The Snaring of the Sun

A Tale from Hawaii

Maui is another hero who is also a trickster. Half-human, half-god, he wanders much of the Pacific Ocean, particularly the islands of Hawaii—including Maui, the island that bears his name—in the dawn of things, setting matters to working right, and enjoying himself hugely in the process.

Maui was born in an unusual way: his mother, Hina, began to fall asleep on the nice, warm sands of the island that would someday bear her son's name. Half-asleep as she was, Hina didn't realize that the loincloth she had pulled over herself was not hers, but belonged to a god. And from the magic in that simple cloth, from that simple coming together of the human and the divine, Maui was begun.

Maui was born more clever and daring than any child ever seen, and began almost immediately to make sure that the world ran the way it should. In those long-ago days, the sun did not move slowly and steadily across the sky. It sped across the sky so quickly that Hina, Maui's mother, grew angry. She was a skillful maker of *tapa,* the cloth that is pounded out of mulberry bark—but the tapa needed to fully dry if it was to be of any use as cloth.

"I beat out my tapa," she told Maui, "but before it has even the slightest chance to dry, the sun is gone from the sky, taking its warmth with it."

Maui was still a child in those days, but he said as bravely as any man, "I will go and cut off the sun's legs."

Hina glanced warily at him. She already knew that her son could do amazing deeds, but still she asked, "Are you strong enough?"

"Oh, I am," Maui answered boldly. "And I am clever enough, as well."

Hina believed him. Carefully, she told him what he must do, then gave him fifteen strong ropes of coconut fiber and sent him on his way.

Maui had listened well to everything his mother had said. At last, as she had told him, he came to a huge wiliwili tree, where the sun came each

morning to eat breakfast. In this tree, Maui knew, one of his ancestors lived, the old woman Wiliwilipuha. He sat at the foot of the tree and waited. The night came and the night went, and a rooster began to crow. Once it crowed, twice it crowed, three times it crowed.

On the third crow, Maui tensed, watching what would happen next. An old woman came out of the wiliwili tree to fry bananas for the sun's breakfast. This woman was Wiliwilipuha, which means "hollow wiliwili," and she was blind. As she lit her cooking fire, Maui snatched away the bananas.

"Humph!" Wiliwilipuha snorted in annoyance. "Where did the bananas go?"

She went to fetch more. But Maui stole these, too. A third time Wiliwilipuha brought bananas to be cooked; a third time Maui stole them.

"This must be the work of a troublemaker," Wiliwilipuha said, and sniffed the air until she had found Maui. "Whose mischievous one are you?" the old woman asked.

"Yours," Maui answered.

"Mine? By whom?"

"By Hina," Maui answered. "I am your grandson, Grandmother."

Was Wiliwilipuha surprised at this? Pleased at this? Her old, strong face showed nothing. "What brings you here?"

"I've come to keep the sun from racing across the sky. It runs so quickly that my mother's tapa cloth cannot dry."

"That would be a feat, indeed."

Wiliwilipuha gave Maui a sharp stone and one more rope, then told Maui to hide.

Maui dug a pit in which to hide. He hadn't hidden there for long before the sun came blazing to the wiliwili tree. Maui cast the first of his ropes—and he snared the sun. Oh, it fought him! Oh, it burned at him! But Maui was small and quick, quicker almost than thought. And quicker than thought, Maui used his sixteen ropes to bind the sun and all its squirming legs. He bound it fast to the wiliwili tree, then picked up the stone.

"I will cut off your legs!" he threatened.

"No!" the sun cried in terror. "Spare me!"

"Why? Why should I spare someone who is so selfish? You race across the sky to please yourself and think nothing of the folk below who need your light and warmth." Maui picked up the sharp stone again. "No, I shall cut off your legs."

"No!" the sun screamed. "Maybe we can strike a bargain."

"Maybe we can." Maui pretended to be thinking things over. But his clever mind had already worked out what he wanted to say. "What if you go slowly across the sky—but only for half the year?"

"And for the other half?"

"For the other half of the year," Maui said, "you may go as swiftly as you please."

"I don't know ..."

Maui raised the stone once more.

"I agree!" the sun shrieked. "We have a bargain."

Maui used the stone to cut the sun free. The sun shot back up into the sky.

And so it is that the days are short for half the year. Those are the days when the sun races across the sky. But for the other half of the year, the sun moves slowly, and that, or so this story says, is the work of Maui the clever.