‘You might have given me some warning,’ Jacque said. ‘Three couples coming for dinner and these Sydneysiders are used to some pretty heavy gourmet dining.’

I delicately suggested to my loving wife that we search the deep freeze. Which we did. And just when I was about to conclude that there weren’t any real treasures, Jacque straightened up with a smile, thrust forward a frozen parcel and said, ‘What about this? I’m sure they’ve never tried worms before.’

I put my arms around her and smiled. ‘Worms it is, sweetheart.’

The solid, green-coloured mass was placed in a large bowl on the kitchen bench to thaw. It doesn’t take long, and by the evening it had dissolved into something that resembled a tangled, viscous bowl of noodle soup.

The guests were seated at the table, elegantly set with Jacque’s best silver cutlery, crystal, and lace placemats. Before each guest, the maid placed a small plate on which was a serving of

the green worm-like entrée and two triangular slices of toast.

Our guests studied the dish politely, then looked up at Jacque inquiringly.

‘Balolo,’ she said sweetly.

They smiled uneasily and turned to me. ‘It’s a marine worm,’ I added, somewhat mischievously, noticing the lady on my right turn a paler shade of white.

‘Oh, how interesting,’ someone murmured.

I scooped up a forkful and as the Balolo slipped down my throat leaving a delicate taste of the exotica of the sea on my palate, I nibbled a slice of toast.

They watched, then cautiously followed suit.

‘How unusual,’ one said.

‘You can taste the iodine,’ commented another.

‘Its rich with iron and riboflavin,’ I said helpfully.

I took another mouthful then added, ‘Actually, it is a sac of eggs and sperm of the sea annelid which lives in the crevices of the coral.’

They all looked at me a little startled. One of the men took a deep draw on his glass of Moselle as if to disinfect his throat.
I smiled pleasantly, ‘it’s not as bad as it sounds. It’s a Fiji delicacy, known as the caviar of the South Pacific.’

‘Tell us more about this—what did you call it?’ I was asked.

‘Balolo,’ I said. ‘It’s one of the most curious phenomenons of the South Pacific. It’s a worm that lives in the deep coral. Twice a year the bottom half, which is laden with sex cells, breaks off from the rest of the body and rises to the surface of the sea to die, phoenix-like, in the propagation of its kind. They swim around on the surface, spilling their sperm cells which sink to the bottom, where life begins all over again. The remarkable thing about it is that it keeps both lunar and solar time, for it comes to the surface only at dawn in the third quarter of the moon in October and November, when the tide is low.’

One of the ladies pursed her lips and asked, ‘what does it look like when it’s …,’ she paused and, in rather a pained way, added, ‘alive?’

‘Like a thin green tube about 45 centimetres long. Actually, the female is green while the male is green-brown. Some people eat it fresh as it is taken from the sea,’ I said. ‘But in its raw state it tastes like a rather potent dose of iodine.’

‘Have you ever seen it rise?’

‘Oh yes, plenty of times. I used to live on the island of Taveuni where the balolo is noted for its risings. Those two days in October and November are the big events of the year. Of course, there is a natural explanation for the rising of the balolo, but the Fijian people had their own way of reading the signs well before the Europeans researched it, and we depended on them to tell us when it would rise. They were seldom wrong.’

I took a sip of wine before continuing.

‘There is a magnificent horseshoe reef circling a deep blue lagoon off the southern end of Taveuni. On the shores of this lagoon is the village of Vuna. Twice a year we would get a message from the Tui Vuna, the chief, that the balolo would rise the next day. We would set the alarm for three am and by four o’clock we would be on our way to the reef in the cool morning gloom. It was quite a hazardous business negotiating the treacherous reef passage into the lagoon in the darkness and the visibility was usually further impaired by a shower of rain. According to the Fijians, this shower of rain was a sure sign that the balolo would rise as predicted.

‘Once inside the lagoon we would stop the engine and lie in the still water, waiting for the dawn. As the sky brightened, we would be able to see other launches and punts and canoes scattered about the lagoon. All waiting! No one knowing exactly where it would come up. Then there would be a shout: ‘It’s
rising,’ and all the boats would converge on the spot from where the shout had come. Sometimes there would be only a small rising. But on most occasions, there would be a seething mass of wriggling green tendrils spread over a large area of the lagoon.

Nets, buckets and all kinds of receptacles were used to scoop up the prized delicacy and it was stored in drums, tubs and basins in the boats. Then, suddenly the sun would rise above the ridge of the island’s hills and the balolo would sink. Its life span was over. The sperm had been spent to sink to the bottom to regenerate new life.’

‘How extraordinary,’ someone commented. ‘Can you see it when you are diving?’

‘Not that I know of,’ I replied.

‘Does it only rise in Taveuni?’

‘Oh no. It comes up in many parts of Fiji as well as other parts of Polynesia and Melanesia. The Samoans are particularly partial to it and wrap it in leaves and cook it in ground ovens. There is another interesting side effect. Some species of fish become poisonous at balolo time. This is supposed to be due to them consuming vast amounts of scum that rises with the balolo.’

Our guests exchanged nervous glances. Jacque asked, ‘Have some more?’

There was a pause before one of them responded, ‘Yes, please. It’s delicious.’