

## *missionary heroes*

### **James Chalmers, the Boy**

The Boy of the Adventurous Heart (Born 1841, Martyred 1901)

by Basil Mathews

James Chalmers (1841-1901) was a Scottish missionary-explorer who served in Rarotonga in the Cook Islands (South Pacific) for ten years, and in [Papua] New Guinea from 1877 until his brutal murder by cannibal tribesmen on April 4, 1901, during a missionary trip to Goaribari Island.

The rain had poured down in such torrents that even the hardy boys of Inverary in Scotland had been driven indoors. Now the sky had cleared, and the sun was shining again after the great storm. The boys were out again, and a group of them were walking toward the little stream of Aray which tumbled through the glen down to Loch Fyne. But the stream was "little" no longer.

As the boys came near to the place called "The Three Bridges," where a rough wooden bridge crossed the torrent, they walked faster towards the stream, for they could hear it roaring in a perfect flood which shook the timbers of the bridge. The great rainfall was running from the hills through a thousand streamlets into the main torrent.

Suddenly there came a shout and a scream. A boy dashed toward them saying that one of his schoolmates had fallen into the rushing water, and that the full spate of the Aray was carrying him away down to the sea. The boys stood horrified—all except one, who, rushed forward, pulling off his jacket as he ran, leapt down the bank to the lower side of the bridge, and, clinging to the timber, held to it with one arm while he stretched out the other as the drowning boy was being carried under the bridge, seized him, and held him tightly with his left hand.



James Chalmers—the boy who had gone to the rescue—though only ten years old, could swim. Letting go of the bridge, while still holding the other boy with one arm, he allowed the current to carry them both down to where the branches hung over the bank to the water's surface. Seizing one of these, he dragged himself and the boy toward the bank, whence he was helped to dry land by his friends.

The boy whom young James Chalmers had saved belonged to a rival school. Often the wild-blooded boys (like their fierce Highland ancestors who fought clan against clan) had attacked the boys of this school and had fought them. James, whose father was a stonemason and whose mother was a Highland lassie born near Loch Lomond, was the leader in these battles, but all the fighting was forgotten when he heard that a boy was

in danger of his life, and so he had plunged in as swiftly to save him as he would have done for any boy from his own school.

We do not hear that James was clever at lessons in his school, but when there was anything to be done, he had the quickest hand, the keenest eye, the swiftest mind, and the most daring heart in all the village.

Though he loved the hills and glens and the mountain torrent, James, above everything else, revelled in the sea. One day a little later on, after the rescue of his friend from drowning, James stood on the quay at Inverary gazing across the loch and watching the sails of the fishing boats, when he heard a loud cry.

He looked round. There, on the edge of the quay, stood a mother wringing her hands and calling out that her child had fallen into the water and was drowning. James ran along the quay, and taking off his coat as he dashed to the spot, he dived into the water and, seizing the little child by the dress, drew him ashore. The child seemed dead, but when they laid him on the quayside, and moved his arms, his breath began to come and go again and the colour returned to his cheeks.

Twice Chalmers had saved others from drowning. Three times he himself, as the result of his daring adventures in the sea, was carried home, supposed to be dead by drowning.

At another time he, with two other boys, thrust a tarred herring-box into the sea from the sandy shore between the two rocky points where the western sea came up the narrow Loch Fyne.

"Look at James!" shouted one of the boys to his companions as Chalmers leapt into the box.

It almost turned over, and he swayed and rolled and then steadied as the box swung out from the shore.

The other boys, laughing and shouting, towed him and his boat through the sea as they walked along the shore. Suddenly, as they talked, they staggered forward. The cord had snapped and they fell on the sand, still laughing, but when they stood up again the laughter died on their lips. James was being swiftly carried out by the current to sea—and in a tarred herring-box! He had no paddle, and his hands were of no effect in trying to move the boat toward the shore.

The boys shouted. There came an answering cry from the door of a cottage in the village. A fisherman came swinging down the beach, strode to his boat, took the two boys into it, and taking an oar himself and giving the other to the two boys, they pulled out with the tide. They reached James and rescued him just as the herring-box was sinking. He went home to the little cottage where he lived, and his mother gave him a proper thrashing.

Some of James' schoolfellows used to go on Sundays to a school in Inverary. He made up his mind to join them. The class met in the vestry of the United Presbyterian Church there. After their lesson they went together into the church to hear a closing address. Mr. Meikle, the minister, who was also superintendent of the school, one afternoon took from his pocket a magazine (a copy of the "Presbyterian Record"). From this magazine he read a letter from a brave missionary in the far-off cannibal islands of Fiji. The letter told of the savage life there and of how, already, the story of Jesus was leading the men no longer to drag their victims to the cannibal ovens, nor to pile up the skulls of their enemies so as to show their own bravery. The writer said they were beginning happier lives in which the awful terror of the javelin and the club, and the horror of demons and witches was gone.

When Mr. Meikle had finished reading the magazine he folded it up again and then looked round on all the boys in the school, saying:

"I wonder if there is a boy here this afternoon who will become a missionary, and by and by bring the Gospel to other such cannibals as those?"

Even as the minister said those words, the adventurous heart of young Chalmers leapt in reply as he said to himself, "Yes, God helping me, I will."

He was just a freckled, dark-haired boy with hazel eyes, a boy tingling with the joy of the open air and with the love of the heave and flow of the sea. But when he made up his mind to do a thing, however great the difficulties or dangers, James usually carried it through.

So it came about that some years later in 1866, having been trained and accepted by the London Missionary Society, Chalmers, as a young man, walked across the gangway to a fine new British-built clipper ship. It had been christened *John Williams* after the great hero missionary who gave up his life on the beach of Erromanga.

This boy, who loved the sea and breathed deep with joy in the face of adventure and peril, had set his face towards the deep, long breakers of the far-off Pacific. He was going to carry to the South Seas the story of the Hero and Saviour Whom he had learnt

to love within the sound of the Atlantic breakers that dashed and fretted against the rocks of Western Scotland.

## **James Chalmers, the Friend**

The Scout of Papua (Date of Incident, about 1893)

The quick puffing of the steam launch *Miro* was the only sound to break the stillness of the mysterious Aivai River. On the launch were three white people—two men and a woman. They were the first who had ever broken the silence of that stream.

They gazed out under the morning sun along the dead level of the Purari delta, for they had left behind them the rolling breakers of the Gulf of Papua in order to explore this dark river. Away to the south rolled the blue waters between this vast island of New Guinea and Northern Australia.

They saw on either bank the wild tangle of twisted mangroves with their roots higher than a man, twined together like writhing serpents. They peered through the thick bush with its green leaves drooping down to the very water's edge. But mostly they looked ahead over the bow of the boat along the green-brown water that lay ahead of them, dappled with sunlight under the trees. For they were facing an unknown district where savage Papuans lived—as wild as hawks. They did not know what adventure might meet them at the next bend of the river.

"Splendid! Splendid!" cried one of the white men, a bearded giant whose flashing eyes and mass of brown hair gave him the look of a lion. "We will make it the white woman's peace. Bravo!" And he turned to Mrs. Abel, whose face lit up with pleasure at his happy excitement.

"No white man has even seen the people of Iala," said Tamate—for that was the native name given to James Chalmers, the Scottish boy who had now gone out to far-off Papua as a missionary. (Note: He had spent some sixteen years in the South Sea Island of Rarotonga and had in 1877 become a pioneer among the cannibals of Papua New Guinea). "Iko there"—and he pointed to a stalwart Papuan who stood by the funnel [a vertical pipe on a steamship from which smoke and exhaust gases escape]—"is the only one of us who has seen them and can speak their tongue."

"It is dangerous for your wife to go among these people," he went on, turning to Mr. Abel, "but she will help us more than anything else possibly can to make friends." And Mr. Abel nodded, for he knew that when the Papuans mean to fight they send their women and children away; and that when they saw Mrs. Abel they would believe that the white people came as friends and not enemies.

As the steamer carried this scouting party against the swift current up the river toward Iala, Tamate wanted to find how far up the river the village lay. So he beckoned Iko to him. Tamate did not know a word of the dialect which Iko spoke, but he had with him an old wrinkled Papuan, who knew Iko's language, and who looked out with worshipping eyes at the great white man who was his friend. So Tamate, wishing to ask Iko how far away the village of Iala was, spoke first to old Vaaburi and then Vaaburi asked Iko.

Iko stretched out his dark forefinger, and made them understand that that finger meant the length of their journey to Iala. Then with his other hand he touched his forefinger under the second joint to show how far they had travelled on their journey—not a third of the distance.

Hour after hour went by, as the steamer drove her way through the swiftly running waters of Aivai. And ever Iko pointed further and further up his finger until at last they had reached his claw-like nail. By three o'clock the middle of the nail was reached. The eyes of all looked anxiously ahead. At every curve of the river they strained their sight to see if Iala were in view. How would these savage people welcome the white men and woman in their snorting great canoe that had no paddles, nor oars? There came a sharp bend in the river, and then a long straight reach of water lying between the forest-covered banks. Suddenly Iko called out, and Tamate and Mr. and Mrs. Abel peered ahead.

The great trees of the river nearly met above their heads, and only a narrow strip of sky could be seen.

There in the distance were the houses of Iala, close clustered on both banks of the steaming river. They stood on piles of wood driven into the mud, like houses on stilts, and their high-pointed bamboo roofs stood out over the river like gigantic poke-bonnets.

"Slow," shouted Tamate to the engineer. The *Miro* slackened speed till she just stemmed the running current and no more.

"It will be a bit of a shock to them," said Tamate to his friends, "to see this launch. We will give them time to get their wits together again."

Looking ahead through their glasses, the white men and Mrs. Abel could see canoes swiftly crossing and recrossing the river and men rushing about.

"Full speed ahead," cried Tamate again, and then after a few revolutions of the engine, "Go slow. It will never do," he said, "to drop amongst them while they are in that state. They will settle down presently." And then, as he looked up at the sky between the waving branches of the giant trees, "we have got a good two hours' daylight yet," he said.

Life and death to Tamate and his friends hung in the balance, for they were three people unarmed, and here were dark savage warriors in hundreds. Everything depended on his choosing just the right moment for going into the midst of these people. So he watched them closely, knitting his shaggy eyebrows together as he measured their state of mind by their actions. He was the Scout of Christ in Papua, and he must be watchful and note all those things that escape most men but mean so much to trained eyes. Tamate seemed to have a strange gift that made him able, even where other men could tell nothing, to say exactly when it was, and when it was not, possible to go among a wild, untouched tribe.

Now the bewildered Ialan savages had grown quieter. Tamate called to the engineer to drive ahead, once more. Slowly the launch forged her way through the running waters and drew nearer and nearer to the centre of Iala.

There on either side stood the houses in long rows stretching up the river, and on the banks hundreds of men stood silent and as still as trees. Their canoes lay half in and half out of the water ready for instant launching. In each canoe stood its crew erect and waiting. All the women and children had been sent away, for these men were out to fight. They did not know whether this strange house upon the water with the smoke coming from its chimney was the work of gods or devils. Still they stood there to face the strange thing and, if need be, to fight.

Brown Iko stood in the bows of the *Miro*; near him stood Tamate. Then the engine stopped and the anchor was dropped overboard. The savages stood motionless. Not a weapon could be seen. The engineer, hearing the anchor-chain rattle through the hole, blew the steam-whistle in simple high spirits. As the shriek of the whistle echoed under the arches of the trees, with the swiftness of lightning the Ialan warriors swung their long bows from behind their bodies. Without stooping each caught up an arrow that stood between his toes and with one movement fixed it and pulled the bamboo strings of their black bows till the notch of the arrows touched their ears. A hundred arrows were aimed at the hearts of Tamate and Mr. and Mrs. Abel.

Swiftly Iko stood upon the bulwark of the *Miro*, and shouted just one word at the top of his voice. It was the Ialan word for "Peace." And again he shouted it, and yet again "Peace, Peace!"

Then he cried out "Pouta!" It was the name of the chief of these savages. They had but to let the arrows from their bows and all would have been over. There was silence. What order would Pouta give?

Then from the bank on their right came the sound of an answering voice. In a flash every arrow was taken from its bow, and again not a weapon was to be seen.

Iko then called out again to Pouta, and Tamate told Iko what he was to say to his friend, the savage chief. For some minutes the conversation went on. At last Iko came to the point of asking for a canoe to take them ashore.

Chief Pouta hesitated. Then he gave his command, and a large canoe was launched from the bank into the river and slowly paddled towards the *Miro*.

As the canoe came towards them, Tamate turned to Mrs. Abel, who had stood there without flinching with all the arrows pointed toward the boat; and he spoke words like these: "Your bravery is our strength. Seeing you makes them believe that we come for peace. You give them greater confidence in us than all our words."

By this time the canoe had paddled alongside the launch. Tamate went over the side first into the canoe, then Mrs. Abel, then Mr. Abel, Iko, and Vaaburi. The canoe pushed off again and paddled toward the landing place, where a crowd of Ialan savages filled every inch of space.

As soon as the bow of the canoe touched the bank, Tamate, without hesitating a second, stepped out with Iko. Together they walked up to the chief Pouta, and Tamate put his arms around him in an embrace of peace.

Pouta, standing on a high place, shouted to all his warriors. But none of the white people knew a word of his meaning.

Look where they would, in every direction, this white woman and the two men were completely surrounded by an unbroken mass of wild and armed savages, who stood gazing upon the strange apparitions in their midst.

Tamate, without a pause, perfectly calm, and showing no signs of fear, spoke to Pouta and his men through old Vaaburi and Iko.

"We have come," he said, "so that we may be friends. We have come without weapons. We have brought with us a woman of our tribe, for we come in peace. We are strangers.

But we come with great things to tell. Some day we will come again and will stay with you and will tell you all our message. To-day we come only to make friends."

Then Iko closed his eyes and prayed in the language of the people of Iala.

Turning to his friends when the prayer was over, Tamate said quietly: "Now, we must get aboard as quickly as we possibly can. My plan for a first visit is to come, make friends and get away again swiftly.

When we are gone they will talk to one another about us. Next time we come we shall meet friends."

So they walked down through an avenue of armed Papuans to the bank, and got into the canoe again: the paddles flashed as she drove swiftly through the water toward the launch. As they climbed her side, the anchor was weighed, the *Miro* swung round, her engines started, and, carried down by the swift stream, she slipped past the packed masses of silent men who lined the banks.

It is a great thing to be a pathfinder... But it is a greater thing to do as these missionary-scouts did on their journey up the Aivai and find a path of friendship into savage lives. To do that was the greatest joy in Tamate's life. For he said, when he had spent many years in this work:

"Recall the twenty-one years, give me back all its experiences, give me its shipwrecks, give me its standings in the face of death, give it me surrounded with savages with spears and clubs, give it me back again with spears flying about me, with the club knocking me to the ground, give it me back, and I will still be your missionary."

Copied by Jason Butte for [www.SowingtheWord.org](http://www.SowingtheWord.org) from *The Book of Missionary Heroes* by Basil Mathews. New York: George H. Doran, ©1922.