went underneath it got all over you. And the tortoises were all red from this pollen, top and bottom.”

“Ah,” said Mr. Belvedere. “Thus their name. I see.”

“Just so. And there were butterflies everywhere, of all colors. And birds. And lively little lizards that lived in the trees. It was like paradise.”

“My goodness, it sounds like paradise indeed.”

Captain Hunt clasped his hands behind his back and bounced restlessly a few times on the balls of his feet, thinking about it all. “Yes, I was quite young at the time, just a

very junior officer, not much more than a glorified cabin boy, really, but it made a lasting impression on me. It seemed as if the earth were a place of marvels, just waiting to be discovered. We took some tortoises from this island, and I thought nothing of it. Two years later I was again on a ship that stopped there. This time it was fall. The grass was still full of tiny flowers, although of different kinds than before. The redcups had red leaves, and where there had been flowers along their roots before, there were now fruits. Very hard tough brown things, right at ground level, that split open in three parts and had red flesh and black seeds inside. I believe that the tortoises ate the flesh and spread the seeds somehow, but I did not observe this because the tortoises were nowhere to be seen. The crew searched around and finally found one, and it did have a reddened mouth and red stains on its feet and underside. But most regrettably we did not spare it. We took it and ate it.”

“Dear me,” said Mr. Belvedere.

Captain Hunt looked away, unwilling to reveal his own painful thoughts on this matter. “After that, I did not return for seven years,” he continued. “When I finally did, the character of the place had changed almost beyond recognition. The tortoises were completely gone. The grass had grown tall and rank, and there were no flowers to be seen. No butterflies. Very few birds. The redcups were still there, and they had the red leaves of fall, but they had no fruit. They could not produce any, with the grass clogging the ground above their roots and no tortoises to spread the pollen.” Captain Hunt kept his voice level with an effort. “We sailors had destroyed the place.”

“I see. Yes, that is too bad,” said Mr. Belvedere sadly. “Yes, indeed. It is quite tragic. We humans are very heedless sometimes, are we not?” He sighed.

The tortoise had finished its goldenrod and its apple leaves and was slowly nosing around for more. Mr. Belvedere dispensed another larger handful of leaves of various kinds. “Here you go, Bumber. There are no redcups here, but I found you some dock. And a little knotweed, and some cress, and dandelion greens, and some nice cottonwood leaves. Yes, he is quite like a little cow. And he seems to like variety. I enjoy picking things for him on my walks. And he keeps the grass mowed and all the bushes pruned up, as you can see. And in the winter I give him hay. My neighbor Jim over there puts up a very good hay. And he is always willing to bring me half a load or so. Yes, Bumber is quite snug down there in the cellar when the weather is rough. I do my best for him, anyway. It is a far cry from paradise, but he seems to like it well enough. Yes, they say paradise is a garden. But perhaps hell is a garden, too. Perhaps it all depends on who’s doing the gardening. Bumber is the gardener here in back, you see. He does the back and I do the front. Well, well. This is very interesting news you bring. So you want to put this island back the way it was.”

“I do not know if it could ever be quite the same, but yes. As much as it is possible to do so.”

“I wonder,” said Mr. Belvedere. “Could you use another kind of tortoise?”

“We tried that. It has not worked very well at all. They all die off almost as quickly as they are stocked. I have halted those efforts; it is nothing but a death sentence for the animals. Apparently there is something about Scarlet Tortoises that we do not yet understand that is essential.”

“Oh, dear, that is too bad,” said Mr. Belvedere, shaking his head slowly and sadly. “The poor things. Dear me. Well, you couldn’t know, I am sure.”

Captain Hunt remained silent. He could not help but feel guilty at the fate to which he had condemned those tortoises. But this also was not something he could talk about.

Fortunately Mr. Belvedere, unlike most people, did not seem to require him to express some preconceived emotional response. Instead Mr. Belvedere stared thoughtfully down at the creature in front of them, which was nosing around among its choices. It got hold of a long skinny leafy thing by the middle and began eating it that way, working the two ends in through the corners of its mouth.

“I do not mean to be a killjoy, but I can’t help but wonder,” said Mr. Belvedere. “If you do return Scarlet Tortoises to that island, won’t they all just get eaten again? Because I should not care to think of that happening to Bumber. Not at all. No, indeed. No, I could not risk that. I would not care to let Bumber go, not with that kind of danger.” His voice trembled with emotion.

Captain Hunt had not meant to upset this kindly old man, and he hastened to reassure him. “No, no, please do not be alarmed. I am well aware of the danger, and believe me, Mr. Belvedere, I would never ask you to let me take Bumber there. Never. I give you my word on that. As you say, the risk is too great. And of course he is in your care, so naturally you would be the one to make any decisions regarding him. No, my hope is to breed Scarlet Tortoises. If such an endeavor were to prove successful, then some of the offspring could be used to restock Fin Olley Island, and eventually the other islands from which they have been exterminated as well. And of course any re-introductions would have to be guarded in some way.”

“Oh, I see,” said Mr. Belvedere with an air of relief. “Yes, that is very sensible of you. So you wish to have Bumber propagate his kind. Well, I daresay I might not object to that. And he could stay here with me in that case, could he not? I daresay I might be able to accommodate a lady tortoise without too much trouble. But of course that is exactly the difficulty, isn’t it? We are down to only one tortoise.”

“No. Quite the opposite. For me there is now one tortoise where there were none before.”

“Ah, yes, I see. That is true. I had not thought of it like that. One is much better than none, is it not?”

“Immeasurably better. And where there was one there may be more. Are you sure

you cannot recall the name of the place it came from?”

Mr. Belvedere shook his head. “No. No, I can’t say that I do.”

Captain Hunt pursued the subject eagerly, keen to unearth any clues. “Did your brother talk about the voyage?”

“Yes, he did. Although truth to tell he told so many stories, and all out of order, that I was not always clear about when they all happened.”

“Do you know where they went on that last voyage? What was their cargo?”

“Hold on now, young man,” said Mr. Belvedere, protesting this urgency with an upraised hand. “Hold your horses. I see well enough what you are after, and I will tell you all I know. But no rush, if you please. I get a little flustered when things are rushed. I am not good with that kind of thing. No, indeed. Some people speed up without a hitch, but I do not. Somehow I lock wheels when I go downhill. But you are not in too much of a hurry, are you? You can stay to supper, I hope.”

“Thank you. I will take you up on that, as long as it does not put you out.”

“Not at all, not at all. It’ll be a pleasure to have your company. And you must let me put you up for the night.”

“Thank you. I do not need anything fancy. I have slept rough many times. Mr. Belvedere, I promise not to rush you. But surely I do not have to wait until supper to hear more. Unless I am keeping you from something?”

“No, no, I am not up to anything else right now. I usually wander out and feed Bumber at this time of day. I like to watch him eat. Here, I will just lay out the rest for him. Here you go, Bumber. Here are some very nice flowers for your desert. Yes, a few late daisies, and some asters and so on. I know you do not like sunflowers, but here are a few pot marigolds for you to try, and I came across a little patch of vetch still in bloom, and these crimson clovers. Very appropriate, although they will not stain him red. You see I do not pick him flowers from my garden. I enjoy them too much for that. And he likes these wild ones very well. I wonder if they are not better for him anyway. There. It will take him some time to work through all that. So yes. About Sol. I am sorry, I know you are wanting to hear more, and I do not mean to keep you in suspense. Perhaps I am getting set in my ways, but I find that the older I get, the more easily I fall into flusterment.”

“No, don’t apologize. I have plenty of time, as a matter of fact. I have been at this long enough that I should have learned patience by now.”

“Well, well, I know you are sharp-set. It is natural enough. Well, then. Let me just get my thoughts in order. So let me see. Sol was with a ship named *Sea Foam*, as I recall. And they had been to the East. To Asia and the South Pacific. I do not know for sure what all their ports of call might have been. But their cargo. Yes, they had a load of silk and spices and china. And tea and paper and ivory. Sol brought back some nice porcelain from that trip. And some carved ivory pieces. I’ll show you the ones he gave

me. Yes, they had been to China, and they came home across the North Pacific. And they picked up Bumber somewhere on the way across.”

“What! In the North Pacific?”

“Yes. That surprises you?”

“I would never have thought—never guessed—there is no land out there!”

“Well, then,” said Mr. Belvedere with unshaken confidence, “that explains why I do not remember Sol telling me the name of the place. I daresay it had none. But I do believe from what he said that it was an island somewhere in the middle of the North Pacific.”

This was the best, most specific lead Captain Hunt had yet uncovered, despite its being so unlikely. But it seemed even more unlikely that this gentle confiding kind-hearted man would be making it up. “Are you sure of this?” he said.

“Well, I am as sure as a man may be who has heard it all told firsthand, at any rate. Sol was always truthful, ever since he was a boy. He did not let himself stretch things the way some people do. In fact he was something of a stickler for honesty. I learned a lot from him in that regard, yes, indeed. Yes, he came back from his trips with a few fantastic tales, but sometimes it is the outrageous that has the ring of truth, don’t you think? So yes, Sol said they ran into some real bad weather on the way across. Quite the storm, to hear him tell it. And not at all what they might have expected for the time of year, I gather. They were blown way off course, and they chanced upon this island, and very glad they were to have found it, too, Sol said. Very glad to have come upon a weather shore, as he put it. Although he never said a word about there being redcups or anything else like the things you have described to me. At any rate, he said they stayed there until the weather cleared. And then they filled their water casks and loaded up a few tortoises and were off. And after that the wind was in their favor all the way home, and that’s how Bumber came to be spared.”

“Who was the captain, do you know?”

“Captain Ward, his name was,” said Mr. Belvedere. “Quite the character, according to Sol. He said they used to call him Captain Windyboots. Do you know him?”

“I’ve heard of him. This is excellent. I believe he is still alive.”

Mr. Belvedere smiled, his eyes twinkling. “Captain Hunt, somehow I get the feeling that there is a voyage to the North Pacific in your future.”

“You may be right about that,” said Captain Hunt. “You may very well be right.”

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