



Worldwide Missions

Missionary Biographies

Mrs. Jane Chalmers

**Wife of the Rev. James Chalmers,
Missionary to Rarotonga and New Guinea,
London Missionary Society**

by Emma Raymond Pitman



It was said of the subject of this sketch that "New Guinea and the missionary society had lost one of the brightest heroines the mission-field had known." This praise was not too high, for a reference to the annals of her twelve years' missionary service will show that her best was given to the Lord of the vineyard. She proved herself to be a heroine in the midst of danger, as well as self-denying and laborious in the midst of duty.

The Rev. James and Mrs. Chalmers sailed in the *John Williams* for Rarotonga, on the 29th January, 1866. The young couple were eager to commence direct missionary work, and looked forward with intense interest to the time when they should "enter into" the labours of Williams, Ellis, and other pioneers of the South Sea Mission. But from the outset they were destined to encounter trials and difficulties. These trials assumed the form of "perils by the sea," for that voyage of the *John Williams* was characterised by disasters almost as soon as the vessel reached the South Sea Archipelago, which disasters finally culminated in the total shipwreck of the vessel, before Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers sighted Rarotonga.

The *John Williams* arrived safely at Adelaide, Australia, in May, 1866, touching also at Melbourne, Geelong, Hobart Town, and Sydney in turn. On August 21st, the vessel sailed for Aneiteum, where it struck upon a reef, and was forced to return to Sydney for repairs. The other members of the mission-party remained at Aneiteum during the return of the *John Williams* to Sydney, but Mrs. Chalmers and her husband fearlessly accompanied the ship back. The needed repairs having been accomplished, they returned with the vessel to Aneiteum, and after receiving on board those missionaries and their wives who had tarried at that island, proceeded first to the Loyalty Islands, and thence to Niué.

They reached Niué on January 3rd, 1867, having been nearly a year on the journey, and not yet having seen Rarotonga. To the dismay of all the mission-party, however, the *John Williams* was wrecked off the coast of Niué on the 8th of that month. Those of the missionaries who had not yet reached their appointed stations were still on board, and among this number were Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers. Not only was the vessel wrecked, but the missionaries lost nearly everything in their possession, besides the stores intended for Samoa and Eastern Polynesia. In an interesting letter written by Mrs. Chalmers, she says, in reference to this misfortune:

"We left Sydney on the 15th of November, with our vessel fully repaired and as strong as ever. In four weeks from the day we left Sydney we had finished all our work at Aneiteum and the Loyalty Islands, and with high hopes we went on our way to Niué. We had to beat all the way, and for nine days before getting to Niué we had to sail amongst most dangerous reefs...

During the night of the 8th the wind changed. ...All means were at once resorted to to keep the vessel out at sea. All the native teachers on board wrought well with the sailors, but all was of no avail: nearer and nearer we approached the dreaded reef. About nine, Mrs. Williams, Mr. and Mrs. Davies, Mr. Chalmers and myself, went to the saloon for prayer. The two gentlemen offered up prayer in

turn, while at the same time the native teachers offered up prayer on the main deck. Fervent were the prayers offered that the Lord would save our justly-prized ship — His own ship — from the doom we saw threatening her, and that she would be spared for many years to carry the good news of Salvation to these lovely isles.

After prayer, we went on deck and fired off sonic rockets and blue-lights, to warn our friends on shore of our danger, though well we knew they could not help us. Oh! the agony of that hour! None but those who have experienced it can realise how we felt. It was sad to see our floating home being drifted on to destruction, and we unable to save her. The night was densely dark, the lightnings began to flash, and now we think surely the wind will come up to save her; but not a breath of air could be felt. About ten the gig was ordered alongside, and the ladies dropped from the side of the vessel into it. No time for ceremony: seventy-two souls, among whom were several native women and children, were on board; and already could the back swell of the reef be felt. By twenty minutes past eleven all were in the boats, and in a few minutes after, the vessel struck with a crash, which quickly dispelled all our hopes as to her safety, and sent a pang through our very hearts. We loved the vessel, and it seemed like losing a friend to lose her. To the last we clung to the hope that ere she struck, a breeze would spring up and save her."

After a short delay Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers proceeded to Rarotonga by another vessel, reaching their destination on May 20th, 1867. Two months later the resident missionary returned to Europe, and the sole conduct of the mission consequently devolved upon Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers. They immediately set about acquiring the language, and while Mr. Chalmers assumed the care of the Training Institution for the native ministry, Mrs. Chambers assembled the wives of the students at her house daily in classes, teaching them reading, sewing, and Scripture, in addition to labouring among the children. With the children of Rarotonga she seems to have been a prime favourite; and her occasional communications to the *Juvenile Missionary Magazine* afford many pleasant glimpses of her life and labours among them. She took special interest in the schools and classes, adopting that as her chosen work. As might have been expected, she attained large success in this congenial employment, and succeeded in leaving her mark upon the schools of Rarotonga. A vivid description from her pen of an annual examination in one of these schools will be perused with interest. She writes:

"All is now quiet. A hymn is read out and sung, prayer offered up to our Father in heaven, and a very short address follows from the missionary. And now begins the true business of the day — class examination. Each teacher is sitting beside his or her class, looking almost as excited as the children themselves. The youngest class is called on first to stand up and read out of Primer I. in the Rarotonga dialect. Soon their courage rises, and we are not long in seeing who have been attentive to their lessons, or who have been careless. After each class has been examined, a hymn is sung by all, but led by one of the class. Some of the younger children sing little rhymes on the alphabet instead of a hymn. In this way we go on till all the classes are over, which takes three or four hours. The elder scholars are examined in geography, arithmetic, and the multiplication-table, beside reading, dictation, and spelling."

Mrs. Chalmers acknowledges the help which a female chief gave to the mission by means of her power and influence. It seems that this woman Tapaern was connected with the family of the head chief of Rarotonga, but was by some means carried off in her youth to Aitutaki. During the Rev. John Williams' stay on that island he met with her, and on his visit to Rarotonga brought her with him, and restored her to her friends. Tapaern had heard of the Gospel in Aitutaki, and partially believed it; but after coming back to Rarotonga she gave in her full adhesion to it. She aided the missionaries and teachers of Rarotonga in many ways, proving herself a valuable auxiliary, as well as a consistent member. Mrs. Chalmers writes concerning this old lady:

"She is now an old woman; her hair is grey, her hearing is very defective, her memory is not so good as it was, her limbs are very stiff, and she finds it difficult

to rise from her seat, or sit down again, but still her teeth are beautifully white and strong, not one is broken; her back is as straight as can be, and she walks with a very majestic step. She has a great influence over all the people, and always exerts it in the right direction. It is amusing to see how all the evil-doers, old, and young, of both sexes, fear her. It is a poor look-out for any wrong-doer when she hears of their shortcomings. They would much rather that the missionary should hear of their sins, than old Tapaern. Sometimes her severity to offenders carries her too far, and then the missionary has to mediate between the parties. Still, she is a great favourite of all, and unless when she considers it her duty to apply the lash, she is a kind, happy old body."

The work which fell to Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers as superintending missionaries at the Rarotongan station was somewhat onerous, and one which required great tact. On account of the disastrous loss of the mission-vessels, the native teachers on the out-stations had not been visited for eight years, and had consequently gone without their accustomed supplies. It seems that their wages are not paid in money — which would be of no use on these isolated isles — but in *goods*, such as drapery, hardware, food, and other necessaries, while the missionary at Rarotonga has to superintend the division and appointing of these supplies. It is amusing to read of the labours of Mrs. Chalmers in this direction.

When the new *John Williams* arrived at Rarotonga with the greatly-needed stores for the scattered labourers, the two set to work, and very quickly divided the cargo into the destined portions, giving, in addition, from their own supplies, "to each student a shirt and pair of trousers, and to each of their wives as much print as would make a dress." After the careful division and assignment of the stores, it became necessary for Mr. Chalmers to go by the departing *John Williams* to visit the out-stations, as well as to carry the goods, while Mrs. Chalmers remained at home to welcome the *Dayspring*, the Presbyterian Mission ship, which was on her way to Rarotonga, and then to despatch by her, six of the students, with their wives, as teachers to new out-stations. In all these duties Mrs. Chalmers acted with a self-denying heroism worthy of admiration. The lonely white woman in Rarotonga was preparing for the time when she should be once more left alone, among a horde of New Guinea savages.

Although visitors were few and far between, Mrs. Chalmers gratefully records that on one memorable communion Sabbath, when an American ship was lying in harbour, "there were assembled representatives of Christ's church from fourteen different lands." That was doubtless "a time of refreshing."

But, after ten years' work, on the island of Rarotonga, Providence seemed to point out a new channel for labour. New Guinea, or Papua, one of the largest islands in the world, offered a most inviting field for missionary operations to those brave spirits who looked out for "other worlds to conquer" for the Prince of Peace. This island, which extends about 1,300 miles in length, and 200 in breadth, is a tropical land, inhabited by tribes of savages who are totally ignorant of civilisation and religion. The island lies to the north of Australia, being divided from that land by Torres Straits. It was visited by Captain Cook in 1770, but has since been somewhat shunned by sailors. Indeed, the barbarous treatment shown by the natives toward all strangers, effectually prevented intercourse; for if it happened that a ship's crew found themselves cast, by the accident of shipwreck, upon the shores of New Guinea, the natives immediately murdered and ate them. But native teachers from the various groups of the South Sea Archipelago, anxious to spread the news of that Gospel which had blessed them, had ventured forth to New Guinea, carrying their lives in their hands, and had stationed themselves among the people at different points, in order to tell of Jesus. They had attained partial success, inasmuch as the natives learnt that the intentions of the white missionaries towards them were good, and that by opening their land to strangers, they would receive spiritual and temporal benefit. Messrs. Murray, Macfarlane, and Lawes went forth on a pioneering expedition into New Guinea, in order to report upon the land and the people for the Missionary Society, and found that to some extent the natives were willing to accept teachers. Still, the experiment promised peril to those who should attempt it.

In May, 1877, Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers were transferred to New Guinea. Dangers awaited them in the shape of murderous conspiracies by the natives, who had been ill-used by the crews of trading vessels shortly before Mr. Chalmers' landing, and who vowed to be revenged on the

first white man who should fall into their hands. Only the care of an overruling and watchful Providence can explain the fact of Mr. Chalmers' preservation during those perilous days of exploration among the New Guinea natives. In the spring of 1878, Mrs. Chalmers accompanied her husband on a cruise along the south coast of the mainland, from east to west, visiting about two hundred villages. In ninety of these villages, the white man was unknown; accordingly, it needed the greatest circumspection and discretion to establish friendly communications with the people.

New Guinea was a hotbed of malignant fever, and peopled by cannibals whose only craving was for human flesh. Under these circumstances, Mrs. Chalmers appears in her true character, as a heroic Christian woman, in consenting to live in such a land, and in the midst of such a people. They settled down at South Cape, established the mission station, and won their way among the natives until the name "Chalmers" acted as a talisman among the different tribes. The work was progressing successfully, when the *Mayri* schooner called at the island, and the crew became embroiled in a quarrel with the natives. Blood was shed on both sides; and the savages, intent upon revenge, were bent upon murdering their teachers. They especially threatened the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers, and surrounded the station in large bands, night after night, yelling and clamouring for the blood of the inmates. But prayer, heroism, and fearlessness conquered. The savages were quelled at last, and quiet and peace once more reigned at the mission-station. God had restrained the wrath of man, and wrought out a deliverance for his servants.

Soon after these disturbances, Mr. Chalmers made a voyage to Thursday Island to bring back necessary stores, and to obtain the assistance of the new mission-steamer *Ellangowan*. He wished much to take Mrs. Chalmers with him; but the heroic woman chose to remain behind as a kind of hostage for the return of her husband to South Cape. Beside this, the recently settled native teachers were in peril; for at some of the villages in which Mr. Chalmers had placed them, a desire on the part of the natives to obtain their property had led them to call in the aid of a sorcerer or medicine-man, who had succeeded in poisoning several of the teachers. On looking at all the circumstances, Mrs. Chalmers preferred to remain, believing that her presence would act as a defence to the native teachers, as well as evidence the good faith of herself and husband toward the people. It was well that she did so. After being absent a month, Mr. Chalmers returned to South Cape to find his wife safe and sound, and pleased to report that the savages had treated her with unexpected kindness during his absence. Mr. Chalmers wrote of this critical time to the directors of the Society in the following terms:

"We left South Cape, on the 5th February, for Port Moresby, Mrs. Chalmers remaining with the teachers. There was really no accommodation on board for her, and she thought it was not well for us both to leave the teachers so soon after the disturbances, and in the unhealthy season. The natives of the place were highly pleased with her remaining, and promised to treat her kindly: they saw we had confidence in their friendship. On my return home, I found that Mrs. Chalmers was well, and had been treated right kindly by the savages, they bringing her food, and saying that she must eat plenty, so that when Tamate (Mr. Chalmers) returned, she might be looking well and strong. Mrs. Chalmers says it is well she remained, as the natives saw we had confidence, in them; and the day following our departure, they were saying among themselves: 'They trust us; we must treat them kindly; they cannot mean us harm, or Tamate would not have left his wife behind.' Had Mrs. Chalmers not remained, it is very probable one of the teachers would have died. She nursed him, and under God's blessing he was restored. She attended to them all, and saw that they had proper medicine and tonics when required, and also saw that they had good, warm food twice a day. One little child — the only child in our company — died after some weeks' illness, and was buried the day after we got home. The natives were highly delighted at my return, and came in crowds to meet me; but their delight was greatest when they got presents of arrowroot, hoop-iron, and a few beads."

Soon after Mr. Chalmers returned to his courageous wife, the shadow of the final separation fell upon them. She was struck down by the fearful malarious fever which is so prevalent in New Guinea, and remained so ill that her husband decided to take her to Cook Town. A few months' rest and change of air partially restored her, and she longed to return to South Cape,

there to take up her chosen work again. But her frame was so evidently shattered that Mr. Chalmers persisted in refusing to allow her to return to the station, sending her instead to Sydney, to visit among dear friends, who were glad to minister to her wants and weakness. But in spite of unintermitting attentions, it soon became evident to all that Mrs. Chalmers was daily becoming weaker and weaker. Daily the poor feeble frame grew more exhausted, but the mind was ever bright and vigorous, and the affections dwelling constantly on the beloved work in New Guinea. She never saw her husband again in this life, although her wifely love longed sorely for one last interview; she was unwilling that he or any of her relatives should be informed of the truth until the day came that the last sad news must be told.

So she sank, gradually, but surely, until she fell asleep in Jesus, on February 20th, 1879. Mr. Gill, writing in April of the same year, from Mr. Chalmers' old station at Rarotonga, says:

"We have just heard with profound sorrow of the death of Mrs. Chalmers, at Sydney. She was a noble woman. Her talent was very versatile. She possessed great courage and tenacity of purpose. Her power of organisation was admirable; she was heart and soul a missionary. The sensation produced throughout the island is very great; the whole population is in mourning. Everybody who knew Mrs. Chalmers when she was going to New Guinea, felt that she was going to certain death. But although it was the wish of the directors of the Society that they should first visit England, they went on to New Guinea for the sake of the teachers."

This was heroism of the first order! To go to possible, and in the end to certain, death, for the sake of the Gospel and the defenceless native teachers labouring there, was bravery such as few could have displayed. Verily "the world knows not its greatest heroes;" "the day alone" shall declare them before the assembled nations. This humble woman, far away from home, friends, and civilisation, patiently winning the hearts of savage cannibals toward the good news of salvation by Jesus Christ, has, all unknown to worldly fame, finished her course, entered into rest, and won the guerdon of immortal renown.

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More Information on [Jane Chalmers](#)