

Lord of the volcano



The “Big Island” of the Hawaiian Islands group in the north Pacific was created by volcano activity. It rises up from the ocean bed to a height of over 4000 metres above sea level. There are numerous craters on the island, many inactive, but a few still likely to erupt on occasion.

The Hawaiian people had believed for generations that the great goddess Pele lived in the largest and most active volcano, Mauna Loa. They prayed to her and made gifts to the Hawaiian priests who served Pele.

The volcano was a terrifying sight. In the huge crater there burned a lake of molten lava that rose and fell within the crater, sometimes boiling over and spilling down the mountain side, leaving burning trees and a trail of destruction in its wake. The danger of an eruption was always present so it was no wonder the Hawaiians feared the goddess Pele above all else.

But the Christian missionaries came to Hawaii in 1820, and in a few years there were many who had become Christians. The new faith was to them so new that they still trembled when the priests called on the name of Pele. Perhaps, after all, Pele was greater than their new-found God, the Father of Jesus Christ.

“Do not neglect Pele,” said the old chiefs. “If you do, her anger will spill over in boiling lava, with merciless ruin and desolation to the country-side.”

“She will pour down her anger into the sea and spoil all your fishing grounds,” said the priests, who were angry themselves, now that the people no longer brought them gifts. “Great is Pele, and greatly to be feared.”

But there was one woman who did not fear. She was a woman of the royal family, a chieftainess named Kapiolani. She looked out with strong, fearless eyes at the priests and said scornfully, “The Lord God, the Creator, is stronger than Pele!”

The people heard her, and in terror cried, “That is Kapiolani! Pele will destroy her!”

“Pele is powerless!” declared the new Christian. “I will believe that God will defend the province of Pele, to the very edge of the crater, where it spills out its lava. Pele will not touch me. Jehovah, my God, is the great God and Pele is as nothing.”

The people gazed at Kapiolani with mingled fear and admiration.

“My God made these mountains,” added the great lady, “and the lava too. He is the only strong One.”

The Hawaiians talked of nothing else.

“Our chieftainess, Kapiolani, is going to defy the great goddess Pele, who lives in the boiling crater, and who rules our island.”

Eighty of her people agreed to go up the mountain with her as she climbed the lower valleys dense with trees, then up and up until she stood on the rough rocks at the very edge of the crater.

During the ascent Kapiolani broke off a branch of a low bush that bore red and yellow berries. Everyone knew that these were Pele’s berries. From of old they had been taught that no-one must touch them without asking her. Not only had the daring Kapiolani broken off the berries. The people feared that this was carrying her daring a little too far. Certainly no harm had come to her yet, but there was still time.

It was cold at the top of the mountain, but the sulphurous fumes gave the air a clammy warmth as they drew near the crater. The ground was hot with the molten lava in the crater. It sent up a cloud of vapour from the rain which had fallen into the fissures in the rocks. It was an awesome sight, but Kapiolani did not hesitate.

From a distance the people watched uneasily. Would Pele reach out and slay their courageous leader? From her robe Kapiolani drew forth a copy of the New Testament, and there, with ringing voice, she read within hearing of the heathen goddess, the message of the one true God. The people waited as Kapiolani did this, their hearts trembling. Then they saw her step to the edge of the crater and let herself down over the side.

The vapour rose about her. There she stood, unafraid. They watched her take some of the berries and cast them down into the fiery heart of the volcano.

Defiantly she sent one stone after another hurtling down into the crater. There was no greater insult she could heap upon Pele. Would she rise in her anger and consume Kapiolani? Nothing happened. The people waited. Still nothing happened. There she stood, a solitary figure, offering prayer and praise to her God, Jehovah, the One who created the volcano, the One who had given her the courage to defy the goddess who had held her people in fearful bondage for generations.

Kapiolani rejoined the group who had accompanied her. She called upon them to praise God who had proved Himself the Lord over all creation. So that day, praises of God rang out across the crater, the song of a free people, no longer subject to the greed of the priests and the fear of a mountain goddess.

Adapted from *Safety Last*, by Rita Snowden, Epworth Press.