

ADVENTURES IN PAPUA

WITH THE CATHOLIC MISSION

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By BEATRICE GRIMSHAW.

(Continued)

It was at Beipaa that I saw one of the most curious things I have ever seen in Papua—the cemetery town.

There was something about Beipaa itself that was difficult to understand, at first sight—the alleged number of inhabitants. Six hundred was the figure as given to me; but even in the late afternoon, when all the hunting and fishing parties were home, and the women had come back from the yam gardens, the big main street seemed rather thinly filled—considering the six hundred. Where could the rest of them be?

The Answer was Simple—in the Graveyards.

The town had not been suffering from any epidemic; on the contrary, it was in a very healthy state; but none the less, a good proportion of its inhabitants were among the tombs, and likely to remain there for an indefinite time.

I went to see. The place has three cemeteries, each very large, and all carefully fenced in with pig fences of wattled sticks, furnished here and there with stiles. Following the Sister who was my guide, I climbed over the stile of the cemetery nearest to Beipaa itself, and there, apparently, was another town, low, straggling, ill-built, but a town all the same, with people eating and carrying food, men and women moving about, numbers of little, roughly-built houses, some of them mere roofs set on the ground.

'Look,' said the Sister, beckoning me under a roof so low that I had to stoop down to the earth.

Inside was brown dusk, with the sunset light sifting in through the rustling leaves of the thatch. A formless heap, covered with bark cloth lay upon the ground. It stirred as we came in and a woman raised her head. She was yellow-pale; her eyes were like deep wells with a spark of smoky fire somewhere at the bottom; her body was a crate of bones.

'That is a widow,' the Sister said. 'They make the widows lie on their husband's graves like this,' just sheltered by a roof, all the time of mourning. They must never be seen out in daylight, and they have to live on what is brought to them by relatives; this poor creatures cries nearly all the time.'

The woman was moaning, and clinging to the Sister's dark blue habit. I never saw a face more wretched.

'How long must she stay here?'

'Until she takes black—puts on the black soot paint you have seen them wear. That may be as much as a year. Poor things, they are very unhappy, shut up so long,' said the Sister, caressing the pitiful, dirty skeleton in the bark wrapper.

'Are there many widows?'

'Oh, very many. I will show you some more.'

The next widow was certainly a change. She was young, fat, and well-looking; she was not lying on her husband's grave, with her head hidden under a mat, but peeping coily out from under the grave-house roof; and may I never see a widow again, if she was not looking and laughing towards the lodge that sheltered a more or less disconsolate young widower, also doing his time in the cemetery.

When a widow is young and pretty, she is not expected to mourn so long as the older and uglier relicts. There would not be much use in expecting, to judge by some of those I saw. Though conventionally in the depths of grief, and unable to tear themselves away from the loved one's tomb, they were obviously getting bored, and ready to take interest in anything that might happen to divert the dulness of graveyard duty. It goes without saying that disconsolate young widowers offer the easiest and most effectual diversion.

Not far away, in another cemetery, were a father and mother seated on a stage that overlooked the grave of their only child. They were thin and worn

with grieving; their faces were hopelessly sad. They had been there for many months, sitting all day on the staging, and at night watching the fires that are built at head and foot of the newer graves, to keep the ghosts away. This seemed a smaller and quieter graveyard than the first; there were fewer young men and women in it, and less of the hurried scuffling in and out of grave-houses, as stranger footsteps drew near. Ashes of fires lay beside the newer graves; the older ones had worn down to mere unmarked heaps of sand, where no one mourned, or slept, or lighted watch-fires any more.

A strange sight, even in the full blaze of noon, are these cities of the living and the dead. They must be stranger still at night, for then custom, which confines the mourners more or less strictly during the day, allows them to come forth from the tombs, and wander about like ghosts. Some of them, still new to loss, run up and down beneath the moon, wailing and crying, and calling out on the lost one's name. Some feast, some tend the fires, some make love to other mourners. When dawn breaks, the shadowy creatures flit back again to the graves, and hide from the light of the day. After a period, longer or shorter according to age and sex, the mourner 'takes black'—puts on a suit of black paint, made of coconut oil and ashes—and joins in the life of the village again. The black is allowed to wear away gradually; when it is gone, the time of mourning is considered to be over.

This Custom of Living in the Cemeteries

is at its worst in Beipaa; but all over Mekeo it is one of the greatest troubles that the missionaries have to contend with. Morally, physically, and psychically, it is bad, and the Mission fights it steadily, with considerable success in many cases. The Papuan native is of all savages the most conservative, and the most deeply attached to his national customs; it takes generations of work to uproot his habits, and the Fathers have had much hard labor over this same matter of living among the tombs. They preach against it, they talk against it, they try to bring individuals out of the cemetery back into the village life, or to prevent them from going there at all. Their own converts, of course, are taught from the first not to practise the custom; and there can be no doubt that, in time, it will die out. But with the Papuan change comes slowly, and for the most part through the children, who have grown up under Mission influence and teaching. With the older savages, not very much can be done.

From Beipaa station I went on through the forest to Rarai with a couple of Sisters, who (of course) rode like lancers. One station in Mekeo is much like another; the houses put up by the coadjutor Brothers with a little native assistance are all the same—split slab and thatch, with 'bush' furniture—each school with its bright-eyed, naked children, learning English and arithmetic and reading and writing from the Sisters, carpentering, boat-building, and other useful work from Fathers and Brothers, is like every other school. That matter of English teaching is worth special notice. Papua is a tangle of different languages; the curse of Babel lies heavy on the land, and natives from one valley or mountain peak often cannot understand a word of the tongue spoken by those of the next. There is no language so suitable for general use among Papuans as English; they take to it like ducks to water, and one may often hear the police, or native servants of the Government, talking to each other in English, since, recruited from all parts of the territory they have no other means of communication. Some of the Protestant Missions choose a native language and teach it to all their converts from different places. This gives the converts a measure of communication among themselves, but locks them up from intercourse with the whites. The Catholic Mission thinks it best for the interests of their charges

That English Should be the Language Taught, and it is. (Most of the teachers being foreigners, it is a comical thing to hear a naked, painted Papuan savage addressing you in schoolroom English flavored with the

Ken. Mayo

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