

The Magical Words

By Lafcadio Hearn

There is in the ancient Finnish tongue a strange book written, called Kalewala, a book of runes, treating about the beginning of the world, and about the god-smiths who first wrought the foundations of the sky, and about the witches and the enchanters of the farthest North. Of witches Louhi was among the greatest; and her daughter was wooed by gods and heroes,—even by Wainamoinen the mightiest. . . . So fair was the virgin that her beauty gave light like the moon; so white were her bones that their whiteness glimmered through the transparency of her flesh; so clear was the ivory of her bones that the marrow could be seen within them. . . . And the story of how Wainamoinen built a boat that he ought sail to woo the virgin, is thus told in the runes of the Kalewala:—

. . . The aged and valiant Wainamoinen resolved to build himself a boat, a swift war-boat. He hewed the trees, he hewed the trunks of the pines and the firs, singing songs the while, chanting the runes that banish evil. And as he sang the smitten trees answered him, the fibres of the oak and of the fir and of the mountain pine yielded up their secrets in sounds that to other men seemed echoes only, but which to Wainamoinen's ears were syllables and words,—words wrung from the wood by enchantment.

Now only the keel remained to be wrought; the strong keel of the war-ship had yet to be fashioned. And Wainamoinen smote down a great oak, that he might carve and curve its body as keels are curved and carven. But the dying oak uttered its words of wood, its magical voice of warning, saying: "Never may I serve for the keel of thy boat, for the bottom of thy war-ship. Lo! the worms have made their crooked dwellings within my roots: yesterday the raven alighted upon my head; bloody was his back, bloody his crest, and blood lay clotting upon the blackness of his neck."

Therefore the ancient Wainamoinen left the oak, and sought among the mountain firs and the mountain pines for flawless keel-wood; and he found wood worthy of his war-boat, and he wrought the same into shape by the singing of magical songs.

For the words of enchantment by which shapes are shaped were known to him; by magical words he had wrought the hull, with magical words had formed the oars; and ribs and keel were by wizard song interlocked together. But to perfect the prow three words must be sung, three warlock words; and those three words Wainamoinen did not know, and his heart was troubled because he did not know them.

There was a shepherd dwelling among the hills,—an ancient shepherd who had beheld ten times a hundred moons; and him Wainamoinen questioned concerning the three magical words.

But the ancient shepherd answered him dreamily: "Surely thou mayst find a hundred words, a thousand syllables of magical song, upon the heads of the swallows, upon the shoulders of the wild geese, upon the necks of the swans!"

Then the aged and valiant Wainamoinen went forth in search of the magical words. He slew the flying swallows by thousands; thousands of white geese he slew; thousands of snowy swans were stricken by his arrows. Yet he found no word written upon their heads, their shoulders, their necks, nor even so much as the beginning of a word. Then he thought unto himself: "Surely

I may find a hundred words, a thousand syllables of song, under the tongues of the summer reindeer, within the ruddy mouth of the white squirrel.”

And he went his way to seek the magical words. He strewed the vast plains with the bodies of slaughtered reindeer; he slew the white squirrels by thousands and tens of thousands. But he found no word beneath the tongue of the reindeer, no magical word in the mouth of the white squirrel, not even so much as the beginning of a word.

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Yet again Wainamoinen bought to himself, saying: “Surely I may find a hundred magical words, a thousand syllables of song, in the dwelling of the Queen of Death, in the land of Tuonela, in the underground plains of Manala.”

And he took his way unto the dwelling-place of Tuonela, to the moonless land of the dead, to the underground plains of Manala. Three days he journeyed thither with steps lighter than air; three days he journeyed as a shadow walking upon shadow.

And he came at last unto the banks of the sacred river, the sable shore of the black river, over which the spirits of the dead must pass; and he cried out to the children of Death: “O daughters of Tuoni, bring hither your bark! O children of Manala, bring hither your bark, that I may cross over the black river!”

But the daughters of Death, the children of Hell, cried out, saying: “The bark shall be taken over to thee only when thou shalt have told us how thou hast come to Manala, how thou hast reached Tuonela,—the abode of Death, the domain of ghosts.”

And Wainamoinen called out to them across the waters, saying: “Surely Tuoni himself hath conducted me hither; surely the Queen of Death hath driven me to Tuonela.”

But the daughters of Tuonela waxed wrath; the virgins of Kalma were angry. And they answered: “We know the artifice of men; we perceive the lie within thy mouth. For surely thou livest! no wound hath slain thee; no woe hath consumed thee; no disaster hath destroyed thee; no grave hath been dug for thee. Who, therefore, hath brought thee alive to Manala?”

And Wainamoinen, answering, called out to them across the waters: “Iron surely hath brought me to the land of death; steel surely hath accompanied me unto Manala.”

The daughters of Tuonela waxed wrath; the virgins of Kalma were angry. And they answered: “We know all artifices of men; we perceive the lie within thy mouth. Had iron brought thee to Tuonela, had steel accompanied thee unto Manala, thy garments would drip with blood. . . . Who brought thee to Manala?”

And Wainamoinen called out again to them across the waters: “Fire hath brought me unto Manala; flame hath accompanied me to Tuonela.”

The daughters of Tuonela waxed wrath; the virgins of Kalma were angry. And they cried out: “We know all artifices of men; we perceive the lie within thy mouth. Had fire brought thee to Manala, had flame accompanied thee to Tuonela, thy garments would be consumed by the fire, the glow of the flame would be upon thee. Who brought thee to Manala?”

And Wainamoinen yet again called out to them across the black river, saying: “Water hath brought me to Manala; water hath accompanied me to Tuonela.”

The daughters of Tuonela waxed wrath; the virgins of Kalma were angry. And they answered, saying: “We know all the artifices of men; we perceive the lie within thy mouth. For there is no dripping of water from thy garments. Cease, therefore, to lie to us; for we know thou livest; we

perceive that no wound hath slain thee, no woe consumed thee, no disaster hath crushed thy bones. Who brought thee to Manala? who guided thee to Tuonela?"

Then Wainamoinen called out to them across the river: "Surely I will now utter the truth. I have made me a boat by my art; I have wrought me a war-boat by magical song. With a song I shaped the hull; with a song I formed the keel; with a song I fashioned the oars. Yet three words are wanting to me,—three magical words by which I may perfect the carven prow in its place; and I have come to Tuonela to find these three words; I have come to Manala to seek these three words of enchantment. Bring hither your bark, O children of Tuonela! bring hither your boat, O virgins of Kalma!"

So the daughters of Death came over the dark river in their black boat, and they rowed Wainamoinen to the further shore, to the waste of wandering ghosts; and they gave him to drink of what the dead drink, and to eat of what the dead devour. And Wainamoinen laid him down and slept, being weary with his mighty journey.

He slept and dreamed; but his garments slept not,—his enchanted garments kept watch for him.

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Now the daughter of Tuohi, the iron-fingered daughter of Death, seated herself in the darkness upon a great stone in the midst of the waters; and with iron fingers wove a net of iron thread, one thousand ells in length.

The sons of Tuoni, the Sons of the Queen of Death, also seated themselves in the same darkness upon the same great stone in the midst of the same waters, and with their hooked fingers, with their iron finger-nails, also wove a net of iron thread, a thousand ells in length.

And they cast their net into the river, across the river, that they might ensnare Wainamoinen, that they might entangle the magician, that they might prevent him from ever leaving the abyss of Manala, ever leaving the domain of Tuonela, so long as the golden moon should circle in heaven, even so long as the silver sun should light the world of men.

But the garments of Wainamoinen kept watch, the enchanted garments of the magician slept not. And Wainamoinen uttered a magical word, and changed himself into a stone; and the stone rolled into the black river.

And the stone became a viper of iron, and passed sinuously through the meshes of the nets, and through the river currents, and into the black reeds upon the black river's further bank.

So Wainamoinen passed from the kingdom of Tuoni, from the children of Death; but he had not found the magical words, nor so much as the part of a word.

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Then thought Wainamoinen unto himself:

"Surely I may find a hundred words, a thousand syllables of song, in the mouth of the earth-giant, in the entrails of the ancient Kalewa! Long is the way to his resting-place; one must travel awhile over the points of women's needles, and awhile upon the sharp edges of warriors' swords, and yet again awhile upon the sharp steel of the battle-axes of heroes."

And Wainamoinen went to the forge of his brother Ilmarinen,—Ilmarinen, the Eternal Smith, who forged the vault of heaven, leaving no mark of the teeth of the pincers, no dent of the blows of the hammer,—Ilmarinen, who forged for men during the age of darkness a sun of silver and a moon of gold. And he cried out: "O Ilmarinen, mighty brother, forge me shoes of

iron, gloves of iron, a coat of iron! forge me a staff of iron with a pith of steel, that I may wrest the magic words from the stomach of Kalewa, from the dead entrails of the earth-giant.”

And Ilmarinen forged them. Yet he said:

“O brother Wainamoinen, the ancient Kalewa is dead; the grave of the earth-giant is deep. Thou mayst obtain no word from him,—not even the beginning of a word.”

But Wainamoinen departed; Wainamoinen hastened over the way strewn with the points of needles and the edges of swords and axe-heads of sharpest steel. He ran swiftly over them with shoes of iron; he tore them from his path with gloves of iron, until he reached the resting-place of Kalewa, the vast grave of the earth-giant.

For a thousand moons and more Kalewa had slept beneath the earth. The poplar-tree, the *haapa*, had taken root upon his shoulders; the white birch, the *koivu*, was growing from his temples; the elder tree, the *leppa*, was springing from his cheeks; and his beard had become overgrown with *pahju-bark*, with the bark of the drooping willow. The shadowy fir, the *oravikuusi*, was rooted in his forehead; the mountain-pine, the *havukonka*, was sprouting from his teeth; the dark spruce, the *petaja*, was springing from his feet.

But Wainamoinen tore the *haapa* from his shoulders, and the *koivu* from his temples, and the *leppa* from his cheeks, and the *pahju-bark* from his beard, and the *oravikuusi* from his forehead, and the *havukonka* from his teeth, and the *petaja* from his feet.

Then into the mouth of the Mountain-breaker, into the mouth of the buried giant, Wainamoinen mightily thrust his staff of smithied iron.

And Kalewa awoke from his slumber of ages,—awoke with groans of pain,—and he closed his jaws upon the staff; but his teeth could not crush the core of steel, could not shatter the staff of iron. And as Kalewa opened wider his mouth to devour the tormentor, lo! Wainamoinen leaped into the yawning throat and descended into the monstrous entrails. And Wainamoinen kindled a flame in the giant's belly, built him a forge in his entrails. Then Kalewa, in his great agony, called on that god who leans upon the axis of the world, and upon the blue goddesses of the waters, and upon the deities of the icy wildernesses, and upon the spirits of the forest, and even upon the great Jumala, at whose birth the brazen mountains trembled and lakes were changed into hills. But the gods came not to aid him.

Then Kalewa cursed his tormentor with a thousand magical curses,—with curses of wind and storm and fire,—with curses that change men's faces into stone,—with curses that transport the accursed to the vast deserts of Lapponia, where the hoof of the horse is never heard, where the children of the mare can find no pasturage. But the curses harmed not Wainamoinen; the curses only called forth the laughter of scorn from the lips of Wainamoinen.

And Wainamoinen cried out unto Kalewa:

“Never shall I depart from hence, O thou mightiest singer of runes, until I have learned from thee the three magical words which I desire,—the three words of enchantment that I have sought throughout the world in vain. Sing to me, O Kalewa, thy songs, thy most wondrous songs, thy marvellous songs of enchantment.”

So the giant Kalewa, the possessor of sublimest wisdom, the singer of marvellous runes, opened his mouth and sang his songs for Wainamoinen,—his most wondrous songs, his wizard songs.

Words succeeded to words, verses to verses, wizard runes to wizard runes. Ere Kalewa could sing all that he knew, could utter all that he had learned, the mountains would cease to be, the waters of the rivers would dry up, the great lakes be depopulated of their finny people, the sea have forgotten its power to make waves.

Unceasingly he sang for many days, unceasingly for many sleepless nights; he sang the songs of wizards, the songs of enchantment, the songs that create or destroy.

He sang the songs of wisdom, the runes sung by the gods before the beginning of the world, the verses by whose utterance nothingness became substance and darkness became light.

And as he sang the fair Sun paused in her course to hear him; the golden Moon stopped in her path to listen; the awful billows of the sea stood still; the icy rivers that devour the pines, that swallow up the firs, ceased to rage; the mighty cataracts hung motionless above their abysses; the waves of Juortana lifted high their heads to hear.

And Wainamoinen heard at last the three words, the three magical words, he sought for; and he ceased tormenting Kalewa, and departed from him. So Kalewa sank again into his eternal slumber, and the earth that loved him recovered him, and the forests reweave their network of knotted roots above his place of sleep. . . .