



# World Letters

Incorporated

Distance travelled from New York, 18,125 miles.  
 Noon here is 8:00 p.m. of the previous day in New York.  
 Port Vila, Nouvelles Hebrides.  
 Vila, New Hebrides. November 5, 1934.

Dear Fellow-traveller:-

Well, let's begin back where these islands were only a dim, blue cloud on the horizon. There was the usual excitement aboard the "Van Rees" of coming into port. Sailors cleared the after hatch to be ready to discharge and take on cargo. Steam was run into the powerful winches that hoist the stout rope slings. The winches were oiled and given a few experimental turns to see that they worked properly. The anchor chain was unblocked, ready to let the huge two-ton anchor slide into the clear, green water. Then the bos'n ran up the flags both fore and aft.

When a ship comes into port it carries the flag of its own country at the stern. The house flag of the company that owns the ship is flown from the main-mast. The flag of the country the ship is visiting is hoisted on the foremast. ~~Imagine how surprised I was to see both the~~ British and the French flags run up.

"What are we doing, visiting two countries at once?" I asked the Chief Officer.

"That's exactly it," he replied. "This is a condominium!"

Condominium, condominium? The word isn't even in my dictionary. But you cannot be in the New Hebrides very long before you know a lot about the one and only condominium in the world.

You will find the New Hebrides marked on your World Letters strip map. Under the name, in parentheses, it says "Br. & Fr." I thought that meant that some of the islands belonged to Great Britain and others of the group belonged to France. But it means nothing of the sort. The New Hebrides belong to both France and Great Britain together.

That is what a condominium is, a territory or country that is ruled jointly by two different nations. There is no need of our going into history here, but if you are interested in the fascinating tales of exploration and discovery in the South Pacific, tales of the days when hardy seamen and adventurers scouted and scoured the world for new places where they could plant their nation's flag for the glory of growing empires, if you will read these old stories you will find that both Englishmen and Frenchmen "discovered" the New Hebrides and both claimed these valuable, tropical islands for their respective countries.

We have been taught to speak of America as the New World, but I think we ought to admit that the "New" part is really out in this sector of the globe. We have already visited New Guinea, and New Britain. We sailed round the end of New Ireland, that long, slim island off the eastern end of New Britain. New Caledonia, where we shall be next week, lies just south of us, and here we are

in the New Hebrides. But have a close look at the stamp that brought your Rabaul letter to you. It says "Nouvelles Hebrides" (N~~y~~-vel-z~~A~~-bred) on it, the French name of the islands.

The first thing we did when we went ashore was to go to the post office. It was a two story wooden building with a red, corrugated iron roof. Like nearly all the buildings in Port Vila (V~~e~~-la) it stood on stilts four feet above the ground. Two flag poles reached up from the wide veranda. From one fluttered the French flag and from the other the British. Inside we found a British postmaster at one window. At the other window was his partner, the French postmaster. The Frenchman sold the stamps such as went on your letter. The only difference in the stamps sold by the Englishman was that they said "New Hebrides" on them instead of "Nouvelles Hebrides" and the "R.F." and "G.R." had changed places from left to right. I did note, however, that the cancellation on the letters was in English. This was Monday. Maybe on Tuesday the cancellation would be in French. I don't know about that.

We came out of the post office and looked up the palm-covered hill to the French Residency, the office of the Administrator sent out by the French government. Across a little valley, on another little hill the British flag waved back with a friendly flap from the British Residency. Right on the highest point of all was the most imposing building in town, the Joint Court, also on stilts. No matter how friendly any two nations may be, there are times when they will not agree on what is the best policy to pursue, so they take their problem to the Joint Court for decision. One judge is a Britisher. One judge is a Frenchman. ~~But the President of the Court is a Belgian, a man whose country has no possible interest in gaining possession or control of the New Hebrides.~~ At the request of France and England the President was appointed by the late King Albert of the Belgians.

England bears half the expense of the government of the New Hebrides and France contributes the other half. Each government has a few native policemen that patrol the waterfront and the main street idly swinging their clubs as they march side by side. They have little to do, for the French, English, and native citizens are quiet law-abiding folk and furthermore, there are practically no laws to break in this doubly ruled country. A Frenchman told me that the Nouvelles Hebrides was the freest country he had ever been in, in spite of its being a condominium.

The town of Vila is on the island of Efate (E-f~~a~~\*-te), one of the 80 islands that string out for nearly 600 miles, from northwest to southeast, to form the New Hebrides group. The fact is, the island of Fila (F~~e~~-la), from which Port Vila is named, lies in the deep-dented harbor right at the town's front door, jungle blanketed like all the rest.

Long ago I heard that the wild men of the New Hebrides were among the most savage cannibals in the world. That seemed hard to believe as I looked at natives dressed in shirts and shorts who seemed interested only in dodging work and the sun as they sprawled in the convenient shade of the cocconut palms. The women, who do most of the work, were dressed in long cotton print dresses that looked like nightgowns on a spree.

"The French people here speak French. The English speak English. But what language is spoken to the natives?" I asked my French acquaintance.

"Pidgin English," he replied. "Even the French have to use Pidgin when they talk to the natives. In fact, when natives from different tribes meet, if they cannot understand each other's language, they will talk Pidgin. It is the trade language throughout the Pacific islands. In the New Hebrides more people speak Pidgin than any other one language."

He went on to tell me an amusing story about three trochus-shell luggers that were wrecked on one of the New Hebrides in the same hurricane. A Norwegian was the captain and only white man aboard one boat. A Russian was the master of the second ship, and a Portuguese was the captain of the third. When they were rescued a few months later by a French ship they were living happily and understandingly together, all speaking Pidgin English.

Hurricanes, by the way, "are the curse of the islands," so I was told. I suspected that there must be bad winds from the number of sand bags I saw on top of corrugated iron roofs all over town. A couple of years ago a severe storm swept across a nearby island and completely destroyed the cocoanut plantations there. Before the storm the plantations were valued at several million francs (for French money is used in the Nouvelles Hebrides just as English money is used in the New Hebrides) and today those plantations aren't worth a sou.

It is not only the cocoanuts that make the New Hebrides valuable for the copra they produce, but also there is cacao, coffee, and cotton. There are a very few miles of public roads in the islands for most of the plantations run right to the water's edge. The produce, whatever it is, is brought down to the wharves on hand cars that run on a narrow gauge track, loaded directly into small vessels and taken to Port Vila for transshipment to Australia, Europe, and America.

In spite of the few, poor roads there are some automobiles. Luckily there aren't more to dash up and down Vila's main street. If you are a British citizen you must get your registration from the British Residency, and you will drive on the left side of the road as is customary in British countries. A Frenchman has his license issued by the French Administrator and, being under the law of France, he drives his car on the right side of the road. Everything is quite all right when a Frenchman and a Britisher are driving down the street in the same direction. But when they are going in opposite directions -- then it is fortunate that traffic is not very heavy.

In a beautiful little garden, filled with brilliant tropical flowers, I saw an enormous fluted clam shell, its mother-of-pearl lining glistening with the colors of a pale rainbow. The shell was fully three feet across.

"What a lot of buttons that would make," I said.

"It would," replied my friend. "But the divers don't get many of those. They fear the giant clam more than they do sharks. The living clam in his heavy shell probably weighed a ton and a half. If a diver, searching the dim-lighted sea bed for trochus shells, happens to touch the soft body of the open clam it will close on him as tight as a steel trap and there the diver stays, to be eaten at leisure by this dreaded monster of the deep."

I planned to visit a native school to get a sample of handwriting for you from the New Hebrides, but the only young person I met was a pretty French girl who wants to go to Hollywood and become a movie star. The condominium government feels much as the Papuan government does in regard to educating the natives. So there are no schools for them. A few natives are allowed to attend the school

maintained for French children by their own government. There is also some schooling given at the various missions throughout the islands, but, for the most part, the tribes of the New Hebrides are so primitive that they cannot learn to read and write and they should have little need of the learning even if they could get it.

Some time ago a native boy came from a distant island to Efate to work on a plantation. He saved his money for a couple of years and when he was ready to go home, asked to buy one of the plantation horses. A horse would be a proud possession in his village. The planter sold the boy the frisky little mare he wanted, but suggested that the animal be exercised and gentled a bit before taking it on the boat. The native boy, however, was eager to get home, so, next day, he took his mare down to the dock and tried to put it aboard a ship. Not that colt! It had no intention of becoming a sea horse. The more she was pulled and shoved the more frightened she became. Finally she shied off the end of the dock and swam to shore. The boy caught his horse and decided to take his master's advice.

There is a high, palm-fringed cliff overlooking the harbor against which the waves beat a continuous tattoo. A few days later the planter saw the boy struggling to lead his frantic horse to the edge of the cliff. He reached the boy and the horse just in time to save them both from plunging over.

"But Master," the boy explained in Pidgin, which I shall not try to imitate, "I am only trying to gentle the horse by bringing her here where she can see many ships and get used to them!"

The tribes of the New Hebrides are not only simple and primitive, but most of them are still cannibals. On the little island of Eromanga (E-ro-mang\*-a) ~~about 150 miles from Port Vila,~~ no less than five missionaries have been killed and eaten. Of course, if you look at it from the native point of view, it is quite a compliment to be chosen for the cannibal's cooking pot. In his simple way, the native believes that he gets the strength, the wisdom, the power, and the cunning of whatever he eats. He eats the flying fox because he believes it is the cleverest of all animals. For, what other animal has wings to fly? He would scorn to eat a little, sickly man because, he thinks, that would make him grow small and weak. But if he can get a white man, who knows how to do so many things that seem like magic, that, the native believes, is the very best medicine of all. This is the real reason why primitive people, the world over, have practiced and still do practice cannibalism.

Ships, schedules, distances, and postmasters being what they are, I have discovered that probably you will not receive the letter about Port Moresby, mailed in Rabaul, New Guinea, until after you receive the letter about Rabaul and this letter, too. When you do receive the Port Moresby letter will you please correct a slip of the typewriter? The first page should be numbered 33 instead of 29. 29 is properly the number of the first page of the letter about Amboina, Molucca Islands

So, being in a Pidgin speaking country,

"Lookim you"

