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Balazs

TURTLEMEN OF LEUSOALII

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TURTLEMEN OF LEUSOALII

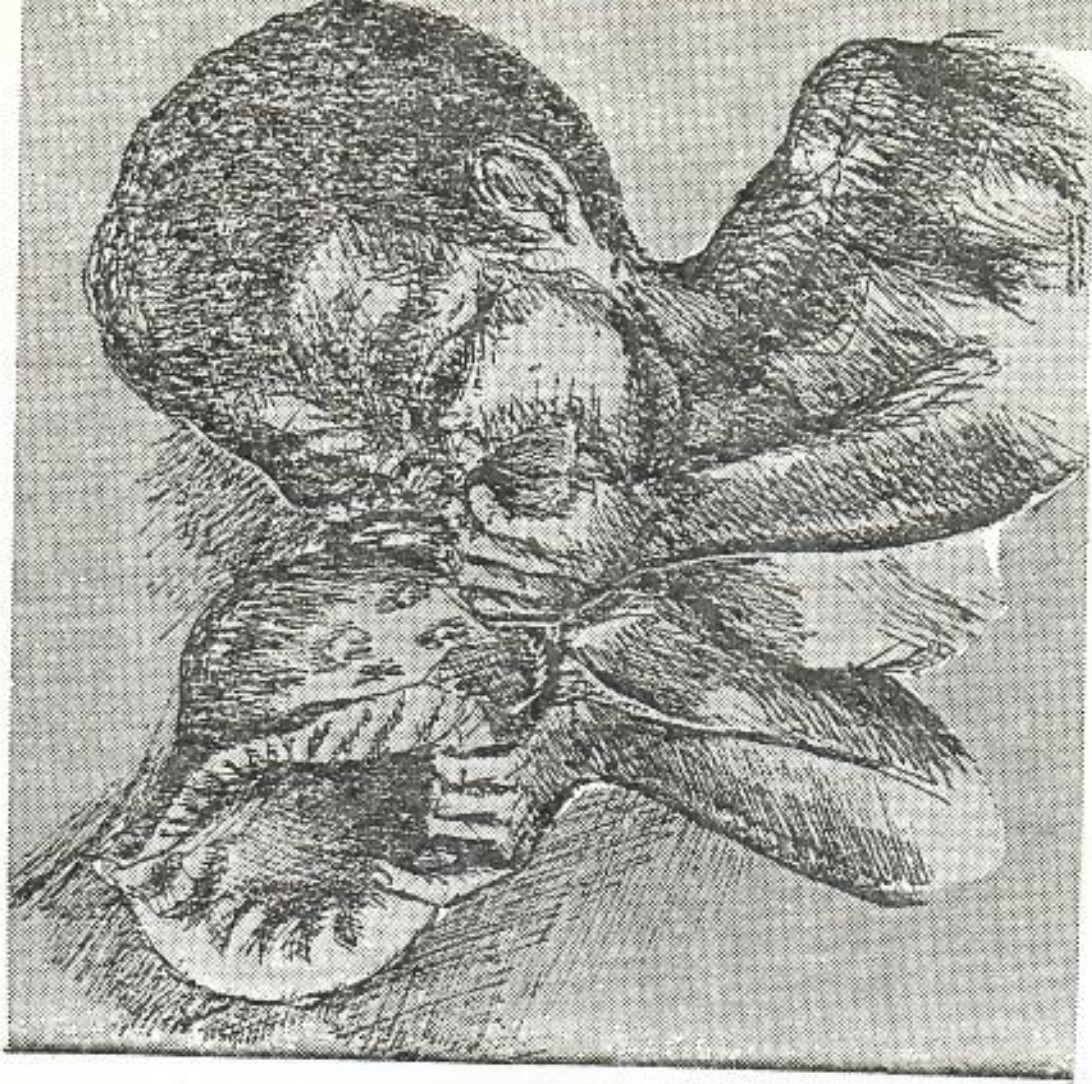
The sun has set behind the steep mountains to the west of the coastal village of Leusoalii, and darkness soon changes the familiar guava and breadfruit trees into shadows that waver in the evening breeze.

The birds are in their nests, but the prowlers of the night, the owls and the flying foxes, have already started hunting for food.

The noise made by the unseen animals, insects and mosquitoes at this early hour of the evening is great, but the cries of the cicadas almost drown all other sounds outside the houses.

Almost, but not quite; for from one end of the village comes the sound of a conch shell, which rises above the cicadas' noisy welcome to darkness. The sound stops the conversations in every family. The dining villagers listen. Three times the shell is sounded, then a voice announces:

'The chiefs have asked that the taulele'a get some turtles tomorrow. Members of the fishing team will assemble on the beach by the third sounding of the shell at dawn. Prepare your spears, goggles, food and drink tonight.'



The message is repeated several times as the announcer moves through the village, until he is satisfied that all have heard it. Early today the chiefs met and decided that the main job for the taulele'a this week was to get some turtles.

octopus and its habits, about hooks, baits, phases of the moon, the tides, the blow-holes and many other things. Other fishermen copy his methods and always seek his advice on fishing and the sea.

Tavita has to plan this expedition well. He must decide beforehand where to fish. He must know the likely force of the waves outside the reef if a certain wind is blowing. Above all, he must know the strength of each of his men, for he alone is responsible for their safety while at sea.

Turtle fishing is done at high tide on the outer slopes of the reef, where the waves dash in anger, only to be reduced by the reef into a dying, creeping layer of white foam which disappears completely as it reaches the peaceful lagoon. Only the hardy creatures, the crabs, the crayfish, and the turtles live amongst the shelves of coral slabs jutting outward from the reef. Turtles have been living there for ages, protected in some way from their enemies by the angry waves.

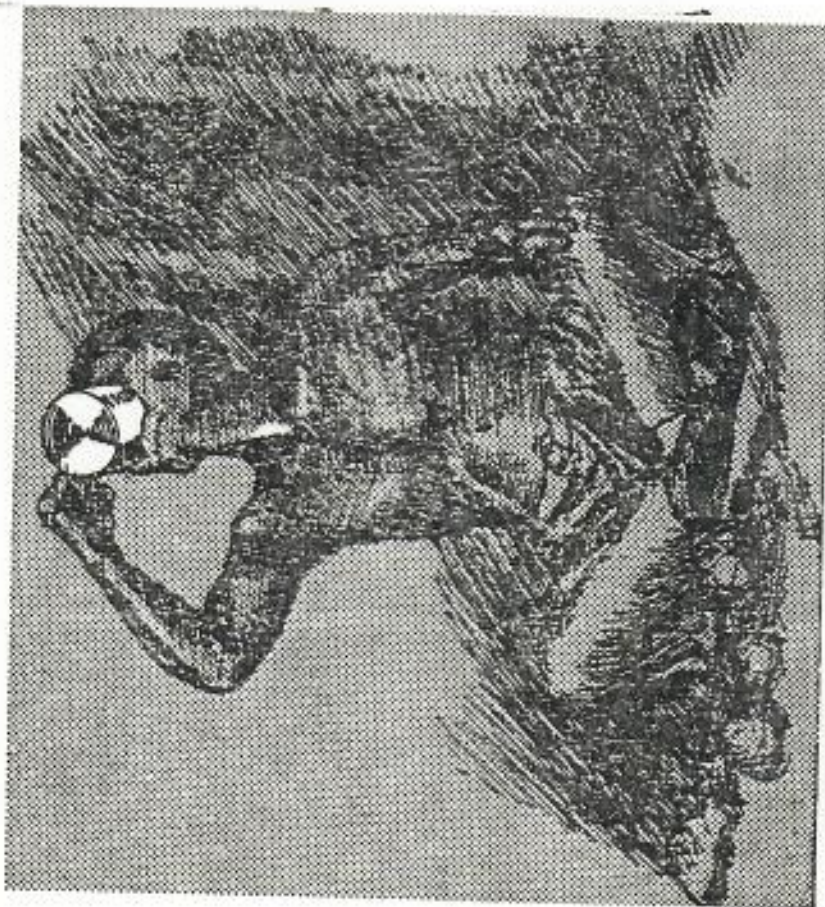
The messenger who made the announcement returns. "Is there anything else I can do Tavita?" he asks.

"No, thank you Tolo, there's nothing else. I have already told the others to see to the fautasi. You can check up your own gear."

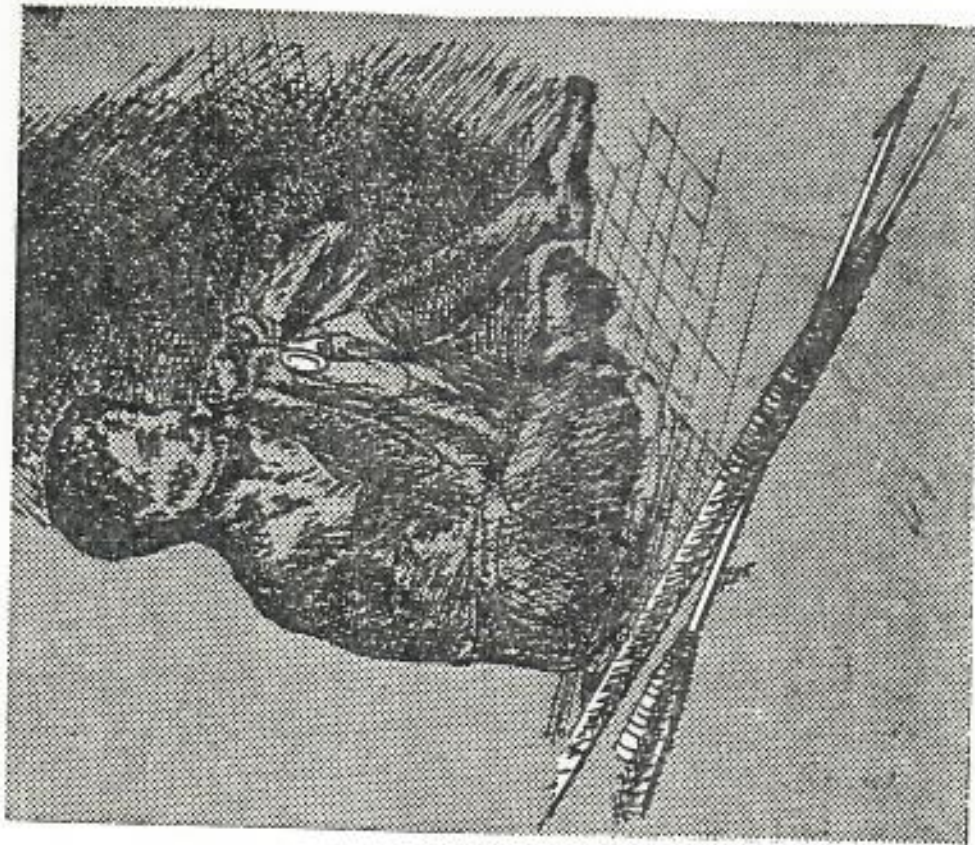
Tolo disappears again into the dark, his feet crunching on the pebbles.

Tavita can hear some of his men passing by his house, talking about their broken goggles, or about borrowing a spear because a turtle escaped with theirs in the last fishing trip. From another direction comes a heavy thumping noise. Somebody is hammering a breadfruit tree with a large stone to get some sap to glue up loose goggles.

"Masina," Tavita calls his fourteen-year-old son, "get



In his house, Tavita, the most experienced fisherman in the village, sits cross-legged on the stony floor. He supports himself with his left hand and drinks a cup of strong cocoa, as he waits for the messenger to return from his errand. To the people Tavita is the tautai - the chief fisherman. He knows all there is to know about fishing, about the



my fishing gear." Masina stands up quickly. He removes from the rafters the goggles and the fifteen-foot-long spear made of olasina, and places them in front of his father. Tavita examines his two pairs of goggles and finds them in good order. He always takes two, just in case one gets broken. Then he feels the iron of the spear which he usually sharpens after each fishing trip. It is very sharp.

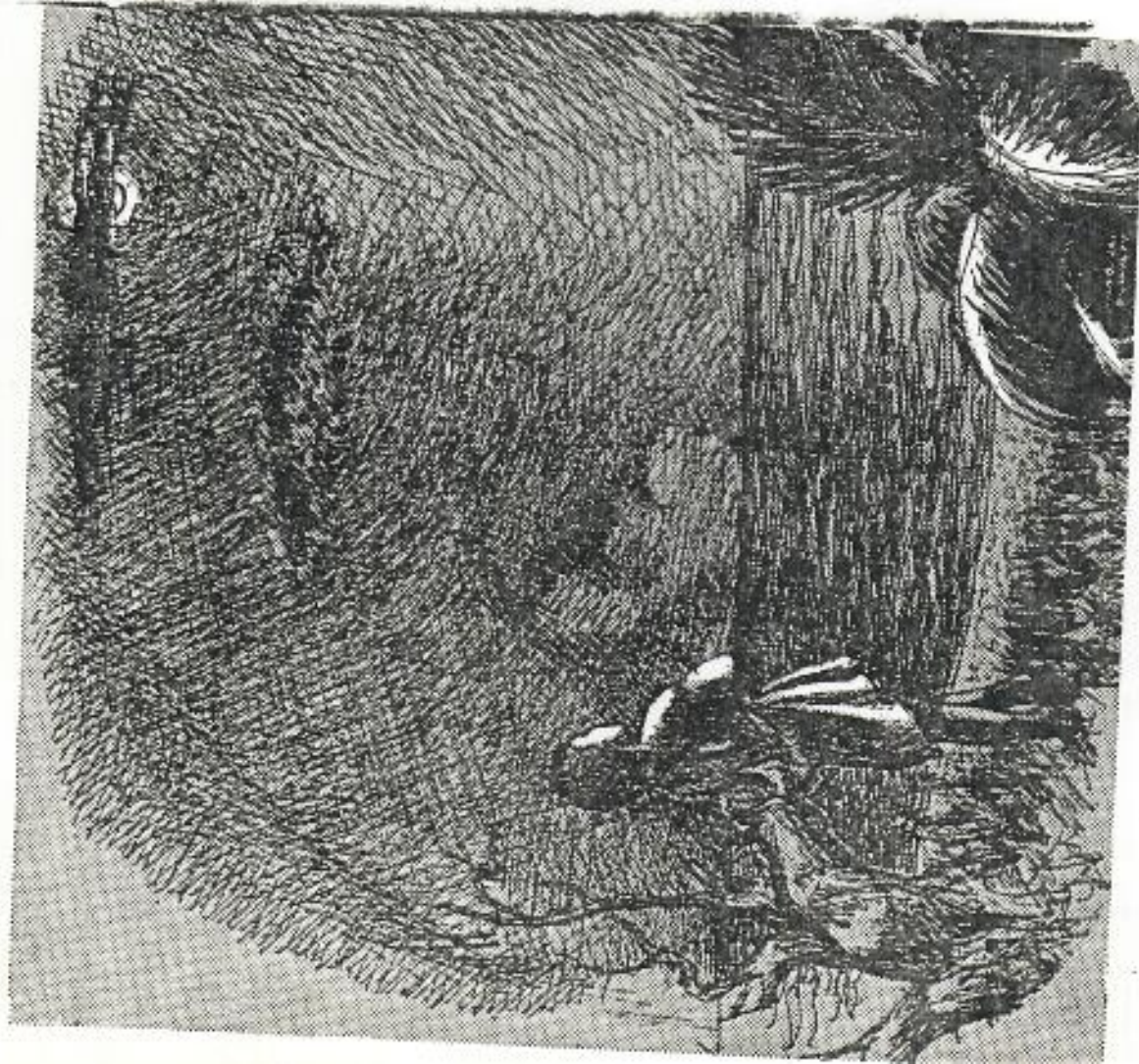
Some young men arrive with their oars to see their tautai.
"The boat is on rollers ready for tomorrow Tavita," one of them says.

"That's good," Tavita replies.

"Have you decided yet where we're going to fish?" asks Loma, a very good turtleman.

"It's going to be a fine day tomorrow, Loma," Tavita answers, puffing his tobacco at the same time, "and the wind will be strong. It will be hard to fish towards Falefa.





That's why I think we'd better go westward. The wind will help carry us. We start fishing from outside our own reef and carry on until we reach the eastern side of Apia Harbour. There we pull ashore to rest and eat. If at that time we have enough turtles we return home. If not, when the tide is high again we shall cross the harbour to the reef beyond and fish for another two or three hours."

"Well," Loma says, "let's hope the weather doesn't change suddenly. 'We'd better go and have an early sleep. See you in the morning Tavita. Goodnight!'"

"Goodnight!"

Before going to bed Tavita walks to the beach and studies the wind and the waves. The day has been very hot and so the sea breeze is strong tonight. It is cloudy, and the clouds travel so fast that the moon itself seems to be racing eastwards.

Tavita knows that the weather tomorrow will be good for turtle fishing, as a night like this is followed by a windy day when the waves break the seaweed from the reefs and carry it to the surface. The turtles come out of their hiding places to feed on the seaweed, and that is when Tavita and his men catch them.

The coconut trees above Tavita sway gently, their leaves rustling in the wind. It is getting cold. Tavita decides to go home to sleep. As he walks back to his house, a breadfruit falls a few yards to his right, and a flying fox flaps its wings to escape.

"What a waste! I should be killing some of those for a meal another day instead of looking for turtles."

The moon is low on the western horizon as the cocks crow the new day in. Tavita turns on his bamboo pillow.

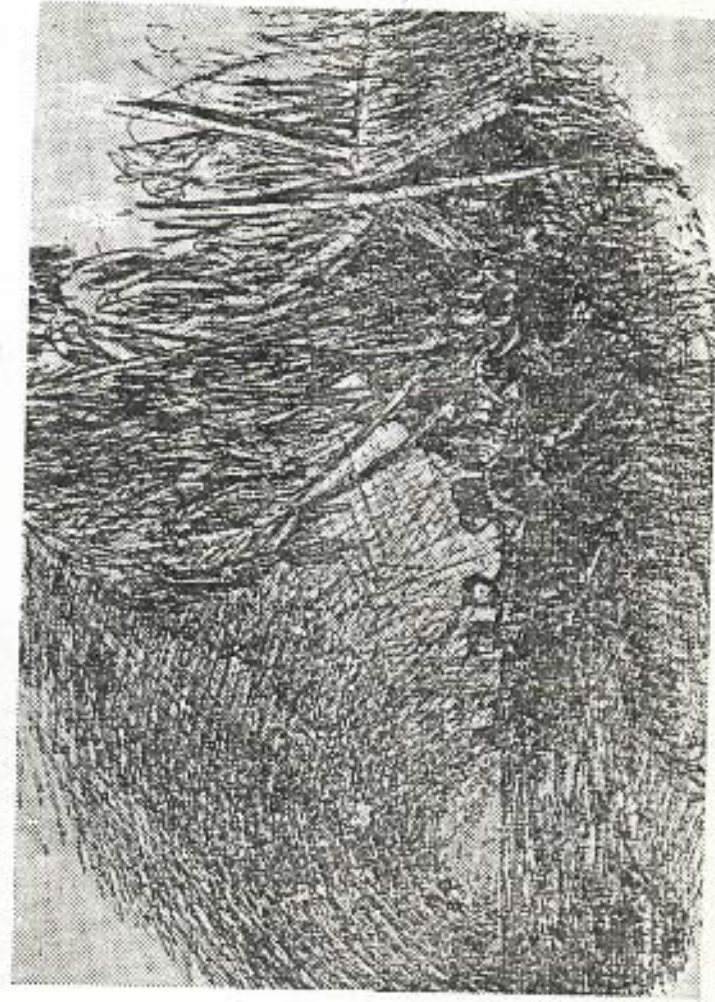
"Wake up Vita," his wife Susana says. "The first horn

has gone. Your cocoa is ready and I've got all your gear there. The men have already taken the oars."

Yawning sleepily, Tavita sits up and says, "Susana, please put some oil on my back. It's going to be very hot today."

Tavita hurriedly drinks his cocoa, picks up his things and hurries along to the beach. He can hear above the cocks' crows his men heaving together as they haul the fautasi out of its shelter. In the faint light of dawn, the shelter looks like a huge centipede with long legs.

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!" There is a splash as the long boat slides into the sea. It rolls from side to side as the wavelets from the nearby reef lift it gently up and down. Some of the men hold the boat steady, while others put their spears in, then the food and coconuts at the stern.



After that they bring their oars and one by one the twenty-four fishermen take their seats. Tavita takes the helm. The final horn is blown. The men pull at their oars, and the sleek longboat gracefully cuts its way across the lagoon, through the reef and out to the open sea.

The fishermen's wives, still wrapped in their white sheets, and some children, stand and watch the boat leaving the beach. The chiefs are still in bed.

As the men row they sing a song about the turtle, describing the place it lives in, its habits, the way it is caught, the delicious meals made from its flesh, the ornaments cut from its shells, and the way in which it is regarded by the people of Leusoalii as the *i'a sa*, or forbidden fish.

Beyond the reef and about a mile out from the village, the men stop, put on their goggles, and jump into the sea with their spears. Four men stay in the boat and row it



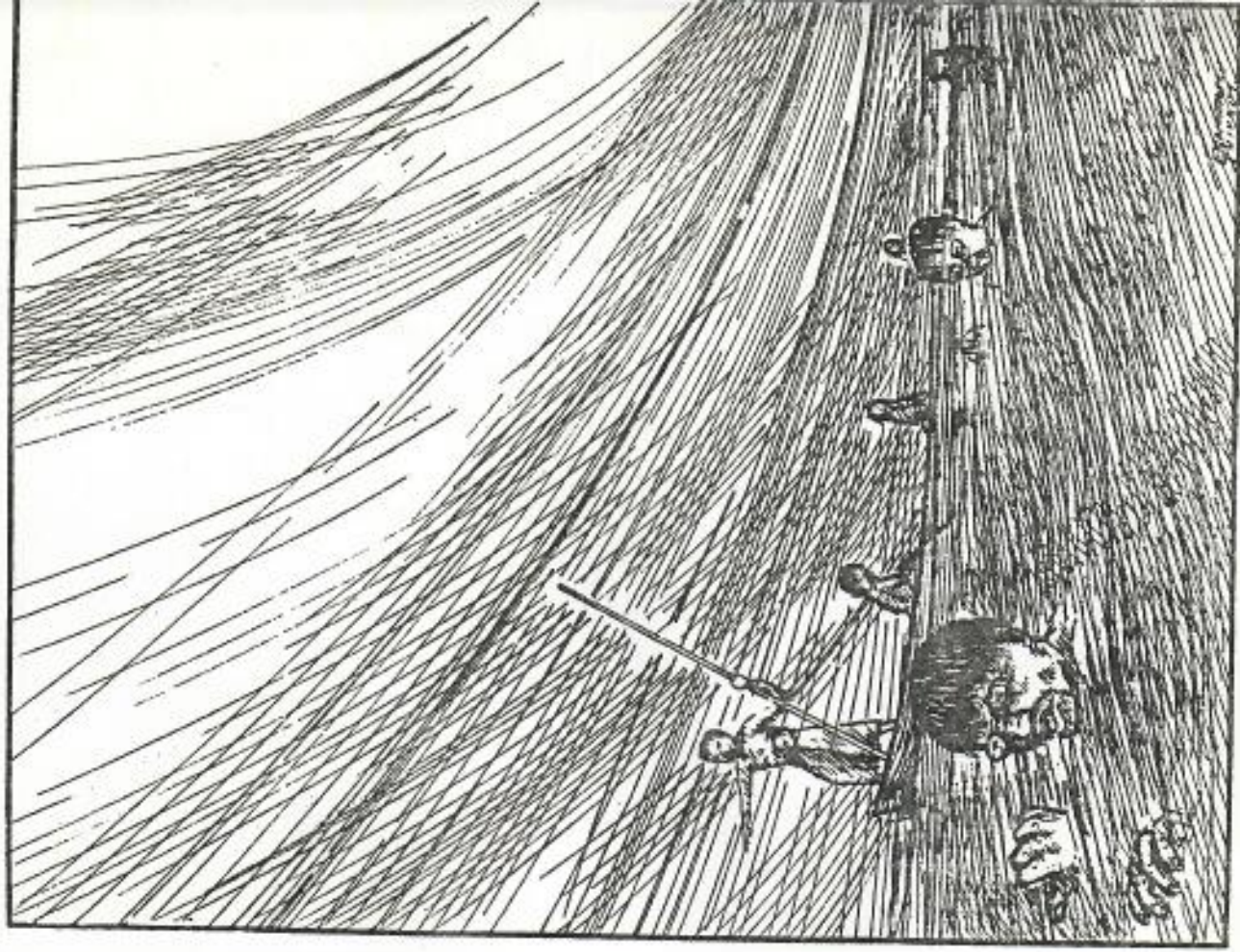
along. One of them is second in rank to Tavita. He keeps a lookout for sharks. As soon as he sees one, he warns the men, who will then swim for the reef or for the fautasi. The men in the boat will have their turn to fish when the others get tired.

On this particular expedition, six men swim to form a straight line at right angles to the reef. They are the faamuli, or rear-guards. Young men who have just started off in 'turtling' are put in this position. The reason is that it is shallower here, because the reefs do not drop suddenly into the deep sea, but slope gradually. If one of them gets into difficulties while trying to catch a turtle, and is taken down by it, he will not be too far below for the others to rescue him, and to catch his turtle as well.

The experienced and much stronger men, eighteen of them this time, forms up in a line that joins the outer end of the faamuli, and runs parallel to the reef. They are called the faalava. The tautai is number seven from the front of the parallel line. From there he controls the 'mata laumei' - or underwater fishing for turtles. He is really the leading man of the faalava, because, as soon as a turtle is seen, the first six men in front of him will 'fold in' and close the square so that a turtle is completely surrounded. These men become the ta'imua, or 'leaders'.

The space between the men of the faalava as they swim along looking for a turtle is about ten feet. Those in the faamuli are much closer, only about six feet apart. This wide spacing is a safeguard against any accidental spearing. Because of their weight the spears rest on the shoulders of the men as they swim on the surface.

They never talk. They know that although turtles have poor eyes, they can easily pick out unusual sounds. So the



men swim quietly, trying to get as near as they can to each turtle before the tautai raises his head above water and gives his first order.

"Ta'imua!" The tautai shouts as soon as he sees the first turtle. All at once the ta'imua quickly swings reefwards and closes the gap. The faalava turns inwards. While moving into their new positions, the men reach for their spears, push them forward, and hold them at their ends. The faalava also closes up until the men are about eight feet apart. The turtle, making uncertain dashes in an effort to escape, is completely surrounded.

"Watch out!" The tautai shouts his short order again as the turtle tries to break through to the open sea. He has hardly spoken when Loma, one of the men in the faalava, thrusts his spear with both hands at the turtle. He dives down as soon as his spear finds its target. The two men on either side of him give their spears to their neighbours and dive down also. All the others still keep in strict formation and watch.

The turtle struggles. It dives deeper, taking Loma with it. Loma works his way down the spear towards the turtle. When he finally gets on to it, it is already twenty feet deep! He glances behind him to see if someone has come to help him. Yes, his two neighbours, Siaki and Vivaa have arrived. As soon as they have got hold of the turtle, Loma lets it go and shoots to the surface for some air.

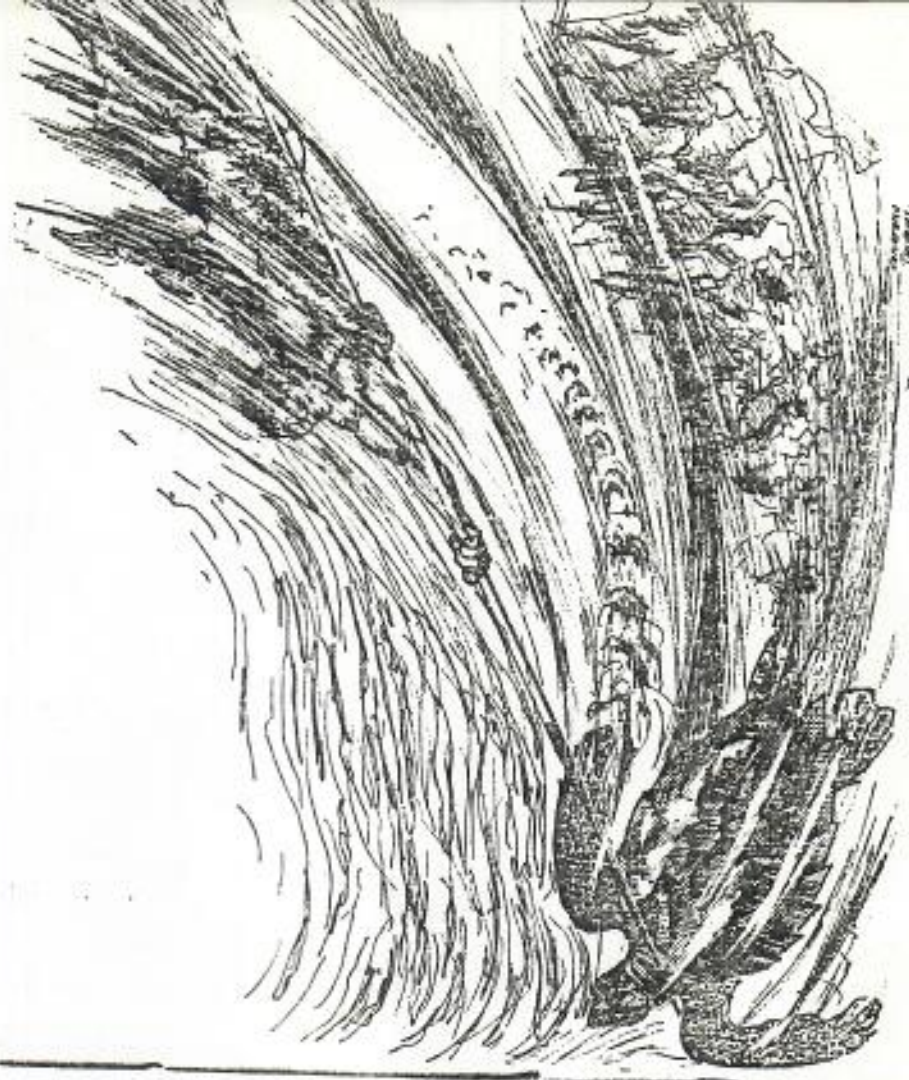
Siaki holds the turtle by the ends of its front flippers and turns its head to the surface. The back flippers are still free and are now driving the turtle and Siaki upwards. Vivaa follows behind.

Halfway up the two men meet their other helpers, Moli and Tainane, who then take the turtle the rest of the way.

They now turn it on its back after removing the spear. In this position a turtle becomes helpless. After they have placed the first catch in the fautasi, the men take up their former positions, and the mata laumei moves on again.

Twelve other catches are made in much the same way. About two hours to noon Tavita's voice rises again.

"Ta'imua! There are four this time. Be careful. Let's kill them as they come."



Almost at the same time the men reach for their spears and watch their prey. The ta'imua closes the front gap. The turtlemen faces inwards ready for the kill. The turtles, two big and two small, dart to the middle and withdraw again to the safety of the reef. Every now and then the men lose sight of their prey when the waves lift them up and out of their positions, but they speedily swim back to formation when the waves subside.

The little turtles are now darting desperately from place to place inside the square. The men know that at any moment now the young turtles will try to dash for the open sea. One of these two flashes across just beyond the heads of the spears. As a rule nobody must spear a turtle from its side. They have to wait until it points its head outward and is close enough for someone to spear it. This ensures that the spear will find a soft part around the neck. It is also a further safeguard against accidents. Only one person can spear a turtle - the person directly in front of it when it tries to break through to the open sea.

The little turtles swim swiftly together, looking for an opening. But there is none. The long spears are covering not only every move they make, but also the likely spaces for an escape. And behind the spears, half submerged like some huge octopuses with only four tentacles each, are the men. The whole trap is a frightening sight to any creature caught in it.

Now the little ones try to break through the trap. They dash towards the faamuli. Mocumi and Laumaile, who are out for the first time are straight in front of the turtles. They aim their spears. They thrust them forward. Laumaile hits his mark. He quickly pulls the turtle towards him and turns it upside down.



But Moeumi misses. His spear flashes under his turtle. and before he knows it, the turtle hits him right on the chest! Because of all the splashing and kicking by both himself and Laumaile, Moeumi cannot see his turtle clearly now. Like a tired boxer in the ring, Moeumi blindly throws his arms about, hoping to catch the turtle by its flippers. His left hand strikes the turtle's mouth. He holds it tight, thinking it is a flipper. But it is the turtle's lower jaw! The turtle bites! Moeumi jerks his hand away in pain. Quickly he throws his right hand forward, catches the turtle's right front flipper, then turns the turtle on its back. Luckily for Moeumi, the turtle has no real teeth, and so his fingers are not badly hurt.

As he drags his turtle to the fautasi, Mocumi thinks, 'Just as well it's not a big one. And just think of me catching my first turtle without a spear!'

The next two, each one more than three feet in length, and much bigger and heavier than the others, put up a great fight. Six men have to turn one of them over on its back and drag it to the fautasi after it has been speared. The other is caught in close formation. One by one ten of the men drop out so that the others can safely close in and form a half circle around this turtle. It is swimming low, about ten feet below surface. The men know they will have to spear it on the back if it does not come up.

The turtle turns to the reef, but there is no way through there. It then turns to the outside, and looks straight ahead. Its front flippers reach forward. With one mighty backward stroke, the big turtle darts forward.

But the tautai, who knows the habits of turtles through long experience, is already five feet below the surface and waiting for it. With all his strength, Tavita thrusts his spear at it. It strikes the turtle on the back, just behind the head. This stuns it for a moment, but it starts again, taking the spear and Tavita with it down to the bottom of the sea.

The men in the boat know what is happening. They can see that the whole team in the water is swimming out to the open. This only means that a turtle has taken a man with it. Quickly they put their goggles on. They jump into the sea. Two of them dive. The other two watch from the surface. But Tavita and the turtle are no where in sight. Only a trail of blood can be seen. The two men follow the trail. They have not reached the bottom when they see the turtle coming up from behind a huge rock, with Tavita holding on to it, directing its swim to the surface. Moli



and Taliivai, the two men who dived to help, can see at once that the tautai is still strong, and needs no help. They swim alongside him. On the way up they meet more men coming down to give a hand. But the tautai keeps on riding his turtle upwards to the surface. On the surface, the turtle is turned on its back, and the men throw it inside the fautasi.

Altogether seventeen turtles have been caught. No other fish was speared, as this might attract sharks. Anybody who spears another fish besides a turtle during the mata laumei, will be punished when the men return to the village.

"Come on fellows, we've got enough," Tavita calls. "The turtle has spilt a lot of blood and I'm afraid the sharks will be around soon. The tide is low and it's not safe to fish near the reef now. Let's land and have something to eat."

One by one the men climb gratefully into the boat. They have been swimming and fishing in the water for almost five hours continuously, and by now have moved from their village to the eastern end of Apia, a distance of about eight miles! The cold sea, the hot sun and the wind have almost changed the men's copper brown bodies to black, the colour of their tattoo which clothe them from below the ribs to the knees.

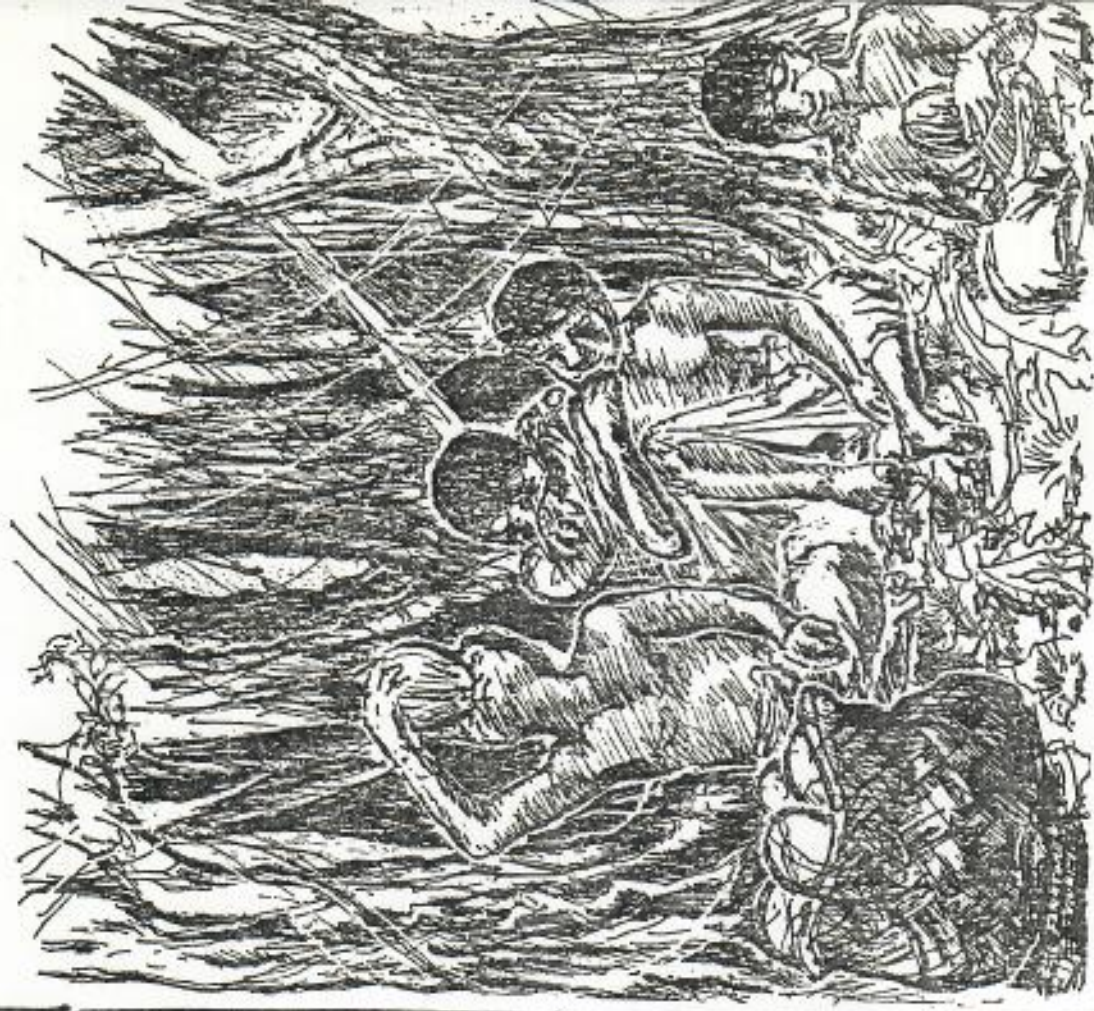
A few minutes later they ride through the reef to anchor the fautasi with its load of turtles just off Vaiala beach. Then they go ashore and eat their meal of taro and rich food made from coconut oil. Green coconuts from two big baskets are opened and passed around for drinking.

"Much better catch this time, Tavita," Loma says with a mouthful of food. "I feel like having another swim in the afternoon."

"Not very much compared with thirty we caught eight months ago," Tavita said. "But of course that was a whole day's fishing. We may be able to catch some more if we try again this afternoon. What do you think?"

"You're the tautai, Tavita," replies a senior member of the team. "Whatever you say, goes. We ourselves feel strong and happy to go on in the afternoon."

"Well, I'm tempted myself to have two or three more



hours of fishing, but I think seventeen should be enough," Tavita decides finally. "One for the pastor, six for the chiefs, and ten to be distributed to the village. We'll have a rest for an hour or two until the wind drops, then we row for home."

In the village, the women and the young men who are not members of the turtle fishing team are preparing food for Tavita and his crew. The chiefs are sitting around the meeting house, braiding sinnet and talking about the days when they themselves were turtlemen. The children have turned the beach into a playground — some race with the waves, others play cricket, a group near a huge rock are building castles, while others play marbles with seeds of the fetau tree. The children know that their fathers will be home soon, and as they play they keep a lookout for the fautasi.

Two hours to sunset the sound of the shell from the fautasi is faintly heard. The children drop everything and the next moment scores of eyes sweep the sea in search of the fautasi. Then the children jump up and down, shouting happily as the long boat comes into view.

"There it is! There it is!"

"It's coming! It's coming!"

"I saw it first!"

"No, me and Fala saw it first."

"But your father's not on it."

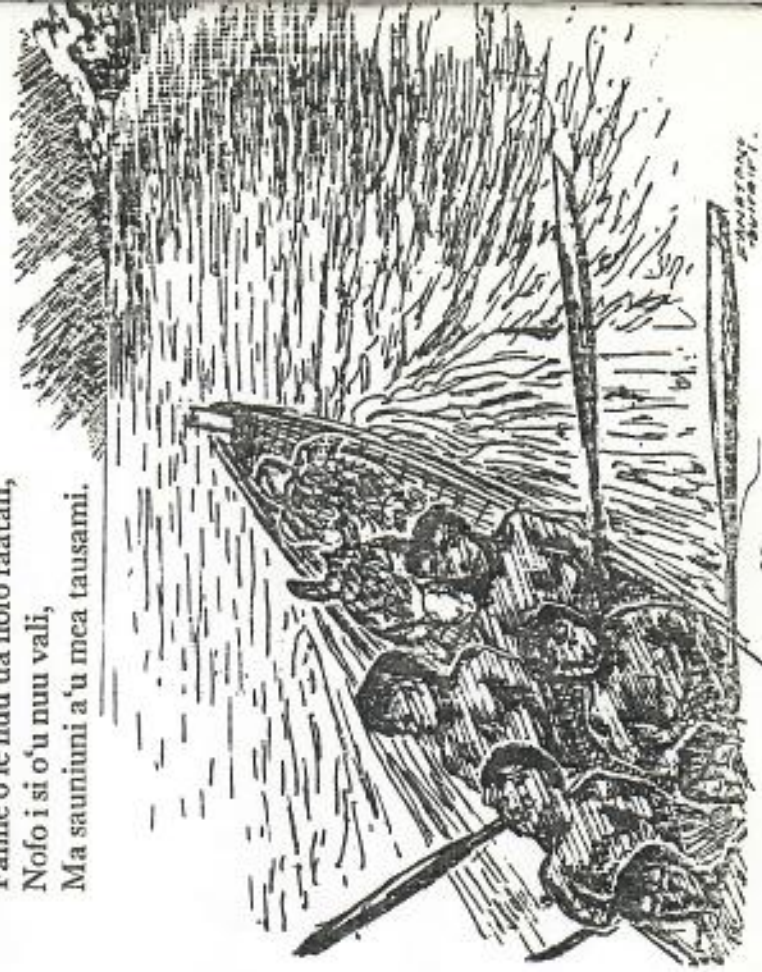
"I don't care. My father's bigger than yours."

A mile away the horn is blown continuously to tell the waiting village that the mata laumei has been successful. In the village everybody is excited. Everyone but the sick is on the beach. Even the chiefs are there!

Just as they did when they left in the morning, the men now sing as they row their boat in to land.

While I am swimming in the sea,
Women of the village are waiting for me,
Waiting in my beautiful village,
Preparing my meal.

'Ita e ua 'au'au i le sami,
Fafine o le nuu ua nofo faatali,
Nofu i si o'u nuu vali,
Ma sauniuni a'u mea tausami.



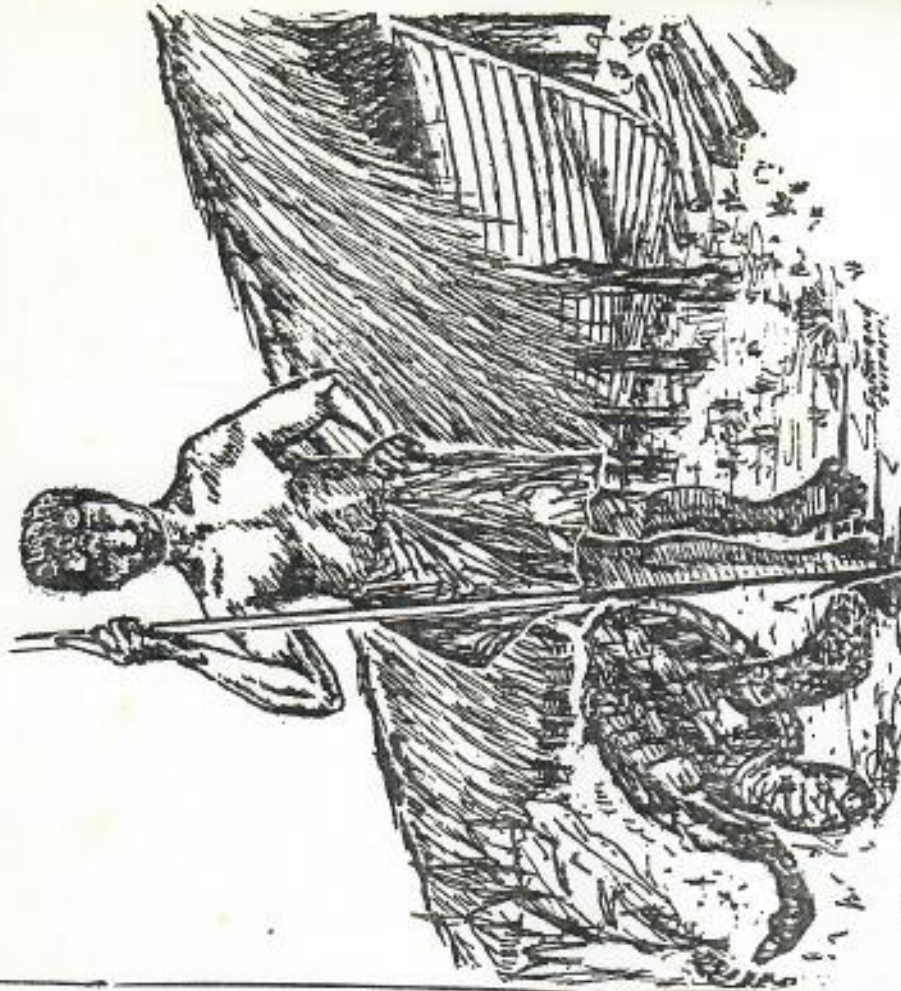
The crowd joins in the singing as the fautasi lands on the beach.

Tavita and his men jump into the sea, collect their gear and come ashore. They have done their job. Now it is for the young men who did not fish to bring the haul ashore to where the chiefs are standing. Some of the turtles are dead. Others are still full of life, and when they are thrown on their backs to the ground, they flick out flipperfuls of pebbles as they struggle to get on their stomachs.

"Malo Tavita," the chiefs say to their tautai and his men. "Congratulations!"

"Malo fo'i le tapua'i!" Tavita replies with a smile. "Thanks for waiting and wishing us well. It's good we've caught some turtles without an accident."

An order is given to other men to take the turtles to the chiefs' house. There the senior orator, after talking to the chiefs, sees to their distribution. The biggest one is given to the 'servant of God'. The next six are cooked quickly for the chiefs' meal. The rest are distributed to all the families, including those of the chiefs.



The next hour is full of bustle as the people cook whole turtles in the umu before cutting them up.

In the chiefs' house kava is being prepared while the chiefs wait for their first serving of turtle for many months. Not far away the women's committee in its yellow uniform prepares the meals for Tavita and his men. Everyone is in a joyous mood. At last their favourite meal of turtles is being served.

Near the beach, the fautasi has already been pulled up into its long shed. Together with the spears, the long boat will not be used again until the chiefs order the turdemen to get another meal of 'forbidden fish'.



"HALF THE WORLD AWAY"

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N. A. ROWE 1. 1722
Kangaroo
2. 1768 de Bougainille
3. la Perouse
1787 (first received ashore)

SAMOA
UNDER THE
SAILING
GODS

Pac.
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R6
339pp.

INTRODUCTION
BY
LLOYD OSBOURNE

"Drive away from us sailing gods, lest they
come and cause disease and death."
An old Samoan prayer.

1930

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