

End of the Quest



Charlie Reinhard and Jason arrived in Port Moresby after their short, but exciting flight from Cairns. Most of their old friends and new acquaintances in Australia had cautioned them about New Guinea, and in fact advised against going there.

"White people up there all live behind high wire fences," they said, "reports say that the people are on the verge of anarchy! And watch out for the Rascals, they say that white women are not able to walk the streets without the risk of being attacked!"

* * * *

The airport was certainly a far cry from the modern elegance of Cairns International. The walkway from the plane to customs was under a tin-roofed path that led to a nondescript building and a crowded area where luggage was checked, and a visa fee collected. Luckily Charlie had converted some Australian dollars into Kina before boarding the plane in Cairns and had enough cash to pay the fee.

After clearing customs, there was a short walk to the domestic terminal to check in for the flight to Madang. Police were in evidence everywhere. Scores of dark men and women talking in a strange sing-song voice crowded the entrance lobby, and it was a pleasure to finally go into the departure lounge for the Madang flight. They found a place on a wooden bench opposite the unattended ticket desk, and settled down to wait for their flight. When Charlie wanted to relieve himself, he asked a uniformed attendant for directions. The attendant called

another man who led Charlie to a door labelled "Men", unlocked the door, and indicated he would wait for Charlie right there.

Back at the bench with Jason, he seated himself and took a look at his fellow passengers. There was very little formal luggage to be seen, instead there were cardboard boxes tied with rope, and string bags filled with food. Men were dressed in shirt and trousers and women were in skirts and blouses or loose printed dresses. Shoes for either sex were generally sandals or sneakers or no shoes at all.

When an attendant announced the boarding, the other passengers deferred to Charlie and Jason, and allowed them priority in boarding. All announcements were made in Pidgin as well as English.

After stowing hand baggage and buckling into their seats, the door was closed and the plane taxied to the end of the runway and with a short delay took off above the lush green jungle on the outskirts of town. As the plane climbed above the mountains ahead of them, the stewardesses brought around cookies and orange juice for the passengers. When Charlie asked for a drink, he was told that no liquor was served on the flight. An hour or so after flying above and around green covered mountain peaks the plane started its let down for their first stop at Lae.

As they rolled along the runway, Charlie was thrilled to see that the airport was at Nadzab, formerly a busy base during World War II that had launched the paratroopers for their historic attack on the Markham Valley. After 50 years the signs of war had been obliterated. There were no bomb craters or wrecked planes visible. There was however, an unusually long runway and signs of long abandoned dispersal areas.

After an exchange of passengers, the plane took off again for Madang into the gathering dusk. The bright red disc of the sun soon descended into the Bismark sea, and the view of the ground was soon marked by the landing lights of the Madang airport.

As the passengers debarked, a bulldozer pulled up to the cargo doors and the luggage was deposited into the bucket and then transported to a large wooden platform raised above the ground about three feet. Baggage handlers passed down the luggage to the passengers who crowded around. After retrieving their bags, Charlie and Jason looked around in vain for a cab or a limo to take them to their hotel. A driver of a van asked them where they wanted to go and told them to wait where they were and he would come back and take them.

Soon all the vans and trucks left and the two travelers were alone with their bags waiting with a few fierce looking black men at the now darkened airport. There was an ominous air to the place that made Charlie remember the quiet just before an enemy attack. Just as he was starting to worry, the lights of a car approached the airport, and soon the driver of the van was loading their baggage in the back and starting back for town.

There were no streetlights, and it seemed that every 500 feet a group of people were caught in the headlights and about to be run over. The driver did not swerve, and the pedestrians magically got out of the way before being hit. When they did arrive at the hotel, they went to the front desk and soon were led to a room overlooking the sea that was lit by the glimmer of moonlight on the top of the waves.

The room was quite nice, and had a sliding screen door that opened on the a patio where a few chairs and a low table had been placed. Palm trees formed a canopy overhead, and a cool breeze brought in the pleasant smell of the sea. Jason was tired and elected to get ready for bed, but Charlie decided to visit the lounge for a nightcap before retiring after a busy day. The room was crowded, but Charlie recognised their driver from the airport making drinks behind the bar. He ordered a gin and tonic, and was surprised when the bartender called him by name.

Charlie looked around him when he got his drink and saw that there was an equal amount of men and women, mostly black, who were all seemingly intent on a television screen that was tuned to an Australian rugby match. Several people smiled at him, as did a group of

Australian soldiers who gave him the thumbs up sign. A group of young women waved coyly at him, and were obviously hoping he would join them. After two more drinks that were placed before him as his glass was emptied, Charlie was fully relaxed and ready to join Jason in the room.

The next morning when they went into the dining room for breakfast, and saw that there were very few blacks in evidence except for the serving staff. Most of the other diners were obviously business men, or men and women who were dressed like tourists. Their identity was confirmed when after eating they all loaded into two vans and were driven away.

Charlie and Jason got a ride into town from Danny, the daytime driver, and exchanged their money into Kina at one of the local banks. They then walked around the town and marketplace and Jason was awed by the people in the streets. "This is the first time I was ever in a place where everyone stared at me," he said, "it feels creepy to not be able to talk the language!"

He soon found out that everyone could understand English, and was very adept at interpreting sign language! It was also amazing that the streets were so clean, and the people were all so pleasant. Every passerby would greet them with "Hello Sir!" and a broad smile. Women with bundles perched precariously on their heads were everywhere, babies were usually carried in string bags on their backs held in place by a strap across the forehead.

The "department" stores carried all sorts of canned goods as well as cloth for laplaps and meri blouses. Alert uniformed guards stationed by the checkout counter made sure that no unpaid merchandise was leaving, but let Charlie and Jason through with a smile and a wave. On the way back to the hotel in Danny's van, his seemingly erratic driving was caused by potholes rather than inattention. There was not much danger of a collision as the roads had more pedestrian than vehicle traffic.

That evening just as it was starting to get dark they had their first real view of the Flying Foxes leaving town for their nightly foraging trip to the jungle. At first there were hundreds and then what seemed like thousands of bats wheeling and squeeling across the sky, some alighting temporarily in a palm tree right outside their door.

After a week of village visits, harbor tours, historical sites and jungle expeditions, they went to dinner one evening at the main hotel in town to see the famous bamboo band that played a combination of traditional and modern music. As they arrived early they went to see the orchid garden at the hotel, and Charlie talked to a young woman who seemed to be the curator. She stayed with them for a while explaining why the orchids were planted in coconut husks. She also showed them some dendrobiums that had real antelope petals on the large blossoms of the flowers.

They finally had to leave to get dinner, and went to the restaurant to find a table. Soon they were seated, and while they were waiting for their drinks, the young woman they had talked to in the garden came in and took a table near them. They waved to each other and smiled, and when the waiter delivered his drink Charlie asked him to deliver a drink to the young woman's table. As the waiter took her order, she nodded her head to Charlie and smiled a "Thank You".

After the waiter delivered her drink he came back to Charlie and said "Miss Gabi asks if you would care to join her at her table?" It didn't take any urging from Jason for Charlie to accept, and soon they were seated with Gabi Edwards as the waiter moved their drinks to her table.

"It's unusual for Americans to visit here," Gabi said, "Most of them go to Moresby or on a tour up the Sepik. What is your interest in Madang?" Charlie told her of his wartime stay in New Guinea, and his desire to see what things were like now. "When I was here last," he said "Everything was a mess. Buildings were destroyed, soldiers were everywhere, and I didn't really have time to see the flowers, or the people."

"My wife and I collect orchids and I have never been able to say that I saw any during the war. I didn't want to go on a cruise or a guided tour, but just wanted to get the feel of the country in peacetime!" He went on to explain that the war relics that he saw now only served to remind him that this was really the place that was so horribly treated 50 years ago.

"My father told me many stories about that time," Gabi said, "He was involved with the Australian and the American armies as well as the Papuan Defense Force." Jason was all ears at this conversation, and started to ask questions till Charlie felt left out of the conversation. Gabi asked them if they had been to any sing sings since they were here, and told them of the one that was being held the next day at the gymnasium at the other end of town.

As they finished dinner the entertainers were setting up their instruments, and soon started to play. The musicians were wearing lap laps and fancy flower and feather headpieces, and had two conventional guitars as well as the bamboo drums and flutes. Gabi told them that this was a modernized version of the traditional music, and suggested that they see the difference at the dance tomorrow. When the show was over, she offered to drive them to the hotel where they were staying as it was on the way to her home.

As Gabi dropped them off at the hotel, Danny and Manus greeted her respectfully, and she responded to each of them by name. She also offered to pick them up the next morning and take them to the sing sing. Charlie stopped off at the bar for a nightcap while Jason went off to bed. In the bar Danny told Charlie that Gabi was a very important person and the Conservation officer of the district. The staff was familiar with her because she had arranged for them to get animals for their small zoo. They had a blue wattled Cassowary, a hornbill, a cockatoo, a wallaby, and a cuscus, which she regularly came by to inspect.

True to her promise, she came around the next morning, and after a short visit with the cockatoo they were seated in her van as she drove them to the sing sing. She drove right past the gate guards and parked her van with those of the officials next to the grandstand. "This is

not an affair staged for the tourists", she said, "this is a dance competition for the local provinces, and they will choose a queen from the young women of the area.

The only western clothes were worn by the spectators, while all the dancers were decked out in their ceremonial best. In addition to the village teams, there was a group of grotesque "mud men", and a team of young men and women from a high school in the highlands. These dancers were not the typical pom pom girls, they were tattooed (with magic markers, Gabi revealed), and bare from the waist up. Jason was bug-eyed, and even Charlie didn't take his eyes off them till their dance was over.

Other groups consisted of fierce looking men and women with spears and arrows, dressed to portray jungle animals. It was a colorful performance in every way, and a highlight of their trip. After the show, as they were going back to Gabi's car, Jason spotted a cemetery on the other side of the fence. He asked Gabi about it, and she explained that it was the public burial place for both native and european alike. She said that if they wanted, she would show it to them.

"My Grandfather, my Grandmother and my mother are all buried here," she said, " so I visit quite frequently." There were all manner of headstones in sight ranging from simple wooden crosses to elaborate carvings and several granite stones. She led them over to a large granite stone and said, "Here is my grandmother and grandfather, Jori and Paul Edwards."

Next to it was a carved wooden marker with the following inscription, "Molly Mallone Edwards - Born 1921 - Died 1991."

"Was your mother born here?" Charlie asked.

"No," Gabi answered, "She was born in Brisbane, and lived in Rockhampton before coming to Papua."

"Was he ever a schoolteacher?" Charlie asked, as Jason was taking a picture of the headstone.

"Yes, she taught at the Grammar school in Rockhampton that I went to." Gabi answered. "When she came here after the war, she taught in Moresby and then here for many years. She was 70 when she died."

Charlie went pale, and looked so strange that Gabi asked him what was wrong.

"It's a long story." Charlie replied.

Soon after he started telling Gabi, she asked him to stop and suggested that they visit Eban and let him hear the tale.

Eban had aged since Molly's death, and stayed at Bundaberg most of the time. He, Gabi, Helen and Justin sat out on the verandah near Cocky's cage till Charlie finished his poignant story about his search for Molly Mallone. After a light snack, Charlie heard all about Molly while Sarah, now an old woman, kept refreshing drinks and bringing snacks and listened as much as she could.

Pictures were dragged out of storage until the group was exhausted and finally went to sleep. The next morning after long goodbyes and promises to write, Gabi brought Charlie and Jason back to their hotel to pack for the next day's flight back to Cairns.

The next morning after paying their bill, Danny drove them to the airport and waved to them as they entered the plane, took their seats and buckled up before takeoff.

"Well, Grandpa," Jason said, "it looks like your search for Molly Mallone is over!"

And so it was.