IDYLLS OF THE SOUTH SEAS WILLIAM S. STONE

of the South Seas

William S. Stone

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In Parting

I WAS homeward bound, far out on the broad, majestic Bay of Matavai. The little canoe rode easily the deep, slow Pacific swells which swept over the sunken chain of reefs where Nona once had fished, finally to curl green and white on black volcanic sands. There was no sound save the gentle slapping of the outrigger, a whisper of breeze, and the murmur of small whirlpools which the paddle stirred to transient life on the sun-bright sea. To this faint accompaniment Tetua's parting words echoed back to me.

"Come again," he had called from where he stood on the curving strand. A breaking wave had raised its voice between us; then I heard him distantly once more. "Soon, Viriamu! None of us lives forever . . .!"

Very true. Thanks to Maui's splendid failure, none of us does. And who would have it otherwise? Yet, like Maui, I could not help wishing that, for the friend I left behind and for myself as well, time in which to continue sharing the Polynesian past and present might go on—if not forever, at least for a generous while. Or long enough, in any case, to allow for other returns, that I might once again harken to the last of Tahitian bards, the last brave teller of his people's wondrous tales.

In sudden decision that the next such return should not be long delayed, I swung the paddle vigorously, and in response the canoe surged forward over Matavai's untiring, heaving breast.

To my wife Barbara whose enthusiasm helped so greatly

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AMONG the widely scattered Polynesian peoples, many variants of their legends are to be found. As one travels from island group to island group he may observe that the names of characters in a given tale, the relationships of the actors, even story incidents have become changed. Of such modifications the story of Tafai affords an example. In Tahiti and Samoa the great hero is still known as Tafai. Hawaiians call him Kahai. To the Maoris he is Tawhaki, and to the Mangarevans, Tahaki. In the Tahitian account Tafai is killed by his cousins and restored to life by his mother, whereas in the New Zealand Maori version he is killed by his brothers, and it is his wife who brings him back to life. Tahitians told of Tafai's descent to the underworld in search of his father, Hema. But in Hawaii this passage was replaced by an adventure in which Hema was carried off by a great bird from whom he was later rescued by his son.

It will be seen, then, that a Polynesian legend bearing the name Tafai may be any one of a number of differing tales. I have seen fit to permit my narrator, Tetua, to borrow on occasion from the renditions of those of his countrymen who settled on distant islands; but for the most part the legends in this book follow, in their main outlines, the versions of his own Tahiti.

Legends such as those of Nona and of Tafai had their origin in Tahiti, and it may therefore be said that the patterns on which Tetua's tales are based are the oldest. When his ancestors set out in their canoes for such far-separated islands as Hawaii and New Zealand, Mangareva and Rarotonga, they carried with them the rituals and the chanted legends that had grown upon Tahiti. But though the chants became altered in the new lands to which they were taken—sometimes slightly, sometimes radically—the Tahitian place names remained identifiable. The names of valleys, mountains, and streams indicate clearly the island on which the heroic sagas were first sung; and they show as well that Tahiti and neighboring Raiatea were the Pacific homelands from which great voyages were begun.

It must not be thought, however, that because their framework is taken at the Tahitian source the stories as they appear in this volume are literal translations of ancient song and myth. Students seeking such material will find it elsewhere. The

intention here has been to present a group of legends in such a way that they might have living reality for a reader who has little or perhaps no personal familiarity with Polynesian peoples or Polynesian islands. I have wanted such a reader to see the tales taking place in the settings where they are said to have happened; I have wanted him to see the youths and maidens and men and women, not as so many strange names, but as real human beings. Finally, I have wanted him to feel himself on and of Tahiti or whatever other island was concerned. If I have succeeded, it is because I have not restricted Tetua to simple quotation of the words of his forebears. Yet to whatever extent he has elaborated upon the original narratives, setting his stage, painting his characters and his island's moods, he has only supplied for his foreign listeners what was intimately known to those who composed the tales and to those for whom, generation after generation, they were repeated.

To make full acknowledgment to all who have helped me in the writing of this book I should be obliged to list the names of the many Tahitian friends and acquaintances who, over a period of more than thirty years, have given me some understanding of themselves, and through whose eyes I have been permitted to look upon their island world. To every one of them I am more than grateful.

For the actual materials of which the stories are made I am especially indebted to ethnologist J. Frank Stimson, most of whose working life was spent in French Polynesia; to Temarii Ninau, former chief of the village of Haapu, Huahine; and to the late Louis Drollet of Papeete. For several of the tales I have also relied heavily on Teuira Henry's *Ancient Tahiti*, Bishop Museum Bulletin 48.

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IDYLLS OF THE SOUTH SEAS



Of Tetua the Teller of Tales

OLD Tetua's visitors are few and are likely to be those who, however well they may love the South Sea islands of today, would give almost anything in life to have come upon the curving, palm-grown shores before progress-busied white men first arrived. Tetua's conversation is not of copra and vanilla markets, nor of island politics or world affairs. Yet for all that, he is a practical man. He tends the patch of taro growing close to the stream which flows into the sea before his bamboo house; he gathers the coconuts which fall from his trees, dries their meats, and sells them to the district Chinaman; he fishes with hooks of steel. One must eat, and in order to do so Tetua comports himself as a man of modern Tahiti. But his thoughts are often elsewhere, and his dark brown eyes look inward where his astounding memory holds stored the fast-disappearing lore of his forefathers. There, in Tetua's mind, are the customs of earlier days, the rituals, the sacred chants, the dances, the wondrous tales of kings and queens and youths and maids who breathed the warm, flower-scented tropic air, who loved and fought and laughed and sang, treading the jungly trails and sailing the blue seas many long centuries ago.

Some to whom Tetua's island is now home—Frenchmen, Americans, and even Tahitians—think him silent and eccentric. They sense his unconcern with their present-day affairs, and if they take slight umbrage they must not be blamed; for everyone, whatever the color of his skin, likes to imagine his own interests important and significant. But neither must Tetua be blamed if he prefers to walk with seeing eyes through his verdant countryside rather than to rush blindly past its changing beauty in a brightly painted car. Not for a minute does he begrudge others their pleasure in such things, but his own satisfactions and delights he finds elsewhere. Between him and many of his fellows there lies a gulf that can hardly be bridged. It is as difficult for them to converse as if they inhabited different planets. And so, in a sense, they do. Tetua's world is one in which the wind and sea, the sun and moon and stars are man's close companions. His airy house stands upon stilts sunk in the dark sand of a mile-long, bow-shaped beach, facing a bay of deep blue water and almost directly in front of the pass which leads through the barrier reef to the

outer sea. It stands alone. No other human habitation is in sight. There is only the backdrop of high mountains, the clouds, the vaulted sky.

Tetua has his friends, for even now there are those who envy him his simple, wholesome way of living; and if the number of like-thinking folk upon the globe were known, it might be found surprisingly large. Happily, some of them are near and ask nothing better than to join him in his walks into the hills where he goes for fruit and firewood, or to ride with him in a canoe when he sets out for the reef to place his traps for fish, to wield his harpoon, or to set his lines. At such times, and with such friends, Tetua is far from silent. Then, with little urging, speaking in his deep, musically resonant voice, he will tell the wonders of the Tahitian past. To a sympathetic listener he will pour out his stories from dawn to dark—stories of fabulous fish and beasts, of mighty rulers, of brave and daring men and women to whom Tahiti was native land. Perhaps you who hold this book are such a listener, in which case, if you could be here on this island, you would certainly find yourself his welcome, close companion. He would insist that his house is yours and that, in visiting him, you must not think to stay brief hours, but rather days or weeks.

Often he has said as much to me. And it was not lack of inclination that so long kept me from paying him a visit on the shores of the Bay of Matavai. It was simply the warm-country habit of mañana that causes one to postpone even those things which promise to be pleasant. The day came, however, when I wrapped a few belongings in a length of cotton print and, with a similar cloth bound about my waist, set off by canoe for Tetua's beach.

It was early morning and the month was April, which in these southern latitudes is the beginning of winter. True, the seasons here bring little change, but in April and May the days are shorter and the sun disappears into the sea far to the north. With darkness the downdrafts from the mountains carry a decided chill, and during the first morning hours there is a tang and crispness in the air. It is a time of year to remind a transplanted white man of the energy and ambition that filled him in his youth. "Come," he says to himself, "you have been half asleep through the long, dreamy days of summer. The things you planned—why not do them now?"

So I paddled on over the calm, bright lagoons, keeping close to the shore, which fell away to north and east. Here and there small islands of mist hung low on the water; the bow of the canoe parted them, and in slow whorls they floated away to either side. As I rounded the last, jutting point of land which separated me from Tetua's bay, the breeze sprang up, ruffling all the great half-moon of Matavai and causing it to dance and sparkle in the sun.

However often I may happen upon the magnificent harbor where CaptainWallis in the stout English ship *Dolphin* dropped anchor, I think the effect upon me always will be the same. For a time I am left near breathless, and the paddle is forgotten.

The canoe drifts on a little way under its own momentum, and then its forward movement ceases. But it does not stand still. So wide is the pass that the whole bay stirs in sympathy with the sea beyond, and the little craft rises and falls as, with steady, measured pulse, the swells slide under it and roll on to foam at last upon the beach at the foot of Tetua's house. I gaze up at the towering mountains and at Orohena, the greatest peak of all, which loses itself in clouds; I stare down the dim, winding, green-clad valleys; my eyes sweep the deserted, sun-drenched shore. And at that moment, invariably, I am subject to a fascinating illusion -an illusion for which Tetua and his often repeated stories of the first coming of white men to Tahiti are, of course, responsible. As I sit drinking in the beauty of Matavai, the scene before me seems to come to sudden life. The lonely strand is no longer empty. I imagine that I see not only Tetua's solitary dwelling, but others by the many score. They line the shore, they dot the hillsides, their soft brown roofs of thatch peer out from between the grey-white boles of the coconuts farther inland. It is a village, a city, a capital—the seat of a government of kings and chieftains. From all directions the people come running, and the air is filled with cries and shouts, with the yelping of dogs, the squeals of startled pigs, the squawking of frightened fowls. Where the populace converges to stand gesticulating, massed together on the beach, there is the flash of spears and the color-bright red and yellow—of feathered ornaments. A fleet of canoes now rides the shimmering surface of the bay, and in them paddle a thousand brown-skinned men of matchless physique, warriors all, hurrying out to the harbor's center where floats the cause of all the shouting, all the astonishment and excitement. It is the weather-beaten Dolphin resting upon the blue water, her sails furled and her anchors gripping tenaciously the sandy bottom.

Amazed but unafraid, the Tahitians swarm about her. "See," they call back and forth, "there is no outrigger; it has but a single hull and yet does not capsize!" Can less than magic, they wonder, account for such a thing? And there are other marvels: "Behold the color of the creatures that line her rails—their bodies are white, their faces pale! Do not the gods alone have skins of white?" Trustingly, unhesitatingly, they clamber aboard, bearing their gifts of coconuts, bananas, fish, and shells.

At this point the mental picture fades. Perhaps it is because I wish to see no more, because I would willingly forget all those who followed so close in the wake of the trailblazing *Dolphin*. In square-riggers out of Salem and New Bedford they came, in men-of-war from London and Marseilles, in merchantmen from Amsterdam and Cadiz—the brawling tars, the whalers, the soldiers, the traders. Was there ever more tragic error than that which caused such as these to be looked upon as deities? Better, one is inclined to think, if they had been taken for children

of the devil and met with stones and spears. That they were not is hard to understand, for the Tahitians had had recent warning from their own high priest of what the white invasion was to mean.

The warning had come but a short time before the arrival of the first foreign vessel. Solemn religious ceremonies were in progress at the holiest of all the ancient shrines. Taputapuatea was its name, and a multitude had assembled there, coming from many islands to witness the sacrifices, to join in the chants and time-honored rites. Close to the massive stone monument which was the center of the place of worship there grew a mighty, spreading *tamanu* tree in whose thick shade stood the king, his chiefs, and his foremost warriors. It was evening. The air was still, and all eyes were turned on Vaita, the high priest, whose voice rose clear as he intoned a prayer to the ruling gods. Suddenly a strange and terrible thing occurred. A great whirlwind rushed in from the sea and fell upon the rugged *tamanu*. For a brief moment the wind roared in the heavy, lashing branches. Then the top of the tree was wrenched up and borne away. Again the air was calm, and the frightened people stared dazedly at the leafless trunk.

Slowly Vaita made his way to the side of the king, and on his face there was a look of deep concern.

"Is it a sign?" the king demanded. "Can you read its meaning?"

The priest nodded gravely. "It is an omen of great change. There are those coming to our islands who are like us in shape, yet in some ways very different. In a ship without outrigger they will come, and they will put an end to all our present customs. They will possess our lands, they will possess our people, and the sacred birds of the sea will come to mourn all that has been taught beneath this mutilated tree."

Such were the dire, cold words of Vaita as Tetua has repeated them to me. "You were warned, Tahitians," I find myself thinking. "Why did you not fight the invaders?" But perhaps I am wrong; perhaps the Polynesian rulers who have been dust these two hundred years were wise. Possibly they sensed that they could as little hope to resist the blond men whose ships were beginning to crawl the seven seas as to bind the *tamanu*-destroying whirlwind.

"Well, enough," I told myself on that April morning. "Have done with such gloomy thoughts. Push on. Ahead lies a house whose doorway leads to an untarnished past, to happier days when Tetua's forebears still walked free, their minds filled with the wonder and the glory of their island kingdoms."

I had taken but a few strokes more when I made out the tall figure of Tetua himself striding down to the water's edge to stand where the waves creamed about his feet. He raised a brown arm, swinging it in an arc above his head, beckoning; and I put my back into the paddling so that the canoe passed swiftly over the gently rolling swells.

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"Ia ora na!" he cried when I was still some distance off. "May you live, Viriamu!" Because the Tahitian language has no sounds approximating either "w" or "l," the name William has its difficulties for Tetua. But he has done his best and has added a final vowel to conform to his ideas of what is proper. Viriamu is the result.

There are times when a high sea crashes on Tetua's beach, running up the smooth, shaded slope to lick the grass roots and the wooden stilts upon which his dwelling perches. On such days even an islander may have serious trouble in beaching his canoe. Fortunately, my visits have coincided with mild weather, and this time was no exception. Nevertheless, my friend waded out to meet me till he was waist deep in white water. As he grasped the bow I leaped over the side, and together we ran the light dugout up to dry ground beneath a *purau* tree whose dark green foliage was at that season spangled with large, bell-shaped, yellow blossoms.

"Ah," Tetua exclaimed, snatching up the small bundle wrapped in a blue and white *pareu* and holding it happily aloft. "At last you have come to stay. It is true, eh? You will not take to your canoe as soon as the sun is low?"

"No, this time there is no need."

"You will remain long with old Tetua?"

"As long as you will have me."

He laughed and led the way to the house. "In that case your wanderings are over, and we may spend the rest of our days beneath this roof." Nimbly he mounted the upended sections of a coco trunk that formed the steps. He placed my things on the lid of a chest which stood in a corner and then, turning to me, asked suddenly, "Would you be willing to do so?"

He still smiled as he spoke, and yet I was quick to sense that he was in earnest. We seated ourselves tailor fashion upon the white matting which was spread over the board floor, close to the wide doorway. Tetua opened his tin of native tobacco, placed it between us, and held out a pandanus leaf from which I tore a small strip, and together we began to roll cigarettes. Meanwhile, my eyes roamed the simple dwelling that I had come to love so well. Nothing had changed since the last time I was there, several months before, when he had told me the story of the conquering Rata and his Ship of Flame. Whatever might have been happening in the crowded countries of the outside world, Tetua's domain was untouched, unaltered, and so, I felt sure, it would always be. I glanced up at the steeply pitched roof with its symmetrical crisscross of neatly plaited fronds, at the evenly spaced ribbons of bark with which the leafy covering was secured to the straight, slender rafters of ironwood. At one end, very near the peak, and hanging quietly in the center of its ingenious web, was a grey spider-the same, I did not doubt, which had inhabited that spot since my first acquaintance with Tetua. Enclosing the single room were walls made of bamboo that had first been soaked in the sea, then split into narrow

lengths no wider than a pencil, and finally woven in six-foot squares to make a tapestry of softest yellow, through whose minute chinks the breeze now stirred with a lazy whispering. All was the work of Tetua, all was done with the materials that grew about him; nowhere was there nail or hinge or any other bit of metal. In such a house his father had lived, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, who had been chief of that entire region.

"You do not answer my question," said Tetua. "Is it that you are not sure you could be content with such a life as mine? Possibly you are not, after all, so very different from other white men, Viriamu. I have seen your house with its many books, its electric icebox, its talking machine. I have seen the white cloths and the knives and forks you put upon your table. Such things you do not find here, and I think it may be that, in time, you would miss them."

"Perhaps," I admitted. "But at the moment, I feel a contentment such that the number of our days seems far too little time in which to savor the beauty and peace in which you live."

"I have had the same thought," Tetua replied, "and it has made me wonder if it is so with men of other lands, if to them also a life span seems as fleeting." He was silent for a while, and there was no sound in the house but the soothing voice of the wind, the swish of the sea on the beach, and the lively chatter of a bird in the nearby *purau* tree. Then he smiled.

"Do you hear the laughter?" he asked.

"Laughter?"

"Yes, the bira—the *manu-iti*. We have him to thank for the fact that we are but mortal and that death, all too soon, comes to every one of us. If it were not for those mischievous and irrepressible little birds—for one of them in particular—we might have all eternity before us in which to chat and smoke and watch the shifting shadows on the lagoon. But for the *manu-iti* we might look upon the swift revolving seasons with unconcern. Summers with their warm rains and hot suns, winters with their cold south winds could come and go, and come and go; we should remain the same, ageless and in our prime." Tetua sat with his elbows resting on his outspread knees, his eyes bent upon the cigarette which he turned in his long, brown fingers. An ash fell to the floor and was whisked by the breeze out the open door. He sighed and repeated: "It is all the fault of the *manu-iti*. But surely that is known to you?"

"No," I replied, "I do not think you have spoken of it before."

"Such things," Tetua stated, "should be heard and remembered, for they explain the world we live in. You must at least recall the name of Maui. Your friends in Hawaii will have kept you in mind of him."

"Maui, who snared the sun and compelled it to travel more slowly through the skies?"

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OF TETUA THE TELLER OF TALES

"And who first raised numbers of our islands from the bottom of the sea. Seven great deeds he accomplished, as is commonly accepted. But there was an eighth task to which he set himself, a task to dwarf all others by comparison. Here in Tahiti the tale is now rarely told, although in Aotea—in New Zealand—it is still often on the lips of our brother Maoris."

I settled myself more comfortably. "Let me hear it, Tetua," I said, well pleased to see him launched upon the adventurous early days.

He nodded and began.