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Helen Hay Whitney**

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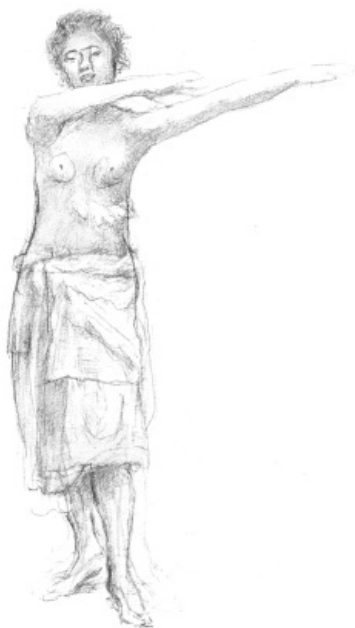
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ROSE OF DAWN: A TALE OF THE
SOUTH SEA ***



*THE ROSE OF
DAWN*
A TALE OF THE SOUTH SEA

By HELEN HAY

With a Drawing by

JOHN LA FARGE



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The ROSE OF DAWN
A TALE OF THE SOUTH SEA

Somnolent, vast, inert, the darkness lay
Waiting for dawn. Across the ocean stirred
A luminous haze, not light, but whispering light,
So softly yet, the islands had not heard.
The mystery of sleep was in the trees
And on the weary stars. A little cry
That broke the silence seemed a sacrilege.
Then thro' the palm trees glided like a ghost
A dusky form; the curtain of the dark
Was rent with life, the forest brought forth men.

Instinct with morning every eye was bright,
Tho' sleep so lately lay across their lids.
No sinister intent had called them forth
Upon the shadows. May held out her hands,
And all the men who dared the dangerous sport
Were faring where the great bonita played,—
Strong shining fish below the mid sea waves.
Upon the beach beneath the paling moon
The boats were launched. Amid the busy stir
One man stood idle; as a chief might order,
He bade the youths prepare his long canoe.
With folded arms he gravely watched the rest
And gave them salutation haughtily.
Uhila^[1] was he called, and in his veins
There ran a slender stream of northern blood.
He bore upon his old and indolent heart,
Scarred with the sins of war, a white device.
Taka, daughter of chiefs and Fiji's pride,
Lily of maidens, was betrothed to him;
Desirous eyes kinged him with envy's crown.

^[1] The lightning.

Scraping across the beach the boats were launched,

And as they touched the waves, they seemed to take
New shape and dignity with that caress
Of little lapping ripples round the prow.
Uhila led the fleet as one who knew
His right by reason of his age and skill.
The little isle seemed now a sleeping maid
Kirtled in green, the beach her snowy breast
Veined with the purple brooks that sought the sea.
Uhila watched it fade below the blue,
Crouched in the bow, his grizzled chin in hand,
Taking his ease, while small Kuma, keen-eyed,
Famed for his daring, paddled lustily.
The dawn had not yet broken, and the soft
Beautiful haze that veils the birth of day
Hung on the water. Loath to break the peace,
Men gave their orders in hushed tones, the clean
Chill of the morning wrapt their naked bodies.
Then, as a slow blush mounts the cheek, a light
Breathed from the sea, and all the air seemed warm
As at the touch of spring, a violet streak,
A pale leaf green, a golden, and a rose
Broke in the sky, and morning was revealed.
With a shrill cry, young Kuma raised his hand
And pointed where with dip and shriek and wheel
A flock of sea birds hovered; all the rest
Echoed the call and bending to the paddle
Shot o'er the waves, for now the fish were gained.
Uhila grasped his rod, and at the stern
Tossed out the shining hook, with laugh and cheer
A glint of silver flashed, then all the air
Was gemmed with streaming stars. They came from deeps;
From azure fairer than its mother sky
Clouded with dazzling whitenesses of foam.
Luck to their fishing:

Now, fair and remote
A scattered emerald from a broken chain
Lying below the bending breast of heaven,
The village had awakened,—once again
Serene Kambara, island of the south,
Exhaled its light upon the light of heaven.
The verdure seemed to shine with lucent green,
The red hibiscus burned with inward flame,
And in the village happy song and shout
Proclaimed the day was fair. Blue upon blue
The bright waves glittered like a shattered star
Set in the silver crescent of the sand.
The palm trees' plume uplifted dauntlessly
To call the morning. At the forest's brim
The day was made alive by human flowers,
Sweet maidens who against the emerald
Showed warm and brown in purest harmony.
The fierce bright flame that is the tropic sea
Burned on their eyes and called them to its heart.
Like eager sea birds they forgot the land,
And, happy as the amorous waves, they gave
Their slim brown bodies to the sea's embrace.
They found them driftwood and astride they leapt
The feathered breakers, one with daring skill
Curved her sweet length to lie within the palm
Of a strong wave, and so was brought to shore.
"Taka," they cried, "has beaten us;" and all,
Shaking the bright drops from their shining hair,
With laugh and song sprang to the beach again,
Sunning themselves to languor ere they made
Their pretty toilet.
Some had gathered flowers
In fragrant wreaths, and others brought the grave
Work of the morning. Yet because the wine—
Sun of the South—gilds even toil, it seemed
A poet's pastime. Scarlet beans they threaded
Later to lie about some golden throat.
Deftly they wove fine mats, and deftly twisted
Bright witchery to adorn themselves, and snare
Men's eyes. With little songs they pearled the air.

Hush! it is Taka singing:—

"Far away
In a fountain dwelt a maiden;
When the silver moon was high
She was glad, but heavy laden
Was she when its light must die.
Far away.

"Far away
Came a stranger brave to love her,
Loved her when the moon was high;
When the moon was pale above her
Love grew pale and like to die
Far away.

"Far away
From the fountain's mist he drew her
Happy while the moon was high,
Waning, fled she, her pursuer
Held her back, and saw her die
Far away."

"'T is a sad song for morning," cried the maids—
"And for a bride. Come, Hopa, sing of laughter."
Hopa sang:—

"Little brown streams,
Slim as my fingers,
Running and laughing
While the light lingers,
Have you no dreams,
Little brown streams?

"Little brown maidens,
Laughing and weeping,
Singing and dancing,
All the night sleeping,
Have you no lovers,
Little brown maidens?"

Afar there sounded in the mellow breeze
The rhythmic movement of the maidens' toil;
Before them on the sand a snowy sheet
Lay spread,—the tapa cloth; tutunga trees
Yield them their inner bark, and lightly then
The maidens tap the fibres till they join,
Made firm with scented gums and bright with dyes,
To form a fabric that a bride might choose,
And this was for a bride. Among the rest
One maiden shone; a moon beside her stars,
Taka, the fair. Her father was the chief
Of this small village. His the splendid store
Of kava bowls for which the isle is famed,
The shining fish-hooks, fairest of mother of pearl,
Great mats from ancient days with border rare
Of crimson feathers, cruel tragic spears,
Sweet unguents, necklaces of pearly shells
Envied by maidens, and above them all
Bales of the snowy tapa, made by hands
Subtle, wise hands of women, over whom
The earth had long laid flowers.

In the land
Where history is but a charming tale
Droned by old men at twilight, future days
Pleasantly certain as the next repast,
Where gods and goddesses appear as birds,
Trees, plants or moonlight, gently rising tide,
And shining girdle of leaves,—all homely things,
Which hold the people's hearts.—In this fair land
Taka was born. Thro' sixteen years of moon
And tropic sun she blossomed in the air.
Chilled by no frost, the world unconsciously
Mirrored her sweetness back to her. The sun
Had kissed her skin to a warm topaz; rare
As dusky wealth of Autumn, her sweet breast,

Gleaming and bare, was hung with ropes of flowers
Yellow and white, and in her curling hair
Glimmered the pure gardenia. All the braves
Wished her for wife, but old Akau the chief,
Knowing Uhila's prowess and the blood
Left by an English forbear in his veins,
Knowing that Taka too could boast, or mourn,
A foreign ancestry, had lately pledged
His daughter to this brave, and now the village
Made preparations for the marriage. There
By the warm sea the maidens paid their court
To Taka, who so soon would leave their gay
Indifferent frolic lives to wed the grave
Stern chief. She did not falter at the choice.
Love which the maidens sang was but a word;
She wished no better fate than to be mated
To a strong warrior whom her heart held dear
As friend to kind Akau. So she waited.
In her slim hands she held a polished cup,
The shell of cocoanut, which caught the light
Like a brown pool. The toil of many days
Had turned the tawny shade to warmest black
In gradual depths as shaded Taka's cheek;
With perfumed oil her fingers gave caress
And waked the hidden pictures in the grain,
The yellow sand, the dusky amber girl,
The brown perfected in the shining globe.
Earth's monotones are justified in this.
Close to her lolled small Hopa, blithe and gay
As a young cricket, teasing all the rest
With her sharp wit; often she dropped her work—
The threading of bright flowers into wreaths—
To look across the waves, and suddenly
She called, "A sail, a little sail," and all
Followed her pointing fingers. Far away,
Tossed like a feather, black against the sky,
Hovered a tiny craft, its unknown lines
Marked it as stranger, and the maidens all
Curiously watched its coming to the shore.

All night the little shell with ceaseless dip
And pause, and rise and dip again, had borne
The trackless trade winds. Tui Tua Kau,
"King of the Reefs," had ventured over far
From Tonga's shore. Caught by a wanton gale,
His idle racing, lengthened in a whim
To cheat his laughing mates, grew a wild flight.
The frail canoe seemed, on the angry sea,
A sweet rose petal blown across the night.
Yet wisely now the winds had mind to crown
Their joyous undertaking, and upon
The shores of Fiji's isles they drew their prize.
The maidens on the shore had seen afar
The stranger's coming, and the songs were stilled
To hush of expectation. Even so
A prince might come to claim his kingdom, lone,
In a frail craft, with weary eyes, and hair
Crowned with a fading wreath, more beautiful
Than all their lovers, slender, strong and young.
With one lithe spring he gained the yellow sand
And caught the boat and drew it with a swing
High on the beach,—its movement seemed alive.
His sinewy fingers loosed the flapping sail,
Gay shells clinked musical against the mast,
And all the maidens, timorous as birds,
Laughed at the sound with shy averted face.
Then straight and slender as the cocoa palm,
Straight as its shaft and crowned with shining hair,
The stranger lifted up his head. The wreath,
Faded yet still alive thro' ocean's breath,
Drooped o'er his brows. His flashing sun-bright eyes
Struck thro' the group of girls as shoots a dart,
And caught and quivered in sweet Taka's breast.
More noble than the rest, she scorned to fear,
And graceful in her modesty she faltered,

Then came to meet and greet the stranger guest.
Erect she faced him, o'er her brow the frail
Curves of the crest she wore, antennæ-wise,
Trembled a little. As a maid beseems,
Her eyes drooped from his gaze, yet not too soon
To miss the gleam with which he caught the first
Flash of her beauty. With that glance he gained—
Half conscious of a gladness—that this maid
Was still for winning. As the custom is
Her hair fell in twin braids, and were she wed
They had been sacrificed to that estate.
Maiden she was, his eyes caressed the sign
Black o'er the topaz beauty of her breast.
The stranger spoke. "Malua am I called;
I hold for title Tui Tua Kau.
Over the violent seas, beneath the frown,
Cold and untoward, of a starless sky,
The waves of chance have borne me; thro' the night
Around me and above the pitiless trades
Were blind with darkness, blown like maiden's hair
Across my face. As palm trees beaten by wind,
The tortured breakers tossed their streaming crests,
And all the light of all my life seemed dead—
Then—morning broke, and I behold the sun!"—
He held her with his gaze and found her eyes—
"On Tonga's shore I reigned a chief, and now
I am a beggar at your mercy." Then
The young pride mounting to his cheek, he cried,
"Nay, but I jested, for I come so far
To green Kambara for a lordly bowl
Fit for the kava of a chief."

She smiled,
And with the smile Malua felt the blood
Leap in his heart, his heart inviolate
Never before so stirred 'neath woman's eyes.
"Come, then, with me," said Taka, and the beach
Stretched from their feet, a ribbon that should bind
In its white length the heaven to the earth.
With delicate step she led him to the hut
Where old Akau gave him kindly greeting.
A little in the shadow, where the gourds
And strange sweet herbs—soft musty fragrances—
Hung swinging from the beams about her head,
Taka withdrew. Her wide eyes opened wide,
And, lightly folded on her golden breast,
Her two hands lay like flowers.

In the light
Bright as a sun god sat Malua listening
With greatest reverence to the aged man,
Who spoke to him of ancient, long dead things
While he displayed his wealth of burnished cups
Out of the splendid eld. "My son," he said,
"Yours is dim future, mine the deathless past;
Heroes have died for me and yet shall die,
And all the glory of the virgin earth
Yields up its sweets to me, for now I rest
And stretch my withered sinews in the sun
And wait for peaceful death; because your lips
Are innocent, and dawn is in your eyes,
I give you of my store the fairest treasure.
After my Taka, you have won my heart."
In his strong hand he laid a bowl; for this
The ages had paid toll, soft lightnings shone
From its brown glory, carved most royally.
He raised the kava bowl aloft, the sun
Struck on its shining rim, and straight as a spear
Shivered the dusk where Taka stood. The light
Lay on her swelling throat, and showed her eyes
Starred like a tropic night. The stranger's hand
Trembled a little, and his quick-drawn breath
Carried a message from his breast to hers.
They left the hut together. From the clear
Bright heat of noon they turned, and took their way

Into the greenly silent forest. Leaves
Flickered above wet blossoms, simple sounds
Of homely labor borne upon the breeze
Made them the more alone. They spoke of Love,
A mighty word to ease the strange new pain
Born in their hearts.

Sudden the path grew wide—
A little space deprived of flowers and life—
"The house of sandal wood," said Taka, pointing,
And there, the last home of a chief, it lay.
White shells and snowy pebbles girt him round
In his great mould of clay, and all his spears
And clubs of war kept vigil, showing still
His might in battle. Shrill the parrot's scream
Rang on the desolation, and the trees
Seemed to withdraw their shadows from the place
Sacred to death, the violent crime of war.
A little shadow darkened Taka's heart,
Could this sweet world contain both death and love?
She sought Malua's eyes to be assured
That love lives always.

He had gone before
To hold the leaves for her to pass, and softly
She came, and like a golden butterfly
Her small hand fluttered down upon his arm.
He caught his breath as tho' the leaping blood
That fled before this touch were very flame,
Then slowly, slowly turned, and in her eyes
Gave up his heart's desire. No word was said.
She knew not that she loved, he only knew
She was the moon of women; but their hearts,
Wiser than they, had flowered into one.
Then as she passed beneath the swinging leaves,
He caught the wreath wherewith on Tonga's shore
The maids had crowned him "King of Love and Beauty,"
And cast it from him with a high disdain
Of token other than from Taka's hand.
She laughed to see it, and her step was light
Along the flowery way.

Love in this land
Grows into perfect stature as the swift
Sweet growth of nature. In these gracious souls
Love stood full-armed, godlike, from birth. Their lips
Whispered of life and laughter, but their hearts,
Singing together, told each other clear:

"Ah, Love, dear Love, there is no need to say,
Catch up life's song, its lightest, merriest word,
Pledge deep the golden sun, the breeze and bird,
Draw down long lashes over happy eyes,
That none may guess the light that in them lies,
Nor with what secret smile your lips are stirred.
The moonlight is so short, so long the day,
Nay, Love, dear Love, there is no need to say."

The whole world laughed with flowers overhead,
The sky a hollow sapphire ached with blue,
The green bright sea gave jewels to the sun,
And all the air was love that doting earth
Breathed to the sun, her lover.

In the midst
Two radiant gods with brave, wide eyes, and hair
Crowned with the beatific spring, they stood,—
Taka, the fair, and young Malua, fierce,
Passionate-hearted youth, and passionate youth;
Faltering before her innocent gaze, he cried,
"Dare I adore?" so crystal clear she seemed
A silver dewdrop in the rose of dawn.
And Taka, trembling: "How can he be mine,
So strong, so fair, a god with heart of flame!"
And so they strove against their hearts and lived
Long lives of hope and fear and love's sweet pain

Within a heart-beat. But the time was near!

There in mid-forest, rimmed with leaves jade green,
All singing in the sun,—as deep and brown
As Taka's eyes,—the pool disclosed itself.
Across the clear light of the morning, showers
Of fiery jewels shone against the trees,—
Rubies, bright sapphires, purple amethyst,
Topaz, fierce opal, grass-green emeralds
Flitting and darting;—were they only birds!
Flower made bird or bird made flower, they seemed
To eyes newborn upon a world of love.
The air was heavy with strange scents, the old
Familiar perfumes seemed so rarely sweet,
The jasmine was the very breath of love.
And when they rested on a flowery bank,
And Taka wove the red hibiscus wreath
To crown Malua, as he gazed at her,
Stretched at her feet, his chin upon his hand,
The whole long world had waited but for this.

(Weaving the rosy wreath.)

"My dream was of thee at sunrise
With light steps over the sea.
Lonely upon the mountain,
I woke from my sleep for thee."

(Weaving the rosy wreath.)

"The wild dark rocks were round me,
The flowery maids were gone;
I woke, thou—bright as lightning
Beside me—waited the dawn.

"Weaving the rosy wreath,
I weave my life in a dream.
Thou camest through dawn on the sea,
Red flower on a sunlit stream."

(Weaving the rosy wreath.)

She laid the scarlet wreath upon his hair.
"My King," she whispered, and Malua's eyes—
Boy, spite of all his battles—filled with tears
Wrung from his burdened heart. He caught her hand;
The lake was hushed with noon-tide, far away
A fond bird starred the forest with a cry.
Then Taka turned, and in her eyes a light—
The light of summer moon in water still
And in her face the glamour of moon and star,
On which the crimson petals of her lips
Lay trembling, eager wings to her new soul,
Love was confessed.

The day went swiftly on.
Malua left her side to gather fruits
For a love feast together. In a dream
His heart had moved, and like a child he longed
To prove it real by sweet familiar ways,
Serving his fairest lady while their laughter
Fell on the air like music. Taka, waiting
On the green bank his coming, told her heart:
"Not for his beauty only, tho' his eyes
Burn into mine more beautiful than the night,
Not for the corded muscle in his arm
Which broke a great branch that would stay my path,
Not for his voice, a murmur of soft seas,
Nor all the gracious ways he knows so well,
Not for his love that breaks within his eyes,—
All these are dear, are dearer than my life,
But for himself I love him," Taka dreamed.
"To be his sister, nay, his mother then,
To welcome him from hunting with my eyes,
To fight his battles with the other women,
To triumph in his triumphs, yet perchance
Be happier if when vanquished he would come
Safe in my arms for shelter. If I might
But suffer for his sake and see him stand

Stronger and happier—he should never guess—
But I might sometimes touch his hair and know
The curls that clung around my fingers mine,
Bought by my pain as he, Malua, mine.
Just so the heaven belongs to each small star
Fixed by its gracious power eternally."

Thro' the late afternoon Uhila came.
The Earth was idle, on her knees her hand
Opened, relaxed and empty, and her eyes
Closed to the ardent sun. The village slept,
Waiting for evening's cool. Uhila came;
Over his shoulder like a silver shroud
He brought the gleaming fish. The purple shadows
Lay in soft pools about the palms; the leaves,
Listless as weary love, hung motionless,
And the hot green gave color to the air,
The world viewed through an emerald.
He came,
And to Akau's hut he brought his gift,
A mighty fish to grace the wedding feast.
And where was Taka? All the gorgeous day
She had been absent, old Akau told;
And of the stranger, wanderer, with eyes
Lit by the fires of youth, Akau told,
Like a glad wind of morning bearing spring,
Spring with the heart of summer, and his brow
Crowned with the calm white flowers of innocence.
Uhila knew, in days long past he too
Had wandered thro' the forest in the glory
And glow of youth.

With mouth set stern and grim
He followed to the pool. His heart was stirred
With turbulent emotions. She was his,—
Taka was his, the blossom that should cheer
The winter of his age. His springing step
Was stealthy as a tiger's, and the way
Was clear before him. Rightly was he named
The lightning; keen and cruel he would flash
Into this sky of love, death in his hand.
The path was strewn with little crimson flowers
Scarlet festooned the trees, or was it blood
That danced within his eyes? His thoughts were vague:
Death, mercy, love, but strongest was desire
Merely to see and satisfy his fear.
Sudden he saw them, and he hid his eyes
Before the sight, then strained to see again
Taka, her arms piled high with blossoms, stood,
An amber goddess of spring with flying hair
Beneath a flower-bent branch, whose leaves had caught
One of her sun-kissed curls. Malua watched her.
Laughing, she would have torn away the tress
And with the effort all the starry flowers
Drifted like snow across their bended heads,
But with a low cry he withheld her hand,
And standing where she needs must turn to see
His two arms o'er her slender shoulder laid,
With fingers little used to gentler arts
His timid touch unloosed her perfumed hair,
Too near—for aught but that her curving throat
Should be upturned to meet his sure caress,
And all the blossoms drifted thro' the air
And fell like blessings on their bended heads.

Uhila bore no more; his heart was great
With unshed tears; their beauty and their love
Touched like soft music on his injured soul
With infinite sadness and a hopeless calm.
He left them there and sought the forest shades
To search his heart. A great nobility
Slept in his native breast, and those pale drops
Of northern blood had taught him self-control
And might of mercy. To and fro he paced,
Learning his lesson. Taka, little moon

Sent by the gods to light his loneliness,
Was his no longer. He must twist his heart,
Wried with grim pain, to smiles of pleasantness.
Ah, it was great. Uhila should be great,
Giving her to Malua as a gift,
Showing Akau how he wished no more
To wed so young a maid, and then the tears
Broke from his eyes and burned his throbbing breast.
Homeward he turned, and all the sleepy birds
Twittered good-night—and almost was he glad.
In the cool green of evening, silent now
Save for their beating hearts, the lovers came
Back to the village. In the stranger's honor
The people made a feast. The air was filled
With busy sounds of preparation. Some
Brought driftwood for the fires, some gathered flowers
To deck themselves, and all the fruitful earth
Was robbed of its delights for beauty's sake.
Before the feasting Chief Akau rose,
Grave and majestic, for the evening prayer;
Pouring libation from the kava bowl
In a deep silence, to the gods he cried,

"Take of our offering, O you mighty gods,
Look on this people kindly, let them prosper
In health and increase. Let the fecund ground
Grant us, your creatures, life to serve you well.
Take of our offering, O you gods of war,
Let men be brave and triumph in your name.
Take of our offering, O you gods of sea,
Spare us your wrath, and in your might depart
Along the ocean to some far off shore.
Take of our offering, all you mighty gods."

The feasting ended, round the fires they gathered,
Wise aged men telling anew their tales
Of youth, sweet purposeless youth which dreams of stars
The while it gathers weeds—of battles dire.
Their thin cold blood warmed with grim memories
Of gods they told, of goddesses with hair
Streaming across the sunset, and of dear
Women long dead, and then the maidens came,
Singing their little songs. One sang of love:

"The breath of spring is in his hair,
He needs no crimson necklaces
To win the favor of the fair.

"The full moon leaned to kiss his eyes,
The fairies brought him purple flowers,
The flowers of love, and made him wise.

"The maidens die for his disdain,
His heart strikes silver lightning,
Their warm tears stir the flowers like rain.

"The breath of love is in his hair,
He needs no crimson necklaces
To win the fairest of the fair."

Another sang of the sad mothers, lone
In their dark homes at evening, while beyond
The limitless twilight on some field of war
Their hearts lie dead.

"O my men, my men!
Keen in the rain and sunshine
For glorious splendid deeds,
You are gathered as idle weeds.

"O my men, my men!
The mighty gods were jealous,
Your virtues shone like a star;
The enemy came from afar!

"O my men, my men!
Vengeance shall follow soon,
Your people shall blast the foe

Or ever the cold winds blow.

"O my men, my men!
My life is an empty shell,
No one has heard my moan,
I sit in the dark alone."

Then of the gods they sang,—a moonlight song:

"Sleep, O soft little winds,
Restless whispering grass,
Reeds of the water-ways sway not,
Sleep, that the gods may pass.
"Deepen, you dreams of the sleepers,
Veil you, O fire of the moon.
Darken, you silver of stars,
Sleep, for the gods come soon.
"Sleep, for the gods who sleep not
Pass on the midnight's breath;
Mystical, magical, secret,
Sleep, for to wake is death."

And after singing came the dance; the brown
Lithe women decked with bright fantastic hues
Wavered into the circle of the light.
Kneeling, they wove their spells. As gracious flowers
Swayed by the winds of evening, they were blown
By breezes of desire. The eye was filled
With luxury of soft motion and the sound
Of soft monotonous chanting charmed the ear.
Then in their midst came Taka, and she stood,
Waiting the signal. Slow she raised her arms,
Slow as tho' ages hung upon her hands
Heavy with burdened love. The music hushed.
Deep in the mystery of her steady eyes
Lingered the secret of the world, and then
Laughter and light came dancing from her smile.
Her fingers fluttered on the harp of love,
And every chord uttered itself again
Within some dusky heart. The earth was still.
The warm night air was strong with heavy scent
Of oil upon the dancers and the flowers
That decked their breasts and hair. Malua's soul
Fainted beneath the load of so much love,
And when the dance was finished, and her eyes
Held him for one long second ere she smiled
And stole away, he knew for death or life
His spirit lay within her golden hands.

Woe for Uhila! As the twilight glow
Faded in soft immeasurable plains
Of darkness, so the beauty in his heart
Faded in clouds of wrath. The great fire blazed—
A ruby in the raven hair of night—
And clear across the flames Uhila saw
His rival, garlanded with blossoms, pale,
Calm as a happy lover. Could he smile
Over his empty hands and meekly bow—
Uhila bow!—to taste a stranger's whip!
Death snapped the sparks, and Vengeance hurled the flames.
Like blood the fire fell o'er the bare young heart,
And he who watched in one mad bound foresaw
How blood indeed might flash across that breast.
The high resolve grew dim in that fierce light,
"Tis noble, strong;" then, in a stab of keen
Humor, he saw again a native brave
Decking his naked body with the coat
Crowned with the hat of some sea-faring man,—
Aping the civilization of his stride
Till his new prowess fell to comrade's jeers.
So with a tiger heart it were to wear
A grave forgiveness of this wanton wrong.
The primal lust had burst the slender bar,
Weak white man's morals. Now to slay and slay.

Darkling, he fixed Malua with his eyes,

Noting each shadow of his changing thoughts,
When the dear dreams centred on Taka, dreams
Dimming his sight. Holding his lips apart,
He slowly rose, Uhila following,
For in the dark the music of her face
Smote on the boy till he could bear no more
The feasting and the firelight; silently
He rose and stole away. The night was still,
And "Taka, Taka, Taka," rang his soul
Against the stars. He felt infinity
Above him brood, and knew the mighty gods,
Who once in every lifetime drop an hour
Of their remembrance fraught with godlike bliss
To luckless man, had turned on him their eyes.
Unconsciously his feet retraced the path
To the dark pool where joy had birth that day.
The scents that wake when the cool dusk begins
Lapped him luxuriously; the heavy sweet
Of passionate gardenia,—kiss made flower,—
White as his turbulent love, was as the crown
And climax of the jasmine stars that breathed
His love in placid day, and when he paused
Beside the pool, the forest held its breath.

"O sweet, O beautiful!" Malua cried,
His young eyes blazing to the tropic night.
"Never before, since all the gods were young,
Was woman loved as I love Taka." Then,
Caught in a very ecstasy of love,
He laid his arms about a slender tree,
White in the moonlight, and his fevered cheek
Pressed on its cooling stem. With broken music
Shaken from his breast, he cried on Taka,—
Little happy words that mothers whisper
Above their sleeping babes. "If love could find
A way to utter love without her lips!"
Her lips, her eyes, the music of her voice—
Death would be easy on her golden heart.
He pictured her at twilight in the door
Of their far home, with eager arms outstretched
To welcome him from toil; how she would stand
A queen among the other women, crowned
With crimson flowers. How had he won her, he
A stranger to her people and her blood!
For in her veins the stream ran pale, but, "Ah,"
He cried, "my kiss shall burn it red again.
White she may be, a queen, my queen, she is,
And still my slave in fetters of my love."

Uhila watched him from the shadow.
Gods!
How young he was! as Vave, the swift-footed
Splendidly strong, an innocent god of war.
The morn with chilly lips laid myriad kisses
About his beauty, slipped thro' jealous leaves
Dripping with silver and fantastic fingers
Reached to caress him from the amorous trees.
Hither and forth he paced; Uhila's eyes
Ached with his hatred of the sight; at length
"Taka," Malua cried, and stretched his arms
Rigid in air, his face against the sky.
The goad was in Uhila's soul, he leapt
Into the moonlight and upon his foe.
Fixed to the ground, they strove as giant trees
Tossing fierce branches in a storm; their wrath
Smote on them like a tempest, hot with hate.
Malua knew a curse was in the hands
That sought his throat, and in the blazing eyes
Close to his own. Life would defend fair life
As chief and Taka's lover. Round the shoulders
Dark and strong, straining to his heaving breast,
He threw his arms, and locked in that embrace
They stood a moment, breathing with the quick
Sharp catch of weary runners. Then a turn—
Raising his knee, Uhila strove in vain

To throw his enemy. Upon their heads
And swaying bodies lay the silver light
Of the bright moon. The great night seemed to pause
Chin upon hand to watch the struggle, air
Hushed to retain the hoarse and laboring sobs
Such strain brought forth. Their shining bodies, oiled
In honor of the feast, granted no hold
To the fierce gripping arms.

Then suddenly

Uhila sprang aside and grasped a branch,
A rough, harsh weapon—for they were unarmed.
Wary they watched each other's eyes, like beasts
Stealthy, retreating, circling with heads low,
Bodies bent for the catch. Malua sprang
Close to Uhila, caught his murderous hand,
And with the branch between them, all its thorns
Tearing their breasts, they strove once more. The moon
Glittered in troubled ripples, they had come
Under the shadow of the trees, the dark
Goaded Uhila's soul anew, his blood,
Blazing with conflict, gave him mad-man's strength
And devil's skill. His straining form relaxed,
Heavily slipping earthward; ere Malua
Could gain fresh hold upon his fainting foe,
Uhila with a twist had laid him low,
Knee on his breast, lean fingers at his throat
Seizing his life.

Malua's eyes grew dim,

The gentle stars seen faint thro' hanging leaves
Wavered uncertainly; his brain seemed black,
Confused with horrid death, the dewy moss
He lay on failed beneath him. Suddenly
Hanging upon the brittle rim of death,
His outstretched hand, gripping the scattered leaves,
Closed on a sharp stone, instinct more than brain
Showed him the way; he raised his weapon, struck
And struck and struck again.
The night looked down
Waning, and saw thro' tangled boughs a still,
Dead figure on the troubled earth. All stained
With crimson blood, there lay a crimson wreath,
And thro' the forest stole a dusky shade
Fleeing he knew not where save that he 'scaped
Death, that was lying by the forest pool.

At dawn the weary boy, who thro' the night
Had cried his love and anguish to the dark,
Wandering half crazed thro' forest deeps unknown,
Feeling upon his throat the hand of hate,
Feeling upon his heart the still more potent
Fingers of love, came to the open shore
Waiting for day. The restless, eager foam,
Stretching white arms around the sleeping earth,
Woke his great love anew. The loneliness
Of open spaces set his hungry soul
Dreaming of Taka, Taka who should come
And fill the empty world for him. The sky
Paled at the thought. The dawn was stealing near,
Glimmering faintly on the edge of night.
He could delay no longer; like a thief
He must secure his jewel in the dark.
In the vast pause that presages the morn
He came to Taka's door. Ajar it stood,
And on the mats within he saw revealed
The pure young oval of her perfect face.
"Taka, my little one," Malua whispered,
And thro' her dreams "Malua" passed her lips,
Slipping insensibly to waking. So
She saw him at the door and came to him,
Her dewy dreams still warm within her eyes,
And gave her face to passionate caress.
Then with soft, broken words he told again
His love, and after when her heart was full

Of glad acceptance, as a flash of fire
Searing his image on her soul, he told
How blood had paid the price of love.

She heard,
And daylight ebbed before her eyes to faint
White mist, then refluent turned and smote
Her heart's eyes with the horror of the truth.
Uhila dead. Uhila with the smile
That woke for her alone. Her thoughts, like leaves
Blown by cold winds, were scattered, and the words
"Uhila dead" was but a symbol grim
Of darkness. All the past, her happy life
Flower in the sun, her home, and all the dear
Familiar duties, all her life to come
Woven with thoughts of kind Uhila, all
Struck to the ground by murder. In her blood
The pale drops cried to heaven against the wrong,
Wrong to her people and her love, till now
So beautiful.

Malua knew her pain,
And how upon its verdict hung his life.
Death's flame had touched the golden rose of love.
If it be dross or gold, the test should tell.
The black gulf night that lies 'twixt dawn and dawn,
Deepened by darker sin,—could frail love, tired
With passion, hope to bridge the perilous way?
His brain cried, "No," his heart, "Ah, Gods, but yes
Or I shall die."

He laid a tender arm
About the shrinking child and drew her forth
Along the forest path. She did not hear
The morning birds who blithely welcomed day,
She did not see the dew upon the leaves,
Glamour of dawn, but dazed with love and pain,
Yielding to that she knew not, kept the way
Towards the forest pool.

It seemed to them,
Waiting the unutterable moment of their loss
Or utmost gain, as tho' the swinging earth
Was emptied of all life, the very air
Seemed hollow and unearthly, breathless pause
On a great brink. They reached the pool, and Taka
Gathered her senses till her eyes were clear
As shining wells of truth. She leaned no more
Helpless upon Malua, tho' his arm
Circled her still. Before them on the path,
Noble and dead, with mute hands pleading, eyes
Subtle with secrets of eternity,
Waited Uhila.

In a moment's space
Malua knew the utter pangs of death
Strong as his soul. And Taka must be free,
Free to decide between the mighty dead
And him, the weakest of all living men.
He spoke no word, the blood of youth once more
Fought with the skill, the power, the eloquence
Of great familiar age. If Taka drew
From out his arms and love a heart-beat's time,
She had decided, and Uhila won.
This the boy knew. Taka had seen him, Ah!
Her woman's heart in pity and distress
Shivered as tho' cold death had laid a hand
Upon her brow. Malua felt a hell
Deep as the world, and then—the sky, pale stars,
Rose dawn, unfathomed heaven rocked in his heart
With tumult of his glory. Taka turned,
Drew closer in his arm, and raising up
Her flowery face smiled in his eyes.

'Twas done—
Death, life and passionate passion burned away

In the white flame of love.
Uhila lay
Vanquished, forgotten. Turning to the sea,
Taka, Malua, children of the sun,
Went forth to meet the sunrise and the day.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ROSE OF DAWN: A TALE OF THE SOUTH
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