

A Samoan Poltergeist

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I have given some carefully recorded statements of natives and facts bearing upon the belief of the old Samoans upon such matters, and I now, for the first time, make known a few facts and experiences bearing upon this most interesting subject as they occurred to me personally more than fifty years ago. During the earlier years of my residence amongst the Samoans, various circumstances occurred which were so strange and unaccountable that I could not understand them, and thinking of them in connection with many statements of the natives I was forced to the conclusion that they were the results of other than ordinary agencies.

Two or three of these may be mentioned which occurred at Falelatai during my residence there, somewhere about the years 1839 and 1840, and the facts alluded to consisted of a constant succession of extraordinary noises and visitations, which I could never understand or fathom as arising from any ordinary causes.

The house we then occupied was a new one, substantial and well built, so as to be free from easy access for the purpose of annoyance; but for many months, night after night, our sleep, as well as the sleep of all in the house, was disturbed by most uncanny noises and doings that were the occasion of much annoyance and astonishment alike to ourselves, our native servants, and occasional visitors.

A long passage ran through the center of the house from end to end, having rooms on either side opening into it, and in a most unaccountable manner this passage became the scene of nightly doings that utterly perplexed and astonished us all, including our native servants and native friends, so much so that they seemed more perplexed than ourselves. Night after night, after we had all retired to rest, this passage appeared to be taken possession of by a party of bowlers, who kept up an incessant rolling of what seemed to be wild oranges or *molis*, backwards and forwards from end to end. Not a sound could be heard other than the interminable mysterious bowling or rolling of these *molis* or balls backwards and forwards; the most cautious inspection failing to reveal any human agency in producing these uncanny noises and disturbances.

After a time we became so used to them that they lost their novelty in a measure, and we slept in spite of them, but we could never dispossess ourselves of a certain uncomfortable feeling that the nearness of such uncanny visitors and roisterous doings produced. Strangers coming and hearing the noises for the first time were amazed and wondered, and the breakfast table the next morning was sure to be the scene of eager questions and expostulations.

“Stair, I wonder you allow your servants to keep such late hours and indulge in such uncanny sports.”

“What do you mean?” I would reply, “there were no servants about, they had all retired to rest long before we did last night.”

“Why,” the reply would come, “I heard them rolling balls up and down the passage for hours last night, so that I could not sleep.” And great indeed was the astonishment when we assured the visitor that these strange noises were of nightly occurrence and the outcome of unknown or apparently ghostly visitants!

At other times loud noises and knockings would be heard on the outer door, which would appear to be bettered as though about to be smashed in; but not the slightest trace could be found of the delinquents any more than they could be found in what I have described under the head of native testimony.

One instance especially made a deep impression on my mind. It was a lovely moonlit night, and a number of native chiefs and leading men had gathered in my front room, as their delight was to talk over various matters, especially to discuss foreign customs and doings. The room was well filled, and we were in the midst of an animated discussion when suddenly a tremendous crash came at the front door, as though it must be smashed in. Instantly the whole party jumped up and scattered, some to the front, some to the back, and others to the sides, so as to completely surround the house and capture the aggressors, or so for the moment the whole company thought. Hardly a word was spoken, but a rush was made to capture the offender. Not a soul was to be seen outside, however, and in a very short time the whole party were collected, crestfallen at their want of success, and keenly discussing as to who could have caused the noise. The idea of its being the act of a native was scouted by the whole party, who said it was well known that the gathering of the chiefs was there, and no native would have dared commit the outrage. It was generally decided that it must be the doings of the *aitu* or *aitus*, who were such constant aggressors! Yet for all that every place was still further keenly searched, but without avail.

Later on in the evening we were collected together at one end of the house near to a large *ifi* (chestnut) tree, in which a good-sized bell was hung for use on various occasions. Suddenly the bell began to ring violently, without any apparent cause—no hand was pulling it, but it kept on wildly clanging in full view of the whole party, who looked on in amazement.

“Perhaps there is a string attached and someone pulling it, secreted under that fence,” suggested one. Immediately one of the number ran to the fence, but no one was there. Another climbed the tree. There was no string attached, but the bell kept on wildly ringing! There was in reality no need to ascend the tree to ascertain the fact of there being no string attached, for every leaf and twig stood out boldly to view in the bright moonlight; but the mystery was not solved, and the old conclusion was come to that it was part of the mischievous doings of the *aitu*.

Still, another mystery! As we were talking eagerly together, we were suddenly pelted with small stones, thrown obliquely, which struck several of the party with no little force; some on the breast, others on other parts of the body, myself on the foot—leaving us all so mystified that we separated, the outsiders to their homes and we to our haunted dwelling, more astounded than ever.

At last, after many months, my wife’s health began to be affected, and at length quite to fail under the effects of much nervous prostration brought on by these continued uncanny visitations, aided by the great humidity of the district, so that it was deemed advisable we should remove to a more healthy place, which we did, at much loss and inconvenience. Our house was left, and with the removal we were happily freed from any further ghostly visitations.

Very much astonishment was expressed by the natives as to what they thought was the occasion of these extraordinary visitations. Some thought the house had been unwittingly built upon an old native burying-ground, others that the *ifi* tree was an old *malumalu*, or temple of an *aitu*. If so, the wrath of the various *folaunga-aitu*, or parties of voyaging spirits, must have been aroused at seeing the sanctity of their temple invaded.

In after years I often visited the spot, but the house was dismantled and, if I mistake not, was not occupied after, certainly it was not by any European.

One old chief and orator, Sepetaio, from Mulinu'u, seemed much concerned at our frequent annoyances, and often discussed them with us. One day he came and, to my amusement, he gravely proposed to capture some one of the *aitus* that caused us so much annoyance. If I would let him have one of my servants named Mu, he declared, he could capture the *aitu* and bring him before me. I thanked him very much, but declined his offer to make me personally acquainted with the *aitu*. Among other things, he told me of an adventure that had happened to this same man Mu many years before, in which he had successfully laid his plans to capture an *aitu*.

Tradition records that an *aitu* was accustomed to sit upon the limb of a tree somewhere near the neighborhood of Palauli (black mud), Savaii, from which he so constantly assaulted travellers as to become the bugbear of the place. At length a traveling party from Falelatai, happening to stay there, were duly informed of the trouble of the villagers, on which Mu proposed to capture the *aitu*, provided the villagers would lend him their assistance and support him in his plans, which they gladly consented to do.

He then procured some putrid fish, with which he rubbed himself over as the night advanced, and started alone for the haunt of the *aitu*, having previously arranged with his companions that they should light a big fire in the marae and appear as if they were having a merrymaking, while some of their number were to lie in ambush near the fire with their clubs.

On nearing the spot Mu saw the *aitu* seated upon a branch, and at once accosted him.

After a little time the *aitu* said, "What a nice smell comes from you."

"Yes," said the man, "I have been feasting upon a dead man, and a famous feast I have had. Would you not like to have some of what is left?"

"Indeed, I should;" said the *aitu*, "but if I go you must carry me."

"All right," said Mu, "I will carry you part of the way and you shall carry me the rest."

On this Mu started with the *aitu* on his back, taking the road towards the village, which they reached after mutual carryings. The *aitu* made some remark as to the noises and shouts of laughter that came from the village, when Mu said to his companion, who was riding, "Don't hold so tightly, you will choke me; sit loosely upon my back, and hold lightly by my throat, for as we must pass through this village I shall have to walk quickly, as I know they are a bad lot; so don't stop my breathing." The *aitu*, anxious to get to the promised feast, did as he was told, and Mu trudged onwards, taking care to pass close by the fire, into which he pitched his burden, then the ambush rushed to the spot and beat fire and *aitu* to pieces with their clubs, and were thus enabled to rid themselves of their tormentor.