



Stranded Goods from Paradise

The mysterious Sea Coconut

In 1768, two French ships, *La Digue* and *La Curieuse* coming from Mauritius, reached a group of islands just south of the equator that had long been of interest to the French. Portuguese and English sailors had previously landed on these uninhabited islands, but the first to claim them were the French in an expedition during the 18th century. They named the archipelago **Seychelles** after the French Minister of Finance under LOUIS XI, the Viscount MOREAU DE SÉCHELLES. The largest of the islands was named **Mahé**, after MAHÉ DE LABOURDONNAIS, the Governor of the “Isle de France”, which is known today as Mauritius.

The commander of the new expedition, CHEVALIER MARION DUFRESNE, had orders to examine the second largest island, Praslin, for timber supplies and also to collect and bring back a number of the giant tortoises that were sought-after to supplement the menu in other French colonies. Naturally, the French flag was also to be flown on this island.

Also on board was the surveyor BARRÉ, who made the discovery of his life here. He had hardly set foot on the white sand when he stumbled over a strange fruit, a sort of coconut of enormous proportions. It was as large as a pumpkin and of a grey-brown colour with two provocative curves, suggestive of a plump female behind. From within the furrow grew some bristly hair. BARRÉ almost stopped breathing. Could this be the legendary sea coconut that had haunted the thoughts of so many sailors for centuries. If so, he had found a treasure. The British, it was said, paid up to £400 for such a nut!

He hastily looked around before carefully hiding his find in the undergrowth, and then continued towards the island’s interior. What he found there was a primeval thicket of sumptuous tropical forest, towered over by enormous fan palms, a type of tree the likes of which he had never seen before, with a huge straight trunk and leaves so large that a single one was sufficient to cover a hut. Scattered over the ground were many of the coveted nuts. When he looked up, under the tree crowns, he saw entire clusters of such fruits surrounded by smooth, dark-green husks. Could this be the home of the **sea coconut**? For centuries, these nuts had washed up on the coasts of India, Ceylon, Indonesia, South Africa, and particularly on the shores of the

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