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IN THE FIJI ISLES

CHAPTER I [Constance Gordon Cumming]

SCENERY AND NATURAL PRODUCTS

FJI, with its hundred and fifty isles, looks in the distance very much like many other isles a good deal nearer home — Harris, Lewis, and Skye, for instance — especially as seen on the day of our arrival. Thick mist alternated with such downpours of rain that we had to beat about for a considerable time just outside the coral reef (which lies about a mile from the shore of Ovalau), actually within sound of the church bells, but seeing literally nothing, till a lull in the storm revealed the passage, i.e. the opening in the barrier reef. Through this we passed into the quiet harbour of Levuka, when a bright gleam of sunshine fell like a ray of promise on the little town, with its background of richly

wooded hills, and dark craggy pinnacles far overhead, appearing above the white wreaths of floating mist.

I confess that Levuka greatly exceeds our expectations. We had imagined it was still the raffish haunt of uproarious planters and white men of the lowest type, described by visitors a few years ago ; instead of which we find a most orderly and respectable community with strongly church-going tendencies. Besides the native chapels there are three well-attended churches of the Episcopal, Wesleyan, and Roman Catholic persuasions. We are told that the reformation in the sobriety of the town is partly due to the Good Templars, who here muster a very considerable brotherhood. Doubtless their work is greatly facilitated by the increased price of gin, which in former days flowed like water, at the modest price of a shilling per bottle, but has now risen to five times that sum.

As concerns shops, or, as they are here called, stores, they are many and various, and if not troubled with a useless frontage of plate glass, they are at least fully stocked with all things needful ; and there are several boarding-houses and hotels which, if not luxurious, at least provide the necessaries of life.

The situation of Levuka is by no means a desirable one for a capital which may become so important as that of Fiji, as it consists only of a very narrow strip of land on the edge of the sea, backed by steep hills, running up to nearly three thousand feet. Though, of course, the lower spurs of these may gradually be

dotted with villas, there is no possibility of extending the town, unless by expensive terracing. Only within the last few months has there been anything like what is ordinarily called a road — even the main street being only a strip of rocky sea-beach, and the few other footpaths are of the roughest description.

So, from the moment we leave the very untempting sea-beach, all our excursions must be on foot ; and such exhausting scrambles I have rarely been driven to attempt. The hills are so very steep, and, moreover, so densely wooded, that a moderate walker really need not attempt them, though the bluff faces of crag and rock pinnacle are certainly attractive.

There is no means of locomotion save walking and boating ; the various Indian methods of carrying are unknown, and great was the amazement of the natives when the first horse was landed at Levuka. So gigantic a creature had never visited them in dreams, and one poor fellow still bears grievous traces of a frightful kick received while too confidently taking hold of the unknown animal by the tail. Greater still was the wonder when, on one of the larger islands, a couple of mounted horsemen appeared for the first time at some of the inland villages, and were, naturally enough, hailed as supernatural beings, at whose approach the affrighted people fled precipitately, seeking refuge in the tallest palms, or wherever else they could find shelter.

This island of Ovalau, though important by virtue of its being the site of Levuka, the present capital, is,

in point of size, somewhat insignificant ; considerably larger, however, than Bau, the tiny isle on which King Thakombau's [Cakobau's] own particular town is situated. Both these isles lie off the coast of Viti Levu,* which is by far the largest of the whole group. Viti Levu simply means Great Viti, which is the name by which these islands are always called by their own people ; the name of Fiji, which we have adopted, being simply the Tongan mispronunciation of the word.

The majority of these isles are protected by a partial rim of coral, which acts the part of a natural breakwater, and encloses a calm lagoon of shallow water whereon the smallest canoes can sail in safety; and as there seems invariably to be a break in the reef opposite the mouth of every stream, there are not lacking passages by which to enter these harbours of refuge. Moreover, many of the isles lie so near to one another, that you can often travel for a considerable distance, almost always profiting by this shelter, and avoiding the dangers of the open sea. Others, however, lie as far asunder as the Scilly Isles from the Hebrides or the Orkneys, and Fiji is composed of several groups quite as distinct as these.

Certainly nature has done her part well in offering surroundings of infinite beauty. There are innumerable sites on these breezy hillsides whence, looking down through a veil of glittering palm-leaves and rich foliage, the eye that loves exquisite colour can never weary of simply watching the ever-changing

* Pronounced " Veetee Layvoo." [actually Lehvoo]

scene outspread below ; for the calm sea-lake, whereon vessels of all sizes float so peacefully, is separated from the great purple ocean by a crystalline rainbow. The coral reef acts the part- of a submarine prism, producing a gleaming ray, wherein blends every shade of aquamarine, mauve, emerald green, sienna, and orange, for ever varying with the ebb and flow of the tide, which at high water covers the reef to the depth of several feet. The highest edge of the reef lies towards the ocean, and a line of dazzling white surf marks where the great breakers wage their ceaseless warfare on the barrier; but the passage through the reef is plainly marked by a break in the white line, and a broad roadway of deep blue connecting the inner waters with the great deep. All along the horizon,

“ Like sweet thoughts in a dream,”

lie the neighbouring isles, their beauty sorely at variance with such deeds of ruthless bloodshed and extermination of whole tribes as have been thereon enacted in very recent years.

The great barrier reef is not our only marine rainbow, for a labyrinth of smaller patches crops up everywhere, making the navigation of these waters a thing of infinite danger to the uninitiated. But for a never-failing sensation of delight, I commend you to floating over the reef in a boat of very light draught, so that you may peer down into all the crevices of those wondrous coral gardens, where every tinge of delicate pink, lilac, and blue recalls the

flowers of earth. Alas ! these sea-flowers fade away so soon as we take the beautiful tufts to land ; for the colour is given by the gelatinous coral insect, which drips its life away when taken from its home, and, in a few hours, leaves us only its white skeleton — a very poor substitute for the lovely thing we saw and coveted.

The beautiful vision, moreover, like all that submarine garden, derived much of its charm from the medium through which we beheld it — the clear, translucent water. Sometimes we look down on patches of many-coloured weed, where exquisite fish of vivid hues congregate in families, some striped with crimson, some with black ; some are vivid yellow, with a collar like peacocks' feathers. The commonest of all are either green or blue, each more dazzling than any brush could paint. Some of the loveliest of these are so tiny that you can keep a dozen in a tumbler ; others are about the length of your finger.

Sometimes we pass over great tables of dark coral, whereon lie lumps of brain and mushroom coral, sponges, and madrepores. Of course, to secure these prizes it is necessary to step on to the reef; which, however tempting in some respects, is not altogether pleasant walking, the sharp points of the coral cutting through the thickest boots, while deceptive appearances make it probable that you will plunge into a much greater depth than you expected. But to the natives, untroubled by overmuch raiment, the reef is

a source of endless amusement and profit, and often at low tide they sail thither in their picturesque canoes, with large yellow mat sail, and curious outrigger attached to one side.

These canoes are always objects of interest, especially those of the chiefs, which, besides carrying a flag, sometimes have a fringe of great streamers floating from the sail, while the canoe is richly adorned at both ends with glistening white shells (the *Cyprea ovula*), which are also a favourite decoration for the main beam on roofs of houses. The boatmen (who rejoice in such quaint rendering of scriptural names as Luki, Joeli, Isaia, Ilijah, Solomoni, Zachausi, Methusela, &c.) beguile the time by singing monotonous songs, which, but for the almost invariable and very peculiar accompaniment of clapping hands, would often recall the Gaelic lays of our own northern boatmen. Some of these are invocations of the idle wind, nor is the familiar custom of whistling for a breeze by any means unknown.

Imagine the aggravation of day by day paddling over this warm sunny sea, sorely tempted to bathe therein, and yet knowing full well that the sharks here hold high revel and have an especial eye to white limbs; not that they are particular, having no objection to eating turtles, shell and all, or anything else that comes in their way.

As regards climate, our impressions are highly favourable. We see white men who have been here or years, going about without any of the ordinary

precautions deemed necessary in tropical climates. White umbrellas and solar hats are alike neglected, and a white puggaree is considered ample protection in a country where sunstroke and fever are alike rare. The thermometer at 90° marks an exceptionally hot day, and with the exception of occasional tropical showers, we have generally fine weather — hot certainly, in the mid-day hours, but almost invariably tempered by a balmy breeze and soft grey clouds. December is supposed to usher in midsummer heat and heavy rains — not incessant, but very much in earnest while they last, and for three months we may be liable to hurricanes, which, however, are not an invariable part of the programme ; nor can they possibly be as severe as those of the West Indies, or all the frail buildings which compose this little capital would inevitably have long since been levelled with the ground.

One unattractive characteristic of these isles forces itself on my notice all the more cruelly, coming in sharp contrast with the profusion of wild-flowers in Australia — namely, that they scarcely produce a blossom. I have walked day after day till I was weary, without finding so many flowers as would fill a small vase.

The strange lack of animal life is one of the most remarkable peculiarities of these isles, where the only indigenous four-footed creatures are rats and flying foxes. Even the pigs, which now run wild in the jungle, were originally introduced by the Ton-

gans, who also brought ducks and fowls; [all of this is total nonsense, these were all brought to Fiji by the first settlers] and as to other animals, such names as *seepi* [*sipi*], mutton ; *goti* (actually, *mē*), goat; *pussi*, cat ; *ose*, horse ; *collie*, dog, and *bullamacow* [*bulamakau*], beef, sufficiently betray their origin. [Not so in the case of *koli*, a word with Austronesian origins that has nothing to do with collie dogs]. Happily, the list of Fijian reptiles is equally small. The snakes are few, and not venomous. Scorpions and centipedes are very rare, so that flies and mosquitoes are almost the only foes we have to combat. Even fire-flies, which we look upon as a positive right in all tropical lands, are very few and very dim.

However great may be the shortcomings of Fiji in the matter of flowers, she may safely divide honours with Australia in respect of ferns, which grow in richest profusion, and are of innumerable species. Nothing can be more beautiful than a damp ravine in either country, with luxuriant masses of exquisite ferns hanging from every bough of the grey old trees, and here and there the stem of a magnificent tree-fern rising thirty or forty feet above the sea of greenery below, bearing its noble crown, and having its lower fronds all tangled with glossy-leaved creepers or festoons of the delicate climbing fern, the tender leaves of which hang mid-air on long hair-like trails.

But if Fiji has her lovely tree-ferns, she also has her tree-nettles, which attain the growth of large forest trees. Beautiful and treacherous are their large smooth leaves, veined with purple or white, so

tempting to the eye, so cruel to the unwary hand outstretched to gather them. Days will pass by ere the pain of that burning sting subsides. As regards the general foliage, it is almost identical with that of Ceylon, though perhaps scarcely so rich.



SPECIMENS OF FIJIAN POTTERY.

CHAPTER II

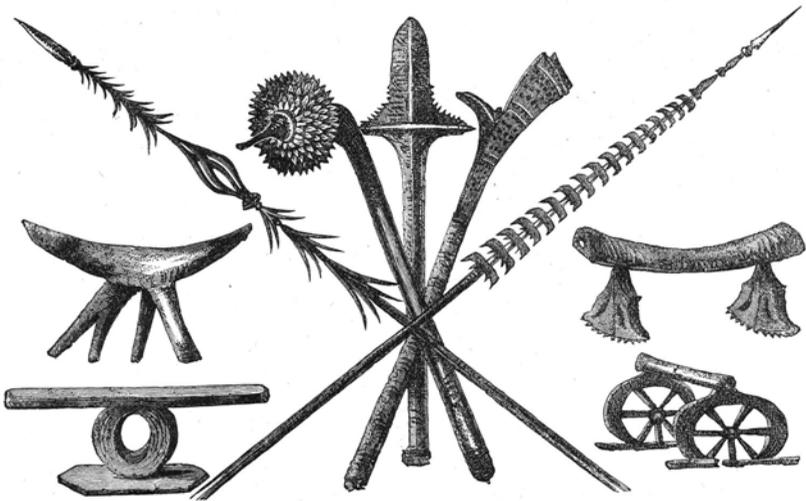
INDUSTRIES AND CUSTOMS

EVERY available corner of the ravines is laid out in tiny terraced fields, or rather miniature swamps, for the cultivation of the yams and taros, which form the staple of native food. Both these roots more or less resemble coarse potatoes, especially the former, which attain to a gigantic size, from one to ten feet in length, and are said sometimes to weigh one hundred pounds. The taro is of a bluish grey colour, and both in appearance and consistency resembles mottled soap. As its name suggests (*Arum esculentum*), its leaves are like those of our own arum greatly magnified ; while those of the yam are like a very rich convolvulus, as is also its habit of growth, each plant being trained along a tall reed. A great many varieties are cultivated, including one the root of which is throughout of a vivid

mauve. The sweet potato is also in common use, and breadfruit and bananas are abundant. The favourite method of preparing the two latter is to wrap them up in a large leaf and bury them till they ferment. The stench when the leaf is dug up is simply intolerable to the uneducated nose of the foreigner ; but the Fijian inhales it with delight, therein scenting the *mandrai* (bread) and puddings in which his soul delights.

These puddings are sometimes made on a gigantic scale, on the occasion of any great gathering of the tribes. We were told of one that measured twenty feet in circumference, and on the same occasion there was a dish of green leaves prepared, ten feet long by five wide, whereon were piled turtles and pigs roasted whole ; also a wall of cooked fish, five feet in height and twenty feet long. Certainly the masses of food accumulated on these great days beat everything we have heard of ancient Scottish funeral feasts. Mr. Calvert describes one festival at which he was present where there were fifteen tons of sweet pudding, seventy turtles, fifty tons of cooked yams and taro (besides two hundred tons which were judiciously reserved), and as much *yangona*-root as would have filled five carts.

The mode of laying the table on these occasions is peculiar. All food is arranged in heaps : a layer of cocoa-nut as foundation, then baked yams and taro ; next the gigantic puddings on green banana-leaves, the whole surmounted by pigs and turtles. These



CLUBS, SPEARS, AND PILLOWS.

are roasted whole in huge ovens, or rather pits in the ground, perhaps ten feet deep and twenty in diameter, which are first lined with firewood, on which is laid a layer of stones ; when these are heated the animals to be roasted are laid on them, with several hot stones inside to secure cooking throughout ; then comes a covering of leaves and earth, and the baking process completes itself.

When all is ready certain men are told off, who carefully apportion this mass of food amongst the representatives of the various tribes present, these subdividing among themselves ; and great is the need for punctilious observance of all ceremonies and points of etiquette, as the smallest breach thereof would inevitably be noted, and involve certain revenge —or rather would have done so before the people became Christians.

But prior to that great change a feast would have been held of small account which was not graced by abundant human flesh ; and if by chance there was no war on hand to provide this delicacy, there was rarely much difficulty in finding victims. A defenceless troop of women from some neighbouring village, a canoe driven ashore by stress of weather, or failing these, a few insignificant serfs, or wives who had lost favour with their lords, supplied the place of limum produce. Several peculiarities were observed concerning the *bokala*, [*bokolal* or human flesh. It was considered indigestible unless eaten with certain herbs, which were purposely grown in every village

(*Solanum anthropophagorum*). Moreover, it was the only meat which was preferred rather high, and which must not be handled, from a belief that it would produce skin-disease. [Untrue—this was a European myth and not a Fijian belief] Therefore it was invariably eaten with a peculiar round wooden fork with four long prongs.

Some of the most noted cannibals, who gloried in the multitude of men whom they had eaten, actually kept a record of their number by erecting lines of stones. One of these registers numbers eight hundred and seventy-two ! and the Christian son of this ogre declares that his father ate them all himself, allowing no one to share with him. Another member of the same family had registered forty-eight, when his becoming a Christian put a stop to the amusement, and compelled him to be satisfied with commonplace beef. In fact one of the excuses urged by Thakombau for so long adhering to cannibalism was that he and his people had no other substitute for English *bullamacow* [*bulamakau*]. It is, however, more than twenty-five years since he abjured the vile custom and accepted Christianity; but many of the islanders kept it up till quite recently.

Strange, indeed, is the change that has come over these isles since first Messrs. Cargill and Cross, Wesleyan missionaries, landed here in the year 1835, resolved, at the hazard of their lives, to bring the light of Christianity to these ferocious cannibals. Picture it in your own mind. Two white men, without any visible protection, landing in the midst of

these bloodthirsty hordes, whose unknown language they had in the first place to master. Slow and disheartening was their labour for years ; yet so well has that little leaven worked, that the eighty inhabited isles have all abjured cannibalism and other frightful customs, have *lotued* — i.e. become Christians — and are now, to all appearance, as gentle and kindly a race as any in the world.

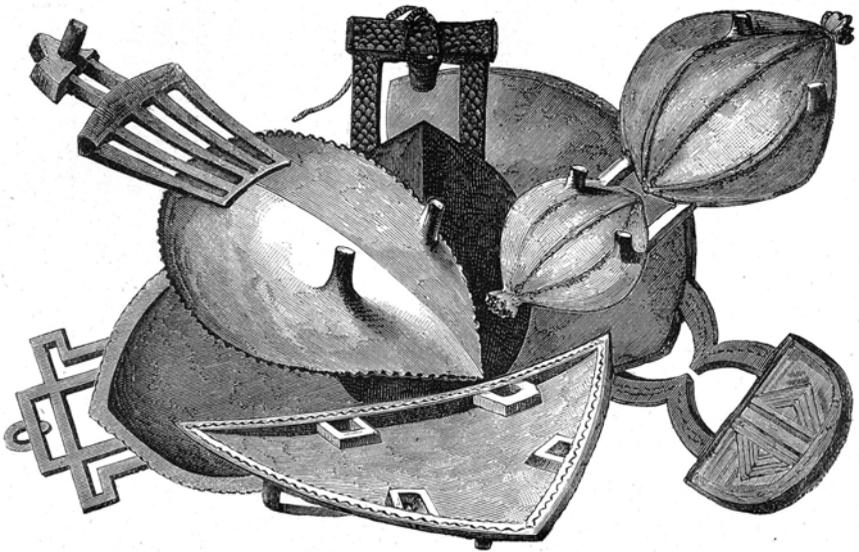
The common objects of industry in these isles are certainly superior to those of most savage people. Their baskets and mats are excellent, and of very varied pattern. So also is the carving of their war clubs, and the numerous variety of bowls of all sorts and forms — sacred bowls for the priests, and for the national beverage, *yangona*; also for oil. Most elaborate of all is the carving of the war spears, and greatly may we marvel when we recollect that the only tools possessed by these artists were stone axes, precisely similar to those familiar to our antiquarians, and which were firmly bound with cord to a wooden handle shaped at one end like a letter V. The fine carving was all done with saws of rats' teeth set in hard wood, and the spines of the echini were also occasionally turned to account.

The sinnet or string work, and the manufacture of tapa, i.e. cloth, are both positively works of art, so elaborate are the patterns produced. The manufacture of pottery is far in advance of that in any other isles of the Pacific, and although the potter's wheel is unknown some of the forms are most artistic. The clay used is unfortunately very friable, or perhaps its extreme brittleness is due to lack of proper baking. The pots are simply roughly modelled, glazed with pine resin, and lightly baked in a fire of grass and sticks. We are greatly struck by the wonderful quickness of these people in noting differences in white men, as well as the justice of their conclusions. One of the native princes gave us his opinion of the captain of a man-o'-war who had treated him very hospitably, and supposed that he had made a great impression. He said, "You know he is not exactly what we should call a gentleman." On the other hand, Thakombau (or, as he is generally called, the Vunivalu, or root of war) summed up his opinion of the governor, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, by saying, "He is quite our idea of a gentleman," that is, always courteous and considerate,

and punctiliously observant of the most minute details of native etiquette — a matter far too generally ignored by white men in their rough-shod intercourse with brown races.

No better example exists of the curious combination I have just noted than the Vunivalu himself. He commenced his career of bloodshed at the early age of six, when with his own little hands he clubbed a playfellow two years older. From this time forward he was noted for every species of atrocity, till the age of fifty, when he resolved to "lotu." Yet, throughout his whole life, he has been noted as a most courtly and dignified chief, especially when seen presiding at a council of minor chiefs. Now he does all in his power to help the progress of order and good, and says he would rather have things as they are and see his people enjoy the blessings of peace, than recover all his old power.

His ideas on all subjects were vastly enlarged by his visit to Sydney, and when you remember the amazement with which one horse was beheld here, that any form of wheeled vehicle is unknown, and that a two-storied house built by the missionaries at Viwa was considered a perfect miracle of construction, you can understand how wonderful so great a city as Sydney must have appeared in his eyes. He told us that the vastness of the crowds gave him some idea of what the gathering of people in heaven must be ! We said we wished he could see Westminster Abbey. He replied



CARVED WOODEN BOWLS FOR OIL.

that he could well imagine that the city, of which Sydney was but an offshoot, must indeed be of surpassing grandeur. "Would he come to London ? " "No ; he feared to die at sea, and be thrown overboard." "But *we* had run that risk to see his isles, and here we were safe." "Oh, it was only his age that deterred him ; his son might perhaps go." We were greatly amused at the reason he assigns for never opening his lips in English, which he doubtless knows pretty well. He says he has heard Englishmen speak Fijian, and that is quite sufficient. His favourite companion in Sydney was a tiny white child, grand-daughter of Sir Hercules Robinson, who delighted to ensconce herself on his knee, sometimes looking up in his face, with a sudden qualm of doubt, to whisper, "Please don't eat me ! You won't eat me, will you?" It would be a pretty picture, would it not, the fine old chief lying on his mat, with his treasured Bible, which he cannot read, lying beside him "because it makes him feel so good," and the little fair English girl nestling beside him? Would that all triumphs of our Christian civilization were equally satisfactory !

C. F. Gordon Cumming