

Piri and Maki



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As a young man living in a village on Rarotonga, Piri had a bad reputation as a drunk and a trouble maker. He had gone to the mission school as a lad and had learned to read and write. But after he left school he got in with a group of young men who had found out from some Tahitians how to make orange beer from fruit growing in the bush. They got involved in drunken parties. Things got worse when the trading ships brought in other alcoholic drinks, and there were serious problems with bad behaviour amongst the young men. Piri was regarded as a ring-leader in the brewing of orange beer, and of course drinking it. So he was often caught and made to pay fines for law-breaking.

“We’ll have to come down harder on these young fellows,” the authorities decided. “Piri is one of the worst. We need to get him under control.” So Piri at the age of twenty became a target for the authorities, who kept a close watch on him.

“It’s that missionary’s fault,” Piri muttered, “he’s the one who turned the authorities against me. One of these days I’ll get that man and kill him with my own hands!”

A day came when Piri had been drinking heavily. This was going to be Piri’s day of revenge. He grabbed a garden spade and made for the missionary’s house. Fortunately his friends saw what he had in mind and went after him with sticks and a rope. Piri had just reached the veranda of the house when they seized him and in spite of his struggles, tied him up with the rope. His friends took him away and kept him at the coast for a few days. When he had sobered up he began to think about his behaviour. “How stupid I’ve been to go on like that. The missionary did nothing to me yet I nearly killed him. It’s the beer that made me so stupid. I promise I’ll never drink another drop.”

Piri went to see the missionary. “I’m sorry I’ve been behaving so badly,” he began. “I can see that living the Christian way is the only thing that will help me.”

“You’re right, Piri,” the missionary agreed. “You come to the worship services on Sundays and to the Bible classes through the week and you will learn to know God. Then you’ll find out how He can help you live a good life.”

Piri did this and became a strong Christian. His greatest desire was to tell those who weren’t Christians the wonderful stories of Jesus. He entered the Training School on Rarotonga where he spent four years being prepared for work as a Bible teacher. At the end of that time the missionary came to him. “Piri, there is a group of Cook Islanders living in Samoa. They need someone to care for them spiritually. Would you and your wife like to go and be their Bible teacher?”

Piri and his wife agreed to go and they spent some time together there. But one day his wife became ill and never recovered. Piri was left alone to carry on the work in Samoa.

Meanwhile, far off to the west, in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), a party of teachers had been left on Tanna to try to establish a mission station. This was one of the seven attempts to follow up the fatal visit of John Williams and his party to the New Hebrides in 1839. All the party except two of the teachers' wives had died of fever. Maki was the name of one of these women.

"I'm afraid of what they might do with us now our husbands are dead," Maki said to the other woman.

"Yes, so am I," she agreed. "The chiefs might fight over which one of them will take us. Then who knows what will happen to us?"

But a kindly old chief saw the difficulty they were in. "You two come home with me," he offered, "I'll look after you. You can be like my own daughters."

"Thank you so much," they said with great relief, "we'll be happy to live with you and care for you."

The women knew that the mission ship came to visit the out-stations regularly.

"I wonder if the ship will come today?" they would say each morning. Then, no matter how ill they were from fever, they would climb the hill at the back of the village to watch for the hoped-for sails to appear on the horizon. But day after day they returned disappointed to the village.

Then one day Maki was left alone, for the other widow died of fever. Maki waited two years and had given up all hope of ever seeing her home island again, when one day as she watched from her lookout on the hill; she could see a speck on the horizon.

"Could that be the mission ship?" she wondered, "Perhaps I'll be able to go home after all."

She watched the ship approach and when she saw people being lowered into the small boat she rushed down to the beach to meet them.

"Oh! I thought you'd never come. I thought you had forgotten about us!" And she told them the sad story of their mission party. They, in turn, told her why she had to wait two years for the ship to come. "The ship has been to England and back since we left your party of teachers here. We're sorry you had to wait here so long. We'll leave in the morning and take you home to your island, Mangaia."

The elderly chief who had guarded Maki so kindly was broken-hearted at losing his adopted daughter and ran beside her to the boat, weeping bitterly. Maki was grateful to him and thanked him for his care of her. Nevertheless she was so relieved to be returning home.

When they reached Samoa the ship's captain said to Maki, "You'll have to leave this ship here and wait for a smaller one to take you to Mangaia."

It was during this time in Samoa that Piri and Maki met. Maki never did get home to Mangaia as she married Piri and together they continued to serve the Cook Islanders in Samoa.

"I hear the missionary society is preparing to take a team of teachers to British New Guinea, (now called Papua New Guinea). They want to establish mission stations in villages all along the south coast." Piri had rushed home to tell Maki the news.

"I believe God wants me to go with them, Maki. I've always wanted to go to people who haven't yet heard about Jesus. Would you come with me, Maki?"

Maki was willing to go wherever her husband went, so Piri went to see the leaders of the missionary team, Mr. Murray and Mr. Wyatt Gill.

"Please will you take us with you in the team going to British New Guinea," Piri pleaded. For a long time my heart has been with the lost people of these other islands. Please may we join you?"

The two leaders were so impressed at the eagerness of Piri's request that they agreed to take them along with the five other couples in the group. The leaders explained to the team what the mission's plan was. "New Guinea has a long coast line on the south side. We will find villages where the people are willing to have you live with them and we'll leave you there to teach them about Jehovah God and Jesus His Son."

Piri and Maki were placed at Boera, a little distance north along the coast from Port Moresby. Unfortunately a number of the teachers became ill with malaria and other fevers. Some of them died, so the mission brought those who were left to live in Port Moresby. Piri and Maki encouraged the teachers.

"Always remember to pray," Piri would tell them. "And always remember that Jesus is very near. He will help you if you ask Him."

Piri frequently traveled around the coast westwards with the missionary James Chalmers on his many journeys, visiting the mission teachers and always searching for further villages where they could place teachers. He helped Chalmers by making friends with the village people who trusted him. Chalmers received a welcome because Piri was with him.

On one of his trips, Chalmers stopped at Boera, Piri's village, to spend the night. "The small boat is safe on the beach," Piri assured Chalmers. "The people here are trustworthy."

In the morning Chalmers went to his small boat to find the rowlocks were all missing. Piri and Maki happened to be on the beach.

“The rowlocks have been taken from the small boat, Piri,” Chalmers told him. “How do you think we can get them back?”

Maki stormed through the village demanding the return of the rowlocks. “Whoever has those rowlocks had better bring them back at once or there will be big trouble,” she threatened. But no one owned up.

Piri called the village chief and head men to a meeting in Piri’s house. “Those rowlocks must be returned,” Piri told them quietly, “I want you men to go through the village and speak to everyone. You must bring them back.”

The head men went to everyone, but still no-one produced any rowlocks. Piri grew angry.

“I told Mr Chalmers you people are honest, that you’d never steal anything. Now you’ve shown us I was wrong. Someone has stolen Mr. Chalmers’ property and I want it returned at once. Every house will be searched thoroughly. No-one is allowed to leave the village until the rowlocks are returned.”

Piri was so angry the people knew he meant what he said. Then, along came a village woman, the rowlocks in her hand. “I found these on a path in the village,” she said, looking very guilty.

Everybody knew that wasn’t true, but at least James Chalmers had his rowlocks back and could proceed with his journey. Piri and Maki were on a trip around the coast to Motumotu when Piri became ill. He recovered a little and said to Maki, “I think I am strong enough to travel back to Boera.”

They set off in their canoe, deciding to travel to Port Moresby for treatment. But Piri died on the way. Only three months later Maki died. They rest side by side on the hill behind the village at Boera, two faithful servants of the Lord.

Adapted from: *James Chalmers, His Autobiography and Letters*, Richard Lovett, The Religious Tract Society, London.