

# The Far Away South Sea Islands

*By a Missionary From French Oceania*



THE coral islands that lie 100 miles east of Tahiti are so much different in their formation, vegetation and foods from the mountainous islands, which are covered with dense and richly colored vegetation that one would not think they are only a few miles apart, but such is many times the case. These islands are circular and oblong in shape, and are very low, being only a few feet above high tide. Each is surrounded by a coral reef, which is all the way from a few feet to several rods in width, and which protects the islands from the incessantly rolling sea. The seashore is lined and dotted with large boulders, while coral gravel extends from the high tide mark to several feet inland. The islands are from three to forty miles in length and three to twenty miles in width. The land itself is from a few rods to a mile in width, surrounded by the coral reef and sea. This land is not one continuous circular or oblong strip, but is broken here and there from the open sea through to the lagoon, thereby forming a path for the incoming tide to rush over the reef and sandless, craggy coral bed to the lagoon.

The reefs are peculiarly formed in places. Some are low and slope down into deep water at different angles. Others are high and are very precipitously formed. Under this style of formation cavities are formed, into which the sea sucks with great strength and rapidity with the inrushing and rapidly receding tide, which boils up and recedes through the many holes in the top of the reef. This makes it very dangerous for an unaccustomed person to walk safely upon the reef during high tide.

The reefs are also dangerous to those landing upon them. One must go ashore in the ship's boat, or in a native's canoe. Great care must be taken in selecting the proper wave which carries your boat on its crest to a safe landing on the top of the reef, where it must then be pulled to a safe place. Many times mistakes are made in selecting the proper wave and the boat is capsized. This is dangerous, not only for those who are unaccustomed to such a life, but many times natives are killed or injured. Sometimes they are sucked into these large cavities under the coral ledge and are unable to get out. Others are pounded to death by the rolling waves upon the reef. The only safe thing to do when the boat or canoe capsizes is to cling to it, and although one is not en-

tirely safe then, he still stands a better chance to live than the one who jumps and tries to swim ashore.

After the boat has been pulled to safety one must walk several rods in shallow water to the shore or be carried in the arms or upon the back of a native. The latter is an embarrassing experience for our lady missionaries. They are usually brave and frequently more plucky than the men. A few years ago one of our large lady missionaries was being carried ashore by a native man through about two and a half feet of water when all at once he dropped her unceremoniously into the water. So far as I can learn it is the first time a native has ever dropped a missionary while carrying the passenger ashore. To this day the native people take delight in tantalizing their brother because of his mishap.

The coral islands are unlike the mountainous islands in that their land is poor and very unproductive. Cocoanuts will grow well on the sandy soil, but not so well in gravel, especially if the gravel is coarse. In fact the cocoanut is the only staple native food here. It will grow by the sea side and still be sweet and delicious, even more so than those grown on the mountain sides in some islands. This is a wonderful provision, indeed, that the Lord has made for these poor native people. Some figs are to be found, but they do not grow and bear well. The papaya fruit grows well in some islands, while the breadfruit and banana will not grow unless mountain dirt is taken to the coral islands to fertilize the soil.

Fish abound in the lagoons and open sea near the reefs. Pigs and chickens are raised for commercial and home consumption. Canned foods, especially meats, can be purchased from the Chinese merchants and foreign traders. Crabs, lobsters and the "mother of pearl" are plentiful in some islands.

The islands being near the equator are very warm, and being so low, with no mountain protection, they are exposed to the trade winds and severe gales, also to the severe windstorms that frequently sweep over them.

But even in these low coral, sandy, unfertile and isolated isles of the sea many men and women have found God and a way to express Him in their lives. Although their skins are dark, their customs different, and their environment not so wholesome as ours, God is working in and with them in fulfilling his promises to the peoples of the earth.

