

## *Piri, The Senior Pioneer Teacher of New Guinea*

**William Wyatt Gill**

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It was very much touched this morning by the I following intelligence from the pen of the Rev. W. G. Lawes, of Port Moresby:

The mission has sustained a great loss in the death of Piri, the senior Rarotongan teacher, who had been at the village of Boera ever since 1873. He died on the twelfth of January last. Many visitors to New Guinea will remember the genial, kindly gentleman who entertained them at Boera. Not only the mission, but New Guinea, has sustained a loss in his death. East and west, Piri's name was the best known and most highly respected of all the Rarotongan teachers.

My first acquaintance with Piri—at Rarotonga in 1858—was hardly satisfactory. The students were all away at the plantations or fishing, for the ensuing Sabbath. I was in the study with a native pastor and an aged deacon. A terrific heathen shout with hurried footsteps on the long verandah, startled us. It was Piri, with only a girdle on, armed with a keen-edged whaling spade (used for cutting out the blubber of whales), and shouting, "I am come to stick pigs."<sup>1</sup> It seems that a cow had trespassed, and drunken Piri resolved to have the life of

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some members of the mission in payment for the half a dozen cabbages destroyed. It was not pleasant to see the gleaming steel pointed at one, and within three or four inches of its mark. Gentle words detained the madman, until my two native friends could grasp the handle and wrest the weapon from the powerful grasp of Piri.

For this escapade Makea imprisoned Piri for two or three weeks. Reflection, by God's blessing, led to an entire change of life. Never again did Piri taste strong drink of any kind. As he had been a ringleader in all kinds of evil, he resolved to devote the remainder of his life to spread the knowledge of that great Love which had touched his once callous heart. He became a consistent church member, was admitted as a student to the Training Institution, and after a course of four years' study, was ordained as a native evangelist. For a number of years he laboured in Samoa with much acceptance.

In 1872, Piri, with his excellent wife, volunteered to accompany the writer, who, in company with the Rev. A. W. Murray, led the first band of Polynesian pioneer evangelists on to the mainland of New Guinea. They were at first located in Redscar Bay, but subsequently removed to Port Moresby. Of that first band of worthies (thirteen in number) only Piri's widow and Ruatoka survive. But their noble work will live on in souls redeemed from sin, and lives made beautiful by faith in the Son of God.

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<sup>1</sup> An ancient phrase for killing human beings for eating.

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I shall never forget Piri's landing (with the rest of the party) among the savages of New Guinea, Nov. 25th, 1872. He was a finely-built man, head and shoulders above the Papuans, and happened to have on a bright checked flannel shirt. The crowd fled in absolute terror; but as Piri did not chase them, but gently assured them that they were men like themselves, they came back, and eventually carried their goods to the hut which had been set apart by the chiefs for their use. The natives in the evening explained to Piri that it was his extraordinary skin (as they at first took his shirt to be) that had frightened them.

For many years his home has been the village of Borea, a few miles west of Port Moresby. Five years ago I paid him a visit, and slept a night in his pleasant cottage. Next day the opening services of his new church—the first lime one in New Guinea—were conducted. It was a most interesting day. In Piri's garden a pair of spur-winged plovers were running about, as if tame. Beyond the garden a stretch of level land sweeps towards the interior. This is the wallaby-hunting ground of the villagers.

Never once did Piri leave his work on home furlough. And now he sleeps amongst the people he loved so well. His comrade and friend Ruatoka writes thus to me from Port Moresby: "Piri has fallen asleep. His work for the Master is done. The workman has laid aside his axe. He has gone to the heavenly land, into the very presence of Jesus, to receive his reward. He now sits by the side of the Master, beloved of Him. 'Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.' "

I would add, "Is not this a brand snatched from the burning?" He who chose Saul the persecutor of the faith, elected this simple-hearted, earnest Polynesian, to make known His power and grace amongst the savage tribes of New Guinea.

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