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Cosmopolitan, 119 West 40th Street, New York

Kohokumu and I dipped our paddles and raced the little outrigger canoe to the dancing pole

The Water-Baby

By Jack London

Illustrated by G. Patrick Nelson

I LENT a weary ear to old Kohokumu's interminable chanting of the deeds and adventures of Maui, the Promethean demigod of Polynesia who fished up dry land from ocean depths with hooks made fast to heaven, who lifted up the sky whereunder previously men had gone on all fours, not having space to stand erect, and who made the sun, with its sixteen snared legs, stand still and agree thereafter to traverse the sky more slowly—the sun being evidently a trade-unionist and believing in the six-hour day, while Maui stood for the open shop and the twelve-hour day.

"Now this," said Kohokumu, "is from Queen Liliuokalani's own family *mele:*

> "Maui became restless and fought the sun
> With a noose that he laid.
> And winter won the sun,
> And summer was won by Maui——"

Born in the Islands myself, I knew the Hawaiian myths better than this old fisherman, although I possessed not his memorization that enabled him to recite them endless hours.

"And you believe all this?" I demanded, in the sweet Hawaiian tongue.

"It was a long time ago," he pondered. "I never saw Maui with my own eyes. But all our old men from all the way back tell us these things, as I, an old man, tell them to my sons and grandsons, who will tell them to their sons and grandsons all the way ahead to come."

"You believe," I persisted, "that whopper about Maui roping the sun like a wild steer, and that other whopper of heaving up the sky from off the earth?"

"I am of little worth, and am not wise, O Lakana!" my fisherman made answer. "Yet have I read the Hawaiian Bible the missionaries translated to us, and there have I read that your Big Man of the Beginning made the earth and sky and sun and moon and stars, and all manner of animals from horses to cockroaches and from centipedes and mosquitoes to sea-lice and jellyfish, and man and woman and everything, and all in six days. Why, Maui didn't do anything like that much! He didn't *make* anything. He just put things in order—that was all—and it took him a long, long time to make the improvements. And, anyway, it is much easier and more reasonable to believe the little whopper than the big whopper."

And what could I reply? He had me on the matter of reasonableness. Besides, my head ached. And the funny thing, as I admitted it to myself, was that evolution teaches in no uncertain voice that man did run on all fours ere he came to walk upright, that astronomy states flatly that the speed of the revolution of the earth on its axis has diminished steadily, thus increasing the length of day, and that the seismologists accept that all the islands of Hawaii were elevated from the ocean floor by volcanic action.

Fortunately, I saw a bamboo pole, floating on the surface several hundred feet away, suddenly up-end and start a very devil's dance. This was a diversion from the profitless discussion, and Kohokumu and I dipped our paddles and raced the little outrigger canoe to the dancing pole. Kohokumu caught the line that was fast to the butt of the pole, and underhanded it in until a two-foot *ukikiki*, battling fiercely to the end, flashed its wet silver in the sun and began beating a tattoo on the inside bottom of the canoe. Kohokumu picked up a squirming, slimy squid, with his teeth bit a chunk of live bait out of it, attached the bait to the hook, and dropped line and sinker overside.

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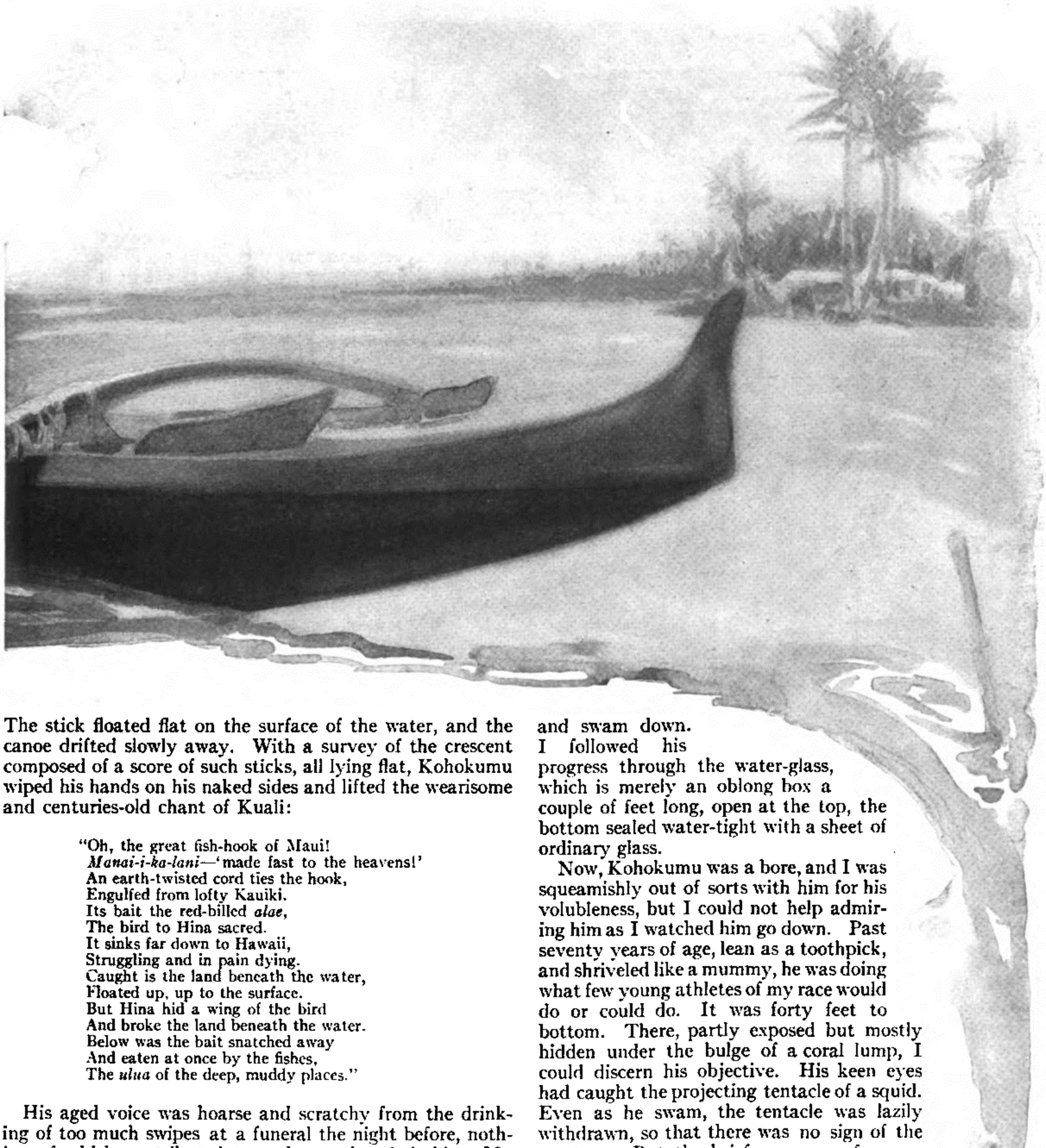


The stick floated flat on the surface of the water, and the canoe drifted slowly away. With a survey of the crescent composed of a score of such sticks, all lying flat, Kohokumu wiped his hands on his naked sides and lifted the wearisome and centuries-old chant of Kuali:

"Oh, the great fish-hook of Maui!
Manai-i-ka-lani—'made fast to the heavens!'
An earth-twisted cord ties the hook,
Engulfed from lofty Kauiki.
Its bait the red-billed *alae*,
The bird to Hina sacred.
It sinks far down to Hawaii,
Struggling and in pain dying.
Caught is the land beneath the water,
Floated up, up to the surface.
But Hina hid a wing of the bird
And broke the land beneath the water.
Below was the bait snatched away
And eaten at once by the fishes,
The *ulua* of the deep, muddy places."

His aged voice was hoarse and scratchy from the drinking of too much swipes at a funeral the night before, nothing of which contributed to make me less irritable. My head ached. The sun-glare on the water made my eyes ache, while I was suffering more than half a touch of *mal de mer* from the antic conduct of the outrigger on the blobby sea. The air was stagnant. In the lee of Waihee, between the white beach and the reef, no whisper of breeze eased the still sultriness. I really think I was too miserable to summon the resolution to give up the fishing and go in to shore.

Lying back with closed eyes, I lost count of time. I even forgot that Kohokumu was chanting till reminded of it by his ceasing. An exclamation made me bare my eyes to the stab of the sun. He was gazing down through the water-glass.

"It's a big one!" he said, passing me the device and slipping overside, feet first, into the water.

He went under without splash and ripple, turned over, and swam down. I followed his progress through the water-glass, which is merely an oblong box a couple of feet long, open at the top, the bottom sealed water-tight with a sheet of ordinary glass.

Now, Kohokumu was a bore, and I was squeamishly out of sorts with him for his volubleness, but I could not help admiring him as I watched him go down. Past seventy years of age, lean as a toothpick, and shriveled like a mummy, he was doing what few young athletes of my race would do or could do. It was forty feet to bottom. There, partly exposed but mostly hidden under the bulge of a coral lump, I could discern his objective. His keen eyes had caught the projecting tentacle of a squid. Even as he swam, the tentacle was lazily withdrawn, so that there was no sign of the creature. But the brief exposure of the portion of one tentacle had advertised its owner as a squid of size.

The pressure at a depth of forty feet is no joke for a young man, yet it did not seem to inconvenience this oldster. I am certain it never crossed his mind to be inconvenienced. Unarmed, bare of body save for a brief *malo*, or loin-cloth, he was undeterred by the formidable creature that constituted his

prey. I saw him steady himself with his right hand on the coral lump and thrust his left arm into the hole to the shoulder. Half a minute elapsed, during which time he seemed to be groping and rooting around with his left hand. Then tentacle after tentacle, myriad-suckered and wildly waving, emerged. Laying hold of his arm, they writhed and coiled about his flesh like so many snakes. With a heave and a jerk appeared the entire squid, a proper devil-fish, or octopus.

But the old man was in no hurry for his natural element, the air above the water. There, forty feet beneath, wrapped about by an octopus that measured nine feet across from tentacle-tip to tentacle-tip, and that could well drown the stoutest swimmer, he coolly and casually did the one thing that gave to him his empery over the monster. He shoved his lean, hawklike face into the very center of the slimy, squirming mass, and with his several ancient fangs bit into the heart and the life of the matter. This accomplished, he came upward slowly, as a swimmer should who is changing atmosphere from the depths. Alongside the canoe, still in the water and peeling off the grisly, clinging thing, the incorrigible old sinner burst into the *pule* of triumph which had been chanted by the countless squid-catching generations before him:

"O Kanaloa of the tabu nights,
Stand upright on the solid floor!
Stand upon the floor where lies the squid!
Stand up to take the squid of the deep sea!
Rise up, O Kanaloa!
Stir up! Stir up! Let the squid awake!
Let the squid that lies flat awake!
Let the squid that lies spread out——"

I closed my eyes and ears, not offering to lend him a hand, secure in the knowledge that he could climb back unaided into the unstable craft without the slightest risk of upsetting it.

"A very fine squid," he crooned. "It is a *wahine* [female] squid. I shall now sing to you the song of the cowry-shell, the red cowry-shell that we used as a bait for the squid——"

"You were disgraceful last night at the funeral," I headed him off. "I heard all about it. You made much noise. You sang till everybody was deaf. You insulted the son of the widow. You drank swipes like a pig. Swipes are not good for your extreme age. Some day you will wake up dead. You ought to be a wreck to-day——"

"Ha!" he chuckled. "And you, who drank no swipes, who was a babe unborn when I was already an old man, who went to bed last night with the sun and the chickens —this day are you a wreck. Explain me that. My ears are as thirsty to listen as was my throat thirsty last night. And here to-day, behold! I am, as that Englishman who came here in his yacht used to say, I am in fine form, in devilish fine form."

"I give you up," I retorted, shrugging my shoulders. "Only one thing is clear, and that is that the devil doesn't want you. Report of your singing has gone before you."

"No"—he pondered the idea carefully—"it is not that. The devil will be glad for my coming, for I have some very fine songs for him, and scandals and old gossips of the high *aliis* [chiefs] that will make him scratch his sides. So, let me explain to you the secret of my birth. The sea is my mother. I was born in a double canoe during a *kona* gale, in the channel of Kahoolawe. From her, the sea, my mother, I received my strength. Whenever I return to her arms, as for a breast-clasp, as I have returned this day, I grow strong again and immediately. She, to me, is the milk-giver, the life-source——"

"Shades of Antæus!" thought I.

"Some day," old Kohokumu rambled on, "when I am really old, I shall be reported of men as drowned in the sea. This will be an idle thought of men. In truth, I shall have returned into the arms of my mother, there to rest under the heart of her breast until the second birth of me, when I shall emerge into the sun a flashing youth of splendor, like Maui himself when he was golden young."

"A queer religion," I commented.

"When I was younger, I muddled my poor head over queerer religions," old Kohokumu came back. "But listen, O young wise one, to my elderly wisdom. This I know: As I grow old I seek less for the truth from without me, and find more of the truth from within me. Why have I thought this thought of my return to my mother and of my rebirth from my mother into the sun? You do not know. I do not know, save that, without whisper of man's voice or printed word, without prompting from otherwhere, this thought has arisen from within me, from the deeps of me that are as deep as the sea. I am not a god. I do not make things. Therefore I have not made this thought. I do not know its father or its mother. It is of old time before me, and therefore it is true. Man does not make truth. Man, if he be not blind, only recognizes truth when he sees it. Is this thought that I have thought a dream?"

"Perhaps it is you that are a dream," I laughed. "And that I, the sky, and sea, and the iron-hard land are dreams —all dreams."

"I have often thought that," he assured me soberly. "It may well be so. Last night, I dreamed I was a lark-bird, a beautiful singing lark of the sky, like the larks on the upland pastures of Haleakala. And I flew up, up, toward the sun, singing, singing, as old Kohokumu never sang. I tell you now I dreamed I was a lark-bird singing in the sky. But may not I, the real I, be the lark-bird? And may not the telling of it be the dream that I, the lark-bird, am dreaming now? Who are you to tell me aye or no? Dare you tell me I am not a lark-bird asleep, and dreaming that I am old Kohokumu?" I shrugged my shoulders, and he continued triumphantly. "And how do you know but what you are old Maui himself asleep, and dreaming that you are John Lakana talking with me in a canoe? And may you not awake old Maui yourself, and scratch your sides and say that you had a funny dream in which you dreamed you were a *haole* [white man]?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Besides, you wouldn't believe me."

"There is much more in dreams than we know," he assured me, with great solemnity. "Dreams go deep, all the way down, maybe to before the beginning. May not old Maui have only dreamed he pulled Hawaii up from the bottom of the sea? Then would this Hawaii-land be a dream, and you, and I, and the squid there only parts of Maui's dream? And the lark-bird, too?" He sighed and let his head sink on his breast. "And I worry my old head about the secrets undiscoverable," he resumed, "until I grow tired and want to forget, and so I drink swipes and go fishing and sing old songs, and dream I am a lark-bird singing in the sky. I like that best of all, and often I dream it when I have drunk much swipes."

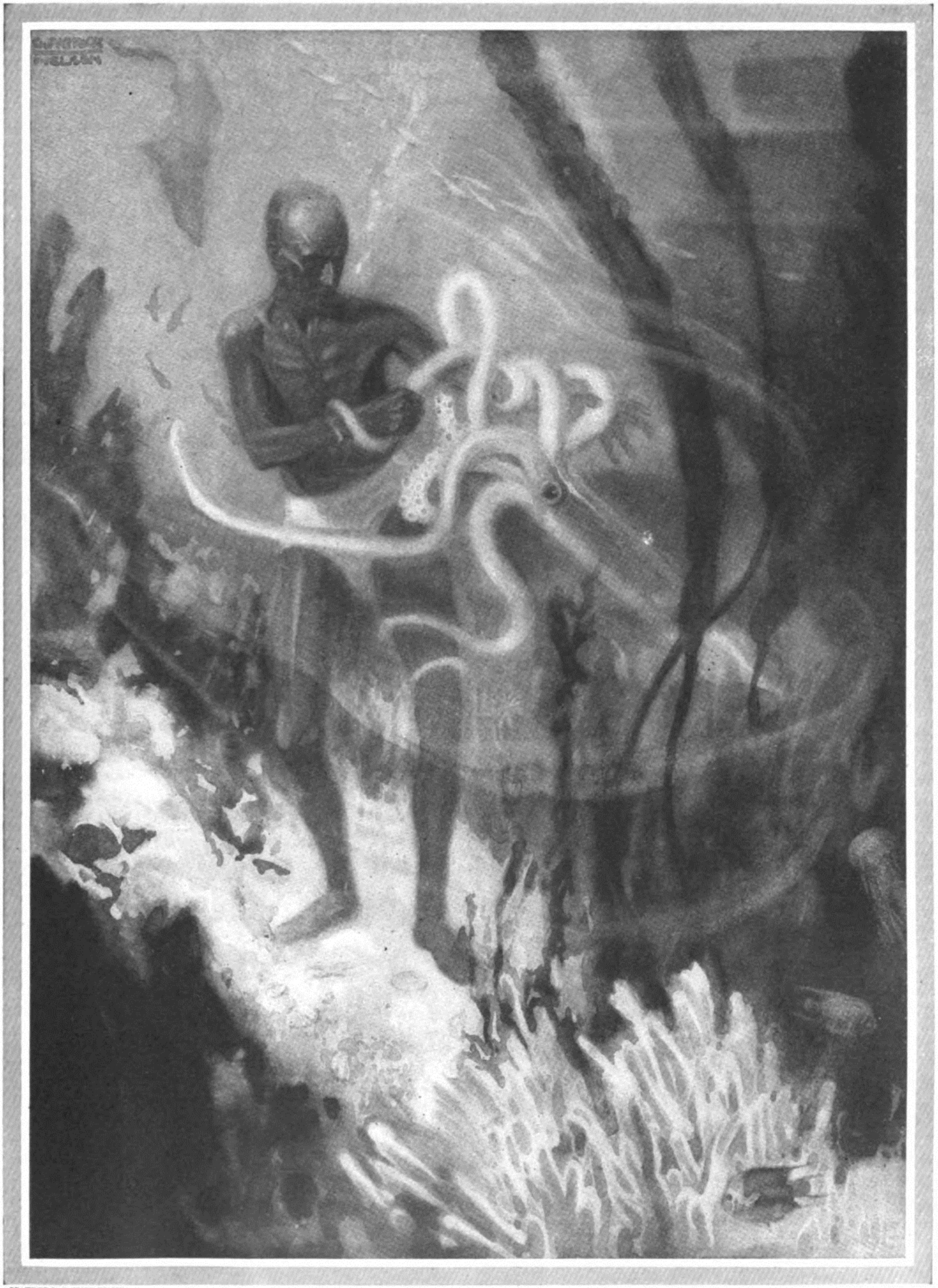
In great dejection of mood, he peered down into the lagoon through the water-glass.

"There will be no more bites for a while," he announced. "The fish-sharks are prowling around, and we shall have to wait until they are gone. And so that the time shall not be heavy, I will sing you the canoe-hauling song to Lono. You remember:

"Give to me the trunk of the tree, O Lono!
Give me the tree's main root, O Lono!
Give me the ear of the tree, O Lono——"

"For the love of mercy, don't sing!" I cut him short. "I've got a headache, and your singing hurts. You may be in devilish fine form to-day, but your throat is rotten. I'd rather you talked about dreams or told me whoppers."

"It is too bad that you are sick, and you so young," he conceded cheerily. "And I shall not sing any more. I shall tell you something you do not know and have never heard—something that is no dream and no whopper, but is what I know to have happened. Not very long ago there



DRAWN BY G. PATRICK NELSON

With a heave and a jerk appeared the entire squid, a proper devil-fish, or octopus

lived here, on the beach beside this very lagoon, a young boy whose name was Keikiwai, which, as you know, means "water-baby." He was truly a water-baby. His gods were the sea- and fish-gods, and he was born with knowledge of the language of fishes, which the fishes did not know until the sharks found it out one day when they heard him talk it.

"It happened this way: The word had been brought, and the commands, by swift runners, that the king was making a progress round the island, and that, on the next day, a *luau* [feast] was to be served him by the dwellers here of Waihee. It was always a hardship, when the king made a progress, for the few dwellers in small places to fill his many stomachs with food. For he came always with his wife and her women, with his priests and sorcerers, his dancers and flute-players and hula-singers and fighting men and servants, and his high chiefs with their wives and sorcerers and fighting men and servants.

"Sometimes, in small places like Waihee, the path of his journey was marked afterward by leanness and famine. But a king must be fed, and it is not good to anger a king. So, like warning in advance of disaster, Waihee heard of his coming, and all food-getters of field and pond and mountain and sea were busied with getting food for the feast. And, behold! everything was got, from the choicest of royal taro to sugar-cane joints for the roasting, from *opihis* to *limu*, from fowl to wild pig and *poi*-fed puppies—everything save one thing: the fishermen failed to get lobsters.

"Now, be it known that the king's favorite food was lobster. He esteemed it above all *kao-kao* [food], and his runners had made special mention of it. And there were no lobsters, and it is not good to anger a king in the belly of him. Too many sharks had come inside the reef. That was the trouble. A young girl and an old man had been eaten by them. And of the young men who dared dive for lobsters, one was eaten, and one lost an arm, and another lost one hand and one foot.

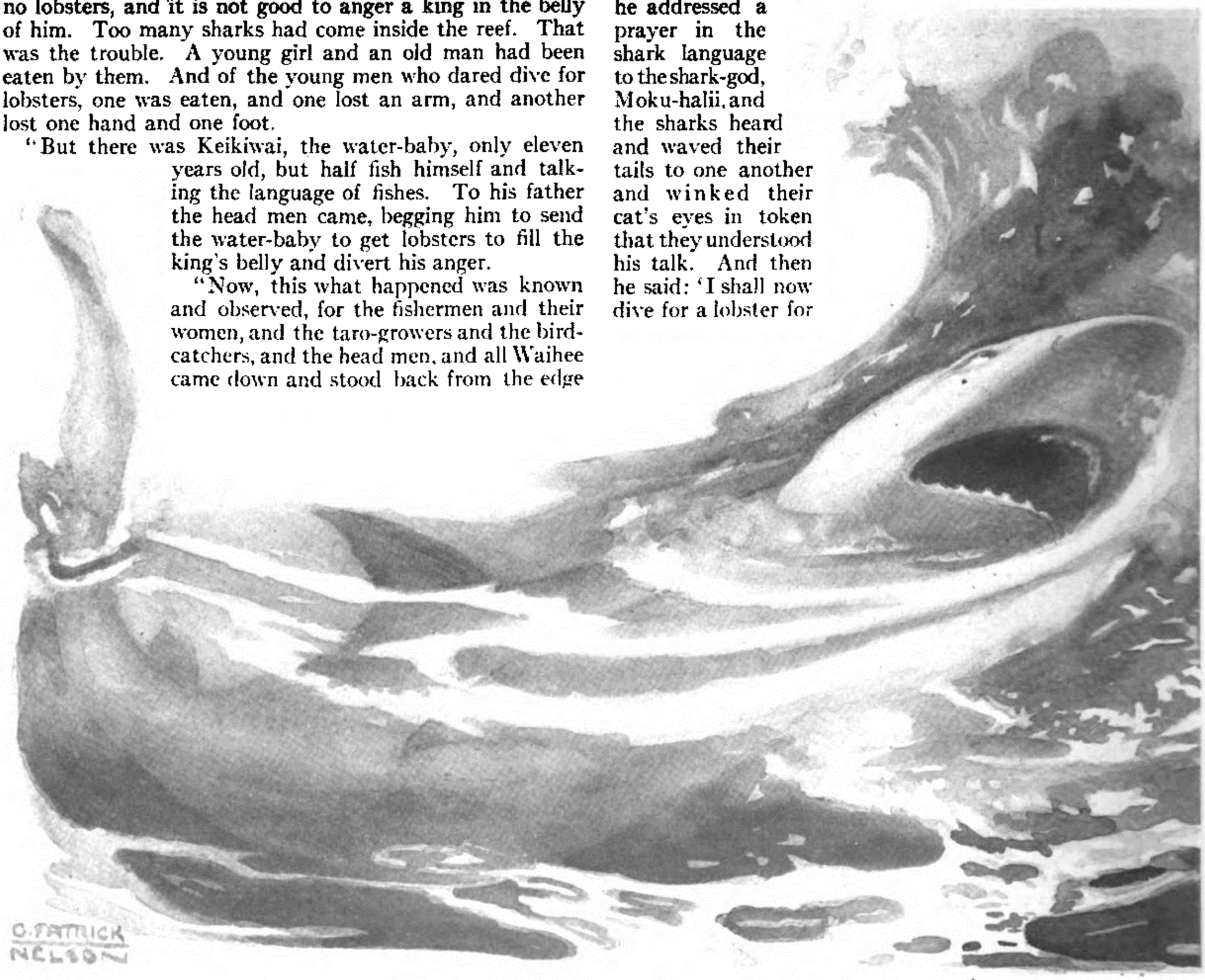
"But there was Keikiwai, the water-baby, only eleven years old, but half fish himself and talking the language of fishes. To his father the head men came, begging him to send the water-baby to get lobsters to fill the king's belly and divert his anger.

"Now, this what happened was known and observed, for the fishermen and their women, and the taro-growers and the bird-catchers, and the head men, and all Waihee came down and stood back from the edge of the rock where the water-baby stood and looked down at the lobsters far beneath on the bottom.

"And a shark, looking up with its cat's eyes, observed him, and sent out the shark-call of 'Fresh meat' to assemble all the sharks in the lagoon. For the sharks work thus together, which is why they are strong. And the sharks answered the call till there were forty of them, long ones and short ones and lean ones and round ones, forty of them by count; and they talked to one another, saying, 'Look at that titbit of a child, that morsel delicious of human-flesh sweetness without the salt of the sea in it—of which salt we have too much—savory and good to eat, melting to delight under our hearts as our bellies embrace it and extract from it its sweet.'

"Much more they said, saying: 'He has come for the lobsters. When he dives in, he is for one of us. Not like the old man we ate yesterday, tough to dryness with age, or like the young man whose members were too hard-muscled; but tender, so tender that he will melt in our gullets ere our bellies receive him. When he dives in, we will all rush for him, and the lucky one of us will get him, and, gulp! he will be gone, one bite and one swallow, into the belly of the luckiest one of us.'

"And Keikiwai, the water-baby, heard the conspiracy, knowing the shark language, and he addressed a prayer in the shark language to the shark-god, Moku-halii, and the sharks heard and waved their tails to one another and winked their cat's eyes in token that they understood his talk. And then he said: 'I shall now dive for a lobster for



By the time they discovered they had missed him, he had gone

the king. And no hurt shall befall me, because the shark with the shortest tail is my friend and will protect me.'

"And, so saying, he picked up a chunk of lava rock and tossed it into the water with a big splash, twenty feet to one side. The forty sharks rushed for the splash, while he dived, and by the time they discovered they had missed him, he had gone to bottom and come back and climbed out, within his hand a fat lobster, a *wahine* lobster, full of eggs, for the king.

"'Ha!' said the sharks, very angry. 'There is among us a traitor. The titbit of a child, the morsel of sweetness, has spoken, and has exposed the one among us who has saved him. Let us now measure the lengths of our tails.'

"Which they did, in a long row, side by side, the shorter-tailed ones cheating and stretching to gain length on themselves, the longer-tailed ones cheating and stretching in order not to be outcheated and outstretched. They were very angry with the one with the shortest tail, and him they rushed upon from every side and devoured till nothing was left of him.

"Again they listened while they waited for the water-baby to dive in. And again the water-baby made his prayer in the shark language to Moku-halii, and said, 'The shark with the shortest tail is my friend and will protect me.' And again the water-baby tossed in a chunk of lava, this time twenty feet away off to the other side. The sharks rushed for the splash, and in their haste ran into one another, and splashed with their tails till the water was all foam and they could see nothing, each thinking some other was swallowing the titbit. And the water-baby came up and climbed out with another fat lobster for the king.

"And the thirty-nine sharks measured tails, devouring the one with the shortest tail, so that there were only thirty-eight sharks. And the water-baby continued to do what I have said, and the sharks to do what I have told you, while for each shark that was eaten by his brothers, there was another fat lobster laid on the rock for the king. Of course there was much quarreling and argument among the sharks when it came to measuring tails; but, in the end, it worked out in rightness and justice, for, when only two sharks were left, they were the biggest two of the original forty.

"And the water-baby again claimed the shark with the shortest tail was his friend, fooled the two sharks with another lava chunk, and brought up another lobster. The two sharks each claimed the other had the shorter tail, and each fought to eat the other, and the one with the longer tail won——"

"Hold, O Kohokumu!" I interrupted. "Remember that that shark had already——"

"I know just what you are going to say," he snatched his recital back from me. "And you are right. It took him long to eat the thirty-ninth shark, for inside the thirty-ninth shark were already the nineteen other sharks he had eaten, and inside the fortieth shark were already the nineteen other sharks he had eaten, and he did not have the appetite he had started with. But do not forget he was a very big shark to begin with.

"It took him so long to eat the other shark, and the nineteen sharks inside the other shark, that he was still eating when darkness fell and the people of Waihee went away home with all the lobsters for the king. And didn't they find the last shark on the beach next morning, dead and burst wide open with all he had eaten!"

Kohokumu fetched a full stop and held my eyes with his own shrewd ones.

"Hold, O Lakana!" He checked the speech that rushed to my tongue. "I know what next you would say. You would say that with my own eyes I did not see this, and therefore that I do not know what I have been telling you. But I do know, and I can prove it. My father's father knew the grandson of the water-baby's father's uncle. Also, there, on the rocky point to which I point my finger now, is where the water-baby stood and dived. I have dived for lobsters there myself. It is a great place for lobsters. *(Concluded on page 133)*

to the bottom and come back, within his hand a fat lobster

The Water-Baby

(*Concluded from page 85*)

Also, and often, have I seen sharks there. And there, on the bottom, as I should know, for I have seen and counted them, are the thirty-nine lava rocks thrown in by the water-baby, as I have described."

"But—" I began.

"Ha!" he baffled me. "Look! While we have talked, the fish have begun again to bite."

He pointed to three of the bamboo poles, erect and devil-dancing in token that fish were hooked and struggling on the lines beneath. As he bent to his paddle, he muttered for my benefit:

"Of course I know. The thirty-nine lava rocks are still there. You can count them any day for yourself. Of course I know, and I know for a fact."

The next ***Jack London*** story,
The Red One, will appear in
October Cosmopolitan.