

Kroom, Son of the Sea

By Valentine Wood



In this story is introduced **KROOM**, who will appear through a series of stories of heroic adventure, which promise to set new standards in romantic fiction.—*Editor*.

TO the gull, beating up against the last of the great gale, it was no more than a bit of white flotsam on the cobalt surface of the wind-torn sea.

To Ciba, the great shark, it was a rounded bottom of hard metal that rose and sank, and drove forward as he followed, fin under, a half-cable's length astern.

To the year-old boy, lashed under the overhang of a wide metal thwart, it was a strange cradle that swung and tossed, and lulled him into the profound sleep that comes with utter exhaustion.

MEANWHILE, in a thousand newspaper offices in a thousand cities of America and Europe, busy machines were clicking off messages from the far-flung corners of the world; food for the hot presses that rumbled and roared as they printed extra after extra devoted to the latest sensational marine tragedy.

TOKYO, Japan: The S.S. *Tashuma* reports no

further word from the yacht *Celeste*, since the SOS picked up at noon yesterday, repeated calls failing to bring an answer.

BRISBANE, Australia: By cable, via London: Little hope entertained here for yacht *Celeste*, whose SOS was picked up yesterday by Japanese steamer *Tashuma*. Wireless from S.S. *Glamortin*, which reached the latitude and longitude given by *Celeste* in her last message at 5 a.m., reports storm still raging but with diminishing intensity.

SANTIAGO, Chile: Ministry of Marine issues unconfirmed report that American yacht *Celeste* was lost with all hands about noon yesterday in the great storm still blowing in the South Pacific.

SAN FRANCISCO: Yacht *Celeste* believed lost with all hands. Sailed from here on the 5th with owner and son aboard for New Hebrides and Tasmania. Unreported since wireless picked up by Japanese steamer *Tashuma* at noon yesterday.

Veteran shipping men interviewed by *Morning Telegraph* consider small chance of a yacht of the *Celeste's* tonnage surviving gale then blowing if damaged to the extent reported in message relayed by S.S. *Tashuma*.

WASHINGTON, D.C.: Navy department without word of the *Celeste*. The president has directed the secretary of the navy to order the nearest American warship to render every assistance possible.

In a strongly guarded office in a mighty tower of steel and concrete, one of the landmarks bordering that teeming canyon that is Wall Street, an old man sat in a heavily padded chair and gazed with unseeing eyes across the manmade pinnacles of lower Manhattan.

To him, presently, came a soft-footed secretary with a sheaf of telegrams, wireless and cable messages. The old man took them, held them for a moment, glanced through the first two or three, and then dropped them unread on the rich carpet that had deadened the secretary's footsteps.

"No hope!" he said. "No hope, whatever, Parkinson! These messages are all alike. No news in this case is bad news! Have you put that call through to my daughter-in-law?"

"Ten minutes ago. I talked to her myself. She refuses to abandon hope. She says the stars have told her that her boy lives. She isn't so sure about your son; but *her* son, she declares, is under astral protection. She is leaving Denver tonight for San Francisco. Will charter a yacht and go to the scene of the wreck. Any further orders, sir?"

"No! No! Leave me alone! I want to think! To be alone!" said the old man.

The secretary gone, he fell into a half-hour of brooding abstraction. At the end of that period he stirred and looked about at the paneled walls, the silken hangings, the warm, shaded lights, the rare woods, the batteries of telephones and push buttons that were the visible evidences of his millions and power.

Then he sighed and rose, and walked to one of the wide windows overlooking the narrow streets and the wind-whipped water of the harbor.

He stood there until the sunset faded, and the lights began to wink and twinkle on the far Jersey shore. Then he looked up, above the shore lights, to where the stars were beginning to gleam in the smoky western sky.

"Perhaps! Who knows? Maybe she is right!" he whispered to himself. "Yet common sense tells me they are both gone: my son—and my grandson! The only ones I had left to inherit my millions! Gone in that storm still raging somewhere across the wide Pacific. Gone in spite of my millions! And there is nothing I can do to help them, nor discover so much as a word as to their fate beyond what I know already!"

AT that same hour the steel lifeboat was still driving before the diminishing gale. It was the only one that floated of those that had been launched from the foundering *Celeste*. The others had been swamped by the gigantic seas that had swept over the doomed yacht. Only it had survived, and it had overturned between davits and water, precipitating its adult passengers into the boiling caldron alongside.

But the year-old boy had been lashed by his nurse to a steel rib under the overhang of a steel thwart, and when the boat righted on striking the water, he had taken no hurt beyond a scaring and a slight wetting. The sun, breaking through the pall of low-hanging cloud, had soon dried his clothes and warmed his chilled body. The movements of the lifeboat, riding from crest to trough of the tremendous seas, had soon lulled him to sleep.

He slept, an atom of humanity, alone, in that expanse of angry sea still torn and dug into furrows by the last of the great storm that had overcome the sturdy *Celeste*. The lifeboat drove steadily before the wind, riding high and shipping no water after its first desperate plunge from the yacht's davits.

The sleeping boy was as safe for the time being as though he had been in his own stateroom, watched over by nurse and trained attendants. He smiled in his sleep, as children will to whom the physical world is just unfolding its, conscious marvels.

Ciba, the great shark, following astern and five feet under the surface, must have sensed that smile, for he pushed forward with a flip of his powerful tail and pressed his blunt nose against the steel keel, a foot to one side of where the boy was sleeping.

A tremor ran through the lifeboat as the great fish moved its cruel head from side to side. The boy awoke with a cry, finding blue sky above where black clouds had been a few hours before. He felt, without understanding, the presence of

something huge and evil just under the lifeboat.

He was too young to comprehend what had taken place, or to realize the apparent hopelessness of his present situation; but he was not too young to have guessed instinctively the nearness of an unseen and voracious enemy.

The boy raised a pudgy fist and struck out at the steel skin of the boat against which Ciba was nosing. The tiger of the sea felt the slight impacts, and knew that something living rode in the boat which he had been following hungrily from the scene of the wreck. Ciba was always hungry; but the knowledge that a living prey was so near sharpened his cruel appetite.

He pushed against the keel again; and again a tremor ran from stern to prow of the steel boat. He lifted his blunt nose, but the boat that had outridden the storm was too well balanced and sturdy to be upset by such as he.

The boy felt the renewed tremors and again struck the steel plating with his pudgy fist. It was a gesture of defiance, of contempt, of courage inborn in a child too young to know except through instinct the significance of what he was doing.

Ciba, however, was old and wise, after the manner of the great sharks. The boy might not know, but Ciba knew that an enemy was defying him. He had followed other lifeboats, not once, but many times, in which men rode who at first were brave to defy him; but sooner or later, thirst, hunger, wind and sea had conquered and brought them to where he followed astern, with sharp fin cutting the surface.

He dropped astern, now, rose and wallowed after the drifting boat. He could now afford to wait. He had patience, the patience of Ciba, the tiger of the sea, to whom all pay tribute who go down into the great waters of the deep.

BUT the boy had fallen asleep again, having straightway forgotten whatever it was that had frightened him. He slept throughout the afternoon, protected from the sun by the thwart under which he was lashed. He slept so soundly that he did not hear, above the lesser noises of wind and sea and creaking boat, a hollow booming that deepened and quickened and grew louder with every lunge the doomed boat made.

Although the sky was now cloudless, something resembling a cloud had appeared on the horizon to the southwest. It was at first little more than a dark

blur above the tops of the cresting waves; but as the minutes passed, it began to assume mass and outlines.

The lifeboat continued to approach it with frightful rapidity. Its speed now seemed to be due, not only to the force of the wind, but also to the pull of some irresistible current. It no longer danced from wave to wave, veering and yawing with rudderless obedience to the gusty gale, but plunged straight ahead, as though guided by some invisible and able helmsman.

As its speed increased, it rocked from side to side, as a canoe rocks in the smooth current above an approaching stretch of boulder-strewn rapids. Ciba, knowing what was coming, submerged and swam forward, rose under the boat and exerted all his cunning strength in a desperate effort to overturn it. But the boat by now was traveling too rapidly and truly toward its goal.

The boy, awakened by Ciba's efforts, cried again, and again struck with his puny fist against the steel planking. Ciba heard the faint thumping, made a last frantic thrust to upset the boat, felt the whirlpool clutching at his rough skin with hungry fingers, and diving down and to one side, abandoned the boat and its solitary occupant.

The distant booming by this time had become like the roll of thunder that heralds the typhoon. The low-lying cloud in the southwest toward which the lifeboat had been speeding like an arrow shot to a mark, had lifted above the sea and grown nearer and clearer. Its outline was now the outline of an iron coast, against which the seas broke in inconceivable grandeur.

Five, six, seven hundred, a thousand feet in places, the smooth cliff rose straight from deep water. There was no beach, no bar, no narrow ledge to break the full force of the pounding seas.

They came in with the strength of a broad ocean behind them—unhampered, unchecked, made mountainous by the great storm—to break themselves in a smother of spray against the glassy cliffs, and rise and lift their torn strength up and up, until a thousand feet above the straight edge of the perpendicular wall was wet and glistening with the last of their futile efforts to batter down the gigantic barrier nature had set in their path.

The noise of their breaking near at hand passed the limits of human hearing. It was like the roar of a tropical hurricane, that never ceases, never lets up, that tears at the eardrums and racks the nerves

and renders both thought and feeling impossible after the first five minutes of its onset.

The boy in the boat whimpered and struggled feebly, as children will when threatened by the unknown, but he was of sturdy stock, strong-fibered, with nerves of tempered steel in spite of his tender age, with a body so perfect in form, so well muscled and sound, that presently he forgot his fears and began to croon with delight at the erratic motions of the speeding boat.

The lifeboat was no longer driving forward, but in a great circle. Faster and faster it went, in narrow and narrower circles. Soon it was not so much floating as clinging to the sloping side of an immense saucer-like depression that had appeared in the sea a league or more in front of the great cliff up which the seas were tossing and breaking like immense inverted Niagaras.

No ship, no strength of a man nor fish could have resisted the whirl of that indrawn water. Not even Tana, the great whale, the leviathan of the deep, could have fought free once fairly caught within those concentric currents.

The lifeboat, light but strong, constructed out of a thin shell of toughened steel, was as helpless as an autumn leaf in an eddy above an open sluice gate.

It spun faster and faster as the great whirlpool drew it slowly but inexorably below the level of the surrounding sea. It spun alone, the one solid object within that gigantic funnel, the sides of which were whirling water, the open top of which was the sky, the pointed end of which—still fathoms underneath—was a boiling caldron of foam and mist and power of churning water beyond all measure or counting.

The boy, lulled again by the circular motion, closed his eyes and slept, as he had off and on from the moment the nurse had lashed him under the thwart. He was still dry, the circular rush of the whirlpool making its sloping sides as sprayless as ribbed glass.

He was still warm, for the sun blazed above the rim of the great funnel into which the lifeboat was slowly sinking. He was no longer afraid, for Ciba neither followed nor nosed underneath, to send tremor-like warnings through the thin shell of the boat of the presence of a lurking enemy.

His ears were no longer assailed by the thunder of the giant seas breaking against the iron-bound coast so close at hand. As the lifeboat slid farther

and farther down the sides of the funnel, its speed increased until presently it was spinning with dizzy velocity toward imminent destruction.

Spray now began to dash over the sides of the lifeboat. It no longer floated on even keel, but held fast by centrifugal force, clung half-inverted against an almost perpendicular wall of angry water. The sleeping boy was unaware of this perilous alteration in the position of the frail craft.

The same force that held the boat against the steepening wall of water held his small body against the thwart to which the lost nurse had lashed him. There was no strain on the strong but light line that held him at once secure and immovable.

As the mist-like spray from the center of the vortex rose and enveloped the boat, he awakened again and rubbed the salt sting from his eyes with his balled fist. He rubbed impatiently, fretfully, protecting himself in the only manner he knew against this strange rain that seemed bent on blinding him.

New noises were all about him now, strange, sucking, terrifying. The boat began to buck and toss like a runaway horse plunging over rough country.

Twice it turned completely over, twice righted itself, straining and groaning in every rivet and welding.

A wooden boat would have been crushed like an eggshell, but this was of steel, sturdily built, well fashioned, designed to afford the ultimate in protection made possible by the expenditure of time, skill, patience and unlimited wealth.

It held intact, though tested at times to the breaking point. There was a moment when it seemed to fly through the mist-laden air at the bottom of the funnel with the velocity of a high-powered projectile, spinning on an axis so narrow that it shone like an airplane propeller in the rainbow rays of the vanishing sun.

And then it overturned, and was drawn down into yeasty foam and torn water toward the mighty undersea current at the base of the whirlpool.

II.

GALA, son of Tindra, Keeper of the Sacred Flame, was on the Sentry Rock with his eyes fixed on the Intake, fathoms below the ruffled surface of the crystalline water.

Gala, was young, scarcely twenty, and to be

sentry after a great storm was an honor that called for unrelaxing vigilance.

He was a tall youth, ivory brown, with black, scale-like hair, large liquid-brown eyes and with iridescent tints under the muscled ripples of his satiny skin.

He was unclothed except for a loin cloth of tanned and flexible shark skin, through the belt of which was thrust a knife of black obsidian.

It was a straight-bladed knife with a knobbed, roughened hilt, pointed and ground to a cutting edge by patient whetting against a smooth stone moistened with fish oil.

Gala stood upright, head slightly bent to enable him to keep his gaze on the curling water a hundred feet below the Sentry Rock.

The rock was a jutting ledge, its surface smoothed and worn by the feet of generations of sentries, that extended over the water above the great Intake.

The Intake was a submerged tunnel at the base of the north wall, through which the outer sea rushed into the old crater.

Its opening was so deep at the base of the wall, that except in times of storm, its inflow brought no disturbance to the water below the Sentry Rock.

But a great storm had been blowing above the mighty Bowl that was the home of the Fish People. It had been such a storm as blows only once in many moons; though its fury, broken by the towering walls of the Bowl, had caused no anxiety to the Fish People.

There might be an aftermath, however, in the shape of Ciba's entry through the submerged tunnel. This happened, occasionally, for Ciba followed storms, and at such times the outer whirlpool sometimes caught him unawares and sucked him down and under the barrier wall.

There was food for him within the Bowl; and the great fish took no hurt from the bufferings of wave and current and whirling vortex.

Long experience had taught the Fish People to station a sentry on the Sentry Rock to watch for Ciba's appearance. Today, Gala was the lucky youngster chosen for this honor. He had stood sentry before, but never after a storm. His responsibility was shown by his motionless posture and by his complete absorption in the water above the Intake. His eyes, trained to pierce air and water alike, were fixed on the dark mouth of the deep undersea tunnel.

A civilized man could not have distinguished that cavernous opening in the sheer rock under the blue and sparkling surface, but Gala was not a civilized man. He was a son of the Fish People, one of a race accustomed for uncounted generations to regard the sea as being theirs equally with the land.

Its depths had been his playground, its strange flowers and grottoes his garden, since he could first splash arms and legs in the shallows before his mother's cave dwelling.

He was not alone in this: all children among the Fish People were virtually amphibious. It was a quality explained by the world in which the Fish People lived, a strange world beyond which lay nothing, to their knowledge but the sky, and the distant outer sea, the presence of which last they guessed rather than knew with any certainty.

It was a round world, shaped like a bowl partially filled with pellucid water that by day took on the azure hues of the sky, and at night became a purple floor studded with star reflections.

Actually, it was the interior of the truncated cone of a long-extinct volcano.

At some far-distant date, so remote as to be counted in aeons rather than centuries, the fires had died in the great volcano; to be replaced by the sea, which rushing in through a vast opening torn by some mighty explosion, had filled the bed of the crater to its own tide-obeying level.

Perhaps the Fish People were the descendants of some race that had lived on the precipitous slopes of the volcano island before the great catastrophe. There was no way of telling, for their entry into the Bowl was shrouded in fable and legend, and incorporated in the songs the mothers sang to their children when gathered on the narrow beaches at twilight.

Gala knew all the legends, all the fables, all the songs, but seldom troubled his mind about the origin of the people from whom he sprang. He was too much occupied with other matters, vastly more important from the standpoint of a youth just emerging into manhood.

There were, for example, new ways to be learned for fighting the smaller sharks brought in by the current that flowed through the great Intake. Also, new methods for shaping and sharpening the obsidian knives, that were the Fish People's sole weapons, for they did not know the use of metals.

These, with the games and sports, common to the youths of all races, had been food enough for

Gala's simple intelligence.

From where he stood on the Sentry Rock he could have looked across, if his attention had not been fixed on the Intake, to the opposite side of the Bowl, fully ten miles distant.

The Bowl was almost circular, its walls steep, glassy, smooth, and unscalable. In places they rose over a thousand feet above the narrow strips of beach that fringed their inner bases. In places they overhung the water, presenting a concave surface, for the perimeter of the Bowl at the top of the cliffs was less than the perimeter of the landlocked lake that filled it at sea level.

As a result, the Fish People on looking up would see a narrowed sky above their little world of rock, sand and water. To climb those glass-like, overhanging cliffs, and reach the rim so far above, was impossible. It had been tried, not once, but thousands of times during the long ages the Fish People had made the Bowl their home, only to be met with failure after failure.

To swim out through the great undersea Intake was likewise impossible. Day and night, never varying except when a storm from the right quarter increased its speed and volume, a current flowed in from the outer sea of such velocity and power that not even the strongest swimmer among the Fish People could make headway against it.

There was but the one Intake. All the waters in the Bowl drained out through some unknown channel in the unfathomed depths of the old crater. As a result, the enclosed water was always as fresh as the sea, and of the same level as the sea.

There were no changes other than the rise and fall of the tides, the calms that followed windless days, and the dancing whitecaps that came when the gales whined and whistled above the untrodden summits of the circular cliffs that shut the Bowl in from the outer world.

GALA shifted his weight, grown suddenly tired of standing in one motionless posture. As he changed position, the long flexible muscles in shoulders, back and in legs rippled smoothly under his brown skin.

He had the true swimmer's muscles, not overlange, bunched nor hardened, but elongated and with the elasticity of finest rubber.

His joints were supple, the articulations at knee, ankle, wrist and elbow being so strong yet delicate, that "double-jointed" would have been an

insufficient term with which to describe his marvelous flexibility of arms, legs and body.

He had inherited these bodily traits from his ancestors, who, crowded on the narrow beaches within the Bowl, had been forced to spend the greater part of their lives on, in and under the water.

As a result, they had developed in time bodies that were fitted to their peculiar environment. Gala—as were all the Fish People—was as nearly an amphibian as it is possible for a man to be. Not only were his muscles and joints suited to diving and swimming, but his lungs, nasal passages and blood vessels were suited for submergence at great depths and for prolonged periods.

That was why the deep water below the Sentry Rock held no terrors for him. Neither had the height, a hundred feet above the surface, on which he stood. His eyes, accustomed to blinding sun above and clouded depths below, did not waver as they searched the dark chasm that was the mouth of the Intake.

Little sharks flashed by, and other fish of all the colors of the rainbow, sucked in and brought into the Bowl after being caught by the whirlpool, but Ciba, the wary tiger of the sea, was seldom caught by tide or current against which his mighty muscles and cunning could not bring him free.

When he was so caught and brought into the Bowl, there followed a time of battle and mourning for the Fish People. Their primitive stone knives enabled them to attack and overcome the little sharks—but not Ciba.

His tough skin was immune to those blunt edges, his power too great for the boldest and most active swimmers. Yet he must be attacked, and would continue to be attacked, so long as the Fish People wished to endure, and there were brave hearts and strong bodies willing to stake their all against the tribal enemy.

Gala knew that the post of chief sentry after a great storm was one of the utmost danger. If nothing happened, all would be well; and he would return when his term of duty was over to his family cave dwelling over under the south wall; but if Ciba made his appearance, then he, Gala, would never return to the well-loved family circle.

Instead, his lifeblood would redden the clear water that rushed through the great Intake. But even though death must wait for him in the course of such an event, his life would not have been

wasted, for he would have given the warning to the other and farther sentries.

These, youths like himself, were stationed at intervals on ledges around the great wall. The nearer kept their eyes fixed on Gala. Those farther on watched those nearest the chief sentry.

So long as the latter stood motionless, they would remain as they were; but let him cry aloud and send his supple body in a flashing arc toward the water far below, and they would take up the cry and send it on from ledge to ledge, until the news that an enemy had been sighted at the mouth of the Intake had reached the most remote cave dwelling under the basalt cliffs.

In this way, the news of Ciba's entry into the old crater would be known to a majority of the Fish People almost before the chief sentry's body had cut the rippled surface above the cruel fish.

No matter who the chief sentry happened to be, his duty was to attack Ciba with his stone knife, and although this was the stated duty for which he was chosen, each sentry knew that his real usefulness consisted in giving warning that could be relayed from sentry to sentry, so that the full man power of the tribe could be mobilized to beat off the intruder.

His job would be finished by the time he struck the water. What followed after that would be the job of older and wiser men, but Gala—as was the case with all youthful sentries—had dreams of conquering Ciba single-handed, should the opportunity present itself.

A vain dream, since no sentry ever had survived an encounter with the great man-eating shark of the deep outer ocean! Gala shivered slightly, with nervous reaction, as his gaze strove to penetrate still farther the cloudy depths below the Sentry Rock.

He was not afraid, for the Fish People were strangers to fear, but he was burdened with a great responsibility, and being young, was naturally anxious to acquit himself with credit during his first term as chief sentry.

The hot sun blazed down upon his uncovered head, being but a short hour at most above the rim of the far western wall. When the red ball touched the basalt cliff, Gala's term of duty would be ended for the day and his place be taken by another.

Until that moment, double vigilance was necessary, for the declining sun threw the shadow of the cliff across the blue water, turning the lower

strata to dark purple, wherein such small fish as moved were scarcely distinguishable to the alert watcher above.

As the shadows lengthened, the purple tints of the under water grew deeper. Soon Gala was gazing down into a mysterious twilight zone, through which even his trained vision had difficulty in penetrating.

Shadows moved there that wavered and shifted, puzzling the eyes of the watcher on the Sentry Rock. Seaweed, torn loose from some far island beach and sucked down by the whirlpool as it was driven before the great storm, streamed from the mouth of the Intake.

Fragments of rock and coral, sand, and the minor detritus that underwater currents carry in their course, further obscured Gala's field of sight. He stood now with legs apart, head bent forward, right hand resting on the hilt of his stone knife.

His own shadow, elongated, reached across the Sentry Rock and lay, like a dark finger, against the basalt wall at his back.

It lengthened, not with his movements, for he was motionless, but with every fractional drop of the fast-sinking sun.

As it reached farther and farther across the basalt wall, Mapa, the youth who was to relieve Gala at the hour of sunset, emerged from the water at the foot of the cliff, and shaking the salt spray from hair and eyes, began to ascend the rough steps that led to the Sentry Rock.

He was halfway up, clinging to the smooth rock, when a cry rang out above him.

It was a cry that froze his blood and paralyzed his muscles for one heart-stopping moment.

Before the echo had time to rebound from the towering wall of the Bowl, Mapa saw a slim figure spring up and out from the Sentry Rock, and fall in a flashing curve toward the water from which he had just emerged.

From ledge to ledge, other sentries had taken up and passed on the cry. Mapa scrambled up the remaining steps that led to the Sentry Rock, and reaching his post of duty, looked with racing heart at what he thought was the opening chapter of a tragedy in the shadowy water above the Intake.

The stone on which he stood was still warm from the pressure of Gala's feet, but Gala was down there, alone, under the rippled surface, speeding to meet a dark object that had been ejected from the mouth of the Intake.

Ciba is long, broad, and swims with the speed of a strong undersea current. His back is rounded when seen from a height; his color varying with the color of the sea in which he forages. His belly gleams white as he rolls to seize his prey.

What Mapa saw was a shadow, a long object, rounded like Ciba's back, about Ciba's length and bulk, that gleamed white like Ciba's belly flashes as it shot from the mouth of the Intake fathoms below the surface.

Gala's body was a plummet that fell to meet the shadowy object. Mapa's orders forbade him to dive to the other sentry's assistance. It was his duty to stand where Gala had stood and watch for further enemies that might emerge from the Intake.

The entry of Ciba into the Bowl was the greatest calamity that could befall the Fish People. He would stay there for weeks, perhaps months, during which time the women and children would be compelled to remain on the narrow beaches, and keep clear of deep water.

For the Fish People used the water in the Bowl as people on dry land use the trails and roads that connect cities, towns and villages. Moreover, from its depths they took seaweed, fish of all kinds, shells that served them for household utensils, fish skin from which they made such primitive body coverings as they were accustomed to wear; and in addition the water was their meeting place, their playground, their only means of diversion after the day's work.

To have a man-eater at large in the Bowl, was like having a hungry tiger at large in a thickly settled countryside. It was death to travel, death to fish, death to do aught but cower on the narrow beaches and pray to the Sacred Flame that the men-folk would return from their massed and organized hunt after the dread intruder.

Gala knew all this from childhood, but now he was a man, chief sentry, flashing down through darkening water, the obsidian knife, sharpened by patient labor, firmly clutched in his strong right hand.

He was carried down by the impetus of his hundred-foot dive, as well as by movements of body, arms and legs too sinuous and fish-like to be caught by the human eye.

The Fish People do not thrash through the water as other humans do, but glide without effort or waste motion, their flexible bodies and elastic muscles driving them forward without conscious

effort.

Swimming was as natural and easy to Gala as walking to one born and bred on the land. Diving a hundred feet down meant nothing to him, whose lungs, heart and blood vessels were adapted to tremendous underwater pressures.

Even the shadowy depths into which he sank, in nowise bewildered him. His eyes pierced those clouded reaches, lighted above by the last beams of the sun, which filtered down and made fantastic the rock wall and streaming seaweed, and the fleeting shadow cast by his own rushing body.

To meet him came another shadow, monstrous and terrible while still far away; that swung up at him, with the long, gliding, irresistible motion of Ciba driving for an enemy.

They met with a shock that shattered the obsidian knife and numbed Gala's arm from wrist to shoulder socket.

This was not Ciba, but another and stranger fish, with a shell as hard as polished basalt and a buoyant power that lifted Gala as he clutched its rounded sides, and bore him up and up until he and it leaped clear of the broken water as the tarpon leaps when it feels the tug of the barbed hook.

The air, imprisoned within the overturned lifeboat, had brought it to the surface in a rush that neither pressure of water nor Gala's strong clutch on its side could hold back.

Sucked down by the whirlpool, the overturned boat had been drawn by the swift current flowing through the natural tunnel that pierced the basalt shell of the long-extinct volcano.

Its steel frame had resisted weight of water and force of current. Its speed had kept it keel up, so that from the moment of its first overturning it had acted in the capacity of an oddly shaped diving bell.

No water had invaded that air-filled hollow wherein the boy, still lashed to the thwart, had made an underwater journey from the outer sea to the Bowl that was the home of the Fish People.

He had passed under the great cliff that towered to unscalable heights into the sky.

He had passed under safely, warmly, dryly, with no hurt whatever beyond a normal fright at the sudden change from broad daylight to inky blackness.

The roar and turmoil of the waters' flow from the base of the whirlpool to where they were discharged into the Bowl through the cavernous

Intake, were no more to him than the roaring and whistling of the gale that had overcome the *Celeste*.

In fact, he smiled, when Gala righting the battered boat, gazed down at the white-skinned boy who met his look with wide-opened, golden-fringed blue eyes.

Not only smiled, but laughed, stretching chubby fists to this strange brown man who had appeared so unexpectedly above the side of the boat.

Gala had realized with the first impact of his knife against the boat that it was not Ciba he was attacking, but some unknown and mysterious marvel from that outer world of which he knew nothing; not a fish, nothing living, but an object made by man for some purpose beyond his understanding.

When he and the boat had leaped clear of the water, following that wild rush upward from the mouth of the Intake he had taken in its dimensions and shape in one lightning glance and had striven to right it, even before he and it had fallen back into the foaming water from which they had just emerged.

The Fish People were ignorant of the use of boats. All travel was by swimming. The few stunted palms that grew on the narrow beaches under the overhanging cliffs were too valuable to be cut down and made into rafts—if rafts had been needed among a population as much at home in the water as on land.

Their wood was used for fuel, for rough furniture to make comfortable the bare cave dwellings; their green tops and fruit afforded a welcome change of diet to old people and invalids.

Though Gala had never seen a boat, once the battered lifeboat was righted and floating on even keel, he understood what it was, even while stunned with amazement at sight of its living occupant.

The boy laughed again and stretched toward Gala's hand that clung to the bent gunwale. His eyes were the color of the sky at midday, after a rainstorm had washed clean the upper atmosphere. His hair was curly and golden, a color never before seen on a human head among the Fish People. His skin, untouched as yet by sun, was an ivory white, tinged with pink and marked with a trace of blue blood vessels.

All the Fish People were dark—darker even than Gala. All eyes among them were dark, liquid brown, all hair black and scale-like when seen

under the tropic sun.

Never before had Gala seen anyone like this laughing blond boy. Instinctively he laughed back into the blue eyes that looked up at him.

The boy laughed again; and Gala reaching down, allowed his finger to be seized by a strong little fist. By now the trails that crisscrossed the Bowl, were crowded with the heads of rapidly approaching swimmers. The entire population, excepting only the sentries standing on their high ledges around the wall, seemed to be hurrying toward the strange white object to which Gala clung with the pride of a discoverer announcing a new marvel.

III.

THE lifeboat had drifted toward the center of the Bowl. Willing swimmers, seizing its sides and stern, propelled it toward the Southern Beach where waited the fathers of the Fish People. Gala had crawled over the gunwale, and untying the line that lashed the boy to the thwart, had taken him in his arms and held him proudly for all to see as the strange procession moved steadily onward.

Twilight had come by the time the keel of the lifeboat grated on the pebbly sand where stood the fathers of the tribe, headed by Tindra, Keeper of the Sacred Flame, and backed by a vast crowd that overflowed the beach and extended into the shallows, from which fresh heads broke as swimmer after swimmer rose from the water to join the earlier arrivals.

Tindra took the boy from Gala's hands and held him aloft so all gathered near might see. Those farther away pressed inward to get a nearer view. There were no sounds but the scuffling of feet, hoarse breathing, excited cries that were stilled on the instant out of respect for Tindra.

THEN before Tindra could speak, Meti, Gala's widowed sister, pushed through the throng and took the laughing boy from Tindra's hands.

She was wild-eyed, her breast heaving, her hair disordered, half-mad since Ciba had torn both son and husband from her sight, following a great storm not twelve moons back.

She caught the boy to her heart for an instant, looking down into his blue eyes which met hers without trace of fear or amazement. As she looked, the wildness faded from her face, and her features

grew soft and tender.

“He has come from the sea!” she chanted. “He has come in the place of my son who was taken by Ciba!”

Very tenderly, crooning a little song, she unwrapped the coverings from about his small body, which shone rosy pink in the last flares of twilight.

“We must find him a name!” she chanted. “A name to fit one all golden and white, who has come to the Fish People through the terrors of the great Intake!

“A name to fit one who is to be the son of Meti, and the grandson of Tindra, Keeper of the Sacred Flame! A name to fit one who shall conquer Ciba when he grows to manhood! A name to fit one who shall be chief of his chosen people! A name not given to anyone else among all the Fish People! A name—”

Meti paused, her eyes distended, her lips trembling.

The boy had turned in her hands, and his naked back, muscled like an infant giant’s, was not a foot from her eyes. In the small of his back, showing clearly against the rosy whiteness of his velvety skin, was a pattern of tiny stars, fixed there indelibly by a tattooer’s needle.

Etched in purple and blue, the pattern was as unmistakable as though drawn on smooth paper by the draftsman’s pencil.

A look of awe crept over the faces of those nearest Meti.

The woman bent closer, and traced with the tip of her finger the distances between star and star.

It was as though she were trying to draw between star and star faint but visible lines, connecting the individual stars into a single constellation.

It was in this manner that the ancients, who discovered the science of the stars by tracing invisible lines between star and star, picked out the various constellations, afterward giving them the names by which they were to be known to future generations.

But the Fish People, being isolated from the outside world, had been forced to invent names of their own for the bright star clusters that blazed in the arching sky above the truncated crater that was their home.

One star, the largest and most central, glowed ruby-red as though the tattooer had dipped his

needle in crimson ink along with the purple and blue when working it. It was rendered more conspicuous by two smaller stars that stood guardian on either side. Beyond these were others; reaching out from the central star was a long curved stem of stars, forming a sweeping tail that curved up and ended in a pair of larger stars.

Meti examined each tiny star again, and again traced the invisible lines between star and star.

The swift, short twilight of near-equatorial latitudes had already passed. Torches had been lighted, and their yellow flames were reflected from staring eyeballs as the crowd pressed closer. Meti waved the torch bearers aside, and lifted a pointing arm toward the sky above the barrier wall to the north.

All turned as she pointed. There was a murmur among the people like the murmur of a following wave up a pebble-strewn beach.

It was succeeded by a sigh, a gasp of awed understanding from those nearest Meti.

Her pointing finger passed from star to star of the great constellation that blazed in the evening sky.

One star, the largest and most central, glowed red as though pricked into a purple canopy with a needle-like pen dipped in crimson ink.

It was Antares, the star called by the Chinese “The Great Fire,” one hundred and sixty-five times larger than our sun, the heart of that constellation known to astronomers as “The Scorpion.”

The Fish People had their own name for what is probably the finest of those immeasurably distant star figures.

Meti’s pointing finger went on from star to star. To the hushed beholders, she seemed to touch Antares, then Beta and Delta, known also as Al Jabhab, with Pi, below them, marking the front of the Scorpion’s head.

Then she indicated the tail, beginning with Epsilon, turning downward then up, and terminating in Lambda and Upsilon, stars of the Third and Fourth magnitude, and which seem to be immersed in the Milky Way where it falls behind the horizon in clouds of flaky luminosity.

As she finished outlining the constellation, her lips parted.

At first, no sound issued. Then slowly, softly, she whispered the name given ages before by the ancestors of the Fish People to that great constellation.

“*Kroom!*”

The crowd took up the name, as she held the boy aloft for those nearest to see the design tattooed on his back.

“*Kroom!—Kroom!—Kroom!*”

Their chant became as the sound of the surf breaking against the iron-bound cliffs that shut the crater off from the sea.

“*Kroom!—Kroom!—Kroom!—Kroom!*”

“IT shall be his name!” cried Meti. “He shall be known as Kroom, Son of the Sea, Foster Child of the Fish People! He shall take the place of the son I have lost, the son who was torn from me by Ciba!

“He shall grow and be strong, and shall be taught all our cunning, and the lore of our divers and swimmers! He shall become happy and powerful, he who came through the great Intake from the far, unseen world beyond, to make his home in the Bowl! He who is now a little child, but who shall grow to be a man, and a weaver of strange destinies! Have I spoken truly, O people?”

“You have spoken truly! His name shall be Kroom! He is marked with the sign of the stars!”

“Kroom! Kroom! Kroom!” the assembled Fish People answered in chorus.

IV.

MONTHS later, a young woman stood on a heaving deck and watched a dark blur to the southwest, that at times took on a silvery sheen against an ominous sky.

The glass was falling, and the captain of the chartered yacht approached and touched his cap uneasily.

“We had best be turning back, ma’am. To approach nearer in face of this storm is dangerous. Yonder is the worst coast in the world. Some say it’s solid rock, and others say it’s an old volcano. It rises sheer from water two miles deep, and there isn’t a beach, or so much as a square yard of footing anywhere around it. Only a crazy man would run in close.

“That silvery color you notice every now and then is the sea breaking against it and rising clear to the top. Those cliffs look low from here, but they’re a thousand and more feet above the water. That shows what kind of a coast it is.

“Those breakers are rolling in now straight from

the Horn. A small boat wouldn’t have any more chance of making a landing there than a bit of tallow dropped into a pan of hot lard.

“Besides, I’ve heard tell there’s a whirlpool hereabouts that’s a bit more than dangerous. There’s nothing between this rock and the pole. Just water—angry water. Any orders, ma’am?”

The woman was silent for a moment, gazing with haggard eyes toward that dark blue that was momentarily obscured with silvery foam. She had been traversing and retraversing those limitless seas for weeks, bent on a quest that she thought was all but hopeless from the first.

Yet somewhere in those wild wastes of waters the *Celeste* had gone down with husband and son overboard!

The husband gone forever, as even she felt sure; but against all reason her mother’s instinct refused to abandon hope for the boy.

Finally, she said:

“Of course you are right, captain. It is time to turn back. Even I can see that nothing living could land on that rock. To hold otherwise and approach nearer would be to run an unnecessary danger. You are responsible for the yacht and all aboard. Do what you think best; give any orders you think required. I will hold out no longer.

“This search was hopeless from the start. And yet—you will think me silly, mad—I feel my boy lives! He is under astral protection! I have had him marked with a certain sign, by which I would recognize him again among a million, no matter how old he had grown or how many years we had been parted.

“But to continue our present search would be foolish—worse than foolish—wicked! We have scoured these seas, visited every island and atoll on which a landing could have been made, questioned every vessel that was within range of the *Celeste*’s wireless at the time of the sinking. And all to no purpose!

“But I’ll not give up entirely. I’ll go back to San Francisco, and from there to my father-in-law’s house on Long Island. And there I’ll wait—wait for the news that some day will come to me from the stars into whose control I have given my boy’s destiny!”

The captain touched his cap again and uttered a sharp command. The yacht came about with thrashing screws, presenting her broadside to the distant rock. With the hum of rising wind through

superstructure and cordage, came a hollow booming. It came again and yet again, while the yacht gathering headway pitched and tossed in the mounting seas.

It was the booming of the tremendous surf against that iron-bound outer wall that enclosed the Bowl wherein Kroom, Son of the Sea and Foster Child of the Fish People, was already beginning to feel at home.

V.

KROOM heard the song the children were singing on the beach before Meti's cave dwelling.

“We are the Fish People,
Our paths go down in the sea,
We sport in its hidden shadows,
Of its corals and caves we are free;
And Kroom is our foster brother,
Wiser and fairer than we.”

A score of years had passed since the night Meti had given him the name by which he was to be known thereafter.

He had been too young at the time to remember anything.

For him life had begun within the Bowl, with his small body cradled in Meti's arms, dim firelight playing over the walls of the cave that was their home facing the Southern Beach.

Gala, by now, was a man grown, with a home and children of his own.

Tindra, Keeper of the Sacred Flame, father of Gala and Meti, was an old man, who warmed his chilled bones beside the fire that burned continually in the Sacred Cave into which none but the fathers of the Fish People were allowed to penetrate.

Tonight, Kroom was to be taken into the Sacred Cave and there assume his place among the men of the tribe.

He was spending the remaining hours of his boyhood sharpening and resharpening the obsidian knife that he, in common with all the grown men of the Fish People, wore thrust through the belt of the sharkskin loincloth that was his sole article of clothing.

On the morrow he was to take his first term of duty as chief sentry on the Sentry Rock, above the submerged opening of the great Intake.

The hot sunlight, refracted from the water outside the cave, bathed Kroom in its yellow glare and showed to the full his well-muscled, perfectly proportioned body.

Six feet to the fraction of an inch from sole to crown, he possessed a grace of movement that concealed the power latent in his lithe frame covered with whipcord muscles that were as strong and as resilient as springs forged from tempered steel.

His skin was a golden yellow that shone in the sun with the luster of polished ivory.

His hair was spun gold, cropped close at neck and back, and falling in curling ringlets above his eyes and temples.

On his cheeks was a faint, golden down, the sign of his youth and at the same time a promise of his coming manhood.

His eyes were as blue as the sea that filled the crater before Meti's cave dwelling.

His nose was classic in its straightness, his mouth well formed and good humored, his chin chiseled with an out-thrust that bespoke unusual strength of character.

But his attitude as he sat cross-legged and ground his knife on a whetstone of smooth basalt was that of a youth completely engrossed with the task in hand.

Actually, he was listening to the children singing, while at the same time waiting for Meti to emerge from her inner chamber.

When she finally appeared, he sprang to his feet, thrusting the keen whetted knife through his sharkskin belt.

“Greetings, O Meti!”

The Fish People address one another by their given names, without the formality of prefix or title. Meti was Kroom's foster mother, but she had taught him as a child to call her “Meti,” the name by which she was called by all except her own family. Tindra called her “daughter,” and Gala “sister”; but Kroom in common with everyone else spoke to her as “Meti.”

But in the tones of his voice there was affection, respect and an all-abiding confidence.

She was the only mother he could remember, and her love for him was as deep and as abiding as though he had been her own child.

“Greetings, O Kroom! Are you getting nervous as the hour approaches?”

“I am not nervous, Meti. I have whetted my

knife until it is as sharp as I can make it. I have listened to the children singing on the beach outside. I have heard the wavelets lapping on the shore, and the wind whistling past the mouth of the cave I have been thinking that you have been very good to me, O Meti, who am a stranger and of a strange people.”

“You are my son, my foster son, the adopted child of the Fish People,” Meti answered.

Meti was brown where Kroom was golden. She was tall, and still slender, though no longer young. There were gray strands in the scale-like black hair that covered her small head, but her step was springy and her voice of full timbre.

Her eyes, dark brown, liquid and oval, grew soft as they regarded Kroom.

She was wearing a short tunic made from tanned skin cut from the bellies of young sharks. It fell from her shoulders to about her knees, hanging loosely to allow her body free movement. On one wrist she wore a bracelet of red coral, carved from one piece and polished by long friction. Except for this, she wore no ornament of any kind, after the fashion of matrons among the Fish People.

The voices of the children drifted in through the mouth of the cave:

“We are the Fish People,
To Ciba we owe no toll;
After the storm at the Intake,
We guard the gate to the Bowl;
And Kroom shall be chosen sentry,
When Tindra opens the scroll.”

“They sing about you,” said Meti. “Your name heads the list for tomorrow. You will not be rash, my son?”

“I will not be rash,” answered Kroom. “But I fear not Ciba, O Meti! I have met him in a dream, long ago, before I came to the Bowl, and did not fear him!”

“He is the tiger of the sea. I dread the chance that you might go against him,” said Meti.

“Nevertheless, I fear him not,” said Kroom, stretching and rocking on toes and heels as the warm blood coursed through his young body.

“He tore my husband and son to pieces before my eyes,” Meti continued with a shudder. “No man among the Fish People has ever met Ciba unaided and come off victorious. Take no risks, my son.”

“I will take no risks, but I fear not Ciba,”

Kroom assured her.

“If you but had a sharper knife,” said Meti, “I would be less fearful. Our knives are strong, but they are not keen enough to cut through Ciba’s tough skin. Only when our men-folk attack him in numbers and force him into shallow water can we prevail against him.

“And by then there are many widows and sorrowing mothers to chant the death chant above the reddened waves. I know, for I remember my own sorrowful singing. I have spoken, and will speak no more. Be well guarded, my son!”

Kroom promised Meti again to take no more risks than his coming position of chief sentry called for. He was quite honest in stating that he did not fear Ciba. The Fish People are strangers to fear as it is commonly understood, but Ciba was so dangerous that a boy could be excused a certain dread at the thought of having to go against him.

In Kroom’s case this dread would have been only natural, for he was possessed of an imagination more vivid and powerful than any among the Fish People.

This was his inheritance from his American father and mother, though its possession was unguessed by him at the time. He only knew that he could see things further into the future than any of his companions. Not only see further, but devise ways and means of accomplishing things that the others never thought of.

It was this inventive quality, as well as his good nature, strength and skill in all bodily exercises that had made him a leader among the young men of his own age.

VI.

THAT night Kroom squatted among the neophytes gathered before the Sacred Flame and heard Tindra chant in a quavering voice the prayers for those about to be initiated into the rites pertaining to full manhood.

The old keeper’s voice rose and fell in time to the screaming of the gale that raged above the precipitous cliffs that formed the walls of the Bowl.

A great storm had come on at sunset, with inky clouds and a wind of such force that Kroom never remembered one like it. Even the sheltered water within the Bowl had been torn and whipped into fury, and the whole Bowl quivered with the impact of the mountainous seas without.

Kroom knew that this meant that his coming duty as chief sentry was to be doubly dangerous, but he gave it no heed, rapt as he was in following all that went on before him.

The Sacred Cave was lighted only by the Sacred Flame that blazed in the hollow central altar.

This was a huge, round block of volcanic rock, hollowed like the Bowl, and pierced at the bottom by narrow openings through which the air rushed to give draft to the Flame.

The Flame rose straight and clear from its fuel of sun-dried seaweed moistened with fish oil.

It gave an amber light that showed the fathers of the tribe packed in serried ranks behind the row of young men about to be initiated.

Kroom squatted in the center of the group, with three youths of his own age on his right, and three others on his left.

His fair skin and golden hair shone by contrast with the dark coloring of those by whom he was surrounded.

Gala, who was to stand sponsor for him in virtue of his having discovered the child, Kroom, in the lifeboat, sat just behind him.

The sponsors of the other six sat on either side of the grave, attentive Gala.

One of these was Mapa, who had followed Gala to the Sentry Rock on that memorable evening long before; and he now nudged Gala and said:

“Little did we think when you dived from the Rock, O Gala, that you would one day be sitting as sponsor to a child that had come through the great Intake. Rather, we thought to see you torn apart by Ciba. It was a lucky day for you when the Ciba you fancied you saw turned out to be a strange craft made by some strange people.”

“Aye! Lucky for me! And let us hope it was an equally lucky day for the Fish People!” Gala answered soberly.

“And for this youngster here before you—lucky for him, too, eh, Gala?”

“Aye! Lucky for him, who shall have need of much luck before tomorrow’s sunset,” Gala answered with equal seriousness.

KROOM heard the conversation but vaguely, his attention focused on Tindra.

The ancient Keeper of the Sacred Flame was approaching his peroration. His quavering voice rose shrilly under the vaulted dome of the Sacred Cave:

“Warm them, O Flame, in deep water!
Make bright their hours of darkness!
Bring them from perils of Ciba!
To be Fathers among our people!”

The Invocation to the Flame ended, there was a stir among those around Tindra.

One by one the young men on either side of Kroom were brought forward by their sponsors and made to take the oath that admitted them to full membership in the tribe. When Kroom’s turn came, he rose with Gala’s hand on his shoulder and stepped up to Tindra, right hand uplifted, voice swelling and filling the cave as he repeated the words the old keeper intoned for his benefit.

“To be faithful at all times and true to the Fish People!

“To take no heed of wind, sun or current when on business for the common good!

“To fear neither Ciba nor the monsters that live in the depths of the outer sea!

“To respect the aged, the infirm, the weak and those over whom one has been given authority!

“To work no injustice! To be clean in speech and deed, and obedient to all laws and customs!

“To serve willing at the call of duty, whatsoever the call might be!

“To accept no profit of any kind from the performance of a public duty!

“To be slow to anger, slow to speech—but quick to go to a brother’s assistance!”

There were a great many more, all of which Kroom had learned by heart and now repeated at the promptings of the old keeper.

His voice was a clear baritone, firmer and more resonant than any among the Fish People.

He stood erect, head thrown back, eyes on Tindra’s wrinkled countenance.

When the oath had been taken, Tindra anointed his forehead with the sacred fish oil and announced his acceptance as a man, with all a man’s rights and privileges, among the Fish. People.

KROOM breathed a sigh of relief, but not so loud that anyone could hear. The ordeal over, he was about to step back to his place among the other newly initiated, when Gala stopped him with one word:

“Wait!”

The rearmost ranks of silent men already were streaming from the cave. The ceremony was over, and the six who had been given the oath along with Kroom were leaving with the older men. Soon, only Kroom, Gala and Tindra were left in the cave.

"My son," said Tindra, addressing Kroom, "we have kept you here, after the others have gone, for a certain purpose. You are now fully and truly one of the Fish People, as you have been from the beginning in all except the matter of taking the oath and being anointed with the oil.

"And yet, as you know, you were not born in the Bowl, but entered through the Intake, being then twelve moons old, as has been explained to you not once but a thousand times. But although born among a strange, light-skinned people—whose name and whose dwelling place we know not—you have become in all matters a child of the Fish People."

"I do know. And I do understand," Kroom answered gently.

"Accordingly, Gala and I, having taken counsel together and conferring with the elders of the tribe, have reached certain conclusions," Tindra continued. "One of these is, that while you are to all intents and purposes one of us, you are not to be bound beyond the terms of the oath if at some future time your interests should lead you elsewhere.

"In other words, that while no one of all the Fish People ever has left the Bowl or deserted the tribe, even for a day, this does not hold as against you. If you can manage to do what no man ever has done—scale the high walls or swim out through the Intake—you are free to go; and free to come back, at any time, day or night; and shall be welcomed on your return with heartfelt rejoicing. Is this understood?"

"It is understood. I am thankful and grateful, but I have no wish ever to leave the Fish People," Kroom answered.

"Perhaps not now. But who can read the future!" said Tindra. "So much have we decided, taking counsel together. And another thing: You were brought into the Bowl enclosed within a shell of some hard and unknown substance. Within that shell, you were kept dry, safe and warm, and protected against the bufferings of angry currents during your passage through the Intake.

"That shell we have preserved in an inner cave against the day you should reach full manhood. It is

yours—not ours. You have been told about it, but have never seen it. The time has come for us to show you this shell and place it and all it contains into your keeping.

"Follow me into the inner cave. And do you, Gala, bring a torch, that we may have light to see this strange marvel of which I have been speaking."

By the smoky glare from the torch that Gala provided, Kroom inspected the lifeboat from the long-lost *Celeste*. It was in a fair state of preservation, though much battered from the pressure of the great whirlpool. Its paint had scaled, but the steel frame though rusted, was intact. Kroom examined it from stem to stern, tapping against it, first with his knuckles, then with the hilt of his obsidian knife.

"What manner of thing—turtle, lobster or crab—lived in this huge shell?" he asked Tindra.

"It is unknown," answered Tindra. "There are those among us who claim that this is no empty shell dredged from the sea, but a thing made by man, hollowed out of some strange type of rock, as our artisans hollow vessels for cooking out of fragments from our hard cliffs.

"Unquestionably, it was designed to float on the water, from which we infer that its makers are ignorant of the arts of diving and swimming as practiced among our people. There are objects under the shelf at the pointed end, which you should examine, Kroom."

Kroom stepped obediently to the bow of the lifeboat, and reaching in, drew out a water cask, a tin box holding a few moldy dry biscuits, and an equally moldy sheath in which was a sailor's clasp knife.

These were all that were left of the stores placed in the boat at the time it had been launched from the foundering *Celeste*. The staves of the water cask came apart in his hands. The biscuits he tossed aside after stirring them with his fingers, but the clasp knife, in its moldy leather sheath, he held out to Tindra:

"Is this mine? May I keep this?"

"Keep what you wish. The shell and what it contains belongs to you, and to you only," Tindra answered.

Kroom slipped the sheathed knife under his loincloth belt, not knowing what it was but liking its weight and balance.

He took it out on returning to Meti's cave dwelling and examined it more closely in the light

from the embers of the fire on the cooking platform.

The Fish People do not understand the use of chimneys, but they manage very well by using pipe-less stoves in the shape of hollow blocks of stone through the bottom of which holes have been drilled to insure ventilation. The tops of these stoves are made of movable stone slabs, that can be lifted off to allow a cook pot to be placed close to the flame, and the whole sits on a bench raised about a foot from the floor, which is known as the cooking platform.

It had been a simple matter for Kroom to slide the top slab from the hollowed rock, and drop on the spark of fire a handful of dried seaweed.

Holding the moldy leather sheath to the mounting flame, he turned it over and over, finally withdrawing the knife that consisted of a seven-inch blade hinged onto a strong steel-and-bone handle.

He saw at once what it was, but did not know at first how to open the blade.

Meti was soundly asleep, having retired to her sleeping nook as soon as she had heard from him all that it was permissible to tell a woman about the initiation.

He had shown her the sheathed knife, but she was not curious and had returned it to him after a brief scrutiny.

Now he had absolute privacy for the remainder of the night in which to satisfy himself as to its nature and probable uses.

Along with his fair skin, golden hair and blue eyes. Kroom had inherited his share of that restless desire to know that has made the Americans what they are. Here was something he did not understand, but which he meant to understand before morning. So dropping fresh fuel on the fire, he set himself to the task of opening the knife.

For a long time it resisted all his efforts. He broke a thumbnail and scuffed the skin from his knuckle before he thought of using the point of his obsidian knife. Hinge and blade were both rusted into the handle, and it took all Kroom's great strength in hands and wrists to loosen the contact.

When the blade finally came free, it opened with a jerk that sent the obsidian knife he had been using as a lever clattering into the darkness beyond the fire.

Kroom tiptoed to Meti's sleeping nook, made sure that she had not awakened, and then returned

to the fire. Taking the open knife in his hand, he inspected it from every angle.

His first thought was that those unknown people from whom he had come possessed a rock of much greater density and hardness than any found in the Bowl. His second thought was that the blade of the knife was made of the same material as was the huge, battered shell he had just inspected in company with Tindra and Gala.

He rubbed it with his fingers, detected a spot of brightness under the rust, and hurried to get the whetstone he had been using earlier that same night.

This he first moistened with fish oil, and then began to rub the blade back and forth with a dragging, circular motion he had learned was most useful in putting an edge on his own primitive knife that now lay forgotten on the floor where he had dropped it.

At the end of an hour he had the blade clear of rust and approaching a degree of sharpness. He tested the point against his thumb, and tried the hardness of the steel against a fragment of glasslike obsidian.

The clasp knife was made of the best cutlery steel, with a small spring guard between blade and handle that sprang into position when the blade was opened.

The bone handle was of ample size, roughened to afford a better grip, and fitted Kroom's palm as though made for him.

The sharp point cut into the glasslike obsidian as a diamond cuts into a windowpane.

Kroom grinned, took up the whetstone and resumed his laborious whetting. The storm still raged without, but he was oblivious to the distant thunder of the seas breaking against the outer wall.

He had a new toy, a new plaything, something that was all his own and the secret of which he did not mean to share with any one for the time being.

VII.

THE sun was once more shining in a cloudless sky when Kroom swam across the Bowl to take his first post as chief sentry on the Sentry Rock.

Tindra, as Keeper of the Sacred Flame, had assigned the hours of duty to Kroom and his six companions during the initiation the previous night.

Each young man alternated with an older man,

so that there was always an experienced sentry within reach of the Rock.

This was necessary, because the post of chief sentry was the most important duty that fell to the lot of a man of the Fish People, since it involved a responsibility on which the security of all within the Bowl depended.

Though the leaden clouds had gone and the gale had died to a light breeze, the Bowl still vibrated to the pounding of the gigantic seas kicked up by the hurricane.

Kroom knew that the flow through the Intake must be of unusual volume and velocity.

He knew, also, that the chances of Ciba's entry had never been better, so far as he could remember.

He mounted to the Rock, climbing from ledge to ledge made slippery by the feet and hands of generations of sentries. The concave face of the huge cliff, which rose a thousand feet into the air, hung above him as he made his way steadily upward.

Soon he was on the level of the Rock itself, which thrust out from the cliff like a pointing finger of smooth basalt.

As Kroom took his place he heard the sentry he had just relieved move back from the tip of the Rock. He had fallen into the required posture automatically, and stood looking down into the troubled water, the normal clearness of which was obscured by seaweed and sand brought in by the unusual current flowing through the Intake.

METI, standing on the beach in front of her cave dwelling on the far side of the Bowl, shaded her eyes with her hands and tried to make out Kroom's golden figure against the wall at the Sentry Rock.

The distance was too great for Kroom to be seen, yet Meti fancied she could distinguish a speck of brightness against the basalt wall.

Nearby the children were singing, dancing in a wide circle. Their voices rose shrilly in the silence that held the older people.

She was still standing thus, tense and motionless, when the cry, relayed from sentry post to sentry post, rang around the Bowl.

"Ciba! Ciba! Ciba!"

There were widows within sound of the cry who put hands to their ears when they heard it, and fatherless children who blanched ashen-gray, remembering, as they did, what the cry when last

sounded had taken from them.

But to Meti it meant that her foster son, the one being nearest to her heart, was diving through the water to meet Ciba.

Watching, hand on knife, he had recognized Ciba instantly amid the masses of seaweed and sand disgorged from the Intake.

There was no mistaking that long, gray-green back, those sharply pointed fins, that cruel gash of a mouth, and those eyes whose expression of hungry ferocity never varies, no matter how recently fed the great fish might be.

And having seen and recognized the terror, he had sounded the cry and sprung to meet him, stone knife drawn, muscled body cutting air and water with the speed of a projectile sent straight to its mark.

KROOM closed his eyes for the split second it took his falling body to strike the dancing water above and in advance of the speeding shark. This was instinctive, and designed to protect his eyeballs from possible injury. But once under the surface, his eyes opened again. He could see underwater about as distinctly as a man sees on land during the last few minutes of twilight.

He had acquired, through practice, all the natural underwater traits peculiar to the Fish People and was as much at home under the surface as he was on the beaches and in the shallows. Swimming was no effort; and the comparative elimination of arm strokes enabled him to obtain the maximum benefit from the air taken into his lungs an instant before submerging. The oxygen thus imprisoned enabled him to remain underwater for a period beyond the experience of any but the Fish People.

Ciba, the great fish was wary, though master of all that swims except the killer whale and the giant octopus of profound ocean depths. His speed and ferocity, though seldom held in check, were restrained now by the caution instinctive in one who has been caught by an irresistible current and drawn into strange waters.

Ciba was angry. But Ciba was always angry. He was hungry—for Ciba's ravenous appetite was never wholly satisfied. He was no longer in the grip of the current that had drawn him into the whirlpool and under the wall of the Bowl, and he was remembering—perhaps—that once, years before, he had been cheated of his prey by that same overpowering current from which he had just

fought free. But he possessed a disadvantage on which Kroom had counted, and on which he had based his plan for attacking the monster man-eater: he must turn on his back, or partially so, to bring his teeth into play. His mouth was set under his head, well back; a provision of nature, no doubt designed to counterbalance cunning and tiger-like ferocity.

Fish and man came together at the instant Ciba was rolling for a stroke. The big shark's maneuver in no way diminished the speed of his upward and forward thrust.

Kroom rolled his body at the same time, his left hand grasping the lateral fin just back of the cruel gash of mouth. His right held the obsidian knife which he had drawn from his belt after striking the water.

He allowed his body to be lifted up and back by the whirl of the great fin, saving every ounce of muscular effort for the knife blow which he directed against the vulnerable spot between fin and mouth. This spot is what would be called the throat in a mammal, and in the shark is less heavily protected than any other area of his thick-skinned body.

Kroom did not make the mistake an ordinary man would have made in delivering the blow. To strike underwater one must take into account the normal resistance offered by a fluid to a moving body. The water cushions a blow, retards it, deprives it of the snag that makes it effective. Kroom timed the blow, so that from start to finish it was one smooth acceleration of bone, sinew and muscle. It was lightning fast, but its tension and speed gathered force as the knife neared its objective.

The point of the stone knife dented then bounced back from Ciba's taut skin. At the same time the shark rolled completely over, coming down on top of Kroom, who found himself in the position the shark had occupied an instant before.

Ciba was fully thirty feet long from snout to tail, five times Kroom's measurement, with a bulk of steel muscle and springy bone that made him as agile as a playful pickerel. His jaws had snapped together like the jaws of a huge steel trap, but they had closed on nothing more substantial than foaming water.

Kroom laughed inwardly as he felt the crushing weight of the big fish over him. Growing suddenly rigid, he sank as a stone sinks that is dropped in a

running stream. He saw Ciba's dark shadow pass on ahead, then kicked himself straight up, rising and getting above and behind the surprised fish as a pilot of a combat-plane loops to get on the tail of a less alert enemy pilot.

Ciba swung himself about with a mighty swish of his powerful body, and, cruel jaws agape, darted straight at this man who had twice dared to elude him.

Kroom arched his body in a leap that brought him to within a dozen feet of the surface, and as the furious shark passed under him, he darted down and aimed another smashing blow with the stone knife.

This time he aimed at the right eye, missing it by a scant two inches, and he felt the point of the knife grate and snap off on the bony cartilage of the armored forehead.

Ciba lashed at him with his tail in passing, a blow Kroom avoided by allowing the water to drive him aside as air drives aside a housefly against which one strikes with a cupped palm.

He shifted the obsidian knife to his left hand, and, reaching under the belt of his loin cloth, drew out the sheath knife found in the lifeboat, which he had secured there by means of a thong made from twisted fish-gut. To pull the knife from the sheath and thrust the stone knife in the belt was the work of an instant.

Ciba had come about again, turning in a radius less than his own length of body. This time he drove straight at Kroom, disdaining to turn for a stroke, using his body as a mighty javelin, of which the blunt nose was the point and the lashing tail the feathery guides that kept it straight on its course.

Kroom met this by catching the onrushing snout in his cupped left palm. He allowed himself to be driven up and back by the shark's tremendous impetus.

As Ciba rolled, shaking his head to free his nose, Kroom kicked his feet straight up, and, head down, body perpendicular to the rolling bulk, drew the stone knife with his left hand and drove its broken blade between the saw-like teeth that snapped shut within a foot of his head.

Ciba possesses bulldog tenacity, once he has found a grip. Kroom figured on this when driving the stone knife between the snapping jaws. He needed a hand hold, firmer, more secure, than that he had first obtained by seizing a fin. Now he had such a hold, and he allowed himself to be dragged

down and against the thrashing body of the shark.

His right hand, holding the sailor's knife, swung out and down. This was no stone knife, with edge and point made brittle by overmuch grinding, but a blade made of steel, tempered, tough, and ground to razor-keen sharpness. As he brought it down, he straddled and wrapped his powerful legs around Ciba's body just back of the lateral fins, in a scissors hold that would have squeezed the life but of the strongest wrestler that ever stepped on the mat.

He was now clinging to Ciba's belly, left hand holding the haft of the stone knife clamped between the great teeth, knees pressing into the sides, just where the dark upper skin gave place to the yellowish-white into which he was driving the knife.

That knife, forged in some Sheffield factory where the finest steel is made for cutting instruments, struck and went through to the guard that protected the heel of Kroom's clenched palm.

Kroom drew it out with a wrenching, cutting pull, and drove it in again, and again, and again—while the great shark floundered and ground its cruel jaws, and the reddened water eddied and swirled and broke into frothy foam, so that the gulls that circled above the scene of the fight screamed hoarsely as they scented the killing, fathoms below the surface.

Kroom rode Ciba as a wrangler rides a bucking bronco that is being broken to the bit. And as the rider lashes the leaping pony with his crumpled hat, so Kroom lashed Ciba with thrusts of the knife.

Time after time his knee-hold was broken as the wounded fish twisted and whipped in efforts to escape, but each time he drove in again, wary now of the menace of the snapping jaws which had shorn through the stone knife.

Kroom no longer could see clearly. He was swung about in a red haze that deepened in color and grew denser, and rose to the surface in oily bubbles that broke and spread in an iridescent patch such as marks the grave of a sunken submarine.

But it was no broken undersea craft of man's contriving that rested under that viscid scum that stained the bright water below the Sentry Rock. It was Ciba, the hitherto unconquered tiger of the sea, now giving out his lifeblood in great gouts as

Kroom's remorseless knife was plunged again and yet again into his quivering vitals.

Ciba was dying, and, like all denizens of the deep at such a time, sought a last refuge from his impending fate in the dark depths at the bottom of the sea that had been his home.

He sank as lead sinks, carrying Kroom down with him toward the unfathomed outlet at the base of the old crater that was the Bowl.

Caught by a down-thrust of a lateral fin with the bulk of the huge shark over him, and blinded by blood that poured from a score of knife wounds. Kroom wrenched out the steel and sent it home through skin, bone, and gristle to the still strongly beating heart.

Twice, thrice, and yet a fourth time, the sharp steel was driven into the mighty heart muscle. Only a shark, whose vitality astonishes all who strive to capture it, could have withstood those otherwise instantly mortal blows. But not even Ciba could endure Kroom's fifth slashing cut into the great ventricle.

He rolled on his back, and, belly up, quivered throughout his thirty feet of suddenly nerveless bulk. Then he rolled over, and over, and over, with the clinging Kroom, holding fast to the knife, rolling with him.

Faster and faster he rolled, no longer sinking toward the unplumbed depths of the Bowl, but beginning to rise in a long spiral that was marked by a bloody trail.

As shark and man neared the surface, the gulls gathered in screaming clouds above the patch of foam under the Sentry Rock.

Fish and man broke clear of the water, and for an instant they showed clearly in the rays of the sun, which turned Ciba's flowing blood to crimson ribbons edged with golden fringes, and sparkled on the steel blade as Kroom buried it to the hilt in one last tremendous blow. Then they fell back in the water with a splash that sent the spray as high as the Sentry Rock on which the sentry was dancing and shouting.

"Kroom conquers Ciba!" he yelled. "Ciba is dead! Kroom has slain Ciba!"

The second installment of this series will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, on the newsstands June 1st.