

# From the Faery Lands

By James Norman Hall

Dusk came on as we sat over our meal. Ruau sat with her hands on her knees, leaning back against a tree, talking to Crichton. I understood nothing of what she was saying, but it was a pleasure merely to listen to the music of her voice. It was a little below the usual register of women's voices, strong and clear, but softer even than those of the Tahitians, and so flexible that I could follow every change in mood. She was telling Crichton of the *tupapaku* of her atoll which she dreaded most, although she knew that it was the spirit of one of her own sons. It appeared in the form of a dog with legs as long and thick as the stem of a full-grown coconut tree, and a body proportionally huge. It could have picked up her house as an ordinary dog would a basket. Once it had stepped lightly over it without offering to harm her in any way. Her last son had been drowned while fishing by moonlight on the reef outside the next island, which lay about two miles distant across the eastern end of the lagoon.

She had seen the dog three times since his death, and always at the same phase of the moon. Twice she had come upon it lying at full length on the lagoon beach, its enormous head resting on its paws. She was so badly frightened, she said, that she fell to the ground, incapable of further movement; sick at heart, too, at the thought that the spirit of the bravest and strongest of all her sons must appear to her in that shape. It was clear that she was recognized, for each time the dog began beating its tail on the ground as soon as it saw her. Then it got up, yawned and stretched, took a long drink of salt water, and started at a lope up the beach. She could see it very plainly in the bright moonlight. Soon it broke into a run, going faster and faster, gathering tremendous speed by the time it reached the other end of the island. From there it made a flying spring, and she last saw it as it passed, high in air, across the face of the moon, its head outstretched, its legs doubled close under its body. She believed that it crossed the two-mile gap of water which separated the islands in one gigantic leap.

That is the whole of the story as Crichton translated it for me, although there must have been other details, for Ruau gave her account of it at great length. Her earnestness of manner was very convincing, and left no doubt in my mind of the realness to her of the apparition.

As for myself, if I could have seen ghosts anywhere it would have been at Tanao. Late that night, walking alone on the lagoon beach, I found that I was keeping an uneasy watch behind me. The distant thunder of the surf sounded at times like a wild galloping on the hard sand, and the gentle slapping of little waves nearby like the lapping tongue of the ghostly dog having its fill of sea water. . . .

It was an hour before sunset when we sighted the land—the merest blue irregularity on the horizon, visible from one's perch in the shrouds each time the schooner rose to the crest of a sea. The mellow shout of landfall brought a score of native passengers to their feet; at such a moment one realizes the passionate devotion of the islander to his land. Men sprang into the rigging to gaze ahead with eager exclamations; mothers held up their babies—born on distant plantations—for a first glimpse of Ahu Ahu; seasick old women, emerging from disordered heaps of matting, tottered to the bulwarks with eyes alight. The island had not been visited for six months, and we carried a cargo of extraordinary variety—hardware, bolts of calico, soap, lumber, jewelry, iron roofing, cement, groceries, phonograph records, an unfortunate horse, and several pigs, those inevitable deck-passengers in the island trade. There were scores of cases of bully beef and

ship's biscuit—the staple luxuries of modern Polynesia, and, most important of all, six heavy bags of mail.

As we drew near the land, toward midnight, I gave up the attempt to sleep in my berth and went on deck to spread a mat beside Tan, our supercargo, who lay aft of the mainmast, talking in low tones with his wife. It was calm, here in the lee of the island; the schooner slipped through the water with scarcely a sound, rising and falling on the long gentle swell. Faint puffs of air came off the land, bringing a scent of flowers and wood smoke and moist earth. We had been sighted, for lights were beginning to appear in the village; now and then, on a flaw of the breeze, one heard a sigh, long drawn and half inaudible—the voice of the reef. A party of natives, seated on the forward hatch, began to sing. The words were modern and religious, I believe, but the music—indescribably sad, wild, and stirring—carried one back through the centuries to the days when man expressed the dim yearnings of his spirit in communal song. It was a species of chant, with responses; four girls did most of the singing, their voices mingling in barbaric harmonies, each verse ending in a prolonged melodious wail. Precisely as the last note died away, in time with the cadence of the chant, the deep voices of the men took up the response, “*Karé, aué!*” (“No, alas!”). Tari turned to me.

“They sing well,” he said, “these Ahu Ahu people; I like to listen to them. That is a hymn, but a stranger would never suspect it—the music is pure heathen. Look at the torch-lights in the village; smell the land breeze—it would tell you you were in the islands if you were set down here blindfold from a place ten thousand miles away. With that singing in one's ears, it is not difficult to fancy oneself in a long canoe, at the end of an old-time voyage, chanting a song of thanksgiving to the gods' who have brought us safely home:’

He is by no means the traditional supercargo of a trading schooner, this Tan; I have wasted a good deal of time speculating as to his origin and the reasons for his choosing this mode of life. An Englishman with a hint of Oxford in his voice—quite obviously what we call a gentleman—a reader of reviews, the possessor (at his charming place on Nukutere) of an enviable collection of books on the natural history and ethnology of the South Seas, he seldom speaks of himself or of his people at home. For twenty years he has been known in this part of the world—trading on Penrhyn, Rakahanga, Tupuai, the atolls of the Paumotu. He speaks a dozen of the island dialects, can join in the singing of *utes*, or bring a roar of applause by his skill in the dances of widely separated groups. When the war broke out he enlisted as a private in a New Zealand battalion, and the close of hostilities found him with decorations for gallantry, the rank of captain, and the scars of honorable wounds. As a subject for conversation, the war interests him as little as his own life, but this evening he had emptied a full bottle of rum, and was in the mildly mellow state which is his nearest approach to intoxication. . . .

“My wife's mother lives on Ahu Ahu, where her ancestors have been hereditary rulers since Maui fished the island out of the sea. I've known the family a good many years, and long before I married Apakura the old lady was kind enough to take a motherly interest in me. I always put up with her when we touched at Ahu Ahu. Once, after I had been away for several months, I sat down to have a yarn with her, and was beginning to tell about where I'd been and what I'd done when she stopped me. ‘No, let me tell you,’ she said, with an odd smile; and, upon my honor, she did—down to the details! I got the secret out of her the same evening. She is very friendly, it seems, with an ancestor of hers—a woman named Rakamoana, who lived twenty-eight generations—seven hundred years—ago, and is buried in the big marae behind the village. When one of the family is off on a trip, and my mother-in-law suspects that he is in trouble or not behaving himself, she puts herself into a kind of trance, calls up old Rakamoana, and gets all the

facts. I hope the habit won't come into general use—might prove jolly awkward, eh? Seriously, though, I can't account for the things she told me without accepting her own explanation. Strange if there were a germ of truth in the legends of how the old seagoing canoes were navigated—the priests, in a state of trance, directing the helmsmen which way to steer for land.

“There is another old woman on Ahu Ahu whose yarns are worth hearing. Many years ago a Yankee whaling vessel called at the island, and a Portuguese harpooner, who had had trouble with the captain, deserted and hid himself in the bush. The people had taken a fancy to him and refused to give him up, so finally the captain was obliged to sail away without his man. From all accounts this harpooner must have been a good chap; when he proved that he was no common white waster, the chief gave him a bit of land and a girl of good family for a wife—now the old lady of whom I spoke. I think it was tools he needed, or some sort of gear for a house he was building; at any rate, when another whaler touched he told his wife that he was going on a voyage to earn some money and that he might be gone a year. There was a kind of agreement<sup>1</sup> current in the Pacific in those days, whereby a whaling captain promised to land a man at the point where he had signed him on.

“Well, the harpooner sailed away, and, as might have been expected, his wife never saw him again; but here comes the odd part of the story. The deserted wife, like so many of the Ahu Ahu women, had an ancestor who kept her in touch with current events. Being particularly fond of her husband, she indulged in a trance from time to time, to keep herself informed as to his welfare. Several months after his departure the tragedy occurred—described in detail by the obliging and sympathetic dweller in the marae. It was a kind of vision, as told to me, singularly vivid for an effort of pure imagination—the open Pacific, heaving gently and ruffled by a light air; two boats from rival vessels pursuing the same whale; the Portuguese harpooner standing in the bows of one, erect and intent upon the chase, his iron the first, by a second of time, to strike. Then came a glimpse of the two boats foaming side by side in the wake of the whale; the be-ginning of the dispute; the lancing and death flurry of an old bull sperm; the rising anger of the two harpooners, as the boats rocked gently beside the floating carcass; the treacherous thrust; the long red blade of the lance standing out between the shoulders of the Portuguese.

“The woman awoke from her trance with a cry of anguish; her husband was dead—she set up the widow's *tangi*. One might have thought it an excellent tale, concocted to save the face of a deserted wife, if the same vessel had not called at Ahu Ahu within a year, to bring news of the husband's death under the exact circumstances of the vision.

“What is one to believe? If seeing is believing, then count me a believer, for my own eyes have seen an incredible thing. It was on Aitutaki, in the Cook group. An old chief, the descendant of a very ancient family, lay ill in the village. I had turned in early, as I'd promised to go fishing on the reef when the tide served, an hour after midnight. You know how the spirits of the dead were believed to flee westward, to Hawaiki, and how their voices might be heard at night, calling to one another in the sky, as they drove past, high overhead. Early in the evening, as I lay in bed, a boy came into the next room, panting with excitement. He had been to a plantation in the hills, it seemed, and as he returned, just after dusk, had heard the voices of a shouting multitude passing in the air above him. I was tired and paid little attention to his story, but for some reason I found it impossible to sleep. It was a hot night, very still and sultry, with something in the air that made one's nerves twitch every time a coconut frond dropped in the distance. I was still lying awake when my fishing companions came to get me; a little ahead of time, for, like me, they had been unable to sleep. We would wait on the reef, they suggested, where it was sure to be cool, until the tide was right.

“We were sitting on the dry coral, smoking. I had just looked at my watch, I remember; it lacked a few minutes to one o’clock. Our canoes were hauled up on one side of the Arutunga Passage—the western pass, by the way. There was no moon. Suddenly one of the boys touched me. ‘What is that?’ he exclaimed, in a startled voice. I looked up; the others were rising to their feet. Two flaring lights were moving across the lagoon toward us—together and very swiftly. Nearer and nearer they came, until they revealed the outlines of a canoe larger than any built in the islands nowadays—a canoe of the old time, with a flaming torch set at prow and stern. While we stood there, staring in silence, it drew abreast of us, moving with the rush of a swift motor-boat, and passed on—out to sea. I was too amazed to think clearly until I heard one of the boys whisper to another, ‘*Kua mate te ariki*—the chief is dead; the great canoe bears him out to the west.’ We launched our canoes and crossed the lagoon to the village. Women were wailing; yes, the old man was dead—he had drawn his last breath a little before one o’clock. Remember that I saw this thing myself. . . .Perhaps it was a dream—if so, we all dreamed alike.’