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The SNOWFLAKE and the STARFISH

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The SNOWFLAKE and the STARFISH

Written by
ROBERT NATHAN

Illustrated by
LEONARD WEISGARD

Alfred·A·Knopf : New York

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The sea-witch came in on the tide, riding on the waves like foam, and her hair floated out behind her like seaweed. She came to the beach and lay there breathing slightly, and her eyes searched everywhere like a hungry gull. And Michael Doyle's little daughter Vicky, walking along the beach in search of colored shells, turned to her brother, Little Thomas, and said, "It's time we went home to supper."

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"I think I saw something behind those rocks," said Little Thomas.

"All right," said Vicky. "Do you want to go and look?"

"No," said Little Thomas.

The two children turned, and started home down the beach. The sea-witch lowered herself gently into the water and swam quietly along the shore, halfway out, keeping an eye on them, and now and then diving through the waves like a porpoise. She was lonely; she had no children of her own to play with.

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Vicky and her brother Little Thomas lived in a house close to the water, with their father Michael Doyle the professor, and his wife Helen. It was a good place for playing, or looking for shells, except in winter when the fogs came in, or when it rained. Then they stayed indoors, or they walked on the hills above the sea, in the weedy grass, and looked down at the ocean, gray and cold and lonely everywhere.

But now it was summer, and they went almost every day to the beach.

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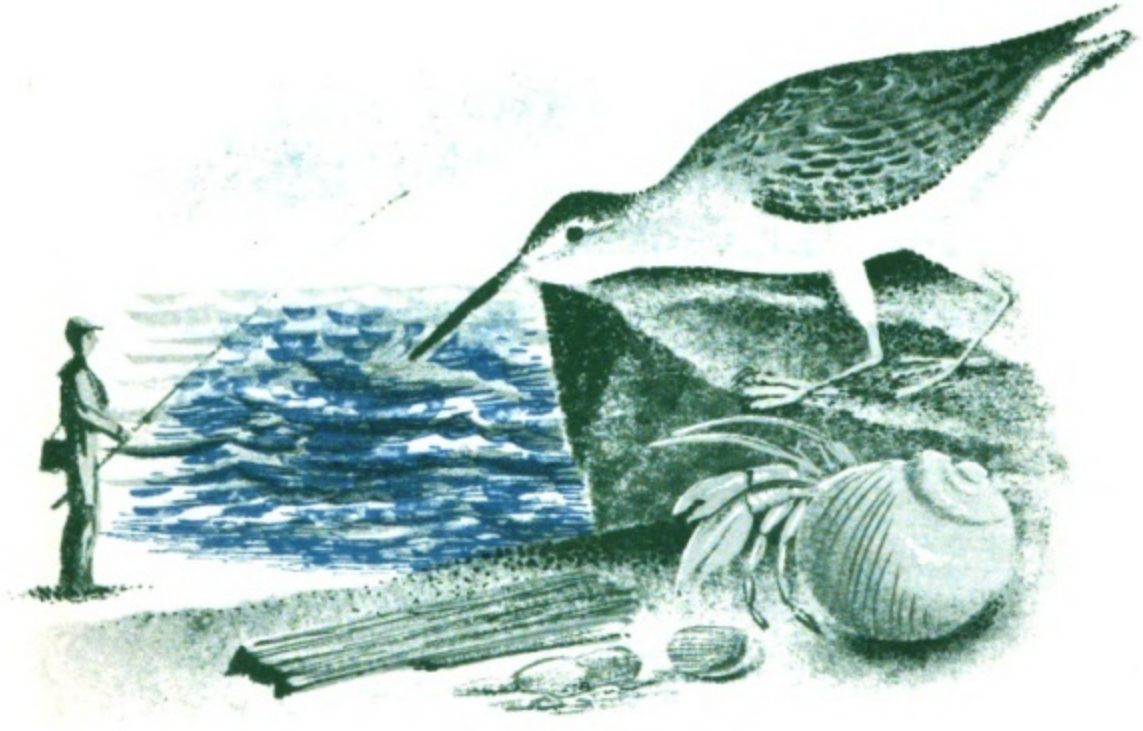
the surf, and stand patient and still until it was time to reel their lines in again. Or sometimes a skin diver would clump down to the water in his big rubber fins, put on his mask, and go sliding out to sea like a seal, pushing a blown-up rubber tube in front of him.



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That night as they were getting ready for bed, she said to her brother Little Thomas, "What do you want most in all the world?"

Little Thomas bounced up and down in his bed once or twice before settling down for the night. "I guess I got everything I want," he said, "or almost. What I want is a private snake."

Vicky lay back with a sigh, and looked up at the ceiling. Her brother's

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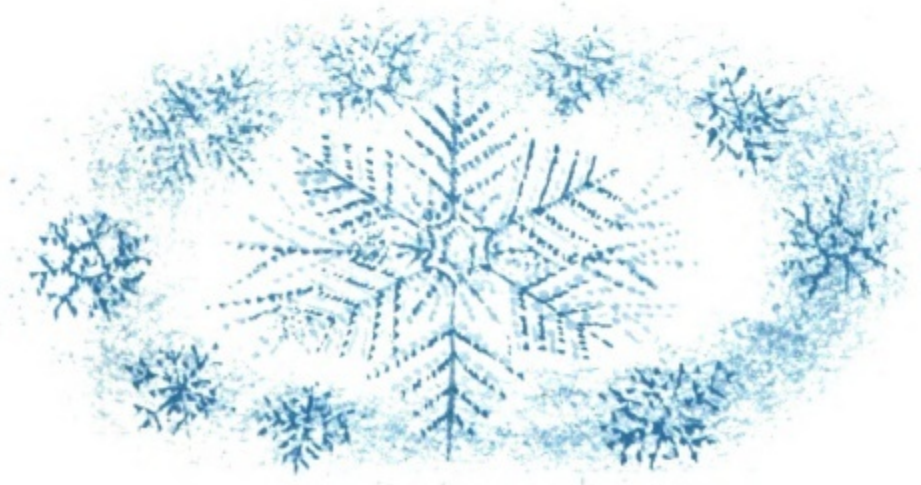
answer was no help to her. Little boys always seemed satisfied with something ordinary, whereas little girls always had to look for something curious and rare. A secret treasure that nobody else knew about, a strangeness, a difference—a little moon to wear in her hair, a star of her own, a personal snowflake—they were such lovely dreams. That was what a hope chest was for: to hold dreams. That was why boys didn't have them.



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Outside, in the dim blue night, the sea-witch lay on the sand near the Doyle house, and sang a sad sea song, and wept a little. Neither of the children heard her. "A secret treasure," thought Vicky drowsily, "a star of my own, a snowflake for my cheek."

"Empty is the sea," sang the sea-witch, "and the shore empty. . . ."

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The children slept, and the sea-witch stirred a little, and began to weave her spell. "Sea porcupine," she whispered, "sea anemone, sea ocelot; crab, oyster, kelp, plankton, barnacle, clam; abalone. . . . Like a snail, quiet, blind, creep into a girl's mind. Find among her little pleasures, what she treasures here below. Herring, sturgeon, pompano, little octopus and squid, creep along, safely hid; where a child lies asleep, creep, creep. Halibut and sea trout, what do children dream about?"

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But the spell missed Vicky, for whom it was intended, and crept like a little gray fog around Little Thomas's bed instead. And the sea-witch drew back in surprise. "A private snake?" she exclaimed. "How odd."

She thought for a moment. "Something has gone wrong," she declared. "There has been some mistake. Abalone! Pompano! Try again."

This time the spell worked properly, and then the sea-witch knew what she wanted to know.

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Next morning, when the children woke up, there was a tiny, silvery starfish lying at the foot of Vicky's bed; and on Little Thomas's counterpane, a small stuffed eel.

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"Marzipan is what witches eat," said Vicky. Rising to her feet, she said to Little Thomas, "I think I hear our mother calling us . . . she wants us to come home for lunch."

Little Thomas obediently rose, and the two children went back to their house, not looking over their shoulders, holding their breath, and being very careful to walk widdershins around the piles of seaweed lying on the sand.

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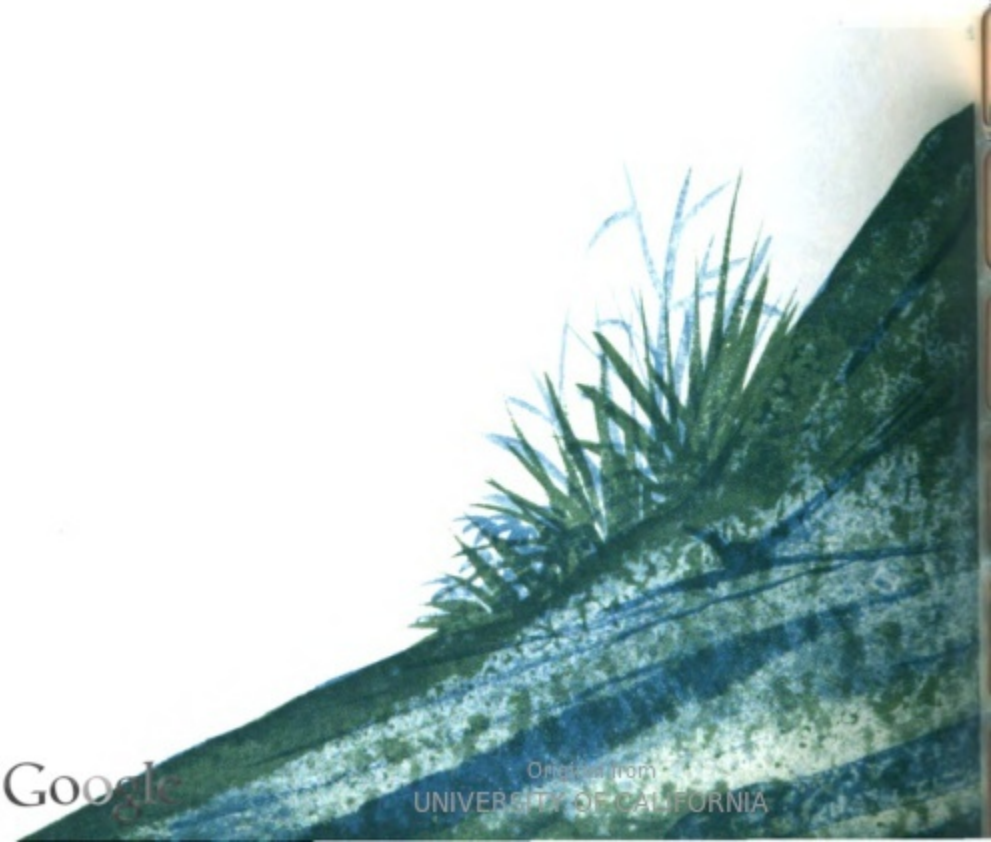
Nevertheless, Little Thomas had forgotten his pail and shovel, and these, with a sly smile, the sea-witch took back with her to her cave in the rocks. It was very important for her to have something belonging to one of the children, if she ever hoped to gain power over them.

And besides, the pail smelled of little boys playing in the sand, in the sun, and that was a comfort to her.



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They decided not to tell anybody, but they thought it would be all right to ask questions. And that night at supper, with her mouth full of peanut butter, Vicky asked her father, "Did you ever see a witch?"

Michael Doyle gave his wife a twinkling, shining sort of look. "I suppose," he said, "you don't mean your mother?"

"No," said Vicky.

"In that case," said her father, "I have nothing further to say."

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This time Little Thomas heard her. "Vicky!" he cried, shaking his sister by the shoulder. "Wake up! She's after us!"

"Wha—what?" mumbled Vicky sleepily. "Who? What's the matter?" And she tried to snuggle down and go back to sleep again.

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"Vicky! Wake up! The witch is after us!"

Vicky sat up very suddenly, the sleep all gone from her head. "How do you know?" she demanded.

"I heard her singing," said Little Thomas. "I heard her ordering them to bring us out in our nighties."

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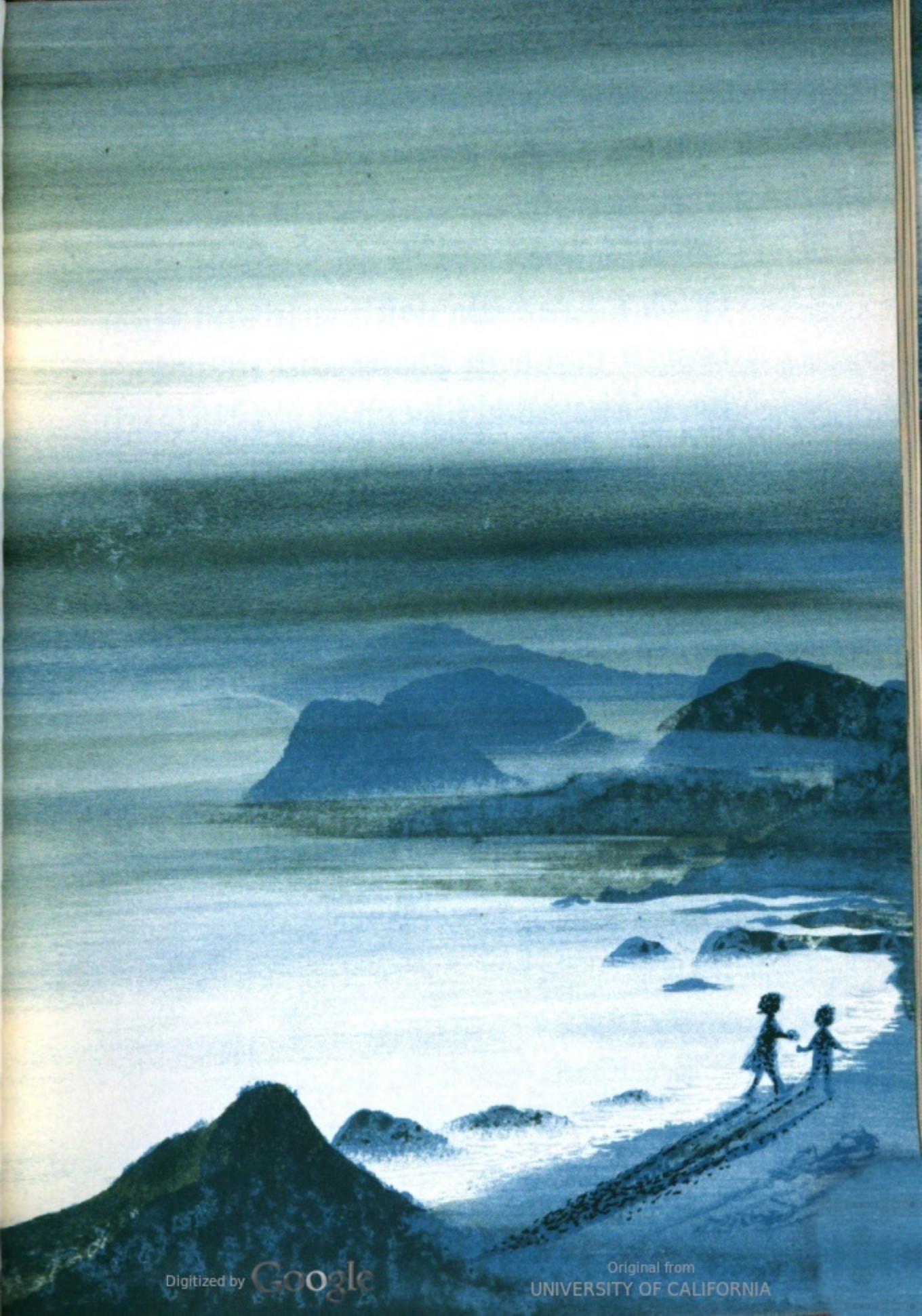

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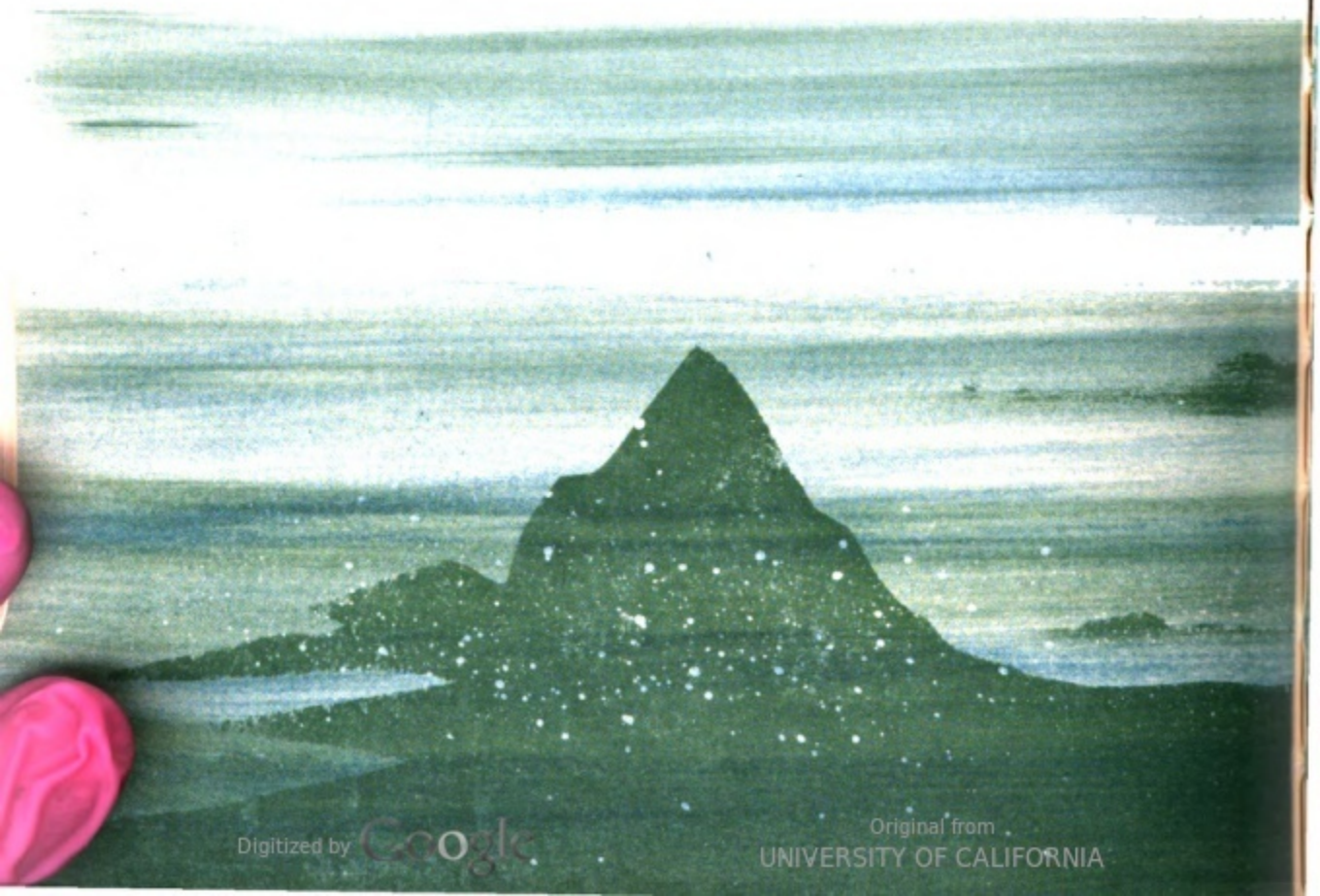
They ran faster than they had ever run before in their lives, taking great leaps and hops, while their throats grew dry with fear and their breath came in gasps and their legs hurt. They fled like shadows through the dark, and the cold wet sticky fingers of the fog brushed their faces



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and clutched at them and let them go; and all the time the witch followed them like a black wind, like the night itself, sniffing the air for their scent.

"Vicky," she cried, and her voice was like the edge of a breaking wave. "Little Thomas! Wait!"

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"Oh never!" sobbed Vicky, feeling the strength ooze out of her, and collapsed at last behind a pile of seaweed that made a deep black shadow all around her. A moment later, Little Thomas sank to the ground beside her; and the two children crouched there together, shivering, holding their breath, listening like hunted rabbits to the sounds of the sea-witch, rustling and snuffling in the sand.

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cry," said Vicky in a small, scared voice. And Little Thomas said, "There, there," and gave her a timid pat on the head.

The sea-witch started up in surprise. "Why," she cried, "how nice of you! I thought I had lost you; and I did so want to take you home with me."

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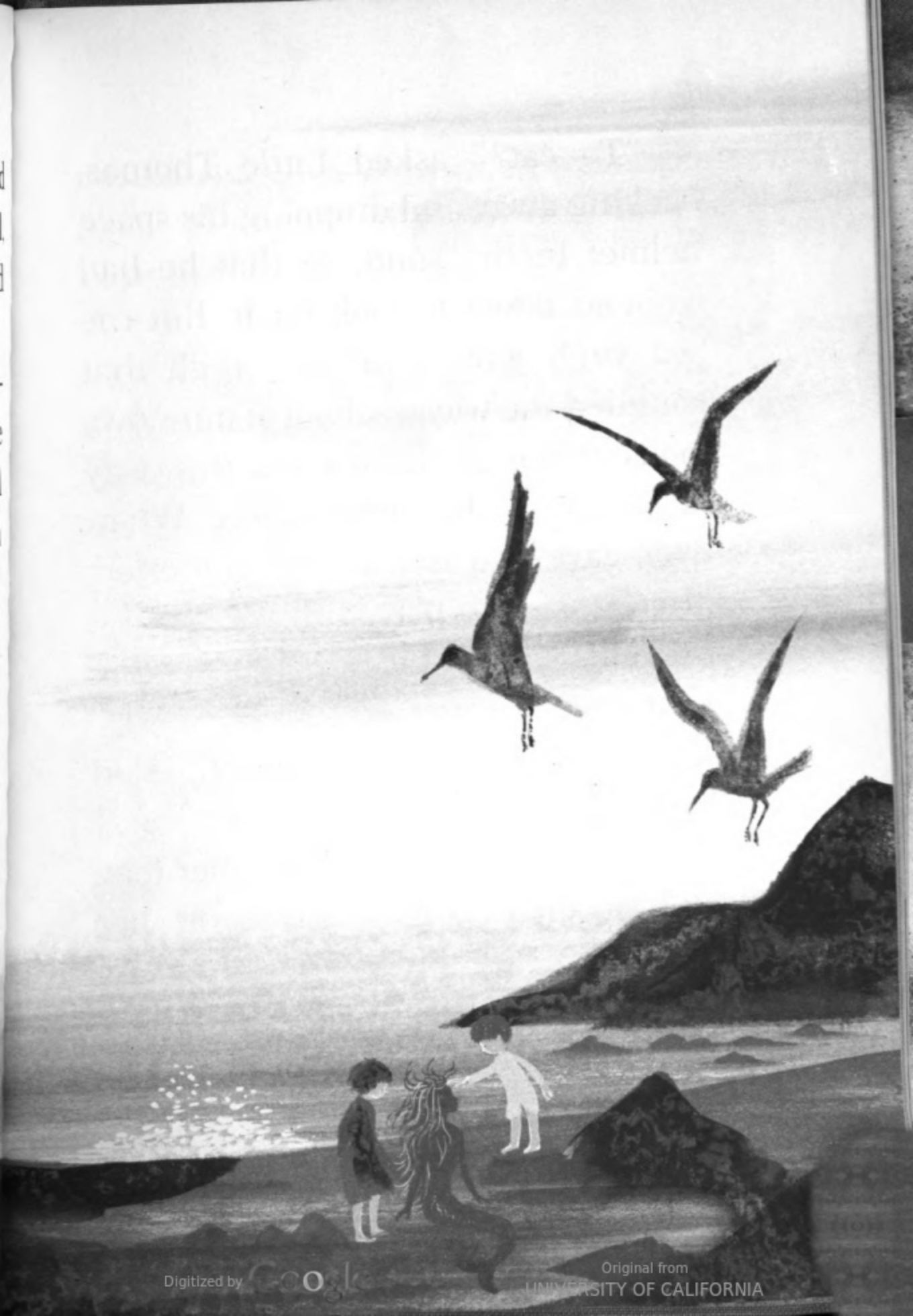

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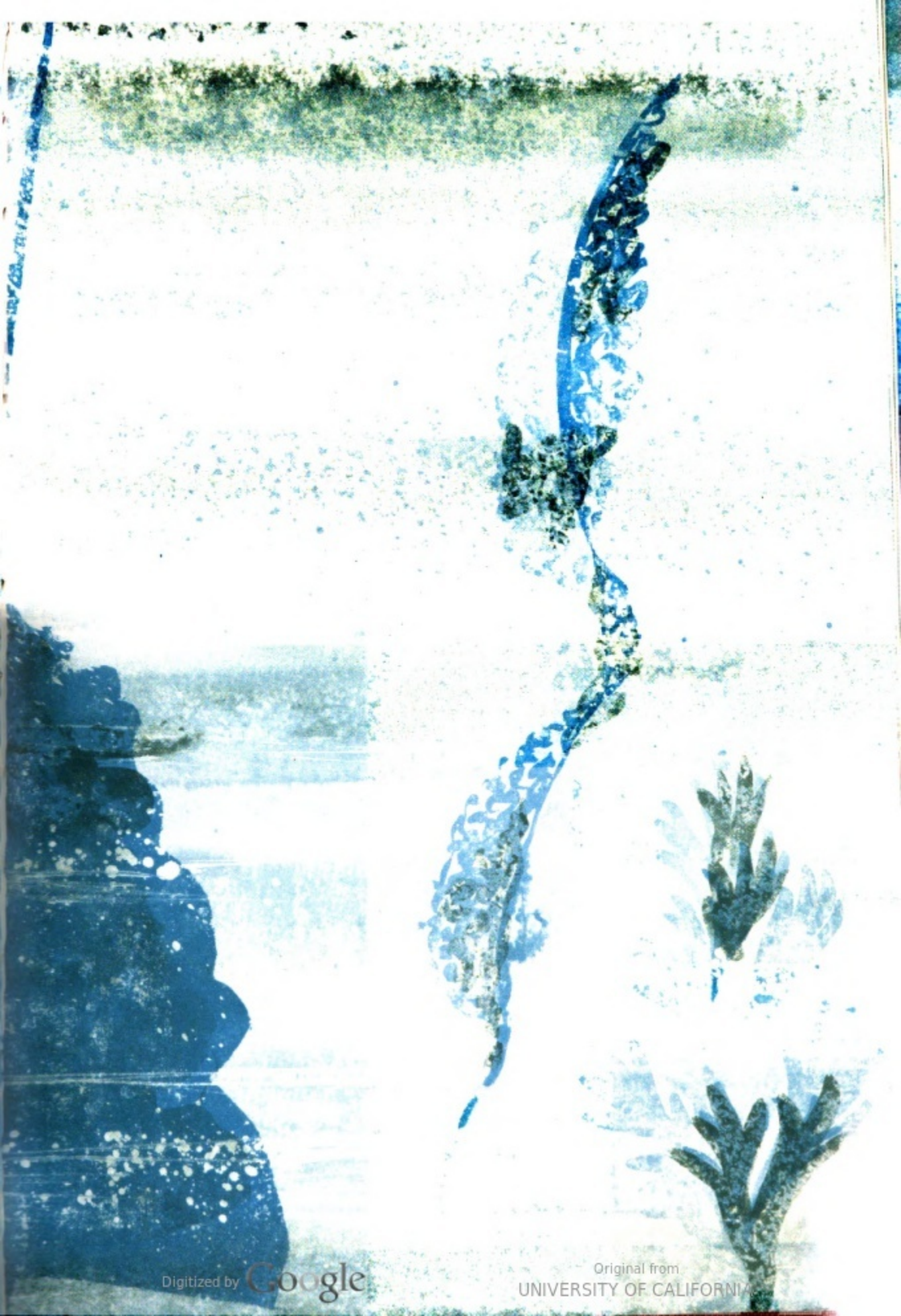

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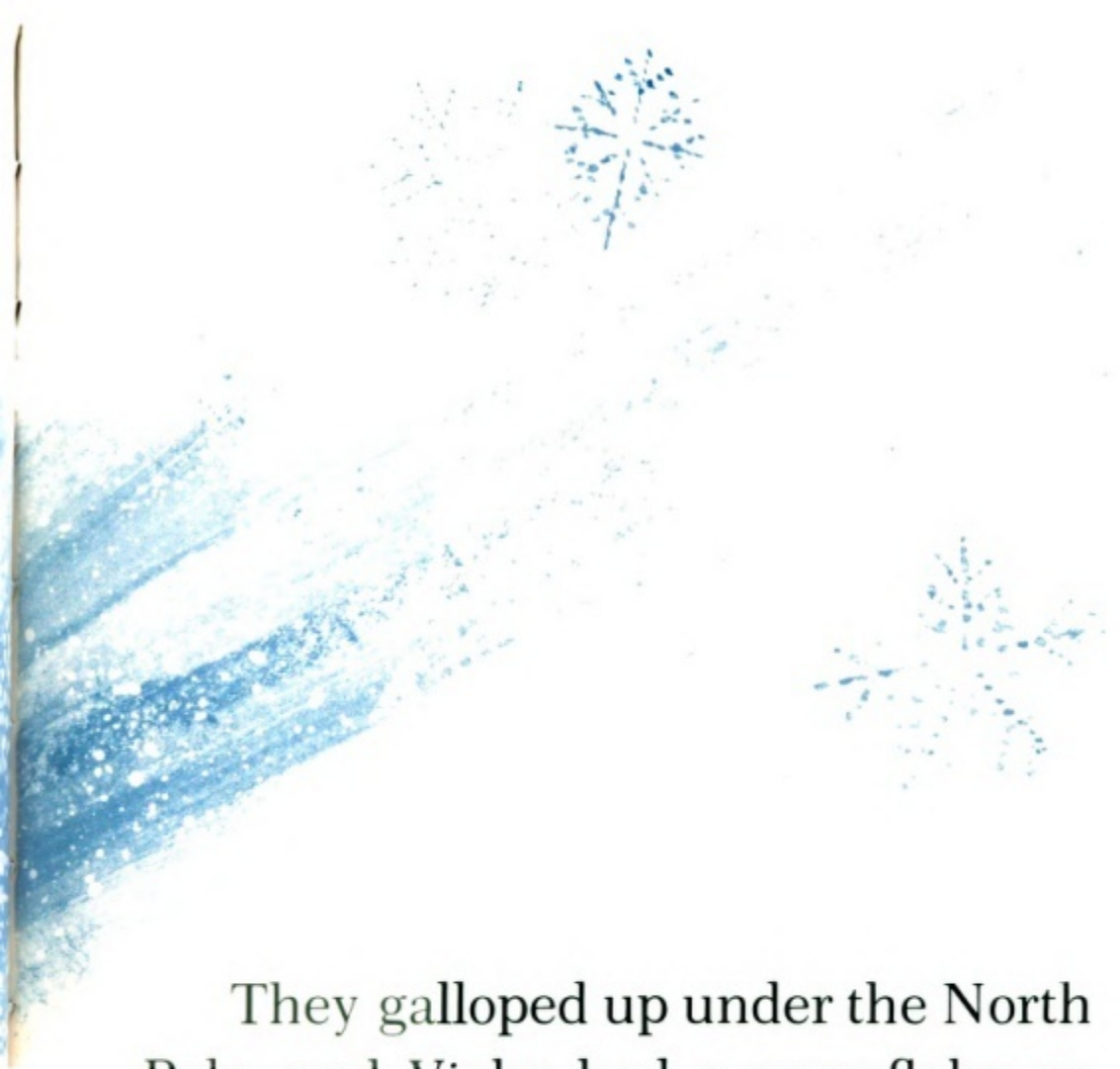

They galloped up under the North Pole, and Vicky had a snowflake on her cheek, but when they got as far south as Oregon it melted. And in the Coral Seas there were a million golden stars reflected in the water, but when she reached for them they rippled away into nothing. "Will you buy? Will you buy?" cried the sea-witch. But Vicky still said, "No."

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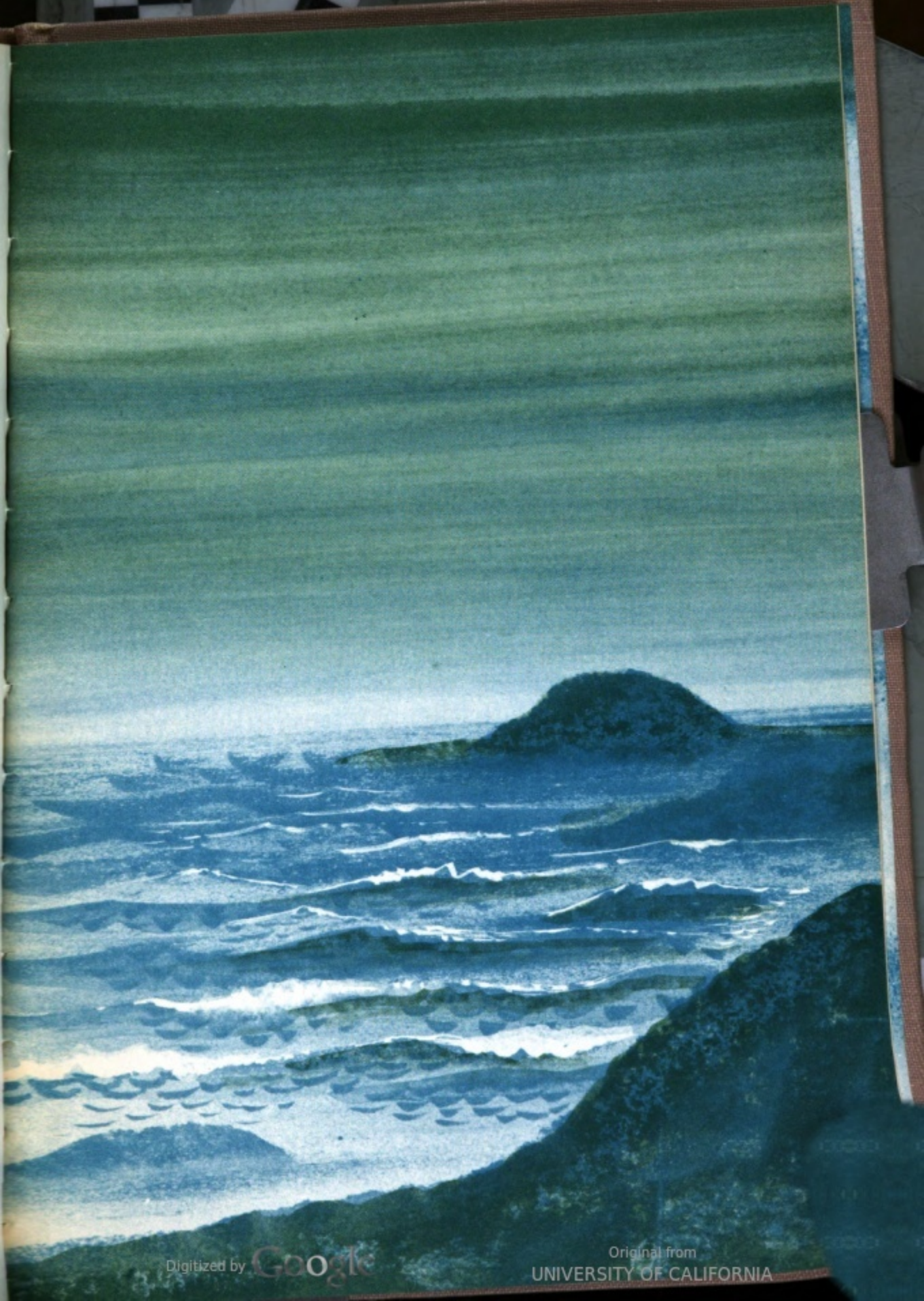

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anyone, they said it was like being kissed by a breath from the sea.

Or why, when the hope chest was opened at last to buy a silver spoon and two linen pillowcases for Vicky's wedding, a little piece of dried seaweed fell out.

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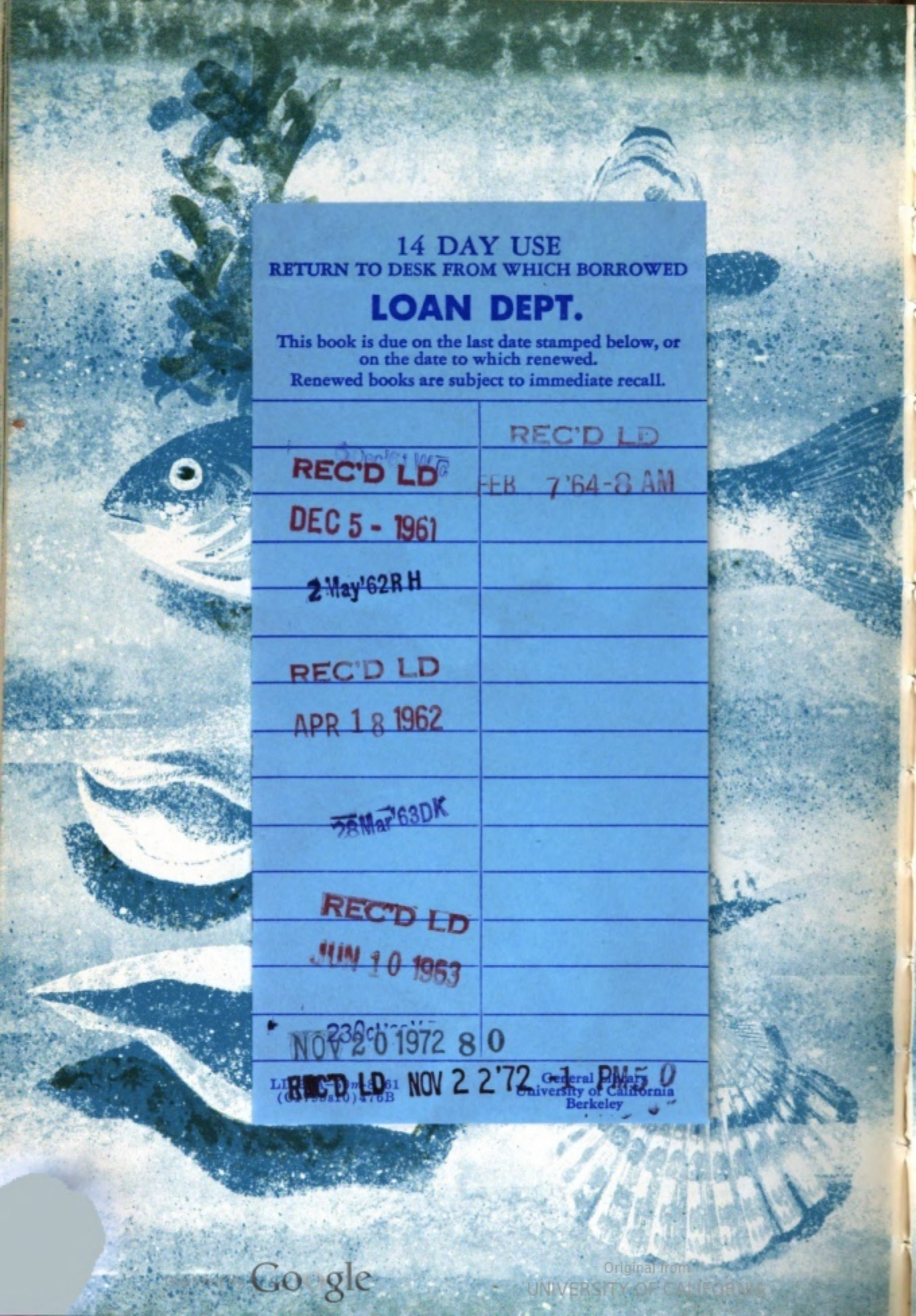

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