

THE SOUTH SEA ISLANDS—

AS THEY WERE TWENTY YEARS AGO.

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The South Sea Islands are in many respects one of the most interesting portions of our globe. In actual appearance they come nearer to our ideas of the Hesperides, the Elysian Isles, or Fairy-land; nearer to the creations of poetry, or the realms formed and peopled by imagination, than any other region of the earth's surface. For three centuries and a half their history has read more like the tales in the Arabian Nights, more like Robinson Crusoe and the higher works of fiction, than the sober chronicles of real life. Yea, in many cases the truth here has been stranger and more striking than fiction. All the maritime powers of Europe have sent forth their most skilful and adventurous navigators to explore that mighty ocean. Spain led the way. On September 26th, 1513, a fortnight after the battle of Flodden, those waters were first gazed upon by European eyes. Balboa, governor of the colony of Santa Maria in Darien, first discovered them from a mountain on that isthmus, and as they lay south from the place where he stood, they received the name of the South Sea. Seven years later Magellan, a native of Portugal, but in the service of Spain, and as a navigator and discoverer second only to Columbus, passed through the straits that still bear his name, and getting into the range of the trade-winds, glided along in the smooth seas over its whole length, till he reached the Ladrões, and from this circumstance he named it the PACIFIC OCEAN. In 1567, when the beautiful Mary Queen of Scots was abdicating her throne, Mendana, another Spaniard, discovered the group which he called Solomon's Archipelago, "from the belief that those islands had supplied the gold and treasure employed in building the temple." England, at that time only a second or third rate power, was beginning to show her character; the Reformation had taken deep root among her people, and was fast developing their inborn energies. The great men who guided the councils of Elizabeth, had their thoughts directed to this ocean, and John Oxenham, a native of Plymouth, the first Englishman that sailed in the South Sea, left England in 1575. He was followed by Drake, Cavendish, and Hawkins. Before the century closed the Dutch had a fleet of five ships in the same seas. The seventeenth century was less famous for maritime discovery than the preceding had been. Blake swept away the navies of Spain and Holland, and raised England to the sovereignty of the seas; but our country was convulsed by such fearful storms that foreign adventure was not thought of. Still during this century several names stand prominently out; two of the best known of these are Quiros and Tasman. Quiros, the pilot to Mendana, "eager to plow up the waters of the unknown sea, and seek out the undiscovered lands around the Antarctic pole,"—eager to discover the great southern continent, the dream of all the early geographers, sailed from Lima, in December 1605, a few weeks after the famous Gunpowder Plot. In the following year he discovered the most northern island in the New Hebrides. Supposing this to be the long-sought-for continent, he named it the *Archipelago del Espiritu Santo*, and drawing, as Sheridan said of some one, upon his imagination for his facts, he wrote home to Philip III. of Spain, that those countries discovered by him might occupy one quarter of the earth's surface, that Espiritu Santo was the most delicious country in the world; it was like the garden of Eden, and would prove the inexhaustible source of glory, riches, and power, to Spain. During this century the Dutch were the most enterprising of South Sea navigators. New Holland, or as it is now called Australia, was discovered in 1616, by Dirk Hatichs, while Tasman, one of the most famous of the Dutch navigators of that age, discovered Van Diemen's Land, New Zealand, Tongatabu and the Feejees, in 1642. The rest of the century was barren of discovery.

In the eighteenth century, Britain and France both appeared in the South Sea.