

THE SECRET OF THE URAVENA

In the depths of the southern seas, where the weight of the ocean prevents even light from penetrating the crystal waters, lives a mysterious fish, a real living fossil. The Polynesians have always known it. They call it `uravena, and scientists know it as *Ruvettus pretiosus*, a name which has become *rouvet* in French (in English it is known as oilfish).

Just think of the skill of these fishermen. There is something magical and fascinating at work here: `uravena is a fish which never comes to the surface. It lives alone or in pairs at depths of between 200 and 800 metres. But the elders know how to catch it and even make a special hook just for this fish: a composite hook, in a V shape, carved from mikimiki wood. The shrub is very common on the shore and is called "sailor wood" in the West Indies. They also have great skill in cooking it because although it is not fatally poisonous like the Japanese fugu, careless eating of this oily fish can result in serious stomach problems.

So, on a moonless night, the fisherman will roll out a long line from his boat. A pebble is attached to the base of the hook by a simple tie, such as a coconut leaf. This is the method called the detachable weight; a few hundred metres down the pebble will come off and fall to the bottom. The hook then remains in mid-water and fools the fish.

Far above the scene of operations, the fisherman holds the line in his hands. Like a blind man reading the Bible by touch, the slightest tension on the line tells him what is happening in the depths. One touch, maybe two, and the fish is snared, the catch is soon on board, brought up with great arm movements.

The technique is tried and tested, passed down from one generation to the next, like all the apprenticeships of these people. Men of few words, the Polynesians show by doing and it is by watching that the son learns and understands his father's actions. But the old fisherman returns alone to his island and the years pass.

Because nowadays the oilfish has little commercial value. Nevertheless, the local inhabitants are very fond of it. A few fishermen in the Austral Islands have not lost this ancestral knowledge and can still catch it. In Rapa, Manuel Marivi is 76 years old. He is one of the last to know the secret of the `uravena. It is a secret which, when he is gone, may well be lost forever at the bottom of the ocean.