

The Breath of Pele

by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919

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I do not know why I allowed myself to be drawn into the quarrel of Lukahilo and Upolapu. It was none of my business, though that is a poor reason, as everybody knows, but Lukahilo was such a polished, agreeable and sincere sort of fellow that I was bound to give him my sympathy. There were so many things that both of us liked. He had gone through Yale with honor, and had taken three years in Europe, at Paris, London and Vienna. He knew a lot about art and politics, and I heard on every side that if Hawaii became a State in the Union, as they said it certainly would some day, Lukahilo was sure to be a Senator, or at the very worst, a Congressman.

It all came up over a church squabble. The converted races set great store by these matters, and they take a religious defeat much to heart. Lukahilo, though he

had lived, as I have said, in Paris, London and Vienna, was like all the rest. He and Upolapu belonged to the same church; each wanted the same position—deacon—and there was a great fight between them to get it.

Lukahilo was the younger and more brilliant of the two, but Upolapu had a stronger and more extensive family connection. Lukahilo talked much to me about the matter, and I began to take a keen interest in the rivalry, hoping that my friend would triumph. I had met Upolapu once or twice, but I had no great liking for him. He was a heavy, silent man, rather darker than the average Hawaiian. He had a good house in Honolulu and a large plantation down on Hawaii, to which he made frequent trips.

The whole thing was to be settled at the church one Sunday, and I intended to be present, but two lieutenants, an ensign and myself were skylarking the night before, and I had the bad luck to sprain my ankle. There was nothing to do but to stay in my room until the ankle got well, and swear at the gay blades who paid me visits of condolence and told me of the great times they were having. I shall never forget how I threw my inlaid bootjack at the assistant surgeon of the Pittsburgh and he took it away with him, saying a man with a sprained ankle had no use for a bootjack.

I was anxious to hear about Lukahilo, and sometime after the noon hour he came into my room. I knew at once from his expression how the thing had turned out. His face was perhaps a little brown to have a cloud on it, but there was a real flash of anger in his eye. I thought it best, under the circumstances, not to ask him anything, but to let him begin of his own accord. as I knew he would, for most Hawaiians, like other people, love to lighten their grief with talk.

He dropped into an arm-chair and sat there in a lump as if all his bones had suddenly turned soft. He looked as if he were posing for a statue of despair. He sat silent so long that I coughed, uttered an *ahem* or two, and then aloud:

„Well!“

He raised his head a trifle, looked at me disconsolately, and said:

„It's all over.“

His tone was so utterly forlorn that I laughed until I was compelled to stop by his look of reproach or a twinge in my bent ankle, I am not certain which.

„I think it's very cruel to laugh,“ he said.

„Of course,“ I replied, „I'm a terror and I rejoice in the unparalleled misfortune of my fellows. Tell me how it happened, Lukahilo.“

„There is very little to tell,“ he replied, in tones of deep depression. „He had more influence than I, and they chose him instead of me.“

He took the thing so hard that I began to rally him.

„See here, Lukahilo,“ I said. „It's no use raising such a row about it. Why, the thing's a trifle, the merest trifle. I'd be ashamed to make such a fuss over so small a matter.“

He responded somewhat to my raillery and brightened up a bit. By and by my friend, the assistant surgeon, came in, though he didn't bring back my bootjack—he has it yet, plague take him—and between the two of us, we got Lukahilo into a fairly good humor again. We started him on some of his best Yale stories, and when he left us, at the edge of a tropical night, we thought we had driven his megrims away for good. Right there we made our mistake.

I heard a day or two later that Lukahilo was disposed to make it an affair of state. and that Upolapu was not at all loath. Their relatives took it up, and the spots on the Hawaiian moon grew. I thought it all very childish, but as in my own glorious State of Kentucky I had known a bloody feud costing eight or ten fathers of families their lives, to grow out of a quarrel over the right and title to one gray goose, I couldn't say much.

I could see that Lukahilo's defeat rankled; he wasn't quite what he used to be; sometimes his stories lacked point, and at other times he was abstracted, which I will always hold no gentleman has a right to be in the presence of others, unless it's his known fad to be eccentric. Dr. Pevenney—that was the assistant surgeon—who was as intimate as I with Lukahilo. became really concerned about him.

„If he keeps on in the way he's going," he said, „I think I'll have to give him some blue pills or treat him for the yellow jaundice, though I'm not sure a brown man could have the yellow jaundice."

But Ensign Whatcomb said Lukahilo had enough ills to bear without flying to those Dr. Pevenney might make, and in the row that followed, I escaped from the room, for my ankle was well then.

Illustration:
A trip to the mountains

A week or so later Dr. Pevenney urged me to join him on a trip to the volcano.

„I've got a good, long leave of absence from the ship," he said. „Lukahilo is going, and besides. the volcano is worth seeing, they say."

I had not yet seen Kilauea, and there was no reason why I should not go, though I dreaded the nasty little sea voyage down to Hilo. But I closed at once with Pevenney's invitation, and the next afternoon saw me on the deck of the WAIMEA, one of the little inter-island steamers which seem to be built for the especial purpose of rocking a man into the extremest stages of seasickness.

Pevenney was there, looking as chipper and cheerful as a hardened sailor who fears not the future has a right to look, and so was Lukahilo, who was brighter than I had seen him since his defeat in the matter of the deaconship. We were beginning to have hopes of Lukahilo, when his eyes suddenly flashed, and I heard his teeth gritting upon each other.

There, coming up the narrow little companionway, was Upolapu, large, rotund and content. His eyes met Lukahilo's, and he smiled a complacent little smile. I was afraid that Lukahilo would break his teeth, he gritted them so hard. We learned a little later that Upolapu was going to his plantation down near Hilo. Pevenney and I were sorry that he had come, for we knew he would spoil sport for Lukahilo. But we did not see any more of him just then, as he went down to his stateroom, and did not reappear while we lay in the harbor.

Pevenney, Lukahilo and I placed our three chairs in a row on the deck and made ourselves as comfortable as we could, though there was not room to stretch our legs. All three of us were decorated with leis, which we took off our necks and threw into the sea toward our friends on shore, when the steamer departed, according to the custom. As we passed out of the harbor. Pevenney said we had a fine sea, and pointed to what he called „sprightly little white caps" chasing each

other over the surface of the water. Shortly afterward, I retired to my berth, followed by Pevenney's gibes and jeers, and the world and the flesh interested me no more until we reached Hilo.

For what happened on the remainder of the voyage, I have to depend on Pevenney's account, which I think is in the main a pretty straight tale, less some exaggerations—Pevenney is in the navy, you know.

„After you left, like the lubberly landsman that you are,“ said Pevenney, „Lukahilo and I sat on the deck talking. He's a good sailor, that fellow, and he didn't mind the white caps any more than if they were bubbles on a mill-pond. Still the WAIMEA was rolling a good bit, I'll allow, just enough to soothe a man and set him to dreaming of a girl in port. Lukahilo was looking cheerful again, when who should come on deck but that fat Upolapu? The ship rolled over on her side just then, and Upolapu tumbled right into Lukahilo's lap. They were both up in a flash, and I thought they'd have a fight there and then, but luckily, the ship happened to take another roll over the other way, and they flew apart like two rubber balls hurled in different directions. It's pretty difficult for two fellows to wrangle on the narrow deck of a little steamer that's turning a double somersault from the top of one wave to the top of another every three minutes. So the intervention of the sea ended that round. They gathered themselves up, rubbed their bruises, and glared at each other. Then Lukahilo resumed his chair and Upolapu went back to his stateroom.

„But both of them are good sailors, and they appeared on time for dinner. The steward had given them seats just opposite each other at the table, and whenever one lifted his eyes from his plate, he was bound to look right into the face of the other. This was an uncomfortable situation, when you consider the feeling they had toward each other, but they got along pretty well at first, and paid strict attention to the dinner. By and by coffee was brought, and Upolapu raised his cup to his lips. The sea was still rough, and at that moment the ship tilted over our way. Most of the coffee in Upolapu's cup was dashed upon the table, and some of it all the way across into Lukahilo's lap and upon his hand. He looked as fierce as a bear with its leg in a trap, and rising, demanded an explanation in a voice that could be heard above the smashing of the crockery. There was all the material for a lovely row, but Upolapu is no good—I think he must be at heart a coward. He was smooth and smiling, and explained in suave, fat tones that it was an accident, and he was really very sorry if the gentleman's clothes were damaged, etc. Of course, Lukahilo, like the gentleman he is, had to accept the apology, though he didn't do it with much grace, and there the matter stands at this telling.“

Arrived at Hilo, I hoped that we had shaken off Upolapu. As a matter of fact, we did not see any more of him for several days. Meantime, we climbed the slopes of Mauna Loa and reached the rim of Kilauea. Absorbed in its tremendous sights, Pevenney and I forgot all about the quarrel. Lukahilo had been to the volcano several times, and he constituted himself a guide for us two. He was really quite American, and we were proud of him when he boasted that we had nothing in our country that could match Kilauea.

On one of our excursions to Hale-mau-mau, we were accompanied by a little shriveled old man, who trotted along by the side of Lukahilo. He looked to me to be about a hundred years old, and was a queer sight with his half-naked brown skin

and a great bunch of white hair like a snowball crowning his head. Old age did not seem to interfere with his activity, for in his bare feet he skipped over the pahoehoe as if it were soft carpet to his touch.

I asked Lukahilo who the old fellow was, and he replied somewhat vaguely that he lived thereabouts and had once been a volcano guide. This satisfied Pevenney and me, and we paid no further attention to him save to admire his agility now and then as he trotted over the lava, even the a-a not proving too sharp or too hot for his feet. Pevenney insisted that they must be inlaid with steel.

After one of these excursions we went back to the Crater House, very tired and ready for a large supper. It does not take a man long to become accustomed to anything, and by this time I thought little of the fact that only a few feet of warm crust divided us from miles of fire, or as Pevenney put it: „Break through the sheet and Hades is your bed.“ Nor did we feel alarmed because we saw occasional cracks in the crust through which smoke and steam and the strong smell of sulphur from the Hades below were coming. „A fellow can't stay scared forever,“ said Pevenney. „I think Old Nick himself would improve on acquaintance.“

The little grass and bamboo hut standing on the edge of eternal fire looked very cheerful to us three who were cherishing sore knee joints and two-edged appetites, and we expected an evening of rest and reminiscence. But it was not our luck. There, sitting on a bench in front of the Crater House, as fat and placid as usual, was our evil genius, Upolapu. Lukahilo at once became moody and sullen, and that cast a damper over Pevenney and me. But Upolapu was polite. He said he came up about once a year from his plantation to see the volcano, and it was a great pleasure, a really great pleasure, though an unexpected one, to find us yet there. I did the courtesies of the evening in my best manner, for I hoped to stop the petty little quarrel between Lukahilo and Upolapu. Lukahilo went into the house and remained there, silent in a corner. Pevenney assisted me for a while, and then strolled around to the kitchen to see them cook taro at a fire spurting from a seam in the earth, humming as he went: „*Oh, my love's a maid of Waikiki.*“

If ever I want to live without care for the future, I think I'll join the navy, where all things are mapped out for you, from cadetship at Annapolis to retirement on pay, a half century later. Pevenney left me alone with Upolapu, but we did not disagree. He talked very sensibly about current topics, but never once alluded to Lukahilo. He went away in the morning, and they told at the Crater House that he had returned to his plantation. Nevertheless, his visit had a most depressing effect on Lukahilo, who recovered with less rapidity than usual, and was moody and silent for several days. He slipped away from us two or three times, and Pevenney and I wondered what he was about. But we did not like to spy upon him.

Pevenney and I slept on cots in the front room of the Crater House. Lukahilo also slept on a cot in a small room adjoining, but the door between us was never closed. When Lukahilo returned after one of his disappearances, we had gone to bed, but we were not asleep. We heard him fumbling about in the room, and could see his figure though indistinctly. He lay down presently, but did not remain on the cot long. In ten minutes he arose and walked over to the far door, which opened into the air. He stood there for a minute or two. He had all his clothes on, and it seemed likely that he was going out again.

„There's something wrong with Lukahilo,“ whispered Pevenney from his cot. „I think we ought to follow him.“

I assented. As I said before, I do not like to spy upon any one, but Lukahilo really looked as if he needed watching, and we were his best friends. We jumped up, dressed quickly, and when Lukahilo stepped out into the air, we were not more than a minute behind him. It was well that we were so quick, or otherwise we should have lost him, for he was walking swiftly and with decision. To our surprise, he advanced directly toward the crater.

It was a bright night. The pungent odor of sulphur, the eternal distillation of Kilauea, tickled our nostrils. Over towards the crater, there was a bloody redness in the heavens, and coils of sullen vapor, shot with lighter streaks of flame, rose lazily from the lava pit. A low, steady rumbling, to which our ears were used already, marked the internal turmoil of Kilauea, the great blowhole of the world.

„He seems to be going to the pit,“ said Pevenney. „Well, I don't mind doing it myself. I haven't been there by night yet, and maybe we'll see Pélé presiding over her own.“

He spoke jesting words, but there was no jest in his tone. It is one thing to go into the pit of a live volcano by day, and another thing to go there by night. We did not doubt that we were bound that way, for Lukahilo walked straight on. He seemed to have no idea that he was followed, as he never looked back. I stumbled once on the pahoehoe, and made some noise, as I threshed about among the ohias, but it did not attract his attention. Above us loomed the huge white shoulder of Mauna Loa, and before us was the angry gash in her side called Kilauea.

We were not strangers to the way, and our knowledge helped us. We quickly passed the ohias and the ohelos, and the other daring plants that aspire to a living almost up to the edge of Hale-mau-mau itself, and came out upon the tumbled masses of broken lava. All the time Lukahilo was walking steadily on and never looking back, like a man who knew his business.

„What the devil can he be up to?“ exclaimed Pevenney, who is an impatient sort of fellow. „Is he going to throw himself into the pit?“

I was too busy picking my way over the lava to answer. We had left the last struggling ohia and were in the region of burnt desolation. The lava billowed before us, black or gray, hot on its under side and hot in its breath. It was a place where a man who did not wish to go to Hades before his time had need to be cautious. The recent cracks, filled with opaque rolls of raw lava, grew larger. The vapors thickened and were heavy with sulphur.

We crossed a steep depression, struggling most painfully, and then ascended a ridge of lava, still warm, and spit recently from the mouth of Kilauea. I had seen the ridge by day, but by night, with the pale glimmer of the moon and the bloody redness of Hale-mau-mau upon it, it was another thing. It had been carved into all sorts of fantastic shapes, perhaps by a demon of the pit. perhaps by Pélé herself. There were long ropes of black and gray lava looking like gigantic serpents, coiled and uncoiled in the moonlight, fresh-crawled from the pit. Heads like those of Mexican War gods grinned at us, and a mermaid sported in flames. I knew that part of it was the effect of the night, but the knowledge did not keep me from seeing strange things.

„It's a pity that Italian poet who wrote about hell hadn't been here," said Pevenney.

Lukahilo never once looked back. The increasing heat of the lava which lay porous and glistening under our feet did not deter him. Presently he turned, and for a moment was out of sight. We followed, turned at the same place, and stood upon the brink of the bottomless pit of fire.

There was trouble in Hale-mau-mau, the red mouth of Kilauea, which groaned and quaked and spat bloody, red drops far up into the air. Huge waves of fire, like those of the ocean, broke upon the black lava sides of the pit. Blowing cones appeared and disappeared. Jets of steamy hot vapor spurted up and fell back into the cauldron. Sometimes over a part of the lake, a thin, fine crust that glistened like silver, with red streaks of fire shining through it, would form, but in a few seconds it was gone. The earth throbbed as the steam and gases, sucked up from its center, tried to escape through Hale-mau-mau. What awed me most was the bloody gleam over everything, not the mere flash of fire, but a deep, gory tint that might shine from the smouldering coals of all the world.

„Pélé is angry tonight," whispered Pevenney.

Even that garrulous and light-hearted little doctor was subdued.

„Is she ever otherwise," I asked. „Watch that crust roll up and break!"

An immense sheet of crust wrinkled, rolled up like a blanket, and then cracked to pieces; huge fragments were sucked down into the fire and cast up again. Fiery cones were pursuing each other over the surface of the lake; once all ran together in the center, fused for a moment into a red mass. and then fell apart. Some stalactites of fire dropped with a dull splash from an overhanging lava cliff, and red spray was cast up when they fell.

„Come away," said Pevenney, plucking at my coat sleeve. „We came here to follow Lukahilo, and not to look into the pit."

It was time we set about our business, for Lukahilo's form was just disappearing again around a lava hill. We followed with caution, glad that his new road was taking him a little further from the pit. When we reached the hill, we stopped, for we heard talking on the other side. Lukahilo had come to see some one. I will admit that curiosity now mingled largely with our solicitude on our friend's account. The hill was made of new lava, and moving around its curve a little, we could see that it was scooped out on the other side into a kind of cavern. We found a fairly comfortable footing, and by great good luck a hole in the lava wall through which we could see directly into the cavern.

The man whom Lukahilo had met there was the weazened old fellow who had been tramping about with us and saying nothing. He was still bare of feet and very scanty as to clothes, but there was a new expression on his face. Both Pevenney and I saw at a glance that he commanded and Luka hilo obeyed.

„Is the hour favorable, Opu?" asked Lukahilo.

The old man nodded and produced two figures from under his scanty gray tunic. They were gray and about a foot high. One I recognized as the image of the goddess, Pélé. The other seemed to have no special characteristic.

Illustration:
On their knees

Just beyond the edge of the cavern was a wide crack from which a pungent, smoky gas arose. Opu placed the two images on the edge of the crack, facing each other and very near together. Then he and Lukahilo fell upon their knees, and the old man began to chant something. What it was, Pevenney and I never knew, for the chant was in the Hawaiian tongue. It went on for a long time, Opu and Lukahilo gently rocking their bodies back and forth.

„I think we’ve struck something queer,“ said Pevenney.

I jabbed him in the side as a hint to keep silent.

By and by the two got up on their feet again, and Opu produced from under his tunic, which seemed to be as capacious as the sleeves of a Hindoo fakir, a small brass pot or skillet. He took it to the fissure and heated it until it was almost red hot, Lukahilo all the time watching him intently. Then he brought it back, holding the hot handle with a corner of his tunic, and placed it upon the floor of the cavern.

The hand went under the tunic again, and when it came out, we saw that it was filled with a fine, dry, brown stuff that looked like a powder. This he began to drop, bit by bit, into the glistening hot skillet. A sharp, penetrating odor, accompanied by a thin blue smoke, arose and filled the cavern. It was wafted through the crevice and went up our noses. It did not make us cough or sneeze, but it had a curious effect upon us, especially upon the sight. Everything was magnified and colors grew more vivid. I looked at Pevenney’s face and it was a lurid red. I had no doubt that mine looked the same to him. My head, too, felt as if it were swelling.

Lukahilo was sitting on a block of lava, watching Opu. He had not spoken a word since the chant, but he followed every movement of the old man with the excited, eager eyes of anticipation. Presently he picked up some strands of Pélé’s hair and broke them nervously between his fingers. The odor grew stronger. Pevenney gasped a little.

„Shall we go away ?“ I asked.

„Not for worlds,“ he replied, glueing his chin to the crevice.

The earth began to throb heavily. At least it appeared so to me, with my swollen head, for I tell what I seemed to see. There were hideous quakings in Hale-mau-mau. The blowing cones rose to an enormous height. The blood red drops spurted far up and fell again in showers of red rain.

Opu began to chant once more, but in a much louder tone than before, his voice rising, clear and penetrating, above the throbings of Hale-mau-mau and the crackle of the molten lava. He whirled about like a dancing dervish, his shock of white hair standing upon his head like a cone. His face was rapt, and it was easy to see that the man was in an ecstasy. His agility was incredible. He seemed to me to whirl as fast as a boy’s well-spun top, and his chant rose and fell with a certain sort of rhythm. Lukahilo sprang up suddenly and began to whirl also. Round and round he went almost as fast as Opu, joining in his chant. The sweat appeared upon both their faces. Lukahilo threw aside his civilized coat and waistcoat, and his eyes had the glassy look of a man who sees things that nobody else sees.

„Listen to the old scamp!“ suddenly exclaimed Pevenney, putting his hand upon my arm.

Opu had changed to the English tongue, and he was praying for some thing. We could hear distinctly the words of his prayer.

„Burn him with thy breath, O Pélé! O great goddess!“ he chanted. „Grant this prayer, O goddess of fire, to thy faithful priest and servant!“

Over and over again he prayed this prayer, and round and round he and Lukahilo spun, their eyes glazed and the sweat dripping from their faces.

„Look! Look!“ cried Pevenney, putting his hand again upon my arm. I could feel his fingers trembling through the cloth.

He pointed to the two idols, and as sure as I stand here, and Pevenney will swear to it, too, flames gushed out of the mouth of Pélé’s image and set the other on fire.

„Burn him with thy breath, O Pélé,“ chanted the priest of the goddess, and Lukahilo joined him in the strain. The flames gushed again from Pélé’s mouth, and the other idol was all in a blaze. The two never relaxed their chant, and they seemed to us to have a swing and rhythm in unison with the quakings and groanings of Hale-mau-mau.

Presently the little idol burned down to a cinder, and what was left of it toppled over and fell into the smoking seam. But the image of Pélé sat on the verge, triumphant.

Opu and Lukahilo sank down upon rolls of lava, exhausted.

„Let’s go,“ whispered Pevenney. „I’ve seen enough of this devilish incantation.“

So had I. We slipped away from the cavern, and by the light of Hale-mau-mau, which was now one huge mass of gory red, climbed out of the crater.

I slept very late the next day, and awoke with a headache. Pevenney was up before me. When I went out on the veranda he was sitting there, and he looked at me rather curiously.

„Have you heard the latest?“ he asked.

„No,“ I said, „what is it?“

„The news came an hour ago that Upolapu died last night of a sudden fever.“

