

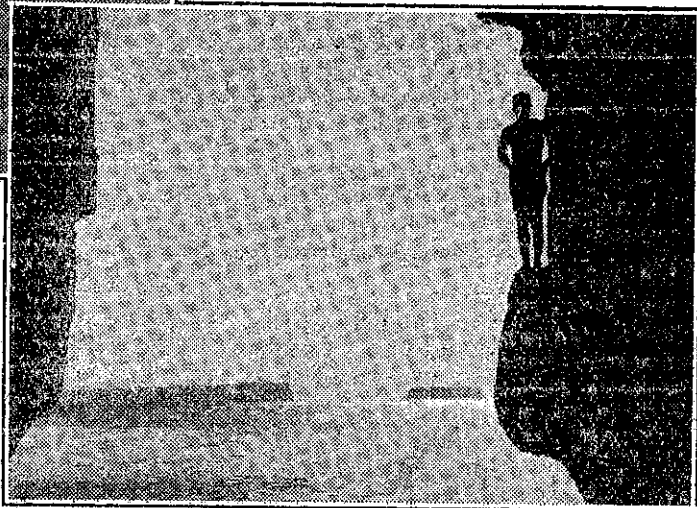
The Song We Never Hear

by

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On the left is the white-domed "palace" of the Queen of Tonga. It is near the waterfront at Nukualofa. Below is a view from one of the many caves, with a native adding a picturesque touch.



WHILE we listen enraptured to the Hawaiian guitar wailing its wistful melodies ("exactly like a sick kitten," as my little boy used to say of it), how many of us realise that we are listening to a cleverly faked New York product which has as much relation to real Island music as my reader has to the Grand Turk? The old traditional tunes of Hawaii are few and far between, and all the "Island" recordings we hear are but sickly imitations of something that has been murdered and perverted by civilisation.

The ancient melodies of the Maori, too, have suffered an eclipse under clever scoring; they are recorded and broadcast all over the world, but the soft sweet sounds of the original music are lost in the din of the world's orchestras and jazz-bands.

There is, however, still a song we never hear, a serene and happy lilt that is as old as Eve and as spontaneous as a bird's call, a real song of the Islands, not artificially concocted in New York, but handed down from generation to generation in the lovely Islands of the immediate Southern Seas—Tonga, Samoa and Fiji. With the exception of the "Fijian Farewell" this sun-soaked music is as yet unrecorded. The only way to hear it is to go there.

In the winter, fashionable England repairs its health by getting a coat of suntan on the Mediterranean coast. Pale-faced society girls go to Nice or to the West Indies to recuperate. This health-saving habit is not yet as fashionable in New Zealand as it will become in time, though our "upper ten" do to some extent patronise the Riviera of the South Seas—the Islands. These people usually return with unrest in their hearts and wonder in their eyes. They have had a glimpse of paradise and cannot forget it.

Tonga is perhaps the loveliest and most unusual of all. It is a mixture of fairyland and comic opera. Here grows the famous ironwood tree with its foliage as fine as asparagus fern, here are the coconut palms, with their starry crowns of feathery fronds ten to fifteen feet long tossing eighty feet or more up in the air on their slender trunks graceful and resilient as a steel spear. Capitalism has never made a cinder heap or slave settlement of Tonga. Here they find grass a soft carpet to walk on, so the streets are "paved" with short grass—a most comforting arrangement to city feet. So much of Tonga is fairyland. Now for the comic opera aspect.

The Queen of Tonga has a white domed palace gleaming in the sun on the sea-beach at Nukualofa. Pillars and towers reflect the dazzling sunlight. "White alabaster!" one gasps. But no. It is not even marble. Upon close inspection it proves to be painted wood. The effect of stage scenery is complete when the Tongan army comes into view—a handful of brown-faced soldiery wearing the scarlet coats and black trousers of the Victorian era. The Tongans of the old days had two rulers—an earthly king who did all the governing and a heavenly king who was worshipped as a god. These worked amicably side by side, and no doubt played up to each other when expediency demanded. Naturally, therefore, the Chapel Royal stands beside the King's Palace on the beach. Here there is a fine native choir, which has a wide repertoire, from Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" to the Tongan National Anthem, a fine dignified piece which any nation might be proud of. Tongan voices are rather like Maori voices—deep, rich and powerful. The old hereditary instrument of the place is, of course, the little wooden guitar, almost like a ukulele; but the new national instrument is... guess? But you never will... the month-organ! This the Tongans play as it is played in no other land.

The women of Tonga have exceedingly fine figures. They are not forced to work, as are the women of the other islands. The men say it makes a woman ugly to work all day in the sun. They prefer beauty to monetary gain, a most endearing trait in the Tongan character. Hence the bony serene countenance of the girl of this blessed Island, the noble upright carriage, the unburied dignity and charm of their demeanour.

The "sights" of this Island are unusual in the extreme and are not duplicated anywhere else on earth. For instance there is the Grove of Bats. This is a group of twenty or thirty large trees, each of which is covered with flying foxes

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