

Boutimar, the Dove

By Lafcadio Hearn

. . . Beyond the seas which are known roar the waters of that Tenebrous Ocean that is unknown to mortals. There the long breakers chant an eternal hymn, in tones unlike to the voices of other seas. And in that ocean there is an island, and in that island the Fountain of Youth unceasingly bubbles up from the mystic caverns; and it was that fountain which King Alexander the Two-Horned, vainly sought. Only his general, the Prophet Khader, found it, whereby he became immortal. And of other mortals Solomon only beheld the waters of that fountain, according to the Persian legend written in the nine hundredth year of the Hejira, by the goldsmith of language, Hossein ben Ali, also called El Vaëz u'l Kashifi. And it may be found in the Anvari Soheily, which are "The Lights of Canopus." . . .

In the Name of the Most Merciful God! . . . I have heard this tradition of Solomon, the unparalleled among kings, for whom all Genii, and Peris, and men, and beasts of earth, and birds of air, and creatures of the deep begirt the loins of their souls with the girdle of obedience, and whose power was measurable only by the hoofs of the horse of the Zephyr, "whose morning course is a month's journey, and whose evening course is also equal to a month's journey, upon the swiftest of earthly steeds."

. . . Now, Solomon being once enthroned upon the summit of the mightiest of mountains, which yet bears his name,—the mountain at once overlooking the plains of Iran and the kingdoms of India,—all the creatures of the universe gathered to do him honor. The birds of heaven formed a living canopy above him, and the spirits of air ministered unto him. And, as a mist rising from the earth, a perfumed cloud shaped itself before him; and from out the cloud reached a hand, fairer than moonlight, holding a diamond cup in which a strange water made jewel-glimmerings, while a voice music spake to him from out the cloud, saying: "The Creator of all—be His nature forever glorified and His power forever honored!—hath sent me to thee, O Solomon, with this cup containing the waters of youth and of life without end. And He hath desired thee to choose freely whether thou wilt or wilt not drink of this draught from the Fountain of Youth. Therefore consider well, O Solomon! Wilt thou drink hereof, and live divinely immortal through ages everlasting, or wilt thou rather remain within the prison of humanity? . . . I wait."

Then a deep silence brooded above the place; for Solomon dreamed upon these words, while the perfumed cloud stirred not, and the white hand motionlessly offered the jewel-cup. And so dreaming, he said unto his own heart: "Surely the gold of life is good wherewith to purchase many things at the great market of the Resurrection; the plain of life is a rich soil wherein to plant the spice-trees of eternal felicity; and joyless is the black repose of death. . . . Yet must I ask counsel of the Genii, and the Peris, and the wisest of men, and the beasts of earth, and the birds of air, before I may resolve to drink."

Still the moon-white hand offered the scintillating cup, and the perfumed cloud changed not. Then the Genii, and the Peris, and the wisest of men, and the beasts of earth, and the birds of heaven, all speaking with one voice of agreement, prayed him that he should drink, inasmuch as the well-being of the world reposed upon his living wisdom, and the happiness of all creatures was sustained by the circle of his life as a jewel held within the setting of a ring of gold.

So that Solomon indeed put out his hand, and took the cup from the luminous fingers; and the fingers withdrew again into the odorous cloud. Wondrous were the lights within the water; and there was a glow of rosiness unbroken all about the cup, as of the sempiternal dawn in those islands beyond the Ocean of Shadows, where the sun rises never above the east and there is neither night nor day. But hesitating yet once more before he drank, he questioned again the creatures of the universe, asking: "O ye administering Genii and Peri beings, ye wisest among wise men, ye creatures also of air and of earth, say if there be absent from this assembly even one representative of all over whom I hold dominion!"

And they replied: "Master, only Boutimar is not here,—Boutimar the wild dove, most loving of all living creatures."

Then Solomon sent Hudh-hudh to seek the wild dove,—Hudh-hudh, the bird of gold, created by the witchcraft of Balkis, Queen of Sheba, the sorceress of sorceresses; and the golden bird brought back with him Boutimar, the wild dove, most loving of all living creatures. Then it was that Solomon repeated the words of the song which he had written "O my dove that dwellest in the cliffs of the rock, in the secret hiding-places of the stairs, let me see thy face, let me hear thy Voice! . . . Is it meet that thy lord, Solomon, shall drink of the waters of youth and know the bliss of earthly immortality?"

Then the wild dove, speaking in the tongue of birds known to Solomon only among mortals, asked the prophet-king, saying: "How shall a creature of air answer the source of wisdom? how may so feeble a mind advise thy supernal intelligence? Yet, if I must counsel, let me ask thee, O Solomon, whether the Water of Life brought hither by this perfumed spirit be for thee alone, or for all with whom thy heart might incline thee to share it?"

But Solomon answered: "It hath been sent to only me, nor is there enough within the cup for any other."

"O prophet of God!" answered Boutimar, in the tongue of birds, "how couldst thou desire to be living alone, when each of thy friends and of thy counsellors and of thy children and of thy servants and of all who loved thee were counted with the dead? For all of these must surely drink the bitter waters of death, though thou shouldst drink the Water of Life. Wherefore desire everlasting youth, when the face of the world itself shall be wrinkled with age, and the eyes of the stars shall be closed by the black fingers of Azrael? When the love thou hast sung of shall have passed away like a smoke of frankincense, when the dust of the heart that beat against thine own shall have long been scattered by the four winds of heaven, when the eyes that looked for thy coming shall have become a memory, when the voices grateful to thine ear shall have been eternally stilled, when thy life shall be one oasis in a universal waste of death, and thine eternal existence but a recognition of eternal absence,—wilt thou indeed care to live, though the wild dove perish when its mate cometh not?"

And Solomon, without reply, silently put out his arm and gave back the cup, so that the white hand came forth and took it, and withdrew into the odorous cloud, and the cloud dissolved and passed away forever. But upon the prophet-king's rich beard, besprinkled with powder of gold, there appeared another glitter as of clear dew,—the diamond dew of the heart, which is tears.