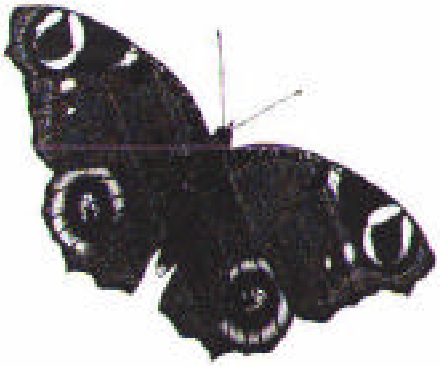
Romantic Beginnings



Eban arrived early on Sunday morning in a Jeep borrowed from the survey office. Molly had made a few sandwiches and a thermos of tea, ready for a long or a short tour. She wore hiking boots, slacks, a shirt and a hat, and felt quite ready for the bush (whatever that would be). Eban had on shorts, boots, army shirt, and of course, his Diggers bush hat.

They set off on a road near the coast going westward past wharfs, warehouses and some rather ramshackle native huts made of corrugated tin. In a short while the road turned into a track that saw more pedestrian than vehicle traffic. The road led to a few small huts built in the native style, and it was there that they finally stopped. Eban got out and talked to the people outside the huts, and after much gesticulating and pointing returned to the Jeep and told Molly that they would walk a short while before coming to the village.

He left the Jeep in the care of some young boys, and he and Molly continued down the now narrow track for about a mile till they came to a large collection of huts with a great number of pigs, dogs, pickaninnys and people marking the heart of the village.

Of course, the young ones immediately crowded around Eban and Molly, but were soon shooed away by the *Lului*, or chief, who came to welcome them. Eban had brought some gifts for the chief, and he presented him with some tins of beef, and a couple of sticks of native tobacco. In *motu*, he introduced Molly as a teacher at the new school, and a recent arrival to Port Moresby.

The *Lului* and Eban took Molly on a tour of the village, and explained the jobs the various people were doing. Some women, sitting in the shade underneath the houses, were weaving baskets, others were cooking over wood fires, the men were either working on a canoe, or repairing parts of the huts. After their initial curiosity was satisfied, the children went off to play in the open area in the middle of the village.

Eban stopped in front of where a new house was being built, and explained to Molly how the whole structure was put together from local materials, and constructed without the use of nails. He showed her how coconut fronds were split and woven into mats which formed the roof and sides of the house. The floors were made of small saplings laid on a frame that allowed air to come through while preventing possessions from falling to the ground.

Windows were simply rectangular openings with a mat hanging over them that could be closed during a rainstorm. Sleeping mats were laid on the floor, and personal possessions were hung from the rafters. Generally the cooking was done under the house allowing the smoke from the fire to infiltrate through the floor above and preventing mosquitoes from bothering the occupants.

A few old men were sitting in a group off to themselves carving wood into figures and bowls. Eban explained that the wood carvings with their gaily painted faces would be taken to the market and sold to the various Europeans in Moresby and at the docks. Generally at this time of the day the women would be working in the gardens, raising crops to feed themselves, but today, being Sunday, was time to stay in the village and socialise.

Molly tried out some of her newly-learned pidgin phrases, and met with limited success. Eban explained that these people were also just learning pidgin, as their regular language was Motu.

Some of the villagers were quite comfortable in English, and anxious to show there skill at the now official language. As in Australia, the older people shied away from new ideas, and relied on the younger people to translate for them.

While "expatriate" was not common in their understanding, "European" was the tag placed on Molly. Even though Eban was far removed from Melanesian in his general looks, he was accepted without question as "one of the people" by the village residents. Although a feast was not planned, the visitors were invited to join the villagers in some food. Molly had some trouble with sago pudding, but enjoyed the yams, rice, fish and fruits that were served them.

After eating, they were taken by the *Lului's* wife to see the gardens which were a few hundred meters from the village. The garden area had been clear cut and fenced in to keep the wild pigs from destroying the plantings.

Molly, who had kept a small garden plot in back of her home in Rockhampton, marveled at the tools that were used here. A digging stick substituted for a shovel, and a machete for a saw. There were no rubber hoses for watering the rows, but jars of water carried from the nearest stream and carefully directed at the roots of the plants being cared for.

By the time they got back to the village, it was late in the afternoon, and time to start back to town. As they left, Eban was solicitous of Molly's reaction to all the walking they had done. Molly assured him that she was well prepared and not at all tired.

As they drove back to town, Molly was full of questions about the village. Although she and Eban had spent a great amount of time together, there was little opportunity to really talk to each other.

Eban asked Molly why she had chosen to come to New Guinea, and how she felt about her decision now. Molly spoke about her circumstances in Rockhampton and how she had felt that the world was passing her by while she was tied to her father and sister. She

mentioned meeting soldiers at the Service club, and marveling how these men had seen and done so much whilst Molly seemed stuck in the same routine.

She said that now she was learning a bit more about the language and the people she was convinced she had made the right decision. Then she asked Eban about his feeling about New Guinea. He confessed that at the start of the war he was in doubt about its future, but that as the war went on he felt a surge of national pride that made him sure that his future was still here.

He really had no desire to emulate his father and become a planter, but felt that so much could be done for the people of the villages that would help them to live a fuller life.

As Molly listened, she felt an enthusiasm grow in her so that her instincts as a teacher told her she would also like to help the natives in their daily life. She knew about the mission efforts, but felt that changing the religious beliefs would take away some of the culture that made the New Guineans unique. She agreed with the missionary principle that health and education was the key to a good life, but wondered if the Christian Ethic was the only way.

She and Eban were engrossed in the conversation and only faintly realized that they were almost back to the dormitories before Eban called a halt. "Look, he said, I want to talk more. Could we possibly go to the lounge in the Ela Beach Hotel and have a drink?". Molly hesitated only a moment and then agreed. When they sat at a table in the Lounge several of Eban's planter friends greeted them, and Eban introduced Molly without comment.

After their drinks were served, they continued their conversation till Molly realized that the hour was late, and the rest of the dorm was waiting to hear about her excursion. Regretfully they broke off the discussion, and Eban finally delivered Molly to the dorms. As Molly went in, she realized that she still had, unopened, the packages of sandwiches she had prepared in the morning. Pat and Aileen were waiting anxiously to hear about her
'date'.

Molly got a cup of tea and then started to tell them about the day's events. The girls were interested, but wanted to know, what sort of a person was Eban Edwards? Molly assured them that he was really quite an ordinary person, with some extraordinary talents beyond being an assistant principal. When Pat heard they went to the Ela Beach Hotel for a drink, she accused Molly of going beyond the bounds of school relationships, even though Molly assured her the meeting had been "just friendly".

The next day at school, Molly did not see Eban, and felt a pang of regret. She wanted to hear more of his ideas about the future, and wanted to add some of her own thoughts.

Later in the week she learned that Eban was off to Brisbane to firm up an order for school supplies. When the next weekend came round, she accepted an invitation from Alec for a visit to the Officer's Club.

While they were sitting at the table, Alec told Molly he had talked to some other soldiers, and found that Eban had made quite a reputation for himself in the New Guinea Rifles. Although Eban had not been decorated by the American forces, he had been commended by several of the commanders, and highly praised for his work.

There were a number of other expatriate women at the club, and Molly soon became friendly with some of them, including a woman who had a child in one of Molly's classes. The women bathed at Ela Beach in the section restricted to "Europeans". ANGAU had built a shelter with a dressing room and a toilet, and hired a boy to maintain it.

At first, Molly was puzzled at being termed a European, as her parents and grandparents had been Australian born. The expatriates all had retained their citizenship in their home country, and most were in New Guinea only on a temporary basis. Now that Molly had joined this select group, she was curious about how the others felt about the country and the people.

Surprisingly, Molly found that except for missionary women, the expatriates had very little contact with everyday life in New Guinea. They usually had a houseboy, a laundress, and a gardener, and spent their time at the beach or the club. Some women were involved with the work of their husbands, particularly the medical officers. Generally, the women were all anxious to return to Australia as soon as possible.

One woman that Molly saw occasionally was always alone, and was never in the company of the other expatriates. Molly talked to her one day, and observed that unlike the others, this woman did not talk about her husband or children. When Molly mentioned her name to the other women, their reaction was restrained.

When Molly mentioned this to one of her friends, she revealed to Molly that the girl had married a native man, and was therefore not accepted in "polite" society. As Molly knew of several men in Moresby who had married native women, she knew that the man in the case was marginally accepted by the community.

The next time that Molly saw her "outcast" friend, Helen Pomfat, she openly broached the subject and listened attentively as the story unfolded.

Helen had met her husband, Marcus when both were attending school in Brisbane. Helen had recruited Marcus to speak at a Study Group on Colonialism to present the native's view. She was impressed by this handsome man's soft-spoken logic as he described his feelings about Colonials treating natives as "things" rather than people. During the discussion period Helen found herself defending Marcus' views without any conscious thought.

In the following weeks, she found many reasons to seek out Marcus and ask his opinions on subjects she was following. Marcus, on his part enjoyed her attention and her company, and soon they were having lunch together and discussing personal matters. Helen and Marcus teamed up on some projects and soon became romantically involved with each other.

When they both took their final examinations and left the technical college, they were fully involved and decided to get married. Helen's liberal parents warned of the difficulties of a mixed marriage but reluctantly gave their blessings to the pair.

Marcus' parents also had reservations but acquiesced in the end. So Marcus and Helen were married by a former missionary minister in a quiet ceremony attended by a number of their classmates and her parents. Marcus had been offered a job in the colonial administration at Port Moresby. When Helen moved into her new home in Hohola, she met her new In-laws, and the rest of Marcus' family for the first time. The reality of living in the native quarter was a cultural shock, but bouyed by her romantic love, she learned to cope.

Marcus' work in the Legal section kept him busy, and because she was discouraged from doing any housework at home, she became a frequent visitor to the Library near Ela Beach. She visited the beach whenever she could, and was welcomed by the other wives until they discovered that she was married to an indigenous man. She was not invited to any affairs where husbands were present, and had to keep a mental list of all the new words she learned: Indigenous, Boong, Black, Native, New Guineaian, Colonial, Expatriate, and Papuan.

Things were equally bothersome in relations with Marcus' family. She was encouraged to wear no makeup when with the family group, and was expected to be subservient to her husband and the other men.

Clothes were to be loose fitting, and modest, and she was expected to sleep on a mat when visiting the village. It was only recently that the ban against natives wearing any clothes above the waist was officially lifted and some of the older women of Marcus' family still stuck to the old way.

When any of the family came to Moresby to visit, Helen was expected to provide a bed and food for all. She also had to keep an eye out for any Beetle chewers and clean up after they had spit indoors. The bright red spittle would stain even wood if it were not cleaned

right off. Marcus chewed beetle occasionally, but never spit when in the house, and was upset when others did, but was constrained by the taboo of not criticizing other people.

At this point, Helen stopped and announced to Molly that she had to go because Marcus would soon be finished his work and she didn't like to be away when he came home. She told Molly that this was the first time she had talked to any of the expats about herself, and hoped that she would see Molly again. Molly, on her part, was fascinated by the conversation, and hoped that Helen would tell her more the next time they met.

As Molly walked back to the dorm, it started raining lightly, a sign that the rainy season was about to start. She hadn't yet experienced the wet period in New Guinea, and wondered if it would be as horrible as some of the people said.

Port Moresby had a relatively short rainy season, not nearly as long as the inland and North coast provinces experienced. In school, some of the day students were asking if they could board during the worst of the monsoon, as floods sometimes made the roads impassable. Molly assured them that if parents approved, there was still room in the residences and the more distant scholars would surely be accommodated.

Social life for both the Europeans and the natives changed with the weather. Indoor activities were emphasised, and travel was diminished considerably. The natives all wore their traditional raingear - a small banana leaf over the head, and a larger one to protect the back and the bilum the women carried. There was only a minimum of work in the gardens, and an increase in the amount of bilums produced and carvings made.

Back at school, Molly thought she would talk to Eban about his feelings about Helen's revelations as she now felt that she knew Eban well enough to discuss such a delicate matter. When she sought out Eban after school, he invited her in to his office and made a billy of tea.

While they were sipping, Eban apologised for his office being in a state of upset, explaining that he was leaving the next day to go to Madang province for a week or two to talk to the Mission people about the new schooling methods that were being proposed by the Colonial Administration.

Molly decided to forego her talk about Helen's story till after Eban's return and instead asked if Eban would see his father and the plantation. Eban was quite enthusiastic about the assignment, and confessed that his trip would certainly include visits to the Bundaberg holdings as well as other haunts of previous times.

The next morning Eban took off from Jackson's drome and landed at Nazdab and the caught another ride to the strip at Madang town, arriving late in the afternoon. After checking in the Colonial HQ, he made radio contact with his father, who promised to pick him up before nightfall.

When Eban finally arrived home, he was amazed to see the progress his father and the staff had made in restoring the buildings and sheds on the property. In addition to various lorrys and mechanical equipment from war surplus of both Japanese and Allied forces, he had acquired a jeep in excellent condition which he offered to Eban for the duration of his visit.

That evening, after telling his father all about the school in Moresby, Eban asked about the labor situation at the plantation. Eban's father, Paul, said that due to the good relations before the war, he was having little trouble in securing workers. Most of the native gardens had been restored, and the villages nearby had returned to normal as laborers were released from army control and worked their way home.

Some of the returned men had difficulty adjusting to village life, as they had seen the benefits of the *cargo* that the white men seemed to have unlimited access to. Almost all of the

returnees had some material acquired during their army service. Tee shirts from the American forces, boots from the Aussies, and a liking for cigarettes from both forces.

Talk of "Cargo" permeated all of the conversations in the Market at Madang, and stories of goods and foods coming from mysterious sources were repeated over and over again.

An ex-police boy named Yali who had served with a coast watcher in Dutch New Guinea, was looked upon as the possessor of all the secrets and mysteries of Cargo. He held regular formal and informal seminars about how to procure all of the marvelous things that the white men possessed.

Eban, on the other hand, had some previous experience with cargo, or *kago*, as it was named in *tok pisin*. Cargo was in the true or literal sense, simply the baggage carried on the ships that came to New Guinea since the time of the German territorial effort in the late 1890's. Back then, the natives observed that the Germans only had to wish for something and a ship would come in and deliver it to them.

Iron axes, wire, food and machinery were brought in to make the Germans rich and comfortable, and would indeed be traded with the natives for labor or copra, or beche de mer. Manufacturing in the islands was confined to beads, carvings, pots, and food. Things as complex as nails and steel knives were beyond the comprehension of the natives.

During the war, a new element of cargo was introduced with air drops that sometimes missed their marks and were found in remote areas of the jungle without any apparent human intervention. Yali was sure in his own mind that superior spirits controlled by the white men produced these goods through their own kind of magic. Yali decided that if the natives emulated the white men, this "manna" or *kago* would accrue to those who were able to tap into the magic procedures of the white men.

Tin containers, flashlights, cloth belts and felt hats became marvels that were beyond the comprehension or capabilities of native craftsmen to produce. After an ANGAU sponsored trip to Queensland, Yali thought he found the secrets of kago and proceeded to train a following to ensure that kago would come to them.

He told his followers to rebuild their huts in orderly rows such as he had observed in Australia, and put cloths on tables with a bowl of flowers in them. He told his followers to work as they always had, but act as Europeans and wait for *kago* to come. He advised the clearing of land for landing strips to accommodate the planes that would surely come just as they had for the soldiers he worked with.

The result of Yali's teaching was that some laborers would not work for the plantations, and would not attend the mission churches or work in the mission gardens. War surplus goods only came to the natives through that available from scavenging the dumps which were guarded by soldiers.

From his father, Eban learned that other planters in some of the distant islands were also facing the formation of *kago* "cults" but thought they would soon be out of fashion when the promised benefits failed to arrive. Later, when Eban was talking with the missionaries, he learned that they were also concerned, because some of the cultists were equating *kago* with the second coming of Christ, and were rejecting the tenet of working for redemption in favor of waiting for *kago*.

In Madang and at Wewak, both the Lutheran and the Catholic mission schools were teaching in a native dialect common to the area, and teaching German as a second language. As most of the missionaries had very little knowledge of English themselves, they strongly resisted the mandate that they teach English or lose the supplementary funds allotted to them by the Colonial Government.

When Eban revealed plans for the establishment of government schools on both the primary and secondary level in both Madang and Wewak, it evoked a promise from the church people to make an effort to establish Pidgin or *Tok Pisin* as soon as teachers could be trained in that language. It was agreed that teaching English would be more difficult unless lay people could be hired with the limited funds available.

Eban had picked up a limited amount of German during his contacts with the missions before the war, and could understand the dilemma of trying to get the mission teachers to abandon their native language in favor of English.

Many of the German traders and planters had been interned during the war, and had a distinct animosity to the Australian Government and the people. These people were united in their hatred of the "Heathen" Japanese, and accepted the Australians as the lesser of two evils.

Since the end of World War I, when the islands were mandated to English control they lost a lot of their power and were no longer the dominant force in the area. Their only political strength derived from the medical and religious work that the missions provided and was accepted by the colonial government.

Generally Eban would meet with mission officials in the dining room of the Madang Hotel, which had served as a guest house for the German administration and later as a Japanese headquarters during the war. Sitting on a patio facing Madang Harbor, seemed to relax people enough to discuss issues without any animosity.

Another big advantage of meeting there was that if the meeting was timed just right, it would end just about dusk. There would be just enough time to visit the tap room and get a drink to carry out on the patio and watch the most glorious sight that Madang offered.

In the Causerine trees in and around the market the flying foxes or fruit bats would wake from their daytime nap and take to the air for a trip into the jungle to raid the native gardens

for their fill of fruit. At first a few would drop from the trees and take to the air, and then more and more would join them to circle the roosts.

At first dozens, then hundreds and then thousands would darken the sky as they wheeled and turned in the sky before starting their evening feeding. These magnificent creatures had wing spans of three feet and over, and except for a muted squealing, would silently fill the sky until darkness came. Although sinister in appearance, they were quite harmless and only a threat to trees loaded with fruit.

One morning while going through the market, Eban spotted a necklace in one of the stalls that was completely different from any of the others on display. On closer examination it turned out to be fashioned from rough pearls of various colors yet all approximately the same size.

The vendor was reluctant to bargain for its sale until Eban pointed out that the pearls were probably stolen during the course of a pearl diving operation with the Japanese. Finally Eban prevailed and the necklace changed hands with both sides feeling they had received the best deal.

He showed them to his father that night, and said they were for a friend he had met in Moresby. His father teased him a bit, but extracted a promise that Eban would tell him how the present was received, and possibly send a picture of the lady wearing it. From one of his trunks, Paul Edwards got out a jewelers box that was just right to carry the necklace in, and gave it to Eban.

The next morning Eban retraced his journey back to Moresby, arriving late in the afternoon with barely enough time to gather his notes in some order before going in the morning to his office.

While Eban was gone, Molly had celebrated the end of her third year of the teaching contract and had signed up for another three year period. In reviewing her tenure, she concluded that things were going most satisfactorily. Her relations with the other teachers at the school were good, and the Principal had several times commended her for her work with the library as well as her performance in the classroom.

Because of Eban, her social life had expanded, and she felt that she was making headway in understanding the country and its people. Pat and Aileen had also extended their contacts, and all agreed that financially the past three years had been profitable.

A few days after he returned, Eban called Molly into his office to give her a copy of her new contract. After an official speech of thanks, he asked Molly to dinner to celebrate the new rate of pay that went with her seniority. Molly accepted, with the condition that Eban tell her all about his trip home, and his talks with the church leaders.

The next evening Molly hurried home from school and put on her best frock to be ready for her date with Eban. While he was away, Molly had missed his company and was looking forward to their being together for the evening.