

# An Island Saved By a Bible



N the shelf of a large public library there reposes a modest little leather-bound Bible scarcely larger than the palm of the hand. This book is known as the Pitcairn Bible and it stands as the centerpiece in the story of the romantic settlement of the Pitcairn Island, that little speck of the South Seas inhabited by godly descendants of English mutineers and native women.

In 1808 the American merchant ship *Topaz* put in at Pitcairn Island, which, according to reputable charts, was uninhabited. The *Topaz* lay-to all night off-shore and made toward land early the following morning. As the dawn lifted, Captain Folger saw, to his surprise, a finger of smoke rising above a clump of palms. Then a small boat, manned by brown, strongly built young men, was seen put off from shore. When it came within speaking distance, Captain Folger and his crew were dumfounded to hear themselves hailed in English better than some members of the crew could speak.

Cordially invited to land, the crew of the *Topaz* saw more to amaze them ashore. They saw a village of homes distinctly different from any other South Sea settlement in an English community, founded, as they were told, by mutineers of the British ship *Bounty*, which sailed from Spithead in 1787. On this ill-fated ship when it left England on its last voyage was this little Bible.

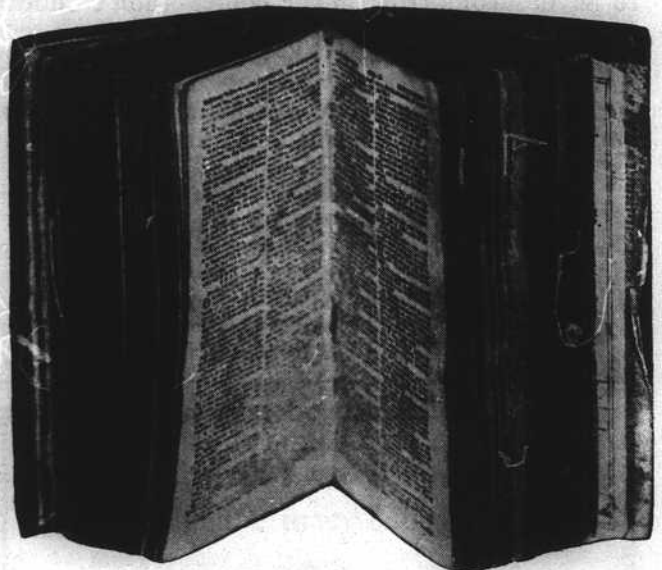
After almost a year, in 1788, the *Bounty*, with Lieut. William Bligh and forty-six men, one of them a gardener, reached Tahiti. Turned loose on this luxuriant island after ten months at sea the men were completely enthralled with the beauty of the place and with the charm of the native women.

Although the men left unwillingly when the *Bounty* headed for England and suffered much at the hands of the cruel Lieut. Bligh, the men mutinied and, led by Fletcher Christian, the master's mate, the crew to the number of eighteen stocked the largest boat of the ship with provisions and set the captain adrift with eighteen loyal men.

Having given Bligh and his companions their freedom, the cooler heads among the mutineers urged that all who were left in the *Bounty* should lose themselves among the islands of the South Seas. There was some disputing this point, for most of the men wished to go back to Tahiti. After a compromise the *Bounty* sailed back to the glamorous island, and sixteen men landed with their share of the ship's provisions and arms. Of these, two died at the hands of the natives and fourteen others were overtaken by the vengeance of the British law.

The nine mutineers who remained with the *Bounty* took on board ten women and a girl of 15 years, and also ten native men. They laid in fresh supplies and provisions and sailed in search of an out-of-the-way island, where they might be safe from discovery. Eventually they found an island which is now known as Pitcairn. The Englishmen took everything off the *Bounty*. Among these things was a small prayer book, taken ashore in a drawer unnoticed. Then, because they needed to destroy every trace of themselves upon the waters, they burned the ship.

Fletcher Christian, still their leader, made some



THE PITCAIRN BIBLE.

attempt at organization. The land was divided among the nine Englishmen to their mutual satisfaction, and each with the help of his native manservant and his native wife began cultivation of his own land. When the *Bounty's* supply of liquor gave out, Seaman McCoy, a member of the party who had been a distiller in England, found that he could distill a liquor from the roots of plants. Because of the isolation, the mutineers' drinking increased which resulted in the natives killing five of the Englishmen, including Fletcher Christian, but McCoy, Quintall and Adams, the other members, escaped to the woods and Young was concealed by the women. Drink and sinful living followed until all native men, several of the women and all the white men save Adams and Young, were dead. John Adams remained the sole adult male survivor and the only pure-blooded white on the island. It is related that this book made it possible for Adams, a man of meager education, to formulate a code of laws for his community. A colony of peaceful, affectionate and friendly people grew up under his care. A genuinely God-fearing community emerged from a sordid beginning.

Twenty years had passed since the landing of the nine mutineers, and the first babies were now grown to men and women.

Adams passed away in 1829 after calling together the heads of families and urging them to appoint a leader in his place. His death did not interrupt the colony's peace and prosperity. Three years later the population was about 100.

In 1839 an American vessel put in at Pitcairn Island. It had on board Levi Hayden, mate, of New Bedford, Mass. He found that two of the widows of the mutineers were still living at an extreme old age. One of them, the widow of Fletcher Christian, gave Hayden the little Bible. Its type, she said, was too small for her failing eyesight. In its place Hayden gave her a Bible in larger print.

Returning to the United States Hayden, still in possession of the Bible, presented it to Rev. Daniel Miner Lord. Years later the son of the aged minister presented the Bible to the New York public library.