

# The Forest of Lost Men

by Beatrice Grimshaw

*The knack of catching the special breath of perfumed adventure that goes with the tropical breezes of jungle islands is one that not every writer can possess. Beatrice Grimshaw is one of the fortunates, for there is something of the South Sea isles which strikes the poetic fancy—their remoteness, the apparent idyllic lack of history, their primitive lushness. To only a few is it given to be able to describe that extra eeriness that hangs in the air of these remaining bits of "terra incognita." In this instance, Miss Grimshaw may have been assisted by something more substantial than a mood. For in a note she says that "names, dates and to some extent circumstances have been altered, but the Forest of Lost Men exists."*

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DON'T mind talking to you (he said)— you've been in the big bush yourself, and you know.

It's those new chums I can't stand, the fellows out from Home that knows it all before they ever set foot on a coral beach. They know everything, and they believe nothing; if you tell them anything that couldn't have happened at four o'clock in the afternoon in the Strand, London, they think right off you're "having the loan of them."

It was one of that kind that went up the Kikiramu with me the year after the war; he couldn't learn anything, he thought—but the Kikiramu learned him.

His name was Harlow, a nice fellow enough, if he hadn't been so sure and certain that human knowledge began and ended with what they stuff down their throats in lectures. Cambridge, he was—science of some sort; one of the lost chicks of them exploring expeditions that come out every year in the dry, to find what no one's ever found before. And maybe some of them does find it, those who get fever and die; but the rest of 'em never finds much beyond the last plantation in the hills, where they can get a drink.

And they spend their money, and go home, them who can; but the rest stops, and sometimes it's bad for them. I've known one to sit down in an

armchair in broad daylight in front of a hotel and blow his brains out with a revolver that was bought but not paid for at the store.

Harlow hadn't got to that yet; he had a bit left, and he was all on to gamble and make it more, like they do in the books about Monty Carlo. I'd been south with a good shammy (*to Sydney with a lot of gold*), and I was back, broke. Where there's gold in New Normandy—and it isn't an island proper, but a country of itself, so gold takes finding—I'll find it. I've lived that way, cleaning up a thousand or so a year, but spent it as quick as it came, ever since the Second Jubilee.

Well, we got together, and went up the Kikiramu, mates. You know how it is when you're mates with a man; you've got to find the best in him, and he in you; and you've got to stick, no matter what happens. I could tell you things—but you've lived in the bush yourself: you know. . . .

After we'd had a week together on the river, crawling up it in a canoe, and camping among the alligators in the mud, and being bit by sand-flies and mosquitoes about all the time, though sometimes worse, I got to like Harlow quite a bit, because all the time I was learning him, and it's natural.

I learned him to "crack hardy" when it rained on us twelve inches in six hours, and the flour got melted, and the bed-sacks, so that you could have wrung a horse's ration of water out of them. And when we walked so far the first day we landed that we ached too much to sleep, but by four o'clock we had to be up and on, for a worse day! Things like that. It done him so much good, you wouldn't believe.

But for all I was making him over, I couldn't get him to change his mind about the things and people in the bush, which he knew nothing of any more than a monkey knows about mathematics. Of course, he let on he knew everything.

We got to the field, which was at the bottom of a river gorge thousands of feet deep, and I staked claims for both, and we set our boys to work getting down to the wash. There was unknown tribes about us in the bush, which was a hundred or two feet high, and as thick as hairs on a new hair-brush. I didn't take any notice of them, and they took none of us, except sometimes when they came and pegged spears among us, themselves hid so that you couldn't see 'em. I'd fire a shot at random, and let it go. But Harlow, he was keen as terriers after rats, about those useless heathen. Keener than he was after the gold. Most of the work was done by me, in fact; as soon as he knew (for I was fool enough to tell him) that the Lakalakas was unknown to whites, you couldn't hold him.

"Let them alone, and they'll let you alone," I told him, one night when we were sitting together as far away from the boys' camp-fires as we could get, fighting mosquitoes over a little smoke of our own. "If once you get them snake-headed," I told him, "they'll show their spite—catch a boy and roast him alive on a stick, maybe. They're used to being shot at," I told him, "but don't you go trying to find any of their villages, not if you value your life, and want to keep your signed-on labor."

He said, sitting there over the smoke, with his face dirty, but white under

the dirt, and his eyes as big and blue as a girl's full of that sort of ginger that one likes to see: "The name of science," says he, "is sacred," says he. "If I don't come to the claim tomorrow," he says, "you'll know I've gone to look."

He didn't come. That was the best day we'd had so far; it was Saturday, and I cleaned up, and it ran about a hundred ounces for the week; so, if you understand, I was pretty busy, and pretty well pleased, and hadn't much thought left for young Harlow. I reckoned he'd be all right.

When he came back, he dropped like a pig when you club it, right in the doorway of the tent. "I'm done," he said. "But oh, Tim Monahan," says he, "I'm so happy I could die this minute!"

Then he told me what he'd seen. He had that sort of beginner's luck makes a man lift gold out of a creek first time he tries, and maybe never again. He'd found what no one else had found,—a village of the Lakalakas—and they hadn't killed him for doing it. They were more or less pigmy, he told me, not the size of a boy of twelve, but bunches of muscle, and all naked except for boar-tusks and shells; and they had spears all carved and painted, like the ones they use to peg at us in the dark. He danced before them and sang, to show it was peace, and they were that pleased they took him by the hand, and led him to the men's house, which was full of all manner of queer things—heads and dried guts, among them. And it was too dark for photos, but he said, when he went away, "I'll come back," and made signs about returning.

"What do you think of it?" says he.

"I don't think," says I. "I've enough to do looking after two teams of boys and two men's claims, without taking time off to think."

"I'm sorry," says he, all grieved. "I didn't—I'm afraid I've not been exactly playing the game; but after I've got my photos," says he, "it'll be all right." And he went to sleep.

I called up my head boy by and by, a wicked young savage that I liked quite a bit, and he knew it, and would tell me things.

"What do you reckon they let him go for?" I said. "I remember a mate of mine when the Wakaka field broke out, that was taken and eat alive for less—eat by bits, cutting off what they wanted. And I went through a village for it, afterward. . . . What do you reckon?"

The boy said, straight away: "They think him mad."

"Oh!" says I. I understand. Savages won't kill a madman. But they will do queer things to him, if he gets across their hawser, in a way of speaking.

The boy stood up in the firelight, with the smoke curling round him like he was some picture of a heathen god in the clouds; a fine chap he was, clean as bronze, and clever in his own way; and it came to me then, how little we knew about any of them, after all.

"The Lakalakas," he said, "are very great sorcerers."

I didn't laugh, at that; nor you wouldn't. You know. . . .

"Well," said I, passing him out a fig of tobacco, to keep him going, "what sort do they do?"

He said something then that I can't translate; it was a native word meaning something like enchantment, putting spells on you; but, if you get me, it had to do with your surroundings too, and the way they was related to you.

"Oh," says I at once, "you mean the cursed forest."

He didn't say any more; he bit the fig of tobacco, and moved away, and I knew he meant: "You've got enough for your money." So I shut up.

But I thought a bit that night in spite of what I'd said about thinking; and in the morning I said to my mate: "You've got a nice little locket hanging on your watch-chain."

"If I have," said he, "whose business is—"

"I'm not asking what's in it," I said. "I lay she's a bonzer little lassie, anyhow. I reckon you'd better think about her, and think twice, before you set out after them Lakalaka men again. You got away once," says I, "and I reckon they won't kill you; but—"

"You mind your mining," he says, "and I'll attend to my science."

Well, I don't believe in interfering with people's fancies, even with the best intentions; many a man has spoiled a nice profile doing it. So I said no more. But I noticed him opening up the locket, later on that night, and looking hard at what was inside. If I happened to be walking behind him just at that moment, it was no fault of mine; and if I had a girl with that kind of hair that shows gold even in a photo, and eyes like hers, I wouldn't mind anybody taking a look. . . . She was handsome enough, too—I don't mean Harlow's lass. But she couldn't do with the mining; women are that way. And gold-mining, you never know how the years go. . . . I pay a bloke in Sydney to keep a few flowers on her grave, but most like he drinks the money. . . .

Well, I'm sorry; this isn't my yarn. I meant to say, that Harlow was as near as nothing to taking my advice, and keeping off of the Lakalakas. But he didn't. And next day he went out, and didn't come back.

When he'd been away a day and a night, I started after him. I took two or three carriers with me, loaded no more than thirty pounds apiece, because I thought there was maybe going to be work. One of them was the boy I'd been talking to; Hanua was his name.

"If you see one of the Lakalaka dogs," says I, "sing out." For though you never see one of the tribe unless they wanted, the dogs gave them away sometimes, coming and going for a drink, or looking at you out of the bush; small black dogs they were, that never made a noise, and didn't look natural nor real. Like the ghosts of dogs that have died and gone to hell, I used to think.

To walk through that country, it's like an ant going up and down the teeth of a comb. We climbed till the sweat ran off us like rain off a roof, and we went down sliding, and climbing again; and so it went on all morning till about one o'clock, when I called a halt, and got out the food.

While we were eating our tin and biscuit, Hanua, sitting near me, caught me by the arm and pointed. The small wicked face of a black dog was look-

ing out of the bush, just where you couldn't have taken two steps without cutting your way. I think it smelled the tinned meat, but it would come no nearer, not even when I threw a bit at it. It just lifted its lips and cursed us, like, and then it wasn't there.

But now I knew the Lakalakas was following us.

So did the carriers; and before I had time to do anything but pull my revolver out of my belt, not even time to threaten them with it, they had dropped their loads and was away. You can't follow a naked native into the bush. In two minutes, with hardly as much noise as would wake a sleeping cat, they had got down the side of the nearest gully, and was running along the stones at the bottom; and that was all I ever saw of them again. Or anyone else. . . . What? I don't know, and I don't want to think; some of them was decent boys enough.

Hanua, he finished chewing the wad of meat and biscuit he had in his mouth, and then he says: "You-me go look, suppose you die, me die." And he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and stood up. And I clapped him on the shoulder, and I says: "Suppose no die, you live with me."

It was up and down again after that, up and down fit to break the heart of a goat or any army mule, only neither one of them could have gone where we were going. And hot. And there was snakes; I trod on a tiger snake, and he just missed me; and one of them pythons swung out of a tree, yards of him, at Hanua, but Hanua slashed his head off with his clearing-knife, and never looked behind. We didn't have any time to spare; we were making for the village in the hills, and wanted to get there before dark, always provided the Lakalakas didn't spear us first.

Why they did not, considering they must have been following all the time, was what I didn't understand, and didn't much like. We saw no more of them, nor their dogs. And when we come, after an hour or more, on a bit of flat ground, the relief was that wonderful that I could have laid down and slept, just where I was.

It was thick with forest, bigger and blacker than any I had seen before. I couldn't remember the like of the trees, not exactly; they had red papery trunks, that bled like arms and legs when you hit them; and their leaves, a good way up, were long and thin like worms. A kind of fir-tree, maybe, but I didn't know it. It smelled bad in there, the sort of smell there is in a butcher's shop on a hot day; but there was nothing to account for it—it seemed just to be in the air. The bush ropes that tangled everything together, and that you had to cut through, same as in other places, wasn't like common bush ropes, not plain brown and green; but they was spotted red, and dirtied up with white, as if some one'd been spilling blood and brains on them. . . . What? Oh, yes, you do see that sort of thing in the bush, but not that much of it.

I stood on the edge of it all looking in, and I didn't like the look of it, but it was on the line I'd marked out with the compass, and we couldn't afford

to waste time. So in we went, and Hanua, he pulled a long breath or two through his teeth, and said nothing, but I knew what he thought.

"Come on, old son," I says, clapping his shoulder. "It can't take us ten minutes to go through, judging by the lie of the hills and the river, and I don't hold with that heathen rubbish, anyhow." For you see, there was chat about that place, though no other white man had ever seen it; and they said that it was cursed, in a way, and that when you got in, you couldn't get out again.

You may believe me or you may not, but I've looked up the place since, and there isn't room for it, anywhere, unless in a spot that's no more than half a mile across. Judging, that is, by the lie of the river, which we did map out careful, and did know—rivers with gold in them gets mapped out soon and good. I tell you, there's no room for it—but all the same, the boy and I walked all afternoon, and we didn't get across it. The compass was no good; I reckoned there must be an outcrop of ironstone somewhere about, though I can't say I seen it. We blazed the way as we went, and we didn't come back on any of our blazes.

When it came near dark, we undid the bit of tarpaulin that we carried instead of a tent, and we didn't light any fire, because of the Lakalakas. And Hanua and me, we sat down beside one another, because I reckoned he was a man, for all he was a naked savage, and we talked a bit, quiet, in his own native talk.

He says: "This is the Forest of Lost Men."

I says: "I've heard of it, but I don't understand. What is it?"

He says: "The sorcerers of the Lakalakas are greater than any other sorcerers, and they have put spells, big spells, on this place, and it goes for miles and miles. And it isn't really there, more than a little bit of it," he says: "but once you get into it, you go on walking and walking, and you walk till maybe you die."

"*Koi-koi!*" says I, which is what you say in the Islands, when you mean damn' nonsense.

"No *koi-koi*," he says, and sits with his head on his hand.

We never slept; it wasn't a place to sleep in. There was queer noises, like children crying, but there weren't no children there. You weren't quite sure if you was there yourself; but all the same you knew, worse luck, that you was nowhere else. When the light came, late, through all those trees, we up and ate a bit. And we walked. And we walked. Like they used to do in Flanders, when the roads was a thousand miles long before a halt. And we walked.

And that night we slept a little, but we were hungry, because the food was near gone. And next day we walked. And we walked. And there was almost nothing left to eat, and no water except what we licked off the leaves of the trees in the early morning. And all the time it was the dark trees with the wormy leaves, and the bush ropes spotted dirty white and red. There

was no footmarks, nor anything of that kind; but we found a bit of necktie stuck on a thorn, and it was blue with stripes, the color of Harlow's school tie, which he thought a lot of. So we knew we were on the right track, if that was any good to anyone, we being all in the same box now.

End of the next day, Hanua says: "They been following us somewhere outside this place," he says; "and when we drop, they'll come in. The sorcerers will come and take us away," he says, "and even the dogs will be full tonight," he says.

All of a sudden I gave a whoop. "The dogs!" I says. You see, I'd got an idea. I was a cattle-hand once in the Northern Territory, and it learns you to be quick. Or dead.

"I reckon," I says, talking to myself for a bit, "that you can't enchant a dog. If there's such a thing as enchantment. Because," I says to myself, "you must have a soul for them games, and a dog he has no soul."

We'd kept one little bit of meat for the last, and I took it, and used the last of the matches to make fire with. And I hung the meat before the fire on a scrap of bark fiber, and I cut myself a length of small bush rope, tough as a whip. And I waited.

It was near half an hour before the thing I was waiting for, happened. Just as the light was beginning to go, at the time those dogs come out to get a drink in the rivers, and hunt food in the bush,—because their masters they don't feed them, except when there's plenty of roast enemy about,—just then, I saw a small black wicked face looking out of the bush, and a small black snout working up and down, at the smell of the cooking meat.

Hanua, he didn't move no more than one of the trees, and I stayed quiet. The dog put out its head, and half its body, and then it stopped. But that was enough for me; I had the loop of the bush creeper around its body, from twenty feet away, before you could wink,—and it kicking like a roped bullock, more than you'd think that anything ten times its size could have done.

We got the tarpaulin over it in a minute, and it bit right through it like it was an alligator, and near took a piece out of me. It did get a bite at Hanua, before we had the rope knotted safe around its neck, and let it go.

We kept hold of that rope the way a drowning man keeps hold of the life-line they throw him from the beach. And we followed the dog, where it went. And in ten minutes—you may call me a liar if you like, because it don't make any difference to me—we were out of the wood, and it was only a black patch of trees behind us, looking not much bigger than you could throw a stone across.

We cut the line, and let the little devil of a dog go; and Hanua, he burned his arm with a firestick, to take the poison out. And we got back to the camp, I don't just know how, for it came on dark in no time at all, and the compass was still cronk—is to this day.

Afterwards we had all the men on the field out looking, and maybe we found the wood that was cursed, and maybe we didn't; there was nothing

to tell us. If we did, it wasn't working, for nobody got lost. But I reckon we never came across it at all.

We didn't find Harlow, either. Only the other half of his necktie, floating down the river, miles away. . . .

What? Oh, no, they don't kill lunatics; and they didn't kill him. He turned up again, like his necktie. It was in Sydney, a year after, and no one knows to this day what he saw, or how he got down to the coast again. The yarn he pitched—and he quite believed it—was that he had looked for the Lakalaka villages, didn't find any, never saw the tribes at all, and had an attack of fever in the bush that took away his memory.

I don't know about fever. Something did; that's sure. The less you know about those matters, the better; I'd sell a lot of what I remember, for half of nothing with the tail cut off.

I sent his share of the gold we won. It was after that that he got married, to the girl in the locket. . . . Me? No. The bush has got me, and you know what that is.