

Lovely Rarotonga

By Ronald Buchanan

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Extracted 20 June 1999, Julie Stokes

Of all the Islands, east or west,
One charming spot I love the best.
A land of loveliness and rest
Is beauteous Rarotonga.
How nobly grand the hills appear,
As, clothed with verdure all the year,
Their bold and striking peaks they rear
In lovely Rarotonga!
- J.L. Kelly ("Heather and Fern")

It is just over eighty years since the Rev. John Williams, after days of searching, discovered the island of Rarotonga. Tradition has it that some three years earlier the island had been visited by an English sea-captain; but, though Goodenough by name, he was hardly "good enough" in character, and he did not venture to tell the world either of his discovery or his subsequent misdoings on the island. There is some reason to believe, too, that Rarotonga was visited by the *Bounty* after the historic mutiny in 1798, though it does not appear that the mutineers made any attempt to land. But here, again, the discovery (if such it can be called) was, in the nature of things, one for which credit could hardly be claimed. And so to the Rev. John Williams belongs the honour of having made definitely known to the civilised world the existence and position of this Gem of the Cook Group. That in the course of fourscore years it has become what it is today is surely one of the greatest triumphs of missionary enterprise.



"QUEEN" MAKEA
Ariki of Avarua, and Chief of the Cook
Islands Federation



PA, ARIKI
Takitumu Tribe



TINOMANA, ARIKI
Arorangi Tribe

It is drawing towards the close of an April afternoon as we cast anchor off the gap in the reef which forms the entrance to Avarua Harbour. The island has been visible since mid-day, our first view presenting the appearance of three fingers of land pointing upwards, trident-like, from the ocean. As we draw nearer, the rugged outlines of Mount Ikurangi and the attendant peaks of Te Atu Kura and Maungatea begin to develop, the jagged pinnacles being alternately hidden and revealed as the mist rolls about them. Now we can discern the clouds of spray that rise from the reef as the roll of the ocean breaks upon the coral barrier. A little later we begin to make out something of the details of the growth of tropical vegetation that with wonderful luxuriance clothes the island from the lower heights to the sea. One of our number is understood to declare that he can see the coconuts, but most of us at this stage are content to know that we can distinguish the stately palms with their graceful crowns of spreading fronds, which are usually among the most prominent and among the first-observed features in the landscape of a Pacific island.

And now our steamer is lying at anchor outside the reef, and we are being rapidly towed over the lagoon to the wharf, about a quarter of a mile from the anchorage. We have been seven days at sea, and

are glad, for this reason if for no other, to set foot on land. But add to this the fact that for most of us this is the first glimpse of those "summer isles of Eden" of which we have read and dreamed so much, and the peculiar interest of our landing may be understood. Down the wharf comes a stampede of native children, with a sprinkling of adults among them, all evidently in high glee at the prospect of being photographed, for the cameras are already in action; and as we pass through the crowd of little brown bodies we feel so strongly the charm of our new surroundings that even the familiar and prosaic legend "U.S.S.Co." on the sheds ahead of us is not sufficient to break the spell.

A few minutes' walk brings us to the residence of Queen Makea - four weeks a widow - and we pay her a brief visit of condolence before going further, and leave a floral token on the tomb of Ngamaru. Then we go on past the church of the London Missionary Society (the pioneers in all Christian effort in these islands), the Mission residence, and a long line of students' houses, while from one and another as we pass comes the cheery salutation "*Kia-orana!*" ("May you live!") Darkness is falling rapidly - there is very little twilight here - and the air, already sweet with the fragrance of flowers, now grows loud with the chirping of innumerable crickets. We are on the Te Aranui-a-Toi (the great road of Toi), an ancient highway which for five hundred years has been trodden by the feet of Rarotongans. It is a delightful avenue of coconut palms, banana and breadfruit trees, and other tropical growths. There is just breeze enough to stir the plumes of the palms, and as we pass along in the fading light we feel that nothing can ever destroy the charm of this first evening in Rarotonga.

We have now reached the Residency, which is our destination for the night. Colonel and Mrs. Gudgeon give us a right cordial welcome to their charming home, and we spend an enjoyable evening in their company. Meanwhile, down in the village, the natives are rehearsing their songs and dances for the morrow, and the village hall resounds with the clamour of native drums. I go to rest with the mosquito curtains carefully drawn, but one impudent intruder has somehow provokingly, singing softly something about the blood of a new-chum. I lie awake for a few minutes listening, and wondering if he really means business; then the humming dies away, consciousness fails, and so - to sleep.

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Rarotonga is certainly the finest island in the Cook Group, both in point of its scenic attractions and in respect of its general productiveness. It is a particularly good specimen of the volcanic order of islands, and the rugged grandeur of its mountain peaks and the variety and luxuriance of its vegetation combine to present one of the most romantic and picturesque scenes that could possibly be found even in the South Seas, where the romantic and picturesque are supposed to abound. Attaining as it does, in Mount Te Atua Kura, an altitude of 2,100 feet, the island is well watered, and a belt of rich soil, varying from half a mile to nearly two miles in width, extends all round from the mountains to the sea. The area of Rarotonga is nearly twenty-six square miles. The population numbers close to 2,000.

For generations, Rarotonga has been ruled by three Arikis or chiefs of almost royal rank, of whom, during recent years, the most influential has been the Ariki of Avarua, this district being the commercial centre of the island. The present occupant of this position, Makea Takau, is an elderly dame, portly in figure and rather sad of countenance. She is woman of some wisdom, and has exerted a good influence over her people - albeit the *mana* of the Arikis is not what it once was. She is also a true and loyal friend of Britain. It was at her instigation that the English Government was petitioned in 1888 to establish a protectorate over the Cook Islands, and the same may be said regarding the movement that led to the annexation of the islands to New Zealand in 1901.

At the time of our visit Makea and all her tribe were wearing the garb of mourning, as were also the visiting natives of Atiu, an island to the north-east, over which Ngamaru Ariki had ruled. This, however, did not interfere with the programme of dancing that had been arranged in honour of our visit. The neat black robes of the women gave quite a peculiar interest to the proceedings, and served to set off with greater effect the tasteful white costumes of the Takitumu and Atorangi tribes, whose performances followed later. I will not attempt to describe those dances, with their attendant chanting, hand-clapping, and drumming. (Oh, that drumming!) Enough to say that the performances were unique, and will not soon be forgotten by those who witnessed them.

After dinner, on board, the doctor wrapped up his phonograph, and we sought the shore again. In the palace grounds stands a humble little cottage, the home of Jacky and her husband Tinirau. This was our rendezvous; and while we sat on the verandah enjoying the cool evening air, and listening to a varied

programme of music as discoursed by the phonograph, Jacky moved about, silent and graceful, dispensing the choicest oranges.

Jacky is something of a celebrity in the quiet way of Rarotonga. We had noticed her on the previous evening, immediately after our arrival. We were struck by a certain grace and dignity that characterised her bearing and movements, and we were not surprised to learn she was, so to speak, a maid of honour to Queen Makea. But though somewhat queenly of carriage, Jacky is herself not of royal blood. She is a foundling who has been taken in hand and brought up by Makea; and now that the loneliness of widowhood has fallen upon the childless old Queen, the help and companionship of the younger woman will doubtless prove doubly precious. Yet Jacky and Makea have had at least one difference that might easily have proved "a little rift within the lute." Tinirau loved Jacky, and his love was well requited; but Makea refused her consent to the match, and for a while the course of true love with this young couple did not run smooth. But their affection was real enough to stand the test of waiting, and in due time the Queen was induced to so far modify her opposition that she consented to submit the problem to a prominent official on the island, and abide by his decision. Fortunately the official gave his verdict in favour of the young folks; the alliance was happily consummated, and Tinirau has found in Jacky a wife both good and true. I confess, however, that my interest in this little romance or Rarotonga was somewhat shaken when later on I beheld the demure and dignified Jacky quietly enjoying a cigarette!

So ended Saturday. It had been a glorious day, full of interest and enjoyment, and I went on board at night glad in the prospect of two more days on the island. So it was with feelings much akin to disgust that I awoke early on the morning to find the vessel out at sea, pitching and tumbling in a heavy gale. It was clear what had happened. A storm had arisen, and our careful and genial skipper had deemed it prudent to make for the open sea. After vainly endeavouring to restore order and repose among the contents of my cabin, I returned to my slumbers, and was relieved to find, on awakening again at daybreak, that we were once more at anchor off the reef. The gale continued all day, but the wind blew from a sage quarter so far as the vessel was concerned. It was accompanied by heavy rain but in spite of the weather the native service in the morning was attended by a crowded congregation. Numbers of men and women had come equipped - as was, no doubt, their custom - with exercise book and pencil; and at frequent intervals during the course of the sermon, when the preacher directed the attention of his hearers to some point of special importance, they might be observed busily making notes. It reminded me of John Williams's description of a Sabbath at Rarotonga, in which he tells how, prior to the service, the people would meet together in classes, and arrange for each individual among them to bring away a certain portion of the sermon. So thoroughly was this system carried out, he tells us, that when later in the day the classes assembled with the missionary, there was seldom a sentiment or sentence of importance that was not repeated by one or another of the congregation.

We were anxious to see as much of Rarotonga as possible during our short stay. Indeed, the purpose of our visit required that we should lose no opportunity of learning something of the island and its people. So, having waited vainly for an improvement in the weather, we proceeded immediately after lunch to drive round the island -- a circuit of twenty miles. Was ever such an outing as this? The wind was blowing with almost hurricane force, and, driving as we were in the face of a blinding rain, the first mile or so sufficed to drench us completely. Thereafter, there was nothing to be feared from the rain. The cocoanut palms along the roadside, with their heavy clusters of fruit, swayed and bent before the gale in an ominous fashion, and here and there the fallen nuts suggested a disquieting possibility.

"Peto. Did you ever hear of a man being killed by a falling cocoanut?" we asked our driver.

The boy could not speak much English, but we understood him to say that he knew of at least one case. Moreover, he seemed to share our apprehension, for we observed that whenever we came to a cluster of palms he looked up furtively, and endeavoured with voice and whip to encourage his little horse to improve his pace. I gripped my umbrella well up to the ribs, and speculated as to its power to repel a full-grown cocoanut shot from a height of fifty feet or more. I decided that the chances were entirely in favour of the nut.

We noticed a strange absence of bird life throughout the drive, only two birds being observed in the whole distance. One was a large bluish fowl, much like the New Zealand swamp-hen. The other, strangely enough, was a kotuku, or white heron, a bird so seldom seen that "As rare as the white heron" is well known as a proverb among the Maoris. Certainly it was no day to be out for either bird or beast.

At Ngatangita we stopped for a little time to converse with a few natives who appeared to be taking life easy under the verandah of their cottage. Two women were just arriving home from an afternoon service, one of whom stood out in the rain for some minutes in a vain endeavour to find me the text. Meanwhile an unregenerate male member of the household, regardless of the Sabbath, was trying to arrange a sale of some clam shells to my companion. Then from within the house temptingly displayed a bowl containing an evil-looking concoction. Perhaps it was "bush beer". If so, he was liable to a fine of sundry dollars. The manufacture of this liquor (from oranges, pine-apples or bananas) has always been one of the most serious problems the missionary has had to face in Rarotonga. The late Rev. James Chalmers stated that he had seen men in all stages of intoxication through indulgence in orange beer. He worked long and zealously to eradicate the degrading custom, and not without some success. The practice still lingers, however, and it will probably die hard, as detection is difficult, since the drink is usually made in the seclusion of the mountain forests.

We were anxious now to get back to the wharf before nightfall. The road in places was blocked by fallen branches, and to be belated on such an evening would have been unpleasant to say the least of it. Rarotongan horse-flesh is not of the best, and our progress was slow, but by dint of much persuasion we managed to reach the end of our journey just as darkness was falling. We had accomplished our purpose, and felt some little elation in the fact. But how chilled we were! As we waited for a boat to take us off to the steamer our teeth fairly chattered. In all my imaginings concerning Rarotonga I had never pictured myself shivering there with cold.

Monday broke calm and bright. The storm was over, and Nature was once more in her fairest mood. But the gale had left its mark on the island, and the season's banana crop suffered to the value of many hundred pounds.

On the doings of that day I need say nothing. What with dances, presentations, and conferences the busy hours went quickly and pleasantly by; and when at sunset we bade farewell to the crowd upon the wharf, we felt that the memory of our brief sojourn in "lovely Rarotonga" would be cherished amount the most delightful recollections of a memorable tour. And now to sea again, the south-eastward for Mangaia.