

The Fountain Maiden

By Lafcadio Hearn

A legend of that pacific land where garments are worn by none save the dead; where the beauty of youth is as the beauty of statues of amber; where through eternal summer even the mountains refuse to don a girdle of cloud. . . .

“Mighty Omataianuku!

“Dark Avaava the Tall!

“Tall Outuutu!

“Shadow the way for us!

“Tower as the cocoa-palms before us!

“Bend ye as dreams above the slumberers!

“Make deeper the sleep of the sleepers!

“Sleep, ye crickets of the threshold! Sleep, ye never reposing ants! Sleep, ye shining beetles of the night!

“Winds, cease ye from whispering! Restless grass, pause in thy rustling! Leaves of the palms, be still! Reeds of the water-ways, sway not! Blue river, cease thy upping of the banks!

“Slumber, ye beams of the house, ye posts, great and small, ye rafters and ridge-poles, thatchings of grass, woven work of reeds, windows bamboo-latticed, doors that squeak like ghosts, low-glimmering fires of sandal-wood,—slumber ye all!

“O Omataianuku!

“Tall Outuutu!

“Dark Avaava!

“Make shadowy the way for us!

“Tower as the cocoa-palms before us!

“Bend ye as dreams above the slumberers!

“Make deeper the sleep of the sleepers,—

“Deeper the sleep of the winds,—

“Deeper the sleep of the waters,—

“Dimmer the dimness of night!

“Veil ye the moon with your breathings!

“Make fainter the fires of the stars!

“In the name of the weird ones:—

“Omataianuku!

“Oututururaa!

“Ovaavaroroa!

“Sleep!

“Sleep!

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So, with the rising of each new moon, was heard the magical song of the thieves,—the first night, low as the humming of the wind among the cocoa-palms; louder and louder each

succeeding night, and clearer and sweeter, until the great white face of the full moon flooded the woods with light, and made silver pools about the columns of the palms. For the magic of the full moon was mightier than the witchcraft of the song; and the people of Rarotonga slept not. But of other nights the invisible thieves did carry away many cocoanuts and taros, and plantains and bananas, despite the snares set for them by the people of Rarotonga. And it was observed with terror that cocoanuts were removed from the crests of trees so lofty that no human hand might have reached them.

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But the chief Aki, being one night by the fountain Vaipiki, which gushes out from the place of waters that flow below the world, beheld rising up from the water, just as the thin moon looked into it, a youth and a girl whiter than the moon herself, naked as fishes, beautiful as dreams. And they began to sing a song, at whose sound Aki, hidden among the pandanus leaves, stopped his ears,—the wizard-song, *E tira Omataianuku, E tira Outuuturoroa!* And the winds were stilled, and the waves sank to sleep, and the palm-leaves ceased to nod, and the song of the crickets was hushed.

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Then Aki, devising to capture them, set a great fish-net deep within the fountain, and waited for their return. The vast silence of the night deepened; the smoke of the mountain of fire, blood-tinted from below, hung motionless in the sky, like a giant's plume of feathers. At last the winds of the sea began their ghost whisperings among the palm-groves; a cricket chirped, and a million insect-chants responded; the new moon plunged one of her pale horns into the ocean; the east whitened and changed hue like the belly of a shark. The spell was broken, the day was dawning.

And Aki beheld the White Ones returning, bearing with them fruits and nuts and fragrant herbs. Rising suddenly from his hiding-place among the leaves, he rushed upon them; and they leaped into the fountain, like fishes, leaving their fruits scattered upon the brink. But, ho! they were caught in the net!

Then Aki strove to pull the net on shore; and, being a strong man, he easily moved it. But, in turning, the male leaped through the opening of the net, and flashed like a salmon through the deeps down to the unknown abyss of waters below, so that Aki caught the girl only. Vainly she struggled in the net; and her moon-white body took opalescent gleams, like the body of a beautiful fish in the hands of the captor. Vainly she wept and pleaded; and Aki blocked up the bottom of the fountain with huge blocks of coral, lest, slipping away from him, she might disappear again. But, looking upon the strangeness of her beauty, he kissed her and comforted her; and she ceased at last to weep. Her eyes were large and dark, like a tropical heaven flashed with stars.

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So it came to pass that Aki loved her; more than his own life he loved her. And the people wondered at her beauty; for light came from her as she moved, and when she swam in the river her passage was like the path of the moon on waters,—a quivering column of brightness. Only, it was noticed that this luminous beauty waxed and waned contrariwise to the waxing and waning

of the moon: her whiteness was whitest at the time of the new moon; it almost ceased to glow when the face of the moon was full. And whensoever the new moon rose, she wept silently, so that Aki could not comfort her, even after having taught her the words of love in the tongue of his own people,—the tongue, many-vowelled, that wooes the listener like the mockery of a night-bird's song.

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Thus many years passed away, and Aki became old; but she seemed ever the same, for the strange race to which she belonged never grow old. Then it was noticed that her eyes became deeper and sweeter,—weirdly sweet; and Aki knew that he would become a father in his age. Yet she wept and pleaded with him, saying:—

“Lo! I am not of thy race, and at last I must leave thee. If thou lovest me, sever this white body of mine, and save our child; for if it suckle me, I must dwell ten years longer in this world to which I do not belong. Thou canst not hurt me thus; for though I seem to die, yet my body will live on,—thou mayst not wound me more than water is wounded by axe or spear! For I am of the water and the light, of moonshine and of wind! And I may not suckle thy child.”

But Aki, fearing that he might lose both her and the child, pleaded with her successfully. And the child was beautiful as a white star, and she nursed it for ten happy years.

But, the ten years having passed, she kissed Aki, and said to him, “Alas! I must now leave thee, lest I die utterly; take thou away, therefore, the coral rocks from the fountain.” And kissing him once more, she vowed to come back again, so that he complied at last with her request. She would have had him go with her; but he could not, being only mortal man. Then she passed away in the fountain deeps, like a gleam of light.

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The child grew up very tall and beautiful, but not like his mother,—white only like strangers from beyond the sea. In his eyes there was, nevertheless, a strange light, brightest at the time of the new moon, waning with its waxing. . . . One night there came a great storm: the cocoa-palms bent like reeds, and a strange voice came with the wind, crying, calling! At dawn the white youth was gone, nor did human eyes ever behold him again.

But Aki lived beyond a hundred years, waiting for the return by the Vaipiki fountain, until his hair was whiter than the summer clouds. At last the people carried him away, and laid him in his house on a bed of pandanus leaves; and all the women watched over him, lest he should die.

It was the night of a new month, and the rising of the new moon. Suddenly a low sweet voice was heard, singing the old song that some remembered after the passing of half a hundred years. Sweeter and sweeter it grew; higher rose the moon! The crickets ceased to sing; the cocoa-palms refused obeisance to the wind. And a heaviness fell upon the watchers, who, with open eyes, could move no limb, utter no voice. Then all were aware of a White Woman, whiter than moonlight, lithe-fashioned as a lake-fish, gliding between the ranks of the watchers; and, taking Aki's gray head upon her bright breast, she sang to him, and kissed him, and stroked his aged face.

The sun arose; the watchers awakened. They bent over Aki, and it seemed that Aki slept lightly. But when they called him, he answered not; when they touched him, he stirred not. He slept forever! . . .