

ADVENTURES IN PAPUA

WITH THE CATHOLIC MISSION

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By BEATRICE GRIMSHAW.

(Continued.)

The Mekeo Plain.

A nun, in a dark-blue cotton robe, riding gallantly astride of a rough bush horse, her forget-me-not colored veil streaming out under a huge 'convent' hat, her strong, nailed miner's boots set firmly in the stirrup; another nun, bobbing neatly along on a side-saddled mare; an ordinary woman riding after, through the green, green dusk of the Papuan forest. That was the picture.

I was seeing the Mekeo plain, and the Sisters of the Catholic Mission (Order of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart) were guiding me. You cannot well see the Mekeo plain without the help of the Mission, as there are practically no other whites in the district. And one would not recommend the average tourist to see it anyhow, though the Mission folk—Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters—are the kindest and the most hospitable in the world, because their gay disregard of the peculiarly unpleasant collection of fevers exhibited by Mekeo, the casual manner in which they treat pythons, wild boars, and alligators, and their total indifference to chances of shipwreck, might be trying to the unseasoned traveller. I cannot say I did not find it trying myself, though I was well seasoned. For an amiable, gentle, pious, dare-devil commend me to a Sister of the Catholic Mission let loose in the Papuan forests.

A Sister of the Mission, when she is not praying, or teaching, or tending native babies rescued from murderous cannibal parents, or making clothes, or cooking, or mending fences, or carpentering, or milking cows, is usually engaged in some form of athletic exercises. Only she does not call it athletics, she calls it going about her business. She may be swimming a flooded river full of alligators, she may be riding a nasty-tempered horse on a broken cross saddle, she may be covering ten or twenty miles afoot, in a sun that would fry an egg; she may even be climbing a tree, rapidly and without premeditation, prayers on her lips and an infuriated wild boar or cassowary at her heels—but, in any case, she is going about her business. All the same, the flower of feminine athletes from high schools and ladies' colleges would find it hard to rival her on her own ground.

This district of Mekeo—a marshy plain some 20 miles square, lying close to the sea, brilliant, beautiful, scorchingly hot, full of mosquitoes and alligators, infested with malarial and black-water fever—is supposed to be the easy, the safe and agreeable part of the Mission territory—or, at least, so the Fathers told me; and I was too polite to contradict them, whatever I might have thought. The mountain district, to which I was going later, was (they told me) hard and trying. Here, in Mekeo, the elder missionaries were put because it was easier. Mekeo is thickly populated; it has many villages and towns, some with as much as five or six hundred inhabitants. Thirty years ago, many amongst these people were cannibals. None of them are cannibals to-day, and

Many of Them are Catholics.

Decent family life is replacing the polygamy of the older days; infanticide has ceased to be a popular pastime, though it is not yet wiped out. War, treacherous war, made up of midnight raids and massacres, torturings, burnings, devouring alive, used to be the sole occupation of adult manhood. It is gone; the Mission and the Government, working hand in hand, have freed Mekeo from that curse. The state of the district, after thirty-five years' mission work, is as heaven compared to hell. For all that, it is not so nice a place as it looks. There is a track leading from town to town, linking up all the chief places of the plain; it was cut

through the dense primeval forests, with incredible labor and pains, and is, for Papua, a wonderful road. Nevertheless, it is gridironed by torrential unbridged rivers, and swamps full of alligators; it is eked out by long stretches of black sand beach, incredibly hot and tiring to walk upon; and it is supplemented only by the roughest of forest tracks. This makes transport difficult and expensive, and travel fatiguing, although the Mekeo trip is considered quite a picnic journey—for Papua.

This picnic had begun somewhere in the small hours of the day, one September morning, with a boat trip across five miles or so of open sea, from Yule Island, the headquarters of the Mission, to the Mekeo coast. Hall Sound is sometimes stormy; the boats are small. There have been quite a number of small wrecks in consequence, but, so far, no member of the Mission has been drowned, and a miss is as good as a mile. So they think at Yule Island.

It had gone on with a walk of some miles, in the hottest hours of the day, on the hottest parts of one of the hottest coasts in the world. The sand was black and soft; the sun was overhead. Pinupaka, the landing place, with its cool, swinging palms, and green flags of banana leaf, its peaked brown houses set up on long-legged piles, its painted, mop-haired men and women, lightly dressed in a bit of bark or a fringe of grass, was a long way behind. Waima, our destination, was several hours in front. It seemed like an all-day walk, but, luckily, certain very old and melancholy horses were procured at a little plantation where two of the Brothers live, and the nuns and I rode them in turns thereafter.

(It was of no consequence, but we had already crossed several creeks known to be the haunt of dangerous alligators—the sort of alligator that grows old and cunning on one particular 'beat,' and becomes the terror of all the neighboring villages. The creeks were low enough for us to wade, to be carried over. Sometimes, when the tide is up, you have to struggle across up to your neck, or swim. It is then that the alligator adventures occur. A little while before, a Tasmanian Sister, swimming across one of these creeks, had been chased by an alligator, and just got over in time. The other Sisters told me that it was 'most inconvenient' for poor Sister A—; she was carrying her skirt on her head, and in the hurry of getting away she allowed it to become wet, which delayed her on her journey. . . . 'They will not trouble us, Mademoiselle; it is really not at all often that one sees them,' assured the elder of my guides.)

The description of quiet little Waima, reached in the twilight, may stand for all the other stations of Mekeo. There are thirty-five of them, and all are much alike.

A church, partly or wholly of corrugated iron, with a few rude seats, a home-made Communion rail, and an altar decorated only by the hands of the missionaries themselves . . . pitiful brave shifts to hide the barest poverty—jam jars and bottles cunningly disguised in gilt paper and cardboard to make altar vases; calico flowers; candlesticks cut out of tin. A house for the Fathers and Brothers—built of wattle-sticks, with chairs, tables, and beds all carpentered roughly from the nearest bush material. A house for the Sisters, much the same. A school also built of sticks, with rude make-shifts for desks and benches. A tiny plot of garden ground, where some handfuls of carrots, half a score of aubergines, a couple of bean plants, struggle feebly in the sandy ground. These latter are the luxury of the station—these, and the milk of the station cow, and the few eggs of the very few fowls.

There is No Superfluity of Anything

on these mission stations. The whole Mission, with its seventy-seven white workers, its hundreds of native children in the schools, its cattle, horses, boats, and expenses of every kind, is run on a sum little over two thousand and a half a year, which is something very like a miracle when one comes to think it out. The houses in these out stations have practically no furniture. The Fathers and Brothers have barely enough common shirts and trousers (of the kind worn by miners