

“Threw Away A Throne”
“How a Shipwrecked Sailor Became King of the Cannibals”
(And How A Seafaring Yarn Hooked a Gullible Reporter)
Compiled by G. Curtis

Following was extracted from *The Fresno Republican*, September 10, 1897

Captain Curtis of the British ship Eurydice, which recently sailed for Europe from Tacoma, Washington, grain laden, had a thrilling experience last year, part of which is now made public for the first time. He was first mate on the ship Flora Stafford when she floundered in the South Pacific Ocean. The crew embarked in boats, and after 15 days of hardships, during which both provisions and water gave out, Curtis' boat landed on one of the main Caroline Islands. Though they sometimes practice cannibalism, Curtis and his fellow sufferers persuaded the natives to treat them kindly. In fact, the sailors claimed to belong to European aristocracy and announced that warships would be sent to exterminate the natives if they were molested. Curtis was received with great deference and made friends with King Ikickikee, who he claims abdicated in his favor. Curtis describes his reign as follows.

“My reign was brief, but brilliant. Proclamations were sent to all subjects to desist from eating the flesh of any white men who might thereafter be cast upon the shores of my dominions, this being done so none of my helpless shipmates who were yet at sea should meet death at the hands of the subjects of their erstwhile first officer. The former king, Ikickikee, had a daughter. She had most exquisite skin and was tall, lithe and graceful. I wooed the princess and won her, and we had a gorgeous wedding. My reign ended after six months when the first steamer passed the islands. I had become tired of royal life and was actually disgusted with the smallness of my kingdom. I kicked over the throne, threw away my scepter and swam to the ship. My guard of honor witnessed the last act of my reign and summoned the former king from his banana patch.”

After several months, Curtis reached Hong Kong where he was made skipper of the Eurydice.

---St. Louis Globe-Democrat

The New South Wales newspaper, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners*, 5 September 1896, reported the loss of the Nova Scotia-built barque *Flora P. Stafford*, sailing from Newcastle, Australia to Manila with a cargo of coal. She was abandoned at sea after the crew battled a fire in the cargo hold for two days. Four men were still missing at the time and it was assumed this was first mate Curtis and his boat crew. Further on 8 September, the newspaper reported additional details. *“The crew took to the boats, Captain Smith and five men in one, the boatswain and six men in another and four men in the third. They all steered towards St. Augustine's Island, but next morning encountered a typhoon, and the boats parted company. After several' days' exposure the captain's boat sighted land, this proved to be the island of Papua [New Guinea]. Accordingly, they steered inshore in search of provisions, but upon attempting to land were received with a shower of darts, which fortunately injured no one. They at once left the island, and put out to sea, and on sighting land again steered towards it. Fearing a similar reception, one man was sent ashore to inspect the island the next*

morning. As he failed to turn up, another man was sent ashore next morning, who also disappeared. The captain remained in the vicinity of the island for five days, and then decided to leave, being unable to secure any provisions beyond a few coconuts, and having grave misgivings as to the fate of the two men ashore. Putting out to sea again, they reached Mento, on which, as it appeared to be inhabited by Christians, they immediately landed. Once ashore they were very kindly received, and, hearing of their distress, they were sent overland to the capital of the district, where they were kept by the authorities until the arrival of the steamer Brutus, when they were transported to Manila. The second boat, occupied by the boatswain and six men, was driven by the storm to Surigao [Mindanao Island, Philippines], where they remained until the arrival of the steamer PS del Rosario, by which they also proceeded to Manila. When the mail left Manila, the third boat, containing four men, was still missing."

The 19 October 1896 issue of Newcastle newspaper announced the four missing sailors of the *Flora P. Stafford* had arrived in Manila. "The account given by the chief officer, J. F. Curtis, shows that he and his companions lost sight of the other two boats on the 9th June, during a heavy squall. Their boat was fortunately well-stocked with provisions and water. It was decided to make for the Palau Islands [western chain of the Caroline Islands], which were reached on the 18th June. The natives of the island supplied the shipwrecked men with plenty of provisions, but somewhat discounted this kindness by taking away all their clothes. From the Palau's they went on to Yap, Caroline Islands, in the schooner *Santa Cruz*, and took a steamer from Yap to Manila."

So did Captain Curtis really become a king of the cannibals and marry the princess? At least one newspaper reporter believed he did hook-line-sinker. I wonder if Curtis concocted his story for the reporter over a couple of ales at a harbor-side Tacoma pub. Those Australian sailors are always good for a yarn.