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TAHITI THE GOLDEN



BY CHARLES KEELER

TAHITI

THE GOLDEN

By

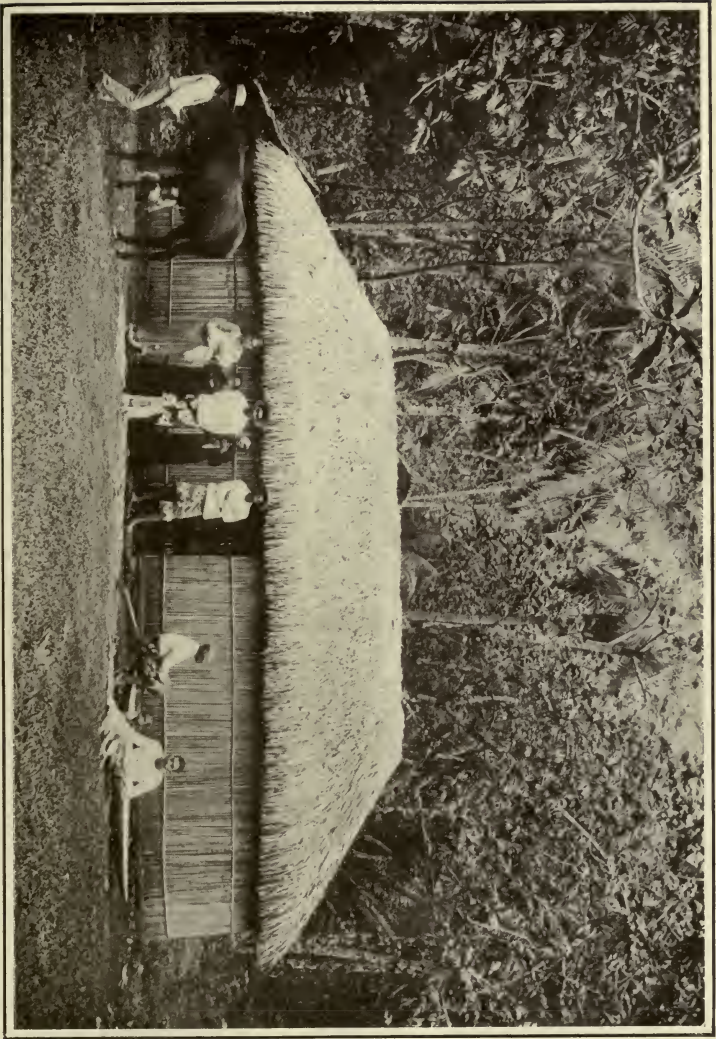
Charles Keeler




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TAHITIAN BAMBOO HOUSE





TAHITI, THE GOLDEN

The Peopling of Tahiti

TAHITI-NUI MAREAREA! Great Tahiti, the Golden! Far over the sea it lies, a beautiful isle of peace! Tropic wavelets break about it in a blue wilderness of sparkling sea! Its center is a citadel of cloud-hung peaks; its shore is a broad plain of verdure, where breadfruit trees stand shoulder to shoulder, where great banana leaves rustle in the trade-wind, and coco palms sway airily with graceful tufts of drooping foliage atop their slender stems. All about its shore the coral builders have reared their wall a half-mile or less from the land, and here the waves leap and laugh in a joyous line of white spray. Within the sacred precincts of the reef is the lagoon of passive opalescent tide, where myriads of rainbow fish flash hither and yon, and the polyps drowse or sway their painted tentacles in the still water.

Long ere Columbus had dazzled Europe with visions of a new world, a hardy race of voyagers had sought

out this lovely solitude and peopled it. They had come from India, tarrying in their migration at Java, and thence on to Samoa on the south and Hawaii on the north. They had traversed the leagueless sea to the eastward and had found Tahiti. What wonder that the land seemed good to them and that they flourished upon its bounty? Before their feats of daring many more distinguished voyages of civilized men pale into insignificance. With no instruments to guide them, in canoes sewed together with cocoanut fibre, poorly provisioned for such buffetings with the sea, they sailed for half discovered realms, taking with them not merely the lusty men, but also women and children. Their traditions are so exact and circumstantial that we can picture them today in their great double canoe, platformed over, with high carved stern-posts and graceful prows, spreading their broad mat sail to the trade-wind and venturing upon their perilous quest, steering by the steady breeze and the silent procession of the constellations, braving the perils of exposure and hunger upon their voyages across the open sea. It was thus that the great chief Olopana of Hawaii, driven from home by disastrous floods, bore his wife Lu'ukia, in the XII Century, to find a new dwelling-place in Tahiti, the Golden, twenty-three hundred miles away. From that remote time to the present the fame of the fair chieftainess Lu'ukia has been passed on from mouth



ON THE NINETY-MILE ROAD



to mouth, and her exploits have been treasured in song and story from Hawaii to New Zealand. She was a poetess, a dancer famed for grace, and the inventor of a style of dress which is still made by the Hawaiians.

In Tahiti every mountain crag and dimpled valley has its tradition to enhance the natural loveliness of the scene by association with gods and heroes. Every promontory of the rock-bound coast, every coral cove, where the wavelets murmur on the sandy shore, is hallowed by tales of genii and spirits, or by the chivalrous deeds of heroes. Here battles have been fought, temples have been builded, lovers have sung their songs to heedless ears. The spirit of romance hangs over the land. There is not merely beauty in contemplation, but also in reminiscence. It is a dream land, a poet land, a South Sea Parnassus. To know it one must go there and dream its dream. It is not enough to see its sensuous splendor of verdant crags and shimmering plains. The people of today are forgetting their old traditions and tales of history, but it is not too late to rescue them from oblivion. Fortunately, much has been permanently recorded and should be learned by all who would truly appreciate this fascinating isle and the remarkable people who inhabit it.

But I forget that Tahiti is not for all the world as for me the loadstone of memory. To many it is scarce more than an intangible name without localization or

association. Those who have delved in the chronicles of the South Sea voyagers—of Wallis, Cook and Bougainville—have read the glowing accounts of such hardy mariners concerning this *Isla d'Amat*, while lovers of Pierre Loti and Herman Melville, of Stevenson and Stoddard, have gleaned from their pages something of the glamor of tropic joy which invests the spot. Nevertheless, I find hosts of restless spirits who have but the vaguest notion of this South Sea paradise, and for such the present brief sketch is written.

Volcanic Islands and Atolls

The map of the Pacific, especially in the western and southern quarters, is peppered over with islets and archipelagoes in bewildering profusion. About thirty-six hundred miles south-southwest of San Francisco, in the midst of a group known as the Society Islands, lies Tahiti. Honolulu is off to the west of north more than two thousand miles. Auckland lies at nearly the same distance to the southwest. Tahiti, in about 17° S. latitude, is not quite so far south of the line as Honolulu is north of it. With a length of scarce thirty-five miles and a breadth of perhaps twelve, it is not a large island, but its ten consorts in the constellation of the Society Group are all of lesser size. Near to this cluster are two other groups—the Marquesas and the



NATIVE SETTLEMENT



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Paumotuian or Low Archipelago. All three, in the division of the spoils of Polynesia, have fallen to France.

The islands of the South Sea are of two forms—volcanic peaks and atolls—although both have a similar origin. The floor of the Pacific, in common with many other parts of the earth's surface, is either slowly rising or sinking, like some vast uneasy sleeper breathing heavily. Here and there at frequent intervals volcanos have broken out and piled up peaks which in Hawaii mount to nearly fourteen thousand, and in Tahiti to over seven thousand feet. Around each of these innumerable dots of land in the vast reach of the Pacific, the coral polyps have builded a fringing reef of lime. Since the creatures can only live in shallow water, and die as soon as exposed to the sun and air, their operations are confined to the coast of the volcanoes. Whenever, as it often chanced, the island upon which they had located was slowly sinking, they would build up their wall to save themselves from perishing in deep water. It is obvious that if this process continued long enough, the land would entirely disappear and leave a submerged circular wall of coral just below the level of low tide. The action of the waves in breaking off masses of coral and piling them up would in course of time produce a ring of sandy beach rising a few feet above the sea. Upon this, cocoanuts are washed ashore and ere long a grove of

palms flourishes about the rim of an enclosed lagoon. This is an atoll—the last stage in the disappearance of a volcanic islet from the sea. The Paumotuan Archipelago consists entirely of such atolls, while several of the Society Islands are also of this description.

The Land and its People

But Tahiti, the peerless—Great Tahiti, the Golden, as it is fondly called in native song,—is no such low-lying ring on the endless blue. Proudly it sweeps in gentle slopes from the shore to the base of the mountains, and then ascends in two glorious peaks—Orohena and Aoraii, the former split into two slivers of rock which shoot up amid the dark masses of tropic cloud so often hanging about them. Numerous other peaks jostle one another on the scanty footing of the island's center, with bold shoulders thrust against the plain. The verdure which runs riot over the lowland, nothing daunted, clings to the steep walls, with bare patches of red volcanic earth showing here and there to heighten the effect of green. Numberless cascades leap from the cliffs in shimmering threads of silver, to go gurgling on as rivulets to the sea, or, swollen by sudden cloudbursts in the mountain's heart, foaming and roaring as formidable streams.

[The island is shaped like a figure 8, the larger



ROAD IN MOOREA



land mass being specially designated as Tahiti Nui, or Great Tahiti, and the smaller division, connected by the low Taravao Isthmus, as Taïarapu. The villages are confined to the coast-line and are generally located near the river mouths. They are all of small size, the total population of the island according to the last census numbering but little over eleven thousand. Just at the bottom of the figure 8, on the northwest end of the island, lies Papeete, the headquarters of the French in the South Seas. Indeed, it is the only settlement of the Society Group where any considerable number of Europeans congregate. Of these there is a scant thousand—a cosmopolitan assemblage, with French predominating, but including American, English, German, Scandinavian and, I dare say, many other nationalities. The Chinese are well represented, many of the smaller and a few of the larger stores being in their hands. The numerous little coffee houses and restaurants, chiefly patronized by the natives, are conducted by the Chinese.

A South Sea Metropolis

Papeete is a charming, lazy, tropic seaport town. Its harbor is entered through a break in the coral reef, admitting with perfect safety, despite its extreme narrowness, the largest ocean steamers. In the sheltered

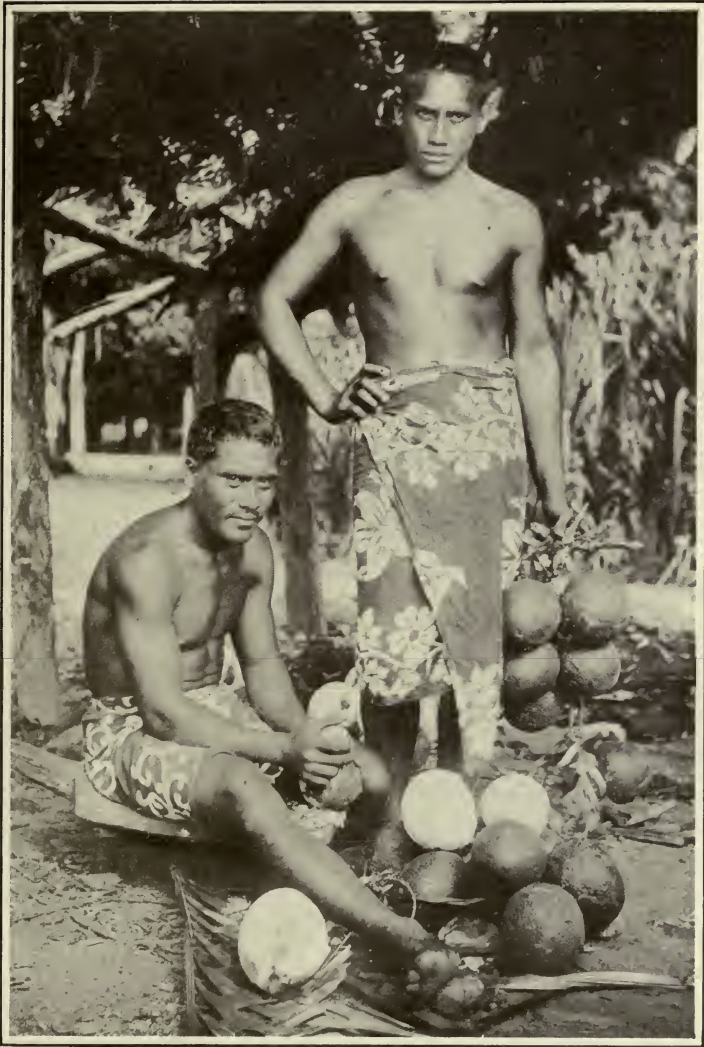
lagoon, with the green mountain walls piled up for a background and the open sea stretching off before it, interrupted only by the great natural breakwater upon which the billows are crashing, many small schooners lie at anchor or moored to the shore. A French cruiser is generally stationed in its still waters, and at regular intervals the steamers come and go on the voyages to San Francisco and Auckland.

How quaint it all is! Here is the market-place where multitudes of natives congregate at daybreak to make their modest purchases of fish and feis, of pineapple and melon, or of preserved shrimp done up in joints of green bamboo. The lovely *Quai du Commerce* along the water front is shaded by wide-spreading arches of acacia trees. Many of the more important stores are located here, and a fine new stone hotel is now in course of construction. We notice the public wash-basin, roofed over with tiles, where a dozen or twenty dusky-skinned women paddle about in the shallow water and pound their clothes with stones. Idleness and ease and good nature is the order of the day. Men and women saunter on the shady highway decked as for a carnival, with flowers tucked behind their ears or wound in chains and wreaths about their necks and heads. A man is well dressed if he wears a bright red figured cloth, known as a *pareu*, around his waist and an undershirt on his back. The women



RAIATEA - AVERA RIVER





PREPARING BREADFRUIT



wear bright gowns of calico hung from the shoulders, often caught up under the arm as they walk. Europeans and the more fastidious and aristocratic natives dress in white—the men in duck, with light hats of native weave made of sugar-cane or bamboo. To add to the picturesqueness of the street scenes are the *Gens d'Armes* in their uniforms, the French sailors, the officers from the substantial military barracks, the Chinese, and a sprinkling of East Indians. A native, carrying his burden swinging from the ends of a bamboo pole held on the shoulder, treads noiselessly down the quiet street. A party arrives in an open, clinker-built boat from a voyage around the coast, and listlessly disembarks and lands the cargo of charcoal done up in rough baskets. An old-fashioned carriage drawn by stocky little island horses clatters past, disturbing for a moment the equilibrium of the scene.

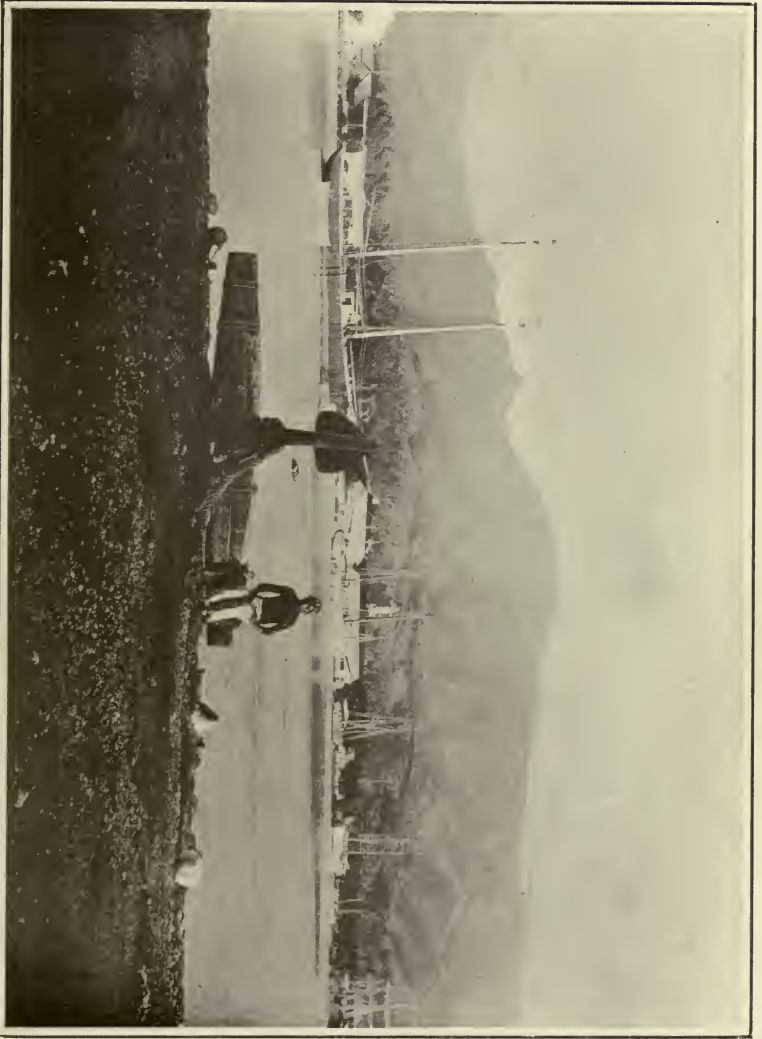
Home Life of the Natives

'Tis a pity the houses of Papeete are not more picturesque. Corrugated iron roofs and painted walls have played havoc with their aesthetic qualities, but they nestle away in bowers of splendid foliage such as only the tropics can produce. The native houses in the outlying provinces still have the primitive charm. They are built of upright sticks of bamboo, lashed side

by side to a frame of stripped poles in the form of an oval. Upon this is a heavy roof of pandanus thatch, covering a cool, airy and truly charming home. The air circulates freely through the cracks between the poles, as well as between the two doorways on opposite sides of the house. There are no windows, nor are they needed.

Food is cooked near by under a shed of thatch, the native oven consisting of a layer of stones upon which a fire is built. When duly heated, the food is placed amid the embers, wrapped in pieces of banana leaves and covered over with piles of damp breadfruit leaves. Breadfruit, taro, green bananas and *feis* or mountain plantains, are the staple foods which are roasted in this fashion, except upon the occasion of feasts, when roast sucking pig and chicken are added to the bill of fare. The cocoanut is used in a variety of ways, and an excellent sauce made of the compressed juice of the grated nut, together with lime-juice and sea water, savors many of their viands.

The fish which swarm in these waters form another easily secured food supply. They are caught in a variety of ways, not the least picturesque of which is the torchlight fishing on the lagoon. Torches are improvised of long coco palm branches tied into rolls. With a boatload of these, together with nets and spears, the fishermen paddle out upon the water after dark.



PAPETE HARBOR



Flying fish, attracted by the light, come whizzing overhead and are dexterously caught in a hand net. Other fish are speared over the side of the canoe. Dolphin and bonita are taken with hook and line in larger canoes sailing on the open sea, but this branch of fishing is limited to a few hardy men. The women scoop up small river fish in baskets, and drag nets are employed to capture the finny prey of the lagoon.

The Tahitians

The Tahitians are quite as much at home in the water as on land, and are great bathers. Strangely enough, they prefer the fresh water, the river mouths being favorite places for them to congregate. They are people of fine physique, tall and well proportioned, with rich, bronzy skin of beautiful color and texture. No feature of the race strikes the visitor more forcibly or more pleasantly than their affability. They have a smile and a greeting for all who chance their way. "*Iorana!*" the island salutation, is on every lip. They have good features, the lips somewhat sensuously thickened and the noses rather wide and flat; but withal, so kindly are their countenances, so large and dreamy the dark eyes, that one cannot but be fascinated with them. There is a childlike simplicity about their every action, a litheness and grace in their motions, a naturalness

governing their impulses, that is refreshingly delightful to one who comes to them from the stiffness and conventionality of modern civilization. Their hospitality knew no bounds until it was continually abused. Among themselves they are communists, sharing homes, food and all that they possess with every needy kinsman. Among Tahitians relations are numberless, so it goes without saying that since they look out for their poor relations, there are no poor. All are happy and content, but alas! the usual fate of the dark races is befalling them. Like other child-folk of the globe, they seem unable to cope with the more aggressive invaders that have come amongst them, and a slow, but inevitable decline in the population is the result.

The French have treated their conquered subjects with unusual liberality, giving them political equality under a governor sent from France. But in spite of this, the forces of disintegration are ceaselessly operative. Some of these deadly causes which are undermining the race are preventable, others not so. Strange as it may seem, one of their misfortunes is their affluence. Why should a man work when there is no spur to his ambition—when food is plenty and he has more money than he knows how to spend? This is precisely the condition with many Tahitians today. The high price of vanilla beans makes this industry an extremely profitable one. Although requiring considerable pains and



CORNER IN PAPEETE



attention, vanilla growing is done with the usual *dolce far niente* of the inhabitants. The drying of cocoanut meat and shipping it away, as copra is another industry calling for little concentration or application, and yet yielding a good livelihood. Within the past two years, since the steamer has been running to San Francisco, a market has been found for the surplus bananas and pineapples which formerly went to waste.

Tropical Fruits

The traveler visiting the tropics for the first time revels in the strange fruits which are lavished upon him so prodigally. To go into a pineapple patch and pluck the golden fruit from its prickly nest, to slash off its rough rind and feast upon its luscious, juicy pulp is an experience not soon to be forgotten. Bananas of unheard of varieties, from the little fine-flavored fig banana to great fat, red Burgomasters of the tribe, are on hand in plenty, and are a different fruit from the musty trophies of the huckster's garret. The cocoanut of the northern markets would be fed to the pigs in Tahiti. The green fruit, thrown by a dexterous climber from its cluster suspended in mid-air, husked, and opened at one end, is full of the most delicious beverage Mother Nature concocts. The pulp can be scooped out with a spoon and has the consistency of

a delicate blanc mange. Other fruits in abundance, many of them unheard of in the temperate zone, go a-begging in this land of plenty. There are several varieties of mangoes, guavas, papayas, avocados, oranges and delicious green limes, as well as various less conspicuous fruits to be discovered and tasted by the curious.

The breadfruit, which forms so important a part of the native food, is really a vegetable rather than a fruit, since it must be cooked before it is fit to eat. Nevertheless, it grows upon a tree and requires no care or cultivation. It is spherical, considerably larger than a full-sized orange, green in color, turning yellowish when fully ripe, and has a honeycombed surface with a wart in the center of each enclosure. When roasted in the native oven, the breadfruit tastes not unlike a mildly flavored sweet potato. It has a firmer texture and a less positive quality than the sweet potato, but is a very palatable and refined food. The gray, mealy taro root is another favorite native dish which is agreeable to the European palate.

Out in the Provinces

One can not expect to see Tahiti by lounging about Papeete, sipping iced drinks at the Cercle Bougainville, or perambulating about the narrow streets and poking into the countless little shops adjoining the market

A HOME BY THE SEA—RAIATEA



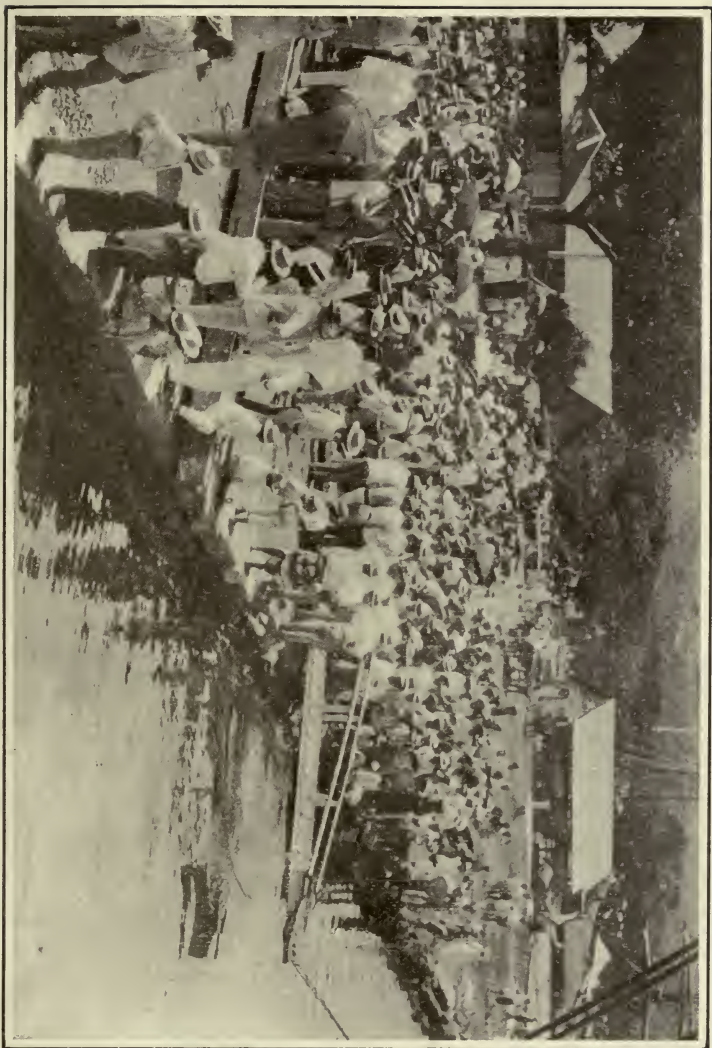


place. The weather is not so hot that one need be uncomfortable, provided ordinary prudence be exercised in keeping out of the sun during the midday hours. The refreshing trade wind blows almost continuously night and day, tempering the air with its grateful ozone. By all means, then, let us stir about and enjoy the life and scenery of this island of enchantment.

I recall with peculiar delight the moonlight drive to Point Venus, famed as the spot where Captain Cook made his memorable observation of the transit of Venus. What climbing of heights commanding a sweep of shore veiled in the mysterious haze of a tropic night! What delving into sombrous hollows with strange, rank plant forms catching glints of light on their broad leafage! What clouds of silver rolling across the dark vault overhead! At one moment a rain squall beat down upon us furiously; anon the moon was bewitching the landscape with its serene light. We edged along a bay where a break in the barrier reef let in the ocean waves full tilt upon the rocky coast, roaring and crashing in glittering white combers. Coco-palms towered above us with fantastic plumed tufts fluttering in the breeze. There were glimpses of native fires in the jungle, and snatches of barbaric song floated to us from afar.

Oh, those native songs, how they take hold of one and stir him with their savage rhythm and impet-

usosity! To hear them to advantage it is necessary to visit the outlying provinces. I did this under delightful auspices—the guest of an island planter who took a merry party of us on the grand tour of the island. We went in two light spring wagons, stopping each night on the way at a native village where we were royally entertained by the district chief and his people. We slept in native houses which were charming in their simplicity and fitness to the life of the people. We partook of their generous fare, in which roast sucking pig and chicken were very much in evidence. Such scenery was unfolded to our ever-wondering gaze as I never expect to encounter elsewhere. Deep streams had to be forded, and there were unfrequented stretches of road that led through the jungle; but all was novel, beautiful, fascinating. Tautira, at the opposite end of the island, was the objective point of our journey. In its main features it has probably changed but little since the days when Captain Cook delighted in its many beauties. It is approached by fording the lovely Tautira River and then down an avenue of lofty arching trees close by the shore of the lagoon. The oval bamboo houses are scattered in a picturesque line near the sea, with bold mountains mantled in verdure rising behind the village. It was here that Stevenson remained to recuperate from an illness, the guest of Ori-a-ori, the chief. We returned to Papeete by the



GOVERNMENT WHARF, PAPEETE



opposite side of the island, passing through the opulent Papara district, which was famed in the days of the early voyagers for its great marae,—a truncated pyramid of stone steps used as a temple, and the scene of much stirring history.

Of shorter jaunts from Papeete, one of the most interesting is to Fautahua, a French military post in the very heart of the mountains. A carriage road extends to Fashoda bridge, well up in the mountains, beyond which a good footpath leads on up the gorge, past a silver thread of a waterfall which leaps over a rocky rim to the bed of the stream six hundred feet below. It was here that the natives made a last stand in their war with the French. A little beyond the spot rise the crags which compose The Diadem, a striking landmark in the mountains of Tahiti.

No one should leave the Society Islands without having visited Moorea. Its shore is only about eighteen miles distant, and a little steamer makes periodic trips. It is Tahiti in miniature, with its beauties accentuated. Peaks and spires rise in such fantastic forms as I had previously imagined existed only in picture books or stage scenery. These cathedral pinnacles jutting up thousands of feet into cloudland, with two narrow landlocked bays almost severing the island at their base, and a lush tangle of tropic foliage overspreading all, gave the island an unearthly beauty.

One might fancy himself upon the island of an enchanter, so unreal and spectacular it all appears. Indeed, we see a hole in one of the lofty crags where a genie of old hurled his spear through the peak.

Iorana Tahiti

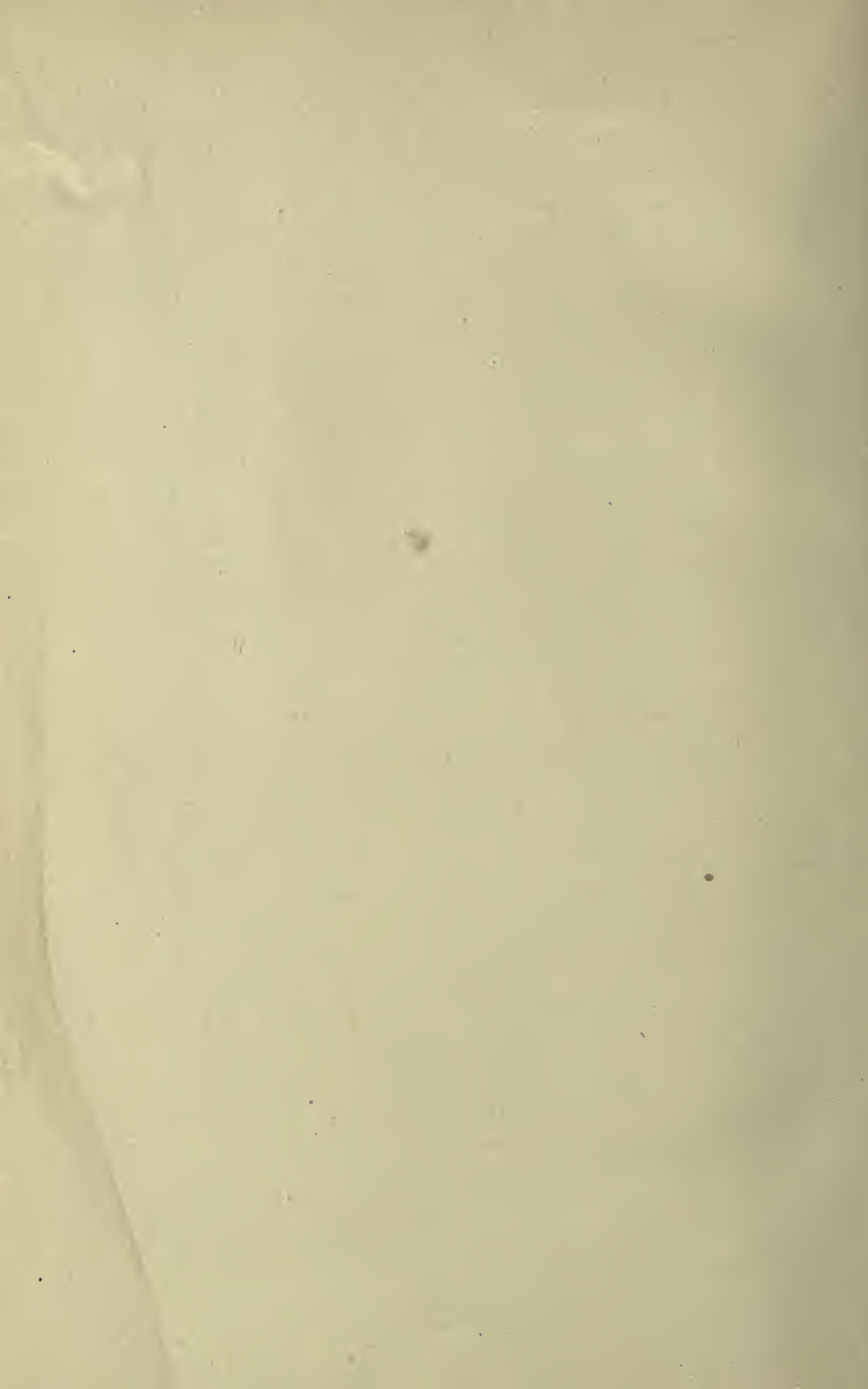
But enough of this South Sea wonderland! He who has once visited it will forever after be haunted with its bewitching charm! The fragrance of the *tiere* flower will be wafted to him by mysterious winds. The roll of drums, the wild cadences of impetuous singers iterating and reiterating their melodious syllables, with swaying bodies and impassioned gestures, will haunt his fancy. He will see the palm-fringed lagoon, with outrigger canoes floating upon the glassy tide. Smiling, dusky faces will peer upon him from the coverts of memory and cry out to him blithe "*Ioranas.*" He who has eaten of the *fei* will ever after think of Tahiti with longing fancies, for its gentle people, its balmy air, its bounty of all green things upon the land and its royal sweep of enveloping blue, deep, tender and serene, its glory of cloud forms unknown in the temperate zone, all will conspire to enchain his memory and make him often dwell upon its peerless charms. *Iorana, Tahiti-nui marearea!*

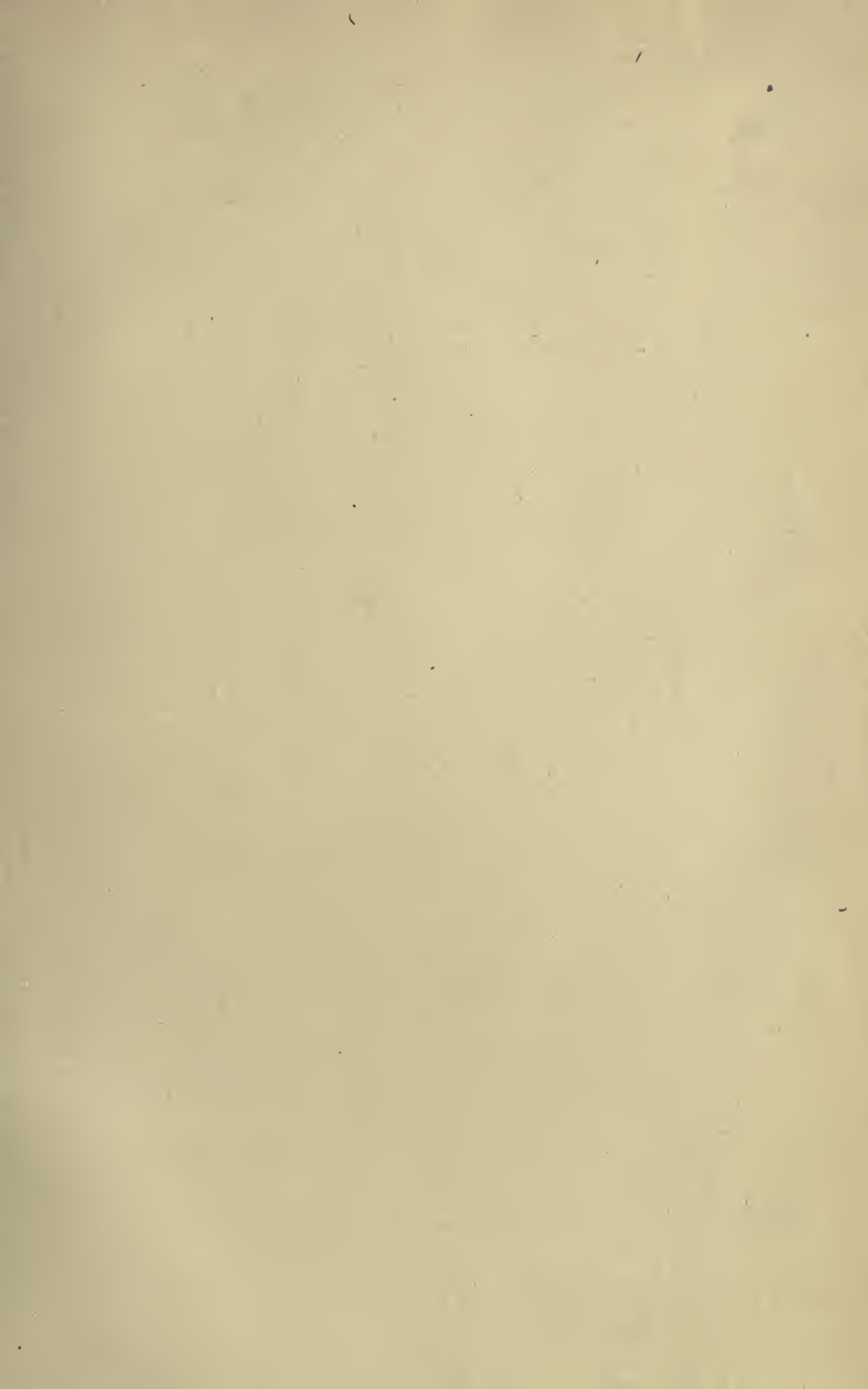


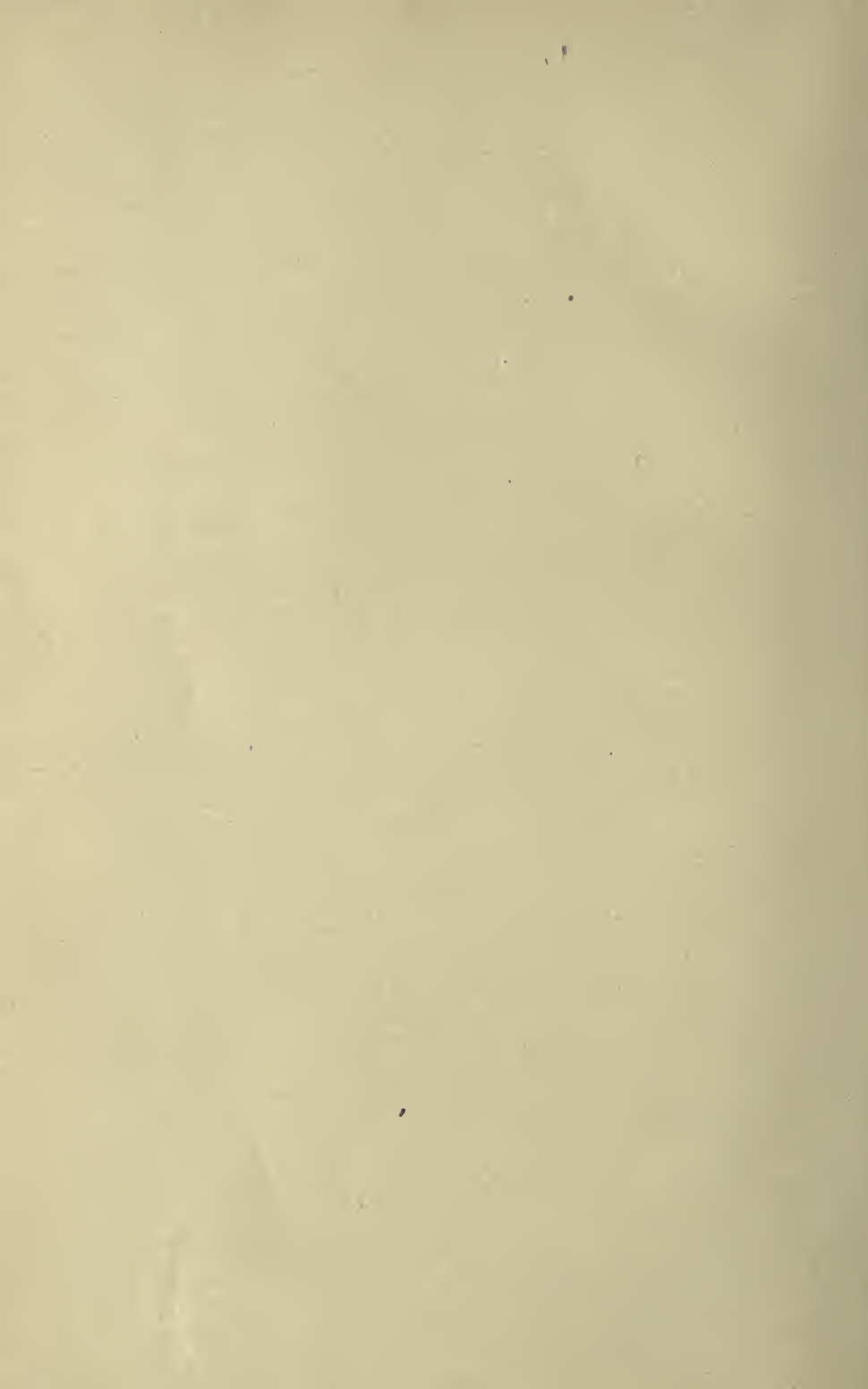
ON THE NINETY-MILE ROAD











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