

The Cannibal King

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by Spencer Grey

In the late 19th century a young girl named Laura was a student in the Chatham School, and, so far as her classmates knew, was just like them. But in fact Laura's great grandfather on her mother's side had been a Hawaiian king, and her paternal great-grandfather was John Young, a boatswain from Truro who had jumped ship in Hawaii and married one of King Kamehameh's daughters. As was the custom, the king had multiple wives, in his case 21, the favorite of which weighed 400 pounds and was his sister, as was customary. With that many wives, it is not surprising that he had many daughters, so John Young had plenty of options. The one he chose to marry was equally large and enjoyed eating small dogs that had been fed nothing but fermented roots, apparently making them a delicious treat. John and his wife had several children who were raised as Cape Codders rather than Hawaiians, and he became the king's favorite son-in-law and his close adviser. When the children were still young, King Kamehameha died and was succeeded by his son, Kamehameha II, who had to do some fast talking to keep the chiefs from eating the body, as was customary, especially the brain for their intellect and the heart for their compassion.

Shortly after his succession, some missionaries who had been invited to the island by his father arrived and were given a huge welcoming party by the new king. Soon after their arrival, Kamehameha II and his favorite wife traveled to England, where they contracted measles and died. The old king's 400-pound sister took over and ruled for nine years until the king's younger brother was old enough to ascend to the throne. Unfortunately at that time measles that had been brought to the island by whalers had taken the lives of thousands of the natives, who had no immunity to the disease, including that of the young king.

The next in line for the throne was Alexander Liholiho, the king's grandson, who married the granddaughter of John Young, Emma Fanny Young, at the Episcopal Church. When he became king she ordered her coronation gown from Boston, which was delivered to her by a whaling ship. On the day he was crowned as Kamehameha IV, he held an elaborate coronation ceremony attended by all of the notable people of the island, including members of the Masons and the Odd Fellows. Emma Fanny, who looked more like a Yankee than a Hawaiian, was close friends with the missionary families. Her husband, however, felt no such friendship because when he had traveled to Washington, D.C. with his brother as a young boy, he had been required to show his Hawaiian credentials before they would allow him to travel in the "white" section of the railroad. Emma Fanny's first child was a boy who would have become Kamehameha V, but he died shortly after he was christened, ending the direct dynasty. Their second child was a girl whom they named Laura, but at that time the situation in Hawaii was growing less hospitable toward those of royal blood, and the next king was overthrown. England and the United States were vying for control of the islands and after the new queen was ousted, a republic was established.

As the youngest member of the royal family, Laura was in danger under the new government. But at this point Captain Hiram Harding of Chatham put into Hawaii to pick up a load of sandalwood. Realizing Laura's dangerous situation, he decided to take her with him to Chatham for safekeeping. After stopping in Boston to buy Laura a new set of clothes, he brought her to live with him in Chatham, where she grew up and went to school, but her schoolmates had no idea that she was the granddaughter of a cannibal king.

