

РОБЕРТ СТИВЕНСОН

PRAYERS WRITTEN AT
VAILIMA, AND A
LOWDEN SABBATH
MORN

Роберт Льюис Стивенсон
Prayers Written At Vailima,
and A Lowden Sabbath Morn

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INTRODUCTION

In every Samoan household the day is closed with prayer and the singing of hymns. The omission of this sacred duty would indicate, not only a lack of religious training in the house chief, but a shameless disregard of all that is reputable in Samoan social life. No doubt, to many, the evening service is no more than a duty fulfilled. The child who says his prayer at his mother's knee can have no real conception of the meaning of the words he lisps so readily, yet he goes to his little bed with a sense of heavenly protection that he would miss were the prayer forgotten. The average Samoan is but a larger child in most things, and would lay an uneasy head on his wooden pillow if he had not joined, even perfunctorily, in the evening service. With my husband, prayer, the direct appeal, was a necessity. When he was happy he felt impelled to offer thanks for that undeserved joy; when in sorrow, or pain, to call for strength to bear what must be borne.

Vailima lay up some three miles of continual rise from Apia, and more than half that distance from the nearest village. It was

a long way for a tired man to walk down every evening with the sole purpose of joining in family worship; and the road through the bush was dark, and, to the Samoan imagination, beset with supernatural terrors. Wherefore, as soon as our household had fallen into a regular routine, and the bonds of Samoan family life began to draw us more closely together, Tusitala felt the necessity of including our retainers in our evening devotions. I suppose ours was the only white man's family in all Samoa, except those of the missionaries, where the day naturally ended with this homely, patriarchal custom. Not only were the religious scruples of the natives satisfied, but, what we did not foresee, our own respectability – and incidentally that of our retainers – became assured, and the influence of Tusitala increased tenfold.

After all work and meals were finished, the 'pu,' or war conch, was sounded from the back veranda and the front, so that it might be heard by all. I don't think it ever occurred to us that there was any incongruity in the use of the war conch for the peaceful invitation to prayer. In response to its summons the white members of the family took their usual places in one end of the large hall, while the Samoans – men, women, and children – trooped in through all the open doors, some carrying lanterns if the evening were dark, all moving quietly and dropping with Samoan decorum in a wide semicircle on the floor beneath a great lamp that hung from the ceiling. The service began by my son reading a chapter from the Samoan Bible, Tusitala following with a prayer in English, sometimes impromptu, but more often

from the notes in this little book, interpolating or changing with the circumstance of the day. Then came the singing of one or more hymns in the native tongue, and the recitation in concert of the Lord's Prayer, also in Samoan. Many of these hymns were set to ancient tunes, very wild and warlike, and strangely at variance with the missionary words.

Sometimes a passing band of hostile warriors, with blackened faces, would peer in at us through the open windows, and often we were forced to pause until the strangely savage, monotonous noise of the native drums had ceased; but no Samoan, nor, I trust, white person, changed his reverent attitude. Once, I remember a look of surprised dismay crossing the countenance of Tusitala when my son, contrary to his usual custom of reading the next chapter following that of yesterday, turned back the leaves of his Bible to find a chapter fiercely denunciatory, and only too applicable to the foreign dictators of distracted Samoa. On another occasion the chief himself brought the service to a sudden check. He had just learned of the treacherous conduct of one in whom he had every reason to trust. That evening the prayer seemed unusually short and formal. As the singing stopped he arose abruptly and left the room. I hastened after him, fearing some sudden illness. 'What is it?' I asked. 'It is this,' was the reply; 'I am not yet fit to say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."'

It is with natural reluctance that I touch upon the last prayer of my husband's life. Many have supposed that he showed, in

the wording of this prayer, that he had some premonition of his approaching death. I am sure he had no such premonition. It was I who told the assembled family that I felt an impending disaster approaching nearer and nearer. Any Scot will understand that my statement was received seriously. It could not be, we thought, that danger threatened any one within the house; but Mr. Graham Balfour, my husband's cousin, very near and dear to us, was away on a perilous cruise. Our fears followed the various vessels, more or less unseaworthy, in which he was making his way from island to island to the atoll where the exiled king, Mataafa, was at that time imprisoned. In my husband's last prayer, the night before his death, he asked that we should be given strength to bear the loss of this dear friend, should such a sorrow befall us.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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