Dark Mysteries of Papua

"She is still the Dark Island, the untamable, the unknown."

EAST is east and west is west, and the South Seas are the South Seas, even if they happen to be north of the Equator. But what may one call the place that is far east of the furthest east, west of any west one can name, that is not the South Seas as men know these regions, that is hardly Australasian, certainly not Malaysian—that is, in fact, nothing but itself.

One may call it New Guinea, and one may recognize it as the jumping-off place, the end of the world. It lies just north of Australia, out of the track of all ordinary journeying. New Guinea was here on the road to anywhere in ancient or in modern times; true, it runs within ninety miles of the point of northernmost Queensland, but the passage for ships is right at the Queensland end of the ninety, and the corresponding New Guinea coast, even at the present day, is most dangerous to navigate. Further, North Queensland is an outback place in itself—tropical, feverish and little inhabited by whites.

Explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, on the lookout for new trade routes, sometimes passed north and south of New Guinea, but they knew the formidable reputation of the place and meddled with it as little as might be. The country was discovered in 1511 by Antonio de Abrega, and the subsequent 300 years that saw conquest after conquest, civilization after civilization, rise and fall in neighboring Malaysia, that saw Australia discovered, settled, partly civilized, left never a mark on the great dark island lying north of New Holland.

In convict days a few escaped criminals, almost as savage as the New Guinea natives themselves, found their way to the unknown country, but most of them met with a speedy end. It was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that the coastline of the southern side was mapped out completely. And it was not till twenty years later that any kind of settlement began, though stray traders, officials and missionaries had been for some while resident in the country.

Today the white people residing in the section known as Papua—formerly British New Guinea—number rather less than 1,000, although the area of Papua is 90,000-odd square miles, and the country is 800 miles long. The whole island continent of New Guinea, including the Dutch-owned half, and British newly acquired late German territory, is 235,000 square miles, 1,500 miles in length, with 430 miles at the widest part.

Australia took over the government of the country in 1906, and it is only fair to acknowledge that she has done better with it than England did in the crown colony days. White settlement and population have increased, many thousand acres of virgin forest have been cleared and planted with rubber, cocoanuts and other tropic cultures; the natives have been pacific all 'round the coastline and for considerable distances inland. Towns have arisen; steamship services, not perhaps of the best, have been kept running at fairly regular intervals. Hospitals have been built, Government doctors appointed. Roads have been made here and there, as funds permitted. Civilization, at last, has touched New Guinea.

But she still resists; she is still the Dark Island, the untamable, the unknown. It takes much money to explore her enormous mountain ranges, rising 13,000 feet in height; her torrential rivers, broken with hundreds of rapids and waterfalls; to prospect, amid incredible difficulties, for the gold and the osmiridium, the gems, the oil, the coal, known to exist in their interior. Australia has not got the money; the country must be, and is, run with the strictest, most pinching economy. It speaks well for the rulers that so much has actually been done.

You can live, if you choose, the safest, most prosaic, most ordinary of lives in Papua. You can take an ugly, hot, little iron house in one of the settlements, attend tennis parties and bridge parties, go to picture shows, and earn your living in various commercial or official ways, just as in Brixton, London, or in Darlinghurst, Sydney. There will be local color of some sort. The accomplished, civil, cooky boy who steals your tea and kerosene so politely, the laundry boy who "does up" muslin dresses and white shirts, will possibly be cannibals in their home village, up Eufi or Mambere way—or possibly not.

The flat blue sea before your veranda will, in the third quarter of the year, bloom into sudden picturesqueness; canoes setting forth on the yearly argosy to the west; brown women, dressed only in swinging crinolines of grass, will crowd your trading store to buy tinned cake and peaches; brown men, largely clad in beads, a bird-of-paradise tail set sweepingly in the hugest head of hair known to the world, will offer models of native houses and canoes for sale. There will be dances, of nights, in the native villages — dances where the dress, or absence of it, is entirely savage and the steps and songs have been handed down from cannibal days. But life will be prosaic enough on the whole, very safe, very ordinary, and the tennis afternoons and the horse races on the beach will be quite like tennis afternoons and horse races anywhere else, from Brighton to Tahiti and all the way back again.

Behind all this—behind the little settlements and the plantation country, and the few primitive roads—lies Papua herself, offering just as much, or as little, adventure, discovery, peril, as you are prepared to go looking for and pay for. The factor of expense must never be neglected. Adventure is not cheap. And the more adventure, the dearer.

Year by year the Australian Government has been pushing back savagery, wiping out cannibalism, bringing wild tribe after wild tribe under control. Thirty years ago you had a very fair chance of being knocked on the head and eaten anywhere a little behind the coast. Twenty years ago the greater part of the country was unsafe. Ten years ago much of the western coast and the deltas of the great rivers were places where you could in one afternoon leap from comparative civilization to utter savagery. Today, if you want to meet the untamed cannibal in his home, you must fit out a small expedition to reach him, and when you do it is fortunately probable that the tales he has heard of a mysterious power called "Govamen" will restrain him from adding you to the menu.

But if you go still further, if you dip into the country where no patrols have been, where no exploring party has yet passed—if you strike the districts where no white man has been seen or heard of—you will run into danger, and until you leave that district you will carry your life, night and day, in your hand. Such is the price of travel.

What will you get for the price? In towns, still savage, at the back of the settled districts—in towns about the coastline here and there that were savage a few years ago—you will get no end of fun, at a fairly cheap rate. Amazing native art and architecture, wonderful dances, astonishing dresses, curious intriguing native customs by the score, beautiful scenery, the loveliest bird life in the world, tropically splendid flowers and butterflies, all these lie within easy reach. There may be a local boat going down the coast; if there is not, you can hire a launch and crew. Probably you will need both, in any case, for the rivers. Food must be bought; the settlements sell it. Tents must be carried for shelter. All in all, the trip is not so very dear; it is safe and it is wonderful.

Up in the interior you must have your carriers, a score or more; you must bring their food and your own, and tents, and firearms for yourself and your licensed shooting boys, to insure a supply of game. A few days' tramp inland takes you far from all traces of white influence, except the wholesome repute and fear of "Govamen."

Here you can see the little men of the ranges, practically dwarfs, and their incredible houses bracketed on to needle-shaped peaks; you can witness dances still more wonderful than those of the coast, hear strange savage music, see mountain scenery that no words can picture or pictures represent.

You can touch primitive man, living still in the Stone Age; you can sleep in villages of cannibal tribes, and find them good fellows and friendly, though they will interpose an iron wall of reserve between themselves and any inquisitive questions about their man-eating ways. You can know the strange experience of looking, as over a precipice, down the long, long rise that your race has mounted, foot by foot; you can learn things that you will never impart, because there are no words in white men's tongues to represent them. You touch mystery here; adventure hangs upon your steps.

Risk? Yes, some degree. In the borderland, where little known almost meets unknown, the tribes may show treachery; friendship may turn, in a day, in an hour, to something else. It is likely that nothing of the kind will happen; still, the chance is there. Much more immediate is the chance of trouble from fever. There is plenty of malaria; most people suffer from it "more" or less. If it happens to be "more," and if the attack takes place very far inland, there may be grave difficulty in getting back, or there may be no getting back at all. But—again one must repeat—this is only possible, not likely.

The crossing of flooded rivers and the adventures of rapids in launches or canoes are the greatest dangers of the back country. Risk, almost equal, hangs about your carriers; they may run away, taking the stores with them—a serious misfortune, as you may be starved or reduced to such a low state for want of proper food that you cannot resist the attack of the always present malarial bacillus. Still Government patrol officers and a few good missionaries encounter these risks year by year and survive them.

Also they encounter the risks of snakebite, of attack from alligators, of accident, slight or serious; the precipitous mountain tracks, and do not often come to grief. The pleasure, to any one in good health and condition, and not afraid of roughing it, is well worth any risks there may be. The cost is another matter. You must have a few loose hundreds lying round if you want to travel right into the interior and make camp at various places for some months—less is scarcely worth while.

Real exploring is for the very few, the supremely fit, for the strongest man at his best, for those who have funds running into thousands. It means months of killing exertion; the danger of every kind that New Guinea can show. It has slain many a good man in the history of the country; some directly, others indirectly. African exploration is an easy matter compared with the difficulties of Papuan travel, where there can be no use of any pack animal save man; where much of the way is sheer climbing, and attack from hostile natives must be thought of and provided against, in the midst of all other difficulties, day and night.

There are secrets still untouched in the heart of New Guinea—more gold to be found, more oil, rivers to be traced, unconquered mountains to be climbed, large areas of unknown country to be visited, where one may discover races and customs unlike any hitherto known to man. The country is a storehouse of new things. Every now and then a collector, sent out by some rich man gifted with scientific tastes, finds butterflies and moths that no one has seen before; birds, too, undescribed in any work or ornithology. There are rumors of new animals. Sometimes, as in the case of the tree-climbing kangaroo, rumor justifies itself. Again, the legend persists, unsubstantiated, through generation after generation.

The "devil pig," many sizes larger than the common wild boar, has been seen by natives, but the white man has only come upon its tracks. There are tales of an iguana larger than the largest six-foot specimen known to hunters and collectors; a creature with the fierceness of an alligator, much feared by inland tribes, who declare that it chases them even up trees and tears them to pieces. It may exist, or it may not. Tailed men, according to the New Guinea native, exist in the far interior; the most circumstantial accounts are offered of their anatomy and their ways, but the explorer, pressing day by day into the unknown, finds, day by day, that the tailed man ever eludes him. Invariably the Papuan with a tail "all same doggy-dog" is just over the next range.

Veiled women, wearing the dress of an Eastern lady, eye-holes and all, have been found by explorers in the heart of a country where, as a general rule, short grass kilts or nothing are the custom. A Government expedition quite recently discovered man in armor; it is true the armor was made of iron-hard split cane instead of metal, but it was complete and not at all unlike the medieval patterns worn by our own ancestors.

There is a place where an expedition, starved out, had to turn back some years ago; where no one has ventured since. At that place a lookout on the top of a mountain shows something that recalls the wildest tales of Edgar Allan Poe. For many miles the whole country is sloped and tilted downward, toward one central spot, much as the water in a basin slopes when the plug is withdrawn. In the middle of all there seems to be a gigantic funnel or opening. Where it leads to, and what it is, no one knows. It is not the common volcano formation; the place is said to look as if "the country had turned inside out and fallen through." Some day another expedition will go a little further and the secret will be told.

Outside the settlement of Samarai, a pretty island town, another of Papua's mysteries lurks beneath the waters of a narrow strait. There, at the depth of some twenty-five fathoms, there is a giant octopus, living in what seems to be a small extinct submarine crater. It has been seen by quite a number of divers, since the strait is a well-known pearl fishery, and both shell and pearls in large quantity have been obtained from it in past times. Now the place is fished out, save for certain masses of magnificent shell that crust the neighborhood of the giant octopus.

The depth is great, but the divers might venture if it were not for "her," as the creature is called. "She" has been described to me (by one Silva, a diver) as possessed of eyes two feet in diameter and tentacles longer than the masts of an island schooner. It was proposed at one time to get "her" with the aid of an electrically exploded dynamite charge, but that necessitated careful placing of the charge, and no one could be found who fancied the job. Since the war more than one person has talked of depth bombs, but depth bombs are not kept in stock by the stores, and, anyhow, as an islander callously stated, no

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one has any particular use for "her" even if "she" were blown out of her hole.

One supposes, all the same, that the chance of octopoda (or decapoda) may in time inspire some scientific society to look the matter up. The strait known to be inhabited by "her" is a very narrow strip of water, only a few hundred yards across, separating the island of Gesila from the mainland of Papua. Mail steamers call within two miles. Small octopoda are very common about the edges of the strait, a fact that points to some special fitness of the neighborhood for the support of these forms of life.

Sea serpents have been seen off the coasts of Papua, and one of them enjoyed the unusual distinction of being vouched for by a high dignitary of the Catholic Church, the late Archbishop Navarre, who was in his study on Yule Island when an enormous sea beast, of form unknown, rose out of the ocean and terrified every one on the shore so much that they all rushed inland and shut themselves up in houses, even the native military police taking part in the general flight. The Archbishop saw the animal and watched it till it sank, after which he went on with his theological treatise.

Pigmies have been, from time immemorial, known to exist among the mountains, but very few of them were seen until of late years. The Dutch half of the country has the smallest people. In (British) Papua there are tribes that can fairly be called dwarf, attainable in about three days' journey from the coast of Mekeo. The women are no taller than an eight-year-old child, and the men are often under five feet. I have stayed among these people and found them friendly and very interesting, amazingly strong and athletic and fond of performing incredible feats of agility among the rocks and precipices of their country. They are very good musicians. By nature they are cannibal and of a quarrelsome type, but in these days they have given up much of their ancient fighting ways and become peaceful. They do not, like most pigmies, use poisoned arows—only spears and clubs.

Until a few years ago it was supposed that native life ceased at 7,000 or 8,000 feet, the higher and colder region being inhabited only by wild dogs and mountain pigs. But it occurred to some one to go and test this theory with astonishing result. As far as 10,000 feet wild women were found, unacquainted even with the existence of white people. They are a miserable and degraded race, who suffer considerably from the cold of the evenings and nights, since they have no clothes and no blankets of any kind, and it never seems to have occurred to them that if they migrated a few thousand feet downward cold need never trouble them again.

An early explorer once said of New Guinea, as a whole, that travel in that country resembled nothing so much as the progress of an ant going up and down the teeth of a comb. Those of us who know the interior are only too ready to endorse his statement. It is the geographical peculiarities of New Guinea that have made it what it is—a land of mysteries. Mysteries demand shut doors; the place of New Guinea on the map—at the end of everywhere, and the beginning of nowhere—added to the unique difficulties of travel and transport which it presents, have been, and are, the doors that keep its secrets.

BEATRICE GRIMSHAW.

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