

## The Sea King's Gift

by Andrew Lang  
from *The Lilac Fairy Book*

There was once a fisherman who was called Salmon, and his Christian name was Matte. He lived by the shore of the big sea; where else could he live? He had a wife called Maie; could you find a better name for her? In winter they dwelt in a little cottage by the shore, but in spring they flitted to a red rock out in the sea and stayed there the whole summer until it was autumn. The cottage on the rock was even smaller than the other; it had a wooden bolt instead of an iron lock to the door, a stone hearth, a flagstaff, and a weather-cock on the roof.

The rock was called Ahtola, and was not larger than the market-place of a town. Between the crevices there grew a little rowan tree and four alder bushes. Heaven only knows how they ever came there; perhaps they were brought by the winter storms. Besides that, there flourished some tufts of velvety grass, some scattered reeds, two plants of the yellow herb called tansy, four of a red flower, and a pretty white one; but the treasures of the rock consisted of three roots of garlic, which Maie had put in a cleft. Rock walls sheltered them on the north side, and the sun shone on them on the south. This does not seem much, but it sufficed Maie for a herb plot.

All good things go in threes, so Matte and his wife fished for salmon in spring, for herring in summer, and for cod in winter. When on Saturdays the weather was fine and the wind favourable, they sailed to the nearest town, sold their fish, and went to church on Sunday. But it often happened that for weeks at a time they were quite alone on the rock Ahtola, and had nothing to look at except their little yellow-brown dog, which bore the grand name of Prince, their grass tufts, their bushes and blooms, the sea bays and fish, a stormy sky and the blue, white-crested waves. For the rock lay far away from the land, and there were no green islets or human habitations for miles round, only here and there appeared a rock of the same red stone as Ahtola, besprinkled day and night with the ocean spray.

Matte and Maie were industrious, hard-working folk, happy and contented in their poor hut, and they thought themselves rich when they were able to salt as many casks of fish as they required for winter and yet have some left over with which to buy tobacco for the old

man, and a pound or two of coffee for his wife, with plenty of burned corn and chicory in it to give it a flavour. Besides that, they had bread, butter, fish, a beer cask, and a buttermilk jar; what more did they require? All would have gone well had not Maie been possessed with a secret longing which never let her rest; and this was, how she could manage to become the owner of a cow.

‘What would you do with a cow?’ asked Matte. ‘She could not swim so far, and our boat is not large enough to bring her over here; and even if we had her, we have nothing to feed her on.’

‘We have four alder bushes and sixteen tufts of grass,’ rejoined Maie.

‘Yes, of course,’ laughed Matte, ‘and we have also three plants of garlic. Garlic would be fine feeding for her.’

‘Every cow likes salt herring,’ rejoined his wife. ‘Even Prince is fond of fish.’

‘That may be,’ said her husband. ‘Methinks she would soon be a dear cow if we had to feed her on salt herring. All very well for Prince, who fights with the gulls over the last morsel. Put the cow out of your head, mother, we are very well off as we are.’

Maie sighed. She knew well that her husband was right, but she could not give up the idea of a cow. The buttermilk no longer tasted as good as usual in the coffee; she thought of sweet cream and fresh butter, and of how there was nothing in the world to be compared with them.

One day as Matte and his wife were cleaning herring on the shore they heard Prince barking, and soon there appeared a gaily painted boat with three young men in it, steering towards the rock. They were students, on a boating excursion, and wanted to get something to eat.

‘Bring us a junket, good mother,’ cried they to Maie.

‘Ah! if only I had such a thing!’ sighed Maie.

‘A can of fresh milk, then,’ said the students; ‘but it must not be skim.’

‘Yes, if only I had it!’ sighed the old woman, still more deeply.

‘What! haven’t you got a cow?’

Maie was silent. This question so struck her to the heart that she could not reply.

‘We have no cow,’ Matte answered; ‘but we have good smoked herring, and can cook them in a couple of hours.’

‘All right, then, that will do,’ said the students, as they flung themselves down on the rock, while fifty silvery-white herring were turning on the spit in front of the fire.

‘What’s the name of this little stone in the middle of the ocean?’ asked one of them.

‘Ahtola,’ answered the old man.

‘Well, you should want for nothing when you live in the Sea King’s dominion.’

Matte did not understand. He had never read Kalevala and knew nothing of the sea gods of old, but the students proceeded to explain to him.[FN#2: Kalevala is a collection of old Finnish songs about gods and heroes.]

‘Ahti,’ said they, ‘is a mighty king who lives in his dominion of Ahtola, and has a rock at the bottom of the sea, and possesses besides a treasury of good things. He rules over all fish and animals of the deep; he has the finest cows and the swiftest horses that ever chewed grass at the bottom of the ocean. He who stands well with Ahti is soon a rich man, but one must beware in dealing with him, for he is very changeful and touchy. Even a little stone thrown into the water might offend him, and then as he takes back his gift, he stirs up the sea into a storm and drags the sailors down into the depths. Ahti owns also the fairest maidens, who bear the train of his queen Wellamos, and at the sound of music they comb their long, flowing locks, which glisten in the water.’

‘Oh!’ cried Matte, ‘have your worships really seen all that?’

‘We have as good as seen it,’ said the students. ‘It is all printed in a book, and everything printed is true.’

‘I’m not so sure of that,’ said Matte, as he shook his head.

But the herring were now ready, and the students ate enough for six, and gave Prince some cold meat which they happened to have in the boat. Prince sat on his hind legs with delight and mewed like a pussy cat. When all was finished, the students handed Matte a shining silver coin, and allowed him to fill his pipe with a special kind of tobacco. They then thanked him for his kind hospitality and went on their journey, much regretted by Prince, who sat with a woeful expression and whined on the shore as long as he could see a flip of the boat’s white sail in the distance.

Maie had never uttered a word, but thought the more. She had good ears, and had laid to heart the story about Ahti. ‘How delightful,’ thought she to herself, ‘to possess a fairy cow! How delicious every morning and evening to draw milk from it, and yet have no trouble about the feeding, and to keep a shelf near the window for dishes of milk and junkets! But this will never be my luck.’

‘What are you thinking of?’ asked Matte.

‘Nothing,’ said his wife; but all the time she was pondering over some magic rhymes she had heard in her childhood from an old lame man, which were supposed to bring luck in fishing.

‘What if I were to try?’ thought she.

Now this was Saturday, and on Saturday evenings Matte never set the herring-net, for he did not fish on Sunday. Towards evening, however, his wife said:

‘Let us set the herring-net just this once.’

‘No,’ said her husband, ‘it is a Saturday night.’

‘Last night was so stormy, and we caught so little,’ urged his wife; ‘to-night the sea is like a mirror, and with the wind in this direction the herring are drawing towards land.’

‘But there are streaks in the north-western sky, and Prince was eating grass this evening,’ said the old man.

‘Surely he has not eaten my garlic,’ exclaimed the old woman.

‘No; but there will be rough weather by to-morrow at sunset,’ rejoined Matte.

‘Listen to me,’ said his wife, ‘we will set only one net close to the shore, and then we shall be able to finish up our half-filled cask, which will spoil if it stands open so long.’

The old man allowed himself to be talked over, and so they rowed out with the net. When they reached the deepest part of the water, she began to hum the words of the magic rhyme, altering the words to suit the longing of her heart:

Oh, Ahti, with the long, long beard, Who dwellest in the deep blue sea, Finest treasures have I heard, And glittering fish belong to thee. The richest pearls beyond compare Are stored up in thy realm below, And Ocean’s cows so sleek and fair Feed on the grass in thy green meadow.

King of the waters, far and near, I ask not of thy golden store, I wish not jewels of pearl to wear, Nor silver either, ask I for, But one is odd and even is two, So give me a cow, sea-king so bold, And in return I’ll give to you A slice of the moon, and the sun’s gold.

‘What’s that you’re humming?’ asked the old man.

‘Oh, only the words of an old rhyme that keeps running in my head,’ answered the old woman; and she raised her voice and went on:

Oh, Ahti, with the long, long beard, Who dwellest in the deep blue sea, A thousand cows are in thy herd, I pray thee give one onto me.

‘That’s a stupid sort of song,’ said Matte. ‘What else should one beg of the sea-king but fish? But such songs are not for Sunday.’

His wife pretended not to hear him, and sang and sang the same tune all the time they were on the water. Matte heard nothing more as he sat and rowed the heavy boat, while thinking of his cracked pipe and

the fine tobacco. Then they returned to the island, and soon after went to bed.

But neither Matte nor Maie could sleep a wink; the one thought of how he had profaned Sunday, and the other of Ahti's cow.

About midnight the fisherman sat up, and said to his wife:

'Dost thou hear anything?'

'No,' said she.

'I think the twirling of the weathercock on the roof bodes ill,' said he; 'we shall have a storm.'

'Oh, it is nothing but your fancy,' said his wife.

Matte lay down, but soon rose again.

'The weathercock is squeaking now,' said he.

'Just fancy! Go to sleep,' said his wife; and the old man tried to.

For the third time he jumped out of bed.

'Ho! how the weather-cock is roaring at the pitch of its voice, as if it had a fire inside it! We are going to have a tempest, and must bring in the net.'

Both rose. The summer night was as dark as if it had been October, the weather-cock creaked, and the storm was raging in every direction. As they went out the sea lay around them as white as now, and the spray was dashing right over the fisher-hut. In all his life Matte had never remembered such a night. To launch the boat and put to sea to rescue the net was a thing not to be thought of. The fisherman and his wife stood aghast on the doorstep, holding on fast by the doorpost, while the foam splashed over their faces.

'Did I not tell thee that there is no luck in Sunday fishing?' said Matte sulkily; and his wife was so frightened that she never even once thought of Ahti's cows.

As there was nothing to be done, they went in. Their eyes were heavy for lack of slumber, and they slept as soundly as if there had not been such a thing as an angry sea roaring furiously around their lonely dwelling. When they awoke, the sun was high in the heavens, the tempest had cased, and only the swell of the sea rose in silvery heavings against the red rock.

‘What can that be?’ said the old woman, as she peeped out of the door.

‘It looks like a big seal,’ said Matte.

‘As sure as I live, it’s a cow!’ exclaimed Maie. And certainly it was a cow, a fine red cow, fat and flourishing, and looking as if it had been fed all its days on spinach. It wandered peacefully up and down the shore, and never so much as even looked at the poor little tufts of grass, as if it despised such fare.

Matte could not believe his eyes. But a cow she seemed, and a cow she was found to be; and when the old woman began to milk her, every pitcher and pan, even to the baler, was soon filled with the most delicious milk.

The old man troubled his head in vain as to how she came there, and sallied forth to seek for his lost net. He had not proceeded far when he found it cast up on the shore, and so full of fish that not a mesh was visible.

‘It is all very fine to possess a cow,’ said Matte, as he cleaned the fish; ‘but what are we going to feed her on?’

‘We shall find some means,’ said his wife; and the cow found the means herself. She went out and cropped the seaweed which grew in great abundance near the shore, and always kept in good condition. Every one Prince alone excepted, thought she was a clever beast; but Prince barked at her, for he had now got a rival.

From that day the red rock overflowed with milk and junkets, and every net was filled with fish. Matte and Maie grew fat on this fine living, and daily became richer. She churned quantities of butter, and he hired two men to help him in his fishing. The sea lay before him like a big fish tank, out of which he hauled as many as he required;

and the cow continued to fend for herself. In autumn, when Matte and Maie went ashore, the cow went to sea, and in spring, when they returned to the rock, there she stood awaiting them.

‘We shall require a better house,’ said Maie the following summer; ‘the old one is too small for ourselves and the men.’

‘Yes,’ said Matte. So he built a large cottage, with a real lock to the door, and a store-house for fish as well; and he and his men caught such quantities of fish that they sent tons of salmon, herring, and cod to Russian and Sweden.

‘I am quite overworked with so many folk,’ said Maie; ‘a girl to help me would not come amiss.’

‘Get one, then,’ said her husband; and so they hired a girl.

Then Maie said: ‘We have too little milk for all these folk. Now that I have a servant, with the same amount of trouble she could look after three cows.’

‘All right, then,’ said her husband, somewhat provoked, ‘you can sing a song to the fairies.’

This annoyed Maie, but nevertheless she rowed out to sea on Sunday night and sang as before:

Oh, Ahti, with the long, long beard,  
Who dwellest in the deep blue sea,  
A thousand cows are in thy herd,  
I pray thee give three unto me.

The following morning, instead of one, three cows stood on the island, and they all ate seaweed and fended for themselves like the first one.

‘Art thou satisfied now?’ said Matte to his wife.

‘I should be quite satisfied,’ said his wife, ‘if only I had two servants to help, and if I had some finer clothes. Don’t you know that I am addressed as Madam?’

‘Well, well,’ said her husband. So Maie got several servants and clothes fit for a great lady.

‘Everything would now be perfect if only we had a little better dwelling for summer. You might build us a two-storey house, and fetch soil to make a garden. Then you might make a little arbour up there to let us have a sea-view; and we might have a fiddler to fiddle to us of an evening, and a little steamer to take us to church in stormy weather.’

‘Anything more?’ asked Matte; but he did everything that his wife wished. The rock Ahtola became so grand and Maie so grand that all the sea-urchins and herring were lost in wonderment. Even Prince was fed on beefsteaks and cream scones till at last he was as round as a butter jar.

‘Are you satisfied now?’ asked Matte.

‘I should be quite satisfied,’ said Maie, ‘if only I had thirty cows. At least that number is required for such a household.’

‘Go to the fairies,’ said Matte.

His wife set out in the new steamer and sang to the sea-king. Next morning thirty cows stood on the shore, all finding food for themselves.

‘Know’st thou, good man, that we are far too cramped on this wretched rock, and where am I to find room for so many cows?’

‘There is nothing to be done but to pump out the sea.’

‘Rubbish!’ said his wife. ‘Who can pump out the sea?’

‘Try with thy new steamer, there is a pump in it.’

Maie knew well that her husband was only making fun of her, but still her mind was set upon the same subject. ‘I never could pump the sea out,’ thought she, ‘but perhaps I might fill it up, if I were to make a big dam. I might heap up sand and stones, and make our island as big again.’

Maie loaded her boat with stones and went out to sea. The fiddler was with her, and fiddled so finely that Ahti and Wellamos and all the sea’s daughters rose to the surface of the water to listen to the music.

‘What is that shining so brightly in the waves?’ asked Maie.

‘That is sea foam glinting in the sunshine,’ answered the fiddler.

‘Throw out the stones,’ said Maie.

The people in the boat began to throw out the stones, splash, splash, right and left, into the foam. One stone hit the nose of Wellamos’s chief lady-in-waiting, another scratched the sea queen herself on the cheek, a third plumped close to Ahti’s head and tore off half of the sea-king’s beard; then there was a commotion in the sea, the waves bubbled and bubbled like boiling water in a pot.

‘Whence comes this gust of wind?’ said Maie; and as she spoke the sea opened and swallowed up the steamer. Maie sank to the bottom like a stone, but, stretching out her arms and legs, she rose to the surface, where she found the fiddler’s fiddle, and used it as a float. At the same moment she saw close beside her the terrible head of Ahti, and he had only half a beard!’

‘Why did you throw stones at me?’ roared the sea-king.

‘Oh, your majesty, it was a mistake! Put some bear’s grease on your beard and that will soon make it grow again.’

‘Dame, did I not give you all you asked for--nay, even more?’

‘Truly, truly, your majesty. Many thanks for the cows.’

‘Well, where is the gold from the sun and the silver from the moon that you promised me?’

‘Ah, your majesty, they have been scattered day and night upon the sea, except when the sky was overcast,’ slyly answered Maie.

‘I’ll teach you!’ roared the sea-king; and with that he gave the fiddle such a ‘puff’ that it sent the old woman up like a sky-rocket on to her island. There Prince lay, as famished as ever, gnawing the carcass of a crow. There sat Matte in his ragged grey jacket, quite alone, on the steps of the old hut, mending a net.

‘Heavens, mother,’ said he, ‘where are you coming from at such a whirlwind pace, and what makes you in such a dripping condition?’

Maie looked around her amazed, and said, ‘Where is our two-storey house?’

‘What house?’ asked her husband.

‘Our big house, and the flower garden, and the men and the maids, and the thirty beautiful cows, and the steamer, and everything else?’

‘You are talking nonsense, mother,’ said he. ‘The students have quite turned your head, for you sang silly songs last evening while we were rowing, and then you could not sleep till early morning. We had stormy weather during the night, and when it was past I did not wish to waken you, so rowed out alone to rescue the net.’

‘But I’ve seen Ahti,’ rejoined Maie.

‘You’ve been lying in bed, dreaming foolish fancies, mother, and then in your sleep you walked into the water.’

‘But there is the fiddle,’ said Maie.

‘A fine fiddle! It is only an old stick. No, no, old woman, another time we will be more careful. Good luck never attends fishing on a Sunday.’

From Z. Topelius.