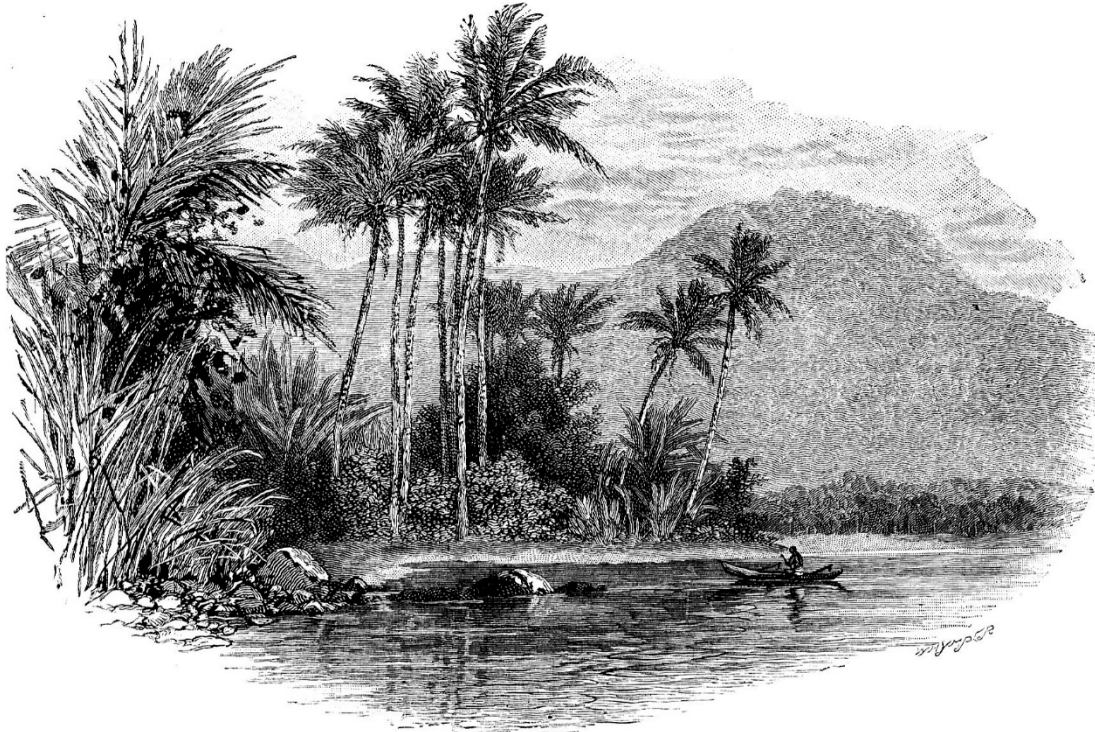


The Past and the Present of Samoa

II - Samoa Casting Off Idolatry



A Coast Scene

In 1830 Williams and Barff, two missionaries of the London Missionary Society, sailed for the Navigators. They had with them on board the *Messenger of Peace* a band of Tahitian teachers, who, even in those early days, were manifesting the true missionary spirit, and, having "freely received," were eager "freely to give." Besides the Tahitians they had with them a Samoan chief, named Fauea, whom they had providentially met with on the island of Tonga, at which they had called *en route*. Fauea proved a valuable and powerful ally when they reached Savaii. On the voyage from Tonga this Samoan had been greatly exercised in mind about a native called Tamafainga, a man in whom the spirit of the gods was supposed to dwell, and whose authority was supreme. Should that man oppose, said Fauea, no Samoan would dare embrace the new religion. To Fauea's unbounded delight, one of the first things he ascertained from his compatriots who came paddling from the shore to meet the ship was that Tamafainga had been killed about ten or twelve days before. Immensely relieved by this news, he came leaping along the deck towards Mr. Williams, shouting as he approached, "The devil is dead—the devil is dead! Our work is done!" When the missionaries understood the cause of his excitement, they could not but recognise in this event a token of God's overruling care. They felt that the good hand of the Lord was with them and rejoiced accordingly.

As the naked Samoans crowded around their visitors, staring at them with open-mouthed curiosity and amazement, Fauea eloquently held forth. "Can the religion of these wonderful foreigners be anything but wise or good?" he asked. "Let us look at them, and then look at ourselves. Their heads are covered, while ours are exposed to the heat of the sun and the wet of

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the rain; their bodies are clothed all over with beautiful cloth, while we have nothing but a bandage of leaves around our waists; they have clothes upon their very feet, while ours are like the dogs; and then look at their axes, their scissors, and their other property, how rich they are !”

Not the highest argument to use, we may truly say, but yet one that told. Fauea was but a babe in knowledge himself; still his words were forcible, struck home, and made a deep impression. And the man was prudent as well

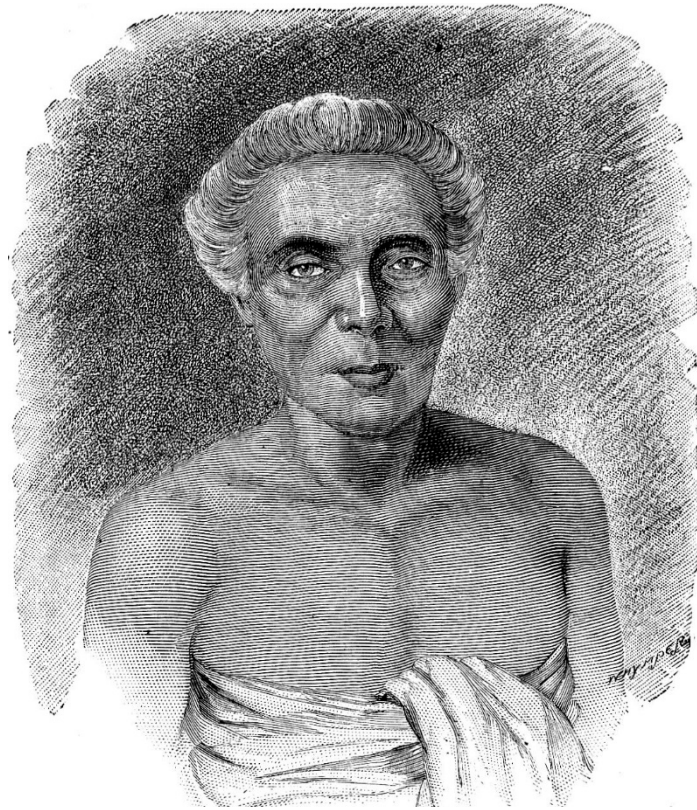
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as earnest. His one request to the two missionaries was that they should urge the Tahitian teachers not to begin their work among his fellow-countrymen by condemning their canoe races, their dances, wrestling matches, pigeon catching, and other amusements, of which they were intensely fond, lest they should conceive a dislike to the religion which imposed such restraints. “Tell them,” said he, “to be diligent in teaching the people, to make them wise, and then their hearts will be afraid, and they themselves will put away that which is evil. Let the Word prevail, and get a firm hold upon them, and then we may with safety adopt measures which at first would prove injurious.”

Eight teachers were landed, were favourably received, and the Samoan Mission commenced. As the canoes were being loaded with their belongings alongside the Messenger of Peace, the missionaries noticed the mountains on the opposite shore of Upolu enveloped in flames and smoke. When they inquired the cause of this, they were informed that a battle had been fought that very morning, and that the flames they saw were consuming the houses, the plantations, and the bodies of women, children, and infirm people who had fallen into the hands of their conquerors. Thus at the very moment that the messengers of the Prince of Peace were being landed on the one shore, the horrors of savage warfare were being perpetrated on the other. This incident, narrated by Williams in his “Missionary Enterprises,” has been confirmed to missionaries now in the field by old Samoans, who remembered the circumstances, and described in detail the gruesome horrors of the scene. After a pleasant stay upon Savaii, Williams and Barff bade their new friends farewell. They had been cordially welcomed, had exchanged presents with the chiefs, and had moved freely about. Instead of being plundered and ill-treated (often the first experience of teachers when placed upon an island inhabited by savages) the teachers whom they settled in Samoa were received with open arms both by chiefs, and people, who vied with one another in expressions of kindness and delight. Four spacious native dwellings were placed at their disposal, and the very longest and best house in the settlement was set apart for public worship and instruction. An open door had been found for the entrance of the Word of Life.

In 1832, twenty months after his first visit, Williams sailed for Samoa again. Approaching from the eastward he determined to touch at every island of the group in succession, and so make acquaintance with them all. On touching at Manua, distant two hundred and fifty miles from where he had stationed the teachers, what were his joy and surprise to hear the natives who came flocking out to the ship in their canoes, shout out as they drew near: “We are Christians—we are Christians !” (literally, we are sons of the word) “we are waiting for a religion ship to bring us some people they call missionaries to tell us about Jesus Christ. Is yours the ship we are waiting for?” A fine stalwart islander clambered on deck, and with great eagerness begged for a teacher. There was but one in the vessel, and as he was already promised to the chief of Manono, Mr. Williams had to try and pacify his petitioner with a present, some elementary books, and the

promise of a missionary as soon as circumstances would allow.



A Samoan Chief

Still greater delight and astonishment were awaiting him at Tutuila, the most easterly of the three chief islands of the group. At first it looked as if trouble was in store for him, for on making the island the vessel was at 'once surrounded by a vast number of canoes filled with wild and excited natives. In one canoe was an Englishman named William Gray, who had settled at Tutuila, and was living almost like the natives. The clamour of the Samoans in this instance was not for missionaries, but for muskets and powder, and Gray told Mr. Williams that they were preparing for war with a neighbouring chief, hence the demand for firearms. Gradually, however, the vessel drew away from the canoes, and leaving them astern, sailed down the south coast of the island until they came to the beautiful and spacious bay of Leone. Oh entering the bay a man immediately came off to them and announced himself as a "son of the Word."

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That was enough for the missionary; he decided to land, and a boat having been lowered, pulled for the shore. A number of natives were on the beach. This was the very spot where De Langle and his men had been killed. Pausing for a moment Mr. Williams ordered his Tahitian crew to stop rowing and unite with him in prayer, as was his practice when exposed to danger; and the boat came to when about twenty yards from the shore. Seeing this the chief made his people sit down on the beach, and himself wading through the water nearly up to his neck, told his white visitor that he need not fear to land, for they were savage no longer, but had become Christians. A great chief from the white man's country had been to Samoa twenty moons before and left "workers of religion," and some of his own people had been taught by them, and wore now themselves teaching others. "There they are," he exclaimed, "don't you see them?" pointing as he spoke to a group of about fifty, each one with a piece of white native cloth tied round the arm as a distinguishing badge. When Mr. Williams made answer that he was the white chief referred to, the enthusiasm rose to the highest pitch. At a sign from the chief the Samoans rushed into the water, and seizing the boat carried it and its occupants bodily ashore. A chapel, with accommodation for eighty or a hundred worshippers, was pointed out as it stood embosomed in a sheltered nook near the shore. A loquacious native—the Samoans have the reputation of being great talkers—informed Mr. Williams that he did the teaching. He explained his method, which was to go off in his canoe every now and again to visit the teachers and "get some religion," as he phrased it, then returning, give what he had thus got to the people. His stock exhausted he would

go away again for a fresh supply. In such unconventional ways was Christianity being propagated.

As in Manua and Tutuila, so in yet greater degree had there been striking progress in Upolu and Savaii. On meeting with the teachers the missionary's heart was filled to overflowing with adoring gratitude to God. A chapel capable of holding a congregation of six or seven hundred had been built and was always full when services were held; the gospel had already been introduced into more than thirty villages; better still the natives generally were only awaiting the return of the mission ship openly to renounce idolatry. The power of their superstitions had been put to the test by the Tahitian evangelists, and the principal idol pronounced impotent, and sentenced to destruction by drowning; but at the urgent request of the teachers it had been allowed to remain until the missionary should arrive. To him it was handed over, and by him it was conveyed to England and placed in the Missionary Museum.



A Samoan Woman

The chief of Manono received his teacher with marked satisfaction; Malietoa, the chief of Savaii, was most favourable to the new religion, and altogether the prospects of the future were bright and encouraging. A stronghold of Satan had yielded with but little resistance.

One antagonistic influence was, however, in active operation. Some runaway British sailors, escaped convicts, and suchlike disreputable characters, men like the William Gray referred to above, had found their way to Samoa, and some of these men had the audacity to set up rival religions, which, while adopting sundry Christian forms and ceremonies, granted free indulgence to heathen immoralities. With a certain section of Samoans these deceivers were more popular than the Bible-teaching

Tahitians. The people were ashamed of their own religion, and eagerly embraced caricatures of the true. To be able to say that they had a foreign teacher and a foreign religion was enough for them; and with brazen effrontery their pseudo-Christian instructors were able to mislead them by pandering to their lust and vanity. How frequently it happens that the vices and unprincipled conduct of our own countrymen—soldiers, sailors, officials, merchants, and traders are the most formidable hindrance our missionaries have to encounter. If those who so readily raise the cry of "missions a failure" would but have the honesty to consider this difficulty they would soon cease their outcry. The wonder is not that so little, but that, in the face of such subtle and powerful opposition, so much has been done.