

**A TRUE STORY OF
THE WESTERN
PACIFIC IN 1879-80**

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A true story of the Western Pacific in 1879-80 by Hugh Hastings Romilly

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HUGH HASTINGS ROMILLY

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TOM PICKING COCOANUTS.

A. Gordon, del.

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WESTERN PACIFIC

IN

1879-80

BY

HUGH HASTINGS ROMILLY

*'You'll take my tale with a grain of salt
But it needs none nevertheless'*



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A TRUE STORY
OF
THE WESTERN PACIFIC.

THE events which I am going to relate occurred, for the most part, in a small island, not known even by name to most people, and only to be found in the largest atlases. Few people know anything of its history, or of the people who dwell there, and yet for more than a year the island has belonged to England, and the government has been administered by an English magistrate. Rotumah, the name of this unknown land, is situated in the Pacific in about latitude 12° south and longitude 177°

east, and is between three and four hundred miles north of the Fiji group. Previous to the date of its annexation to Fiji, it had been the scene of fierce intertribal quarrels and religious wars. Life was unsafe and property insecure, and at length the chiefs of the different tribes recognised this fact, which would never have been acknowledged by the representatives of the antagonistic religious sects. Those chiefs had been engaged in such bitter hostilities that they were anxious for peace, but were unable to establish any form of government for themselves. The island, described later by Lieutenant Bower in an official report to the Governor of Fiji as the 'Garden of the Pacific,' had suffered terribly. The native gardens were neglected, and many of the cocoanut trees, on the produce of which the natives had to depend for their modest

luxuries, were destroyed. Whenever an opportunity offered, the young men deserted their homes and shipped as sailors in any vessel which happened to touch at the island for fresh provisions. It appeared not improbable that, in a very few years, Rotumah would be left in possession of only the old men, women, and children.

The chiefs found themselves unequal to the task of selecting one from their own ranks to enjoy the supreme power, and decided to present a humble petition to the 'Great Queen' to send a white chief to govern their people, and to secure the religious freedom for which at heart they were all anxious.

For this purpose the three most powerful chiefs took the first opportunity of going to Fiji, and in person they presented their petition to Sir Arthur Gordon. They were received

by him on October 25, 1879, with great state, many of the high Fijian chiefs having been invited to attend the ceremony. Sir Arthur sympathised with their difficulties, and promised to forward their petition to Her Majesty. He told them that till the answer should arrive from England, which could not be for six or eight months, he would send a relative of his own, Mr. Arthur Gordon, not to govern them, but to give them the advantage of his advice.

The chiefs expressed themselves much pleased, and on their departure from Fiji they were accompanied by Mr. Gordon, who took with him, as interpreter, an Australian half-caste named Thomas Simpson. I have thought it necessary to give this short account of the circumstances preceding the annexation of Rotumah, in order to

explain the presence of Mr. Gordon and his interpreter Thomas Simpson in such an unknown speck in the Pacific. I followed Mr. Gordon to Rotumah about a month after his departure.

As there are several features of unusual interest in or near the island at places to which we made expeditions during our stay there, and which I have not met with elsewhere, I may as well attempt a short description of them here before beginning my story.

The main island is surrounded with islands still smaller than itself, and each of these is the home of some superstition firmly believed in by the natives. These islets are seldom visited, and with one exception are uninhabited.

The most remarkable among them is one called Hofliué, or as we named it, Split Island, a sketch of which, by