

Progress and Disaster



One day Ann Dale showed up at Molly's house with Helen in tow. "We're going to collect Orchids," she said, "want to come along with us?" Molly agreed to go looking for the plants in the forest in back of the town cemetery.

Helen had noticed the flowers growing at the base of some palm trees about a kilometre in from Astrolabe bay. They decided to walk as it was a cool day and only about three kilometres from Molly's house. Both Ann and Helen knew the names of all the plants and trees that they passed, with Helen supplying the local name for most of them. In Rockhamptom Molly had a flower garden and a few orchids given to her by a neighbour, and always marvelled at the beautiful blossoms given off by a sparse stalk.

While in Moresby, Molly had seen some orchids growing in pots at some houses and buildings, and at the airdrome some of the men had grown them near the barracks, but she had never really been conscious of the plants in their wild state. When she went with Eban to the native villages, she was much too busy watching him to be aware of much else.

Ann Dale, however, was an amateur botanist, and knew the Latin names for most of the trees and shrubs and the orchids. Whenever Helen gave the local name for a flower, Ann would tell her the Latin name, and try to give Helen a sense of scientific notation.

"Most of the orchids around here are members of the dendrobium family," she told Molly, "and Helen and I have been trying to see how many varieties we can find." Ahead of them they saw a large Melaleuca tree that was covered with blooms at about shoulder height. "But they aren't growing in any soil." Molly said, "Are they parasites?"

"They are epiphytes, they get their nutrition from the air and the moisture that they absorb." Ann replied. "If you pot them it has to be in some sort of medium that allows a lot of air circulation so the roots can dry after they have been watered."

Ann proceeded to carefully pry loose the roots of one of the dendrobiums and gently remove the plant from the tree. There were at least a dozen blossoms of a beautiful cerise hue on the plant when she finally separated it from the others clinging to the tree. "We'll take it back to your house and tie it to one of your trees and before long it will adjust to its new home and provide you with some pretty flowers for your garden."

When Paul stopped by to visit that evening, Molly showed him her new acquisition and told Paul where she had found it. "Back in the forest where we are cutting logs there are loads of orchids," Paul said, "and many with other colours and some with very large blue flowers."

He promised to take Molly and Ann to see them and help them get some plants to take back with them.

A fortnight later on a Saturday morning he picked up Molly and Ann in his new light lorry and drove them to the logging tract an hour or so away from the plantation. When they arrived at the logging camp after a drive along newly-cut roads they were glad to get out and stretch.

Paul had expanded his timber business and acquired a lot of surplus equipment including road scrapers, bull-dozers loading hoists and several lorries for hauling logs to the sawmill, and cut lumber to the docks in town. Paul had also hired a former Army engineer to teach the local workers how to operate the machinery and maintain it.

At the sawmill the women transferred to a jeep for the final journey into the area where the cutting was being done, and the orchids were located. The track was narrow and rutted but they knew they were near their destination when they heard the roar of the chain saws ahead of them. They inched past a large truck being loaded and came to a stop at a clearing just ahead of where the cutting was taking place.

Paul got out of the jeep and talked to a worker named Justin who would guide them to the spot where the orchids abounded, and soon the party walked through the jungle track to a

shallow stream where orchids seemed to be growing from almost every tree. Just as Paul had promised, the blossoms were larger and made up a rainbow of colours.

Ann could not contain herself. "Just look!" she said "There are epidendrums, dendrobiums, and it looks like some vandas over there! Some of the dendrobiums I have never seen before except in books. The pretty yellow and brown one must be an antelope type with its twisted petals." Justin, under the direction of Ann and Paul, was soon up in the trees cutting plants and then dropping them down for Ann to examine.

When Molly expressed concern that the roots had been cut, Ann assured her that they would soon put out new roots and become even more vigorous. They soon had a large bag of plants that Justin carried back as Ann and Molly looked around at the hundreds of plants in the area.

When they arrived back at the jeep the women thanked Paul and Justin for showing them this treasure trove, and promised to take care of the plants as best they could. The superintendant, who was waiting for Paul informed him that a man was waiting to see him. "He says he wants to talk to you about the logging operation."

Paul went over and talked to the man, and as they talked it was noticeable to the women that the conversation was not friendly on Paul's side. After a short while Paul turned his back on the man who got back in his vehicle and quickly drove away.

On the way back to town Paul was noticeably quiet and when he dropped off the women he left without accepting an invitation for some tea. When Eban returned from work, Molly mentioned the incident to him after she told him about their orchid expedition. "Paul is worried about the timber rights," Eban said, "rumors are that some people representing Japanese businesses are trying to get government concessions for logging along the North Coast."

Paul had found out that some of the tribes in the Gogol forest had been contacted by agents for the Japanese and were being offered money for logging rights. The administrators for the islands feel that by selling some of the timber it would give the villagers an income and raise their standard of living. Already, around Wewak a shipping company had taken on a Japanese partner and brought in a portable sawmill from Japan. This shipping group was logging on land that had been owned by a German company and sold when the Germans were forced to leave.

As Wewak had been dominated by the Japanese since the start of the war, and had never surrendered till after the war ended, the people were used to dealing with the Japanese and had no reservations about selling to them. Paul, Eban, and the other planters in the Madang area felt no such cordiality to the Japanese, and felt that they should be barred from capitalising on the land that they were unable to win by force. Molly was aware of all these political maneuverings, but was more concerned with her project to educate the young women of the area. Through her

friendship with Ann, Molly was able to formulate some solid plans for making people aware that education for females was not a waste, but a profit in the long run.

It was obvious from the marketplace that the women were the sharpest traders and the most astute money managers. In Bilbil the men did not dispute this fact, and encouraged the women in expanding their trading ability. Helen's mother was a firm believer in Molly's philosophy, and did everything she could to encourage Helen to read and study under Ann's tutelage.

The government school was now operating in an efficient manner, and a lot of the Standard Six students were being tutored in tertiary subjects in anticipation of the opening of a High School. There was still a disappointing lack of girls in the higher grades, but more and more of the Lutheran students were joining the Government school for additional classes. When Helen left the Lutheran school and enrolled in the Government school, she became a model student, and indeed was often called upon to tutor students who lacked some of the information necessary to compete in High School.

To compensate for the loss of Helen's services, Molly arranged with her family for Helen to work after school hours doing minor clerical work for which she was paid a small stipend. As Helen's mother had a stall in the market, Helen would walk with Molly to her house after school and visit before meeting her mother to go back to the village.

While she was with Molly, Helen was constantly learning. Molly gave her books to read, and helped her interpret words and ideas from poetry to history. Helen was a quick learner and was able to question the meaning of things she read after only a few days. Because of her interest in plants, Molly fed her information on Biology and chemistry on a basic level, which only served to whet Helen's appetite for more knowledge of each subject.

Molly wondered if what she was doing was proper as she noticed Helen questioning some of the tribal beliefs that dictated the actions of her parents and her peers. Although Helen had religious training in the Lutheran school, she did not quite believe the Christian doctrine any more firmly than the traditional beliefs of her parents.

Molly was worried that she was taking from Helen some things and leaving her with very little basic philosophy. She determined that Helen needed to be turned away from compromising her beliefs, and reach a clear understanding that there was room for more knowledge before making up her mind.

In addition to Helen's ability to absorb information she was also adept at keeping up with local gossip. She reported to Molly one day that Paul was becoming involved with a group of planters that were trying to dissuade the local tribes from making agreements to sell their timber rights. Some of the tribal members were in favor of selling to the Japanese, but others were listening to Paul and hoping to harvest the timber in a cooperative that would allow them to retain ownership of their tribal lands.

Paul had a reputation as being a good manager, and paying fair wages as well as training the men in skilled jobs that would be higher paying. His workers were able to use equipment and supplies to improve village roads and to buy supplies at cost from the plantation.

The local Cargo group complained that Paul was only doing this to enlarge his own holdings, and gave nothing to the villagers. This hurt Paul, and made him put into operation a plan he had been working on for a year or so. He offered to sell to some of his workers a portable sawmill provided they would sell him the lumber at a fair market price. If they agreed, he would train the men and teach them how to manage the finances of the operation.

The plan was not without opposition. Some of the other planters felt that such an operation would erode their control over the labor supply, and doubted that the villagers would be intelligent enough to be able to cope with the intricacies of managing a business. Paul's bankers cautioned him that they would be reluctant to lend any financial support, and it would have to be financed entirely by Paul.

In the villages, the attitude was much the same. The Big Men were afraid their powers would be eroded unless they had a final say about all parts of the operation. They wondered how the gardens would be affected and how neighboring villages would react.

Eban backed his father all the way, but cautioned that initial dealings should be handled as gently and patiently as possible. Henry Thomas, the new District Commissioner, and Brian McGregor, the Kiap were cautious, feeling that they would withhold judgement until they heard Moresby's reaction. Molly was enthusiastic because she felt that in some way it would help the cause for more education for the young people.

Paul went ahead with his plans and bought a newer model sawmill, to replace the one that he was going to sell to the villagers. He had the Big Men of the involved Gogol villages visit, and suggested that they recruit some men as potential sawmill operators and send them to the plantation for training.

When the new mill arrived, he put some of the Gogol men in the crew that was setting the mill up, and the rest of them with the crew that would disassemble the older mill. Meanwhile the Big Men and some of Paul's men who were related to the Gogol people met to learn how to manage the enterprise.

Officials in Moresby were mildly enthusiastic about the project, and promised cooperation whenever necessary. Molly and Eban visited the involved villages to answer questions and reassure the people. Each time they went they brought a pig as an offering, and were assured a warm welcome.

After much palaver and soothing ruffled feathers, the villagers approved the idea, and with the help of Paul's barrister, an agreement was finalised and the Gogol Timber Cooperative was formed. The Co-op headquarters remained at the Bundaberg Plantation with accounting being taken care of by Paul's staff. After a month of operation, the Co-op was ironing out problems and the Villagers were satisfied with their new enterprise.

After meeting with the bank representative in Madang one afternoon, Paul went over to the Hotel to have a drink with Brian McGregor and discuss the siting of a new medical station in the Gogol area. Both Paul and Brian felt that such a facility would make it easier for the villagers to have basic needs taken care of without resorting to the long trip into Madang. Funds for supplies and staffing would be from a government grant, if the land and building would be supplied by the Co-op.

Because of the newness of the enterprise, Paul agreed to underwrite construction costs and persuade the villagers to supply the land and construction labor. It was agreed that the two men would inspect the site as soon as the big men had been consulted and came to an agreement.

When their business was finished, they went out on the verandah to have a drink and catch up on local gossip. "Have you encountered any timber buyers in Town lately?" Brian asked, "I've heard that some Dutch shippers have been trying to secure land that the Germans formerly owned." "Some of the villagers mentioned that to me," Paul said, "and at one Co-op

meeting someone asked if they could make more money by just selling the rights." It was pointed out that in Wewak a sawmill was being built without the villagers having to provide anything but the land. The sawmill owners were expatriates being backed by an unknown foreign company.

Paul had strong feelings about the villagers giving up their land. He knew that there were not as many plantation owners as benevolent as he was, and feared that future clear cutting would gradually strip away the forests that were depended on to provide a decent, though subsistence, living. The villagers were only now beginning to grasp the concept of money and had a hard time relating it to the crops and artifacts they sold at the market.

Most of the men depended on the produce raised by their family, and the pottery made by the women to give them cash money. Knives and axes as well as nails and wire were only available with cash, and a kerosine lamp was a status symbol that was now becoming possible only with cash.

Selling their land for a few pounds would give unimagined riches to a village, and little thought was given to the destruction of the forest that was so necessary to their way of life. Whenever he could, Paul preached the forming of cooperatives that would retain land rights for the village.

Many of the Cargo sect rejected his preaching, and felt that he was only looking out for himself in assuring a good supply of timber for his own use. Even though Yali had been discredited by the authorities, his followers still felt an allegiance to his ideas and hated Paul for speaking out. They felt that this was another example of diverting Cargo from the native to the white man.

After several months of operation the coop became well organised, and the only dissention among the members was about the method of dividing the profits. Some of the neighboring tribes were aware of the success of the enterprise, and wanted to join.

One group of villages that had land adjoining but upland from the co-op decided to sell their logging rights for cash, and sold to a group that was rumored to be backed by Japanese funds. they built roads to their tract, but used expatriate labor and did only a bare minimum of grading and bridging. In the dry season the roads were adequate but in the wet, the roads were mostly impassable.

Because the group was clear-cutting for chipwood, the land eroded quickly and caused the streams to muddy downstream of the logging site. The co-op was forced to strengthen bridges because of the increased water flow, and frequently had to clear streams of debris washed down from above. After hearing complaints from the co-op workers, Paul decided to visit the new logging site and see for himself what was causing the trouble. He and one of the

co-op workers drove the jeep up into the hills to the new road that had been cut and followed along to the area where cutting had resumed after the end of the heavy rains.

Paul was amazed at the sloppy work that had been done. The road was nothing more than a track that allowed runoff from the storms to follow the road instead of being channeled into drainage ditches. In some places the grade was much too steep for safety even though the road was considerably narrower than a properly graded road. They passed a lorry buried in mud at one point that had obviously been pushed off the track by a bulldozer and left to rust. Some parts had been cannibalized indicating that the truck was not to be salvaged in the future.

They passed areas where the clear cutting left a landscape that was unpleasant to view. Erosion was well advanced and even though the forest had been removed, the remaining land was totally unfit for even subsistence farming. There was only one abandoned village nearby, populated by some Cargo sect members who were lounging around outside of unkempt houses that had not been re-thatched and maintained.

At the company headquarters was a general store where food and necessities were available at inflated prices and poor quality. Instead of being run by village people, the store was managed by an Indian man who kept a sharp eye out for any pilfering. All sales were by cash, and only workers of the company were allowed credit.

"It's a bloody shame," Paul said, "these people have traded their land for a few shillings and when they spend that, they will have nothing to fall back on but the hopes of Cargo!"

"They all have kerosine lamps and iron knives," the worker said, "but they have no crops to cut and no goods to trade in town!" After talking to a few of the loggers, and some of the truck drivers, Paul felt that he had learned enough and decided to return home.

Just before leaving, Paul noticed a tremor in the earth, and decided that Krakar was starting to act up again. The volcano was quite active in the island off the coast, but had recently only been a threat to the island itself and only an annoyance to the rest of the Madang area.

When they got to the area of the steep grade, it looked like the road had shifted a bit, and now seemed to be muddier than when they had first passed. Paul decided to send Jun, the worker, on ahead to check the road as Paul followed a bit behind. When they reached a bend in the road where they couldn't see too far ahead, Jun waded through the ankle deep mud to see what was ahead. Paul stayed in the jeep, which he had placed in 4-wheel-drive, while waiting for Jun to return with his report.

While sitting there quietly, Paul noticed a small tremor in the earth, and then as he glanced up towards the hill above him, saw the remaining trees shaking as if in a strong wind. He put the Jeep in gear, and decided to catch up with Jun and make a run for the main road.

As the Jeep moved forward the earth shook even more, and suddenly the mud became more liquid and started to slide sideways. Paul looked upward and saw the hill moving towards him and at the same time pushing the jeep closer to the edge of the road.

Before he could take any defensive action, the entire hillside collapsed on him and buried him and the jeep in a river of mud and debris. Jun had gotten around the steep grade and onto level land when the earth-slide hit. He managed to stay on top of the moving earth and ended up a few meters below the road in a cul-de-sac where he was able to hang on to a stub of a tree till the earth movement stopped. When he scrambled up the bank to where the road was, a scene of devastation met his eyes. There was no road or track to be seen. Only a swarth of mud and debris stretching for two or three kilometers back up the hill.

Jun made his way back to where he thought he had left Paul, and finally, below him towards the valley, he spotted what seemed to be part of the jeep sticking out of the mud. He started digging with his bare hands but made little progress. The earth had stopped moving, and the mud seemed to be solidifying so that digging with his hands became almost impossible.

Jun decided that he must get help, and knew that he was nearer to the co-op than trying to go up the hill where they had been. As fast as he could he went down the track and without meeting anyone he finally reached one of the co-op villages. He got one of the young men to take a message to the nearest loggers and asked that they send men and shovels to try to extricate Paul.

It was almost dusk when a truck finally arrived with equipment and men, and Jun was able to guide them to the site of the landslide just before darkness came. With lanterns and torches the crew dug at the jeep, and finally were able to locate Paul's body.

When they got back to the village, the women washed the mud away, and made a proper litter to place the body in for transport to the base camp. When they arrived at the camp, Eban and Molly were there with Brian McGregor to meet them. The earthquake had done considerable damage to bridges and dams, but the only large mudslide was the one that took Paul's life.

Word of Paul's death had already reached Madang where a group of men and women were gathered around Molly's house when they arrived. Helen and Ann Dale had taken over the kitchen, where gifts of food and drink were already arriving. A wood carver was already at work making a coffin out wood from a fine canoe-tree log.

Paul had considered Molly as a daughter, and she revered him for his kind gentle ways. As Molly attempted to console Eban, she realized how much she relied on a quiet talk with Paul in difficult times. Eban clung tightly to Molly as he realized she was his only link to Paul. During the initial period of mourning Eban was made very much aware that he was expected to take Paul's place as an advocate for the villagers and a leader in the Madang community.

The days before the burial reminded Molly of an Irish wake. Not only did she have to supply food and drink to the officials who made formal visits, but she had to consult with the Bilbil people about the proper protocol for the burial. Although Paul had never been officially accepted into the village, his wife and his son were members, and Molly was given all the respect that her honorary position demanded.

It was decided that pigs given in Paul's honor would be delivered to the village, and that Eban's uncle, Titus, would coordinate all planned ceremonies. Samuel, Paul's Major Domo would take care of the Bundaberg house and act as custodian of Paul's body until burial. As time went on, it became quite obvious that Paul had indeed been a much respected leader of the entire community.

There was no question in Eban's mind but that Paul would be buried in the town cemetery next to Joli, Eban's mother. A carved wooden marker was prepared to place at the grave until the marble headstone ordered from Australia would be delivered. Although Paul was not a regular churchgoer, the Pastor of the Lutheran Church offered to officiate at the church funeral service.

Members of the Lumber co-op volunteered to escort the coffin from the church to the cemetery, and the village people all wanted to join a procession in Paul's honor. The night before the burial. Molly was busy at the house greeting people who had come from all over the province to offer their condolences. Surprisingly, there were several officials and friends from

Moresby who knew Paul and respected him. Paul had cast his lot with New Guinea many years ago, and was considered more of a native than an expatriate by most people.

Eban was at the village that evening, where a ceremony was held in the traditional style with people who wore costumes that were appropriate for the occasion and would feel out of place in the town. A funeral song using momo's and garamuts was sung and danced by a group from the village that Paul has visited just before his death. A feast that would last several days was in progress and Eban was made aware that he was expected to take his father's place as a leader and Big Man of the area.

At noon the next day, a crowd that had started to form early in the morning was outside the church waiting for the funeral to start. The casket had been brought in to the church early in the morning escorted by the plantation staff who had also honored the christian custom of arranging flowers all around the church. Ann Dale had marshalled the school choir to sing a hymn during the service.

Promptly at noon Eban and Molly arrived and after the guests had been seated, the choir sang a few hymns before the minister started the short service. When the service concluded, the pall bearers carried the coffin outside and loaded it onto a new truck that had been decorated for the occasion.

As the truck slowly started out for the cemetery, mourners formed a large procession that followed along, and seemed to involve the whole town. The coffin was carried to the grave side by another group of pallbearers, some in ceremonial costume, followed by a group of singers offering a musical dirge. The Pastor kept the burial service short, and then allowed time for various offerings from the villagers to be placed in and on the grave.

Molly and Eban returned to their house where Helen had supervised the preparation of a sumptuous feast that was presented formally in the house, and informally out on the lawn. It was not until late that night that all of the guests had left and Molly and Eban were able to review the events of the day. Both had observed that members of the newly formed political parties had been there and they were constantly being introduced to Big Men from the native and expatriate population who all indicated a desire for future talks.

Before his death Paul had been aware of the drive for a constitution, and had some worries about how the villages would fare in the future. He had discussed this with Eban, and said that he was ready to involve himself in the process. Molly, of course felt that Eban should follow Paul's lead, but Eban was reluctant to jeopardise his position in the school system.

But Eban did not have to make the decision at all. Whether he was ready or not, people were deciding for him. Official memos from Moresby directed him to give an opinion about the drive for independence, and indicate the leaders of the Madang community who might be interested in serving on various committees.