

From Prison to Peace

These masterly short stories, mainly of action in the disastrous Malayan campaign of World War II and of the long agony of Japanese Prison Camps, have a complete authenticity and atmosphere easily recognised by those who shared Geoffrey Bingham's experience.

Geoffrey's literary gifts shine in this difficult field of the short-story writer in these concise tales of heroic events, grim fortitude, and in the balance, the grace of suffering and dying men.

These short stories depict vividly episodes in the lives of soldiers under the stress of action, and those subjected to the remorseless grindstone of captivity and frequently lingering death. His concluding analysis is expressed in 'The Lonely Kamikaze Man':

What of this puzzling and terrifying contradiction—the conflict of nobility and depravity, of extraordinary love and unlimited hatred?

I am pleased to welcome the publication of these collected short stories, and I trust that they will influence and inform this generation and those to come.

Sir Edward (Weary) Dunlop

Troubadour Press Inc.

LAUGHING GUNNER

AND SELECTED WAR STORIES

Geoffrey C. Bingham





LAUGHING GUNNER

AND SELECTED WAR STORIES

Geoffrey C. Bingham

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Tall Grow the Tallow-woods

To Command the Cats

The Translation of Mr Piffy

The Days and Dreams of Arcady

The Raymond Connection

The Boy, the Girl, and the Man

The Spirit of All Things

TROUBADOUR PRESS INC.

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FOREWORD

THESE masterly short stories, mainly of action in the disastrous Malayan campaign of World War II and of the long agony of Japanese Prison Camps, have a complete authenticity and atmosphere easily recognised by those who shared Geoffrey Bingham's experience.

Geoffrey's literary gifts shine in this difficult field of the short-story writer in these concise tales of heroic events, grim fortitude, and in the balance, the grace of suffering and dying men.

Like Greek classic writers' accounts of war, he appears very modestly in a third person role.

In fact, in a short disastrous campaign in Malaya and Singapore, as a Sergeant in action, he won the coveted Military Medal and was mentioned in despatches.

In a desperate attack upon a Japanese machine-gun nest, he was severely wounded, suffering a compound fracture of the right thigh-bone with damage to a nerve which inflicted foot drop and partial paralysis below the knee.

Most fortunate to survive at all, he lost weight in a few weeks from twelve to seven stone, and after four months bedridden extension emerged with diminishing but permanent lameness to become librarian in the 10th Australian General Hospital.

A DEDICATED Christian, at the age of twenty he had left farm work to enrol at Moore College to train for the Ministry.

With the outbreak of war in 1939, he was impelled by his conscience to give up his course and to enlist in 2nd AIF in April 1940.

His grim stories of war and of the extreme suffering of diseased and semi-starving men, always living in the shadow of

death, are relieved by a marked sense of humour and the born storyteller's flair for depicting dramatic and novel situations.

For four years after the war this dedicated Christian achieved rehabilitation and some readjustment of faith, in farming and writing short stories.

He then re-entered Moore College for a distinguished and spirited course before being ordained to the Priesthood in 1953, and immediate elevation to the Minister in Charge of the Garrison Church of Holy Trinity, Miller's Point.

Turning his back on a novel and highly successful Ministry, aged 38, he sought missionary service in Pakistan with a great impact there and in neighbouring Asian countries during ten years of remarkable evangelistic ardour.

After returning to Australia he was to become for six years Principal of the Adelaide Bible Institute, with a lively impact not only on South Australia but at the interstate and international level.

From 1975-1989 he was the moving spirit in the New Creation Publications and Teaching Ministry, a training centre with an outreach to all Christian churches. During that time he became a prolific author.

THESE lively short stories have a crisp, spicy authenticity, in which, however, memorable individuals assume mostly the anonymity of nicknames. As rare exceptions there is the mention of Lt. Col. Cotter Harvey (Dr W. C. B. Harvey, CBE), a distinguished physician, and Murray Griffin, that well-known Australian artist.

'Laughing Gunner' is a grim story of Singapore fighting in which 'Tiger', an awkward and unusual soldier, passionately competent with automatic weapons, dies heroically in the ecstatic madness of unselfish action covering a withdrawal.

'Guerrilla' is an account of Tony's single-handed epic exploit in an onslaught upon a Japanese encampment at Endau.

'The Rim' deals objectively with the circumstances of his own grave wounding.

He deals sensitively with the Japanese in such episodes as the condemned spy ('The Life and Death of Puggi Mahomet'), the

merciless mass executioner Matsuoko ('The Mind of Matsuoko'), and the sometimes inexplicable forbearance of the Japanese in the near tragic comedy of 'Killa T' Pig George'.

These short stories depict vividly episodes in the lives of soldiers under the stress of action, and those subjected to the remorseless grindstone of captivity and frequently lingering death.

A deeply sensitive man who obviously maintained high personal standards of Christian conduct, he was able to view human frailty with a dispassionate philosophy. His concluding analysis is expressed in 'The Lonely Kamikaze Man':

What of this puzzling and terrifying contradiction-the conflict of nobility and depravity, of extraordinary love and unlimited hatred?

I am pleased to welcome the republication of these collected short stories, and I trust that they will influence and inform this generation and those to come.

I commend the collection to those who will cherish the works of a born storyteller whose whole life has been dedicated, distinguished, most varied, and entirely useful.

Sir Edward Dunlop, AC, CMG, OBE, MS, FRCS, FRACS, FRCS, FRCS Edin. (Hon.) FRCS Thailand (Hon.), FCS Sri Lanka (Hon.) D.Sc. Punjabi (Hon.), LL.D. Melb. (Hon.)



PREFACE

EVERY so often a writer has a book whose birth comes as a special pleasure to him. I suppose I never set out to write war stories, as such. Joining the Army at the age of 21 years I was a raw recruit-an initiate in the art of the short story. My first yarn, written about a dingo, was published when I was with the AIF in Malaya. About that time the Australian Broadcasting Commission aired a two-piece documentary describing a long and hazardous raft trip on the Keneboi and Triang Rivers through a part of the jungle. I edited a couple of Unit Journals. Badly wounded and imprisoned in Changi POW Camp, I wrote on, editing a war history, and especially enjoying a writer's group, of which Ronald Searle was a very active member. On return to Australia a story written in the POW camp-'Laughing Gunner'-was snapped up by the *Bulletin* as soon as I submitted it. That was why I chose it as the title story to this book. Thirty-three more stories were accepted by the same journal within a few years, and I was dubbed as their most prolific writer. I owe most in my writing career to the poet and short-story writer Douglas Stewart, who was literary Editor of the *Bulletin* for twenty-four years.

Many other things have happened over the past fifty years. One of them has been that stories have kept bringing themselves into existence-hundreds of them, in fact. Most lay dormant in my files for decades, and about sixteen years ago a fresh spurt of interest resulted in the publication of *To Command the Cats* by Angus and Robertson, and then five collections of those short stories as well as individual journal acceptances. Then in 1991 a novel, *Tall Grow the Tallow-woods*, was published, and in 1992 a book of verse, *The Spirit of All Things*. A volume of previously unpublished stories=*The Boy in the Valley-is nearing*

publication. It was suggested that in this fiftieth year since the fall of Singapore that a selection of war stories be put into one volume-some already published, and some as yet unpublished.

This, then, is the book which has given me much pleasure, for its bonuses have been many. Two great figures of prisoner of war days have combined to bring out the volume. The much revered and loved Sir Edward ('Weary') Dunlop') warmly agreed to write the Foreword, having already read quite a number of my books. The other man who has helped to make the book is Murray Griffin, who was the official Australian War Artist with the 8th Division. I well remember being propped up in bed during his visit to me, since normally I had to lie flat because of my war injury. Murray asked question after question to reconstruct a battle incident which related to a recommended decoration. The painting on the cover of this book was the fruit of that grilling. The other work Murray did that day was a frontal black and white face sketch of me, whilst I tried to balance the battle-bowler on my rather wobbly head. I am sure he did well to visualise what my taut skin-and-bone face had looked like prior to meagre prison rations, but to this day I swear he did not fill out my ears to match! So then, three ex-prisoners of war have worked together to form the present book.

The third bonus has been working through my collection of yarns so as to cover time in battle action, time in prison camp, and the impressions which come to those travelling home from war and prison, settling into civilian life, along with some of the fantasies that come to returned servicemen, especially as they grow old. Certain events stand out in one's memory, and whilst I confess that some of my stories overlap a bit, or partly repeat themselves, yet I make no apology for that. What interests me most are the men and women I have met in all these phases of life. Because I never set out to be a professional writer, as such, I have immense delight in writing, and that has come from seeing the amazing creatures we call 'human' at their work and their play, their joy and their suffering. I have had time to discover how weak a member I am of this race, but I think the years have not been lost in other pursuits which have helped me more to understand my own kind so deeply.

Of course this book would have to be a dedication to the men and women with whom I have had to do in days of war and prison camp, but no less with those who have shared their humanity with me over the past fifty years. For me war and peace always seem to be merging, yet not blurring, for our human history has been one. War brings horror and terror and sometimes terrible torture, but it is in the midst of these that we often see a greatness of spirit that is not similarly seen in times which do not make the same demands.

I am grateful for the permission received from the Australian War Memorial to use the Griffin painting, to Murray Griffin himself, and to Sir Edward Dunlop. I am also thankful for the work done by the two typesetters, Kay Robinson and Pam Webb, and special proof-reading by Olive Openshaw and Mavis Schultz. I am of course eternally grateful to my wife, Laurel, who has never ceased to encourage me over all the years of our marriage.

Geoffrey Bingham



Days of War

LAUGHING GUNNER

THEY began calling him 'Tiger' after a while. Not that there was any reason for it. Alan started it: 'He's a tiger,' said Alan; 'a tiger with the thing.'

He was, too, but the word 'tiger' in that context is slang. Not that we didn't use slang—we did. Even the kid called Tiger used it, but it was not often he spoke.

He was queer that way. In the Army you find it hard enough to stop some chaps talking. They want to go on and on, and it means putting a drink into them, or, if they're sick, a thermometer. No, they won't stop, and it's no use giving them a drink either, when you think it over, because they only talk a lot more. Young Tiger didn't talk very much.

To look at him you'd think he'd do a lot of talking. He was a good-looking kid in his own way, and one you'd think the girls would fall for, but you'd be wrong. They shied away from him, as though maybe there was something funny about him. When you thought about it, too, there was something funny about him. He didn't like people, and they didn't cotton to him; not quickly anyway.

I liked him, but maybe I like most people; I don't know. I liked Tiger because there was something about him I admired. Men don't like a fellow who keeps to himself, but Tiger was so young that they thought he shouldn't be in the Army, and that would excuse any faults he had. It wasn't as though Tiger worried very much about any thoughts they had about him. He was just self-sufficient, I suppose.

Sometimes I would catch him looking at someone, and there would be a strange gleam in his eyes. I don't rightly know what it meant. Even now I don't know what it meant, but then it's hard to know these things.

'I think we should pal up with him a bit,' Jon said; but after a while they all left him alone. They stopped saying things to him, too.

At first they used to gig him on his parade-ground work. He just couldn't march. Put him with a column of men and you would see his legs moving against the easy swing of the platoon. Everyone in step except Tiger, and he walked along, sublimely ignorant of the error of his step. Men hated marching behind him, because they trod on his heels; or in front of him, because he trod on theirs. To see him with a rifle would make you groan. Clumsy and awkward it was in his hands, and it sent a shiver through you to see him slope arms or order arms or present arms. Officers and non-commissioned officers tore their hair trying to show him how to do it, but with no avail. He just plugged along—go your way, I'll go my way—and what could you do about it? Everyone gave up trying.

They would keep him off the big parades—you know, where you present arms to a big shot with brass around his hat. Yes, they were careful to keep him off those, and yet I have seen sergeant majors nearly go mad when at the last moment he would wander on to the parade ground, a vacant look on his face, and his rifle trailing behind him, and maybe a puttee trailing, too, and his buttons all undone.

In his eyes there would be an empty look, and his face would be devoid of expression. He comprehended none of our urgent gestures. The sergeant major would look at him with agonised expression, and in a painful whisper would mutter, 'Get him off quickly, quickly. I'll go mad if he doesn't. I'll kill him, that's what I'll do. I'll kill him!' Someone would race over to Tiger and lead him away. It seemed a pity, but there it was.

You'd say he was no good for anything, and at that time you wouldn't have been wrong. It was only when we started on machine-gun work that the change came.

YOU should have seen that boy on the machine-guns. It was uncanny the way he picked up knowledge about them. Any kind of machine-gun or sub-machine-gun. He liked the Vickers the best.

When the lectures started, he was there first. He never turned up late for M.G. classes. He was first with the answers, too. Knew everything there was to know about rates of fire and lines and fields of fire, and how many parts there were to a Lewis, and he could disassemble and reassemble with his eyes closed, and beat even the experts. Yes, he was a 'tiger' on them, as Alan said.

If the lecturer asked about enfilading fire and effective ranges, and questions like that, then the class could sit back and listen to Tiger. He knew. He seemed to be in his element. The rest of us he did not see. We did not count. It was the machine-gun he liked. His hand would creep over it in a caressing way.

'That kid ain't natural,' Alan whispered to me.

I muttered something about no soldier being natural, but he was right. There was something strange about this young fellow. I learned to become proficient with machine-guns, but even now they don't thrill me; most of us were like that.

When we went on board the transport that took us to Malaya, the platoon sergeants were busy giving the men their bayonet drill, and you could see and hear them trying to work up the troops.

'Point!' they would yell in a loud voice. 'Withdraw!' they would scream, and then in a fury, 'Point! Withdraw! Point! Withdraw!' and the men would be nearly mad with imagination, and the bayonets would be flashing. And yet Tiger did not like the bayonet any more than he liked the rifle. It was queer, when you came to think of it. In the end they left him with his machine-guns, and if you went up on to the top deck you would see him there day and night, staring over the sight. At night, when the moon came out, you could see him, white and pale, as he searched for aircraft.

The sergeant who wanted him to point and withdraw was disgusted at Tiger's unseeing indifference. 'Hell!' he would say. 'Call that a soldier!'

'You should see him on the Vickers,' said Jon, and after that the sergeant left him alone. They forgot all about him when we drew into Singapore.

Later, when the war broke out, they remembered him. They put him on a Vickers right down on the Mersing Beach. The

chaps in that show remember how open the beach was to attack, and how Tiger fired, laughing, at a Jap aeroplane that came swooping towards the yellow sand. The aeroplane dived angrily at him, but he only laughed and kept firing. When the bomb landed near him, he went further along the beach and still kept firing.

After that show, we went to Singapore Island. Things were grim there, much different from the east coast, and all day long the great ack-acks thumped away at the sky. We were short of planes there. The Japs had plenty, and they bombed our positions on the north-west sector of the island, and across the Straits of Johore boomed about five hundred field guns, and they landed one quarter of a million shells in our sector in just about twenty-four hours. Still we crouched in our weapon pits and M.G. nests, and we waited. We knew they would come, and in the end they did come.

THEY came on Sunday night. The yellow men tumbled from their armoured barges into the water. The water was dark with their dead. Our guns hammered loudly, in a kind of mad song. Sometimes we'd hear one stutter, somewhere out in front of us, and go quiet.

Jon and Alan and I crouched over ours. We had Tommy-guns over our shoulders so that we could be ready if the guns jammed. Tiger was close to the water, and we could hear his gun, and then the others came through, those who had run their guns hot or jammed them. Nodding as they passed us, they left us bent over our guns. There was no glory in their eyes, and they seemed weary to death. Tiger had come back with them, and now his gun was in an empty pit near ours. Then the enemy came through.

They had their old stunts of throwing crackers, and screaming, but we were ready for that. Tiger's gun crackled first, and it became the joyful thrumming of a song of death. The Vickers raked the long *alang* and the barbs that twirled and twisted through the short, rough scrub. The hillocks were kept clear of the enemy. They jammed up against the wire. They writhed in the now grey grass.

We were tired with weaving bandoliers into the guns, and

snapping new magazines into the Bren. The guns became hot. Someone had a Tommy-gun going, and it was doing good work even at its range. Then our gun jammed, and in the heat of it all we could do nothing.

'We'll have to get out of it,' yelled Jon, and he grabbed his rifle. He picked up a lump of iron and smashed into the gun. After that, we went quickly because there was a hail of fire near us. Alan, who had the Bren, fell and I grabbed him. Jon cursed in a terrible voice, but it was no good. Alan was done for.

Only after we got away a bit did we hear the other gun still singing, and Jon said, 'Good God! That's Tiger and his gun!'

I said, 'Maybe it's just Tiger. I don't know about the crew.' And we were silent.

'He's a fool!' Jon said, and we both knew that, but didn't like to think about it at all.

We heard the gun for some time, and then things got hot again, and we lost the sound of it. Jon and I spent the night on the aerodrome. We had a tin of bully beef between us.

Next morning we saw Tiger. He just stared at us.

'Our gun jammed,' we told him.

He just nodded. 'I knew that,' he said; nothing more.

Jack, who had been with him, told us the other men had been killed and Tiger had told him to go if he wanted to. They had plenty of ammunition, and Tiger was prepared to stay. Mad but brave. The enemy had swung about on their flank, and although things were pretty thick they had managed to get away.

'Nearly too late,' Jack had said; and then, softly to us, 'He's mad!'

ON the Wednesday night the enemy came through and cut off our company. We did not know, until suddenly we heard their crackers and cries and realised they were on our right flank.

We wondered if they would swing across our front and then push us round. They didn't, but then we heard them on our left flank, and we knew that was the end. Jon and I looked at each other and we were pretty sick, and then, after a moment or so, one of the reinforcements we had on our gun just turned over and groaned. He was dead.

The other chap said, 'They'll get us.'

'So what!' said Jon savagely. 'What if they do?'

The reinforcement said nothing, but looked unhappy. Then Tiger's gun began to hammer, and we knew they were there. We set ours going, too, so that the two guns were singing a twin song, a rising and falling song which had the tone of madness through it, a sort of divine ecstasy, a fearful joy. I heard it most in the song of Tiger's gun, and I shivered, knowing I would never forget it.

The rounds were heating the gun, and I was praying the heat wouldn't seize it. It didn't. If it had we would have had to leave Tiger and his gun alone, and we knew what that meant. It was all or nothing here, and no soldier wants to die. He wants to fight maybe, but not to die.

Tiger had two men on the gun with him, but only one was in our view. A moment later and he was over to us, reporting progress. We saw him crawling through the grass, and then his sharp, excited tones told us all. The other chap was killed and Tiger wanted more ammo; it was madness for us both to stay there. It needed only one gun on this short front; maybe we could get through. Tiger wanted to stay, and our ammo would do him; we'd better move pretty quick.

Jon took the gun, and I looked across to where Tiger was. There was a red glow from some fire or other, maybe a burning dump, and I could see his face. It was set with an intense joy such as I have never seen on any man's face. He was staring ahead, with the pale red light flickering up into the set hollows of his cheeks. The gun in his hands was singing the joy of the man.

Involuntarily I shuddered at this terrible magnificence. No awkwardness now; no blundering onto parades and being taken off. His life had reached some wild climax. He was a god, laughing, seized with the divine madness of death.

I gave ammo to the gunner, and he went across with it to the pit. I saw him crawl through the grass, and then I turned to Jon.

'He'll stay there,' I said. 'He'll stay there till crack of doom. We'd better get out!'

'Maybe that's being a coward,' said Jon, and it was hard to read his voice.

'Maybe,' I said, 'but he'll stay there even if we don't, and he wants us to go. There's only ammo for one gun now.'

'I see,' said Jon, and his hand was still on the trigger.

For a moment, which might have been years, I looked across at the man who had been a misfit. Then he had seemed but a boy, but now he was full with his years and the glory was through his face. With each rise and fall of the mad song of his gun, his joy pulsed through him.

'Look,' I said to Jon, and he let the gun go, looking at him.

'God!' he said sharply, and then the other gunner was across to us again.

'He said to go,' he whispered excitedly. 'He's mad. So are we, if we stay.'

'We'll go,' said Jon quickly, and with pain in his voice. 'Get the gun quickly,' he said, and we made ready to go.

Somehow I got the ammo and ran across to where Tiger was. The air was thick with bullets, and I laughed at that, because the madness of the boy reached out to where I was and drew me with it. Jon and the other two I could see moving through the trees. I threw the ammo into the weapon pit, and he said 'Good!' in an exultant voice, and without turning his head.

'Luck!' I said to him, and knew that was a mad thing to say, and not effectual. He took no notice, and when I went through the trees, I could see the madness laughing from his face, and leaping from the gun.

Looking back, I saw the smile on his face, and then I had to run because thousands of the enemy were coming, and the night was filled with shots and cries.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF PUGGI MAHOMET

CHIKKA Hogan and I have an agreement. In general life 'Chikka' is Charles Hadley Hogan. At least, his name is something like that. I wouldn't reveal his true name for all the world. Two mates can't be mates like we are, and one reveal the true identity of the other. In pure autobiographical writing it is OK to do that sort of thing, but the human race hides more things, in truth, than it ever exposes to itself. So you will have to bear with the name 'Chikka Hogan', and I trust you will never try to find out who the man is.

Only Chikka and I are left of the original seven linesmen of 'Jug' Section of our own old Aussie Divisional Signals Unit. You can see three of the names written on the Roll of Honour walls of Kranji Cemetery on Singapore Island. The other two did well when they went back to their sheep-and-wheat farming in the Riverina after our war—World War Two. We used to meet each Anzac Day in Sydney and do the march to the Cenotaph, and the four of us would go off to the Botanical Gardens together after we had met the fellows of our Unit. We had a special reason for this, although it was not always spoken aloud. We would sprawl out on the green grass and talk things out until evening, and then we would go our ways. We used to talk about 'Sproggie' James, 'Blower' Brown and 'Chips' Chinnery—the men of our Section who had died in action—the ones whose names are written with thousands of others on the Memorial Wall of the Kranji Cemetery. The other two who came back from the Japanese Prison Camp were Joe Little and 'Don R' Dempster. We called Dempster 'Don R' because those were his initials, and because he was the best of us when it came to riding motor-cycles, 'Don R'

meaning 'Despatch Rider' in Army jargon. At least, they are the names I am writing down this early hour of the morning, and now I can't even contact Chikka, for reasons I will tell you later. I have had my special nightmare dream, and writing it down somehow helps me emotionally. Being well into your seventies is an emotional time, I can tell you.

I guess I could lengthen this story considerably by describing the seven of us, but I suppose we were pretty similar to any seven mates you might see in old Army photographs—young, hopeful, decked out in tropical gear, and so on. The four of us who returned from Malaya still went on being typical, especially at Anzac Day reunions, but I doubt whether our idiosyncrasies differed much from any other set of returned men you might find. Chikka and I have kept fairly close because we have lived in the same State and feel the urge every so often to contact one another. Often it has to do with the matter of Puggi Mahomet.

I can understand that this mention of returned soldiers and their mateship means little to many younger men and women these days. Some of them are a bit cynical of the old Anzac cult—as they deem it to be—but I also know others carry about a bit of awe for those men, women, and times we knew in the Pacific theatre of war. When, then, you enlarge it to all the theatres of battle for all the wars in which Aussie 'Diggers' have participated, you have to say that the tradition is more than a cult, and better than merely a yearly nostalgia. The reason we would go to the Sydney Botanical Gardens was to get away from our other returned soldier friends, because they still know nothing of what happened regarding 'Puggi'. Only seven of our unit ever knew the matter, and, of all these, only Chikka and I survived into the 1990s. The name I go under in this memoir is Danny Walters, and I guess you won't be able to read my story until I am gone.

IF you find this introduction a bit tedious, I can forgive you, but all those names mean a lot to me and Chikka. They meant a lot to us all in the training days at Bathurst Army Camp in 1940, and in both Port Dickson and Mersing in Malaya the following year. Just mention one of those names to survivors and it will send them off on a long trip of memory. Nostalgia and inner tears will

come quickly, and the strange heart-warming camaraderie that such memory evokes.

I can remember the nights I have heard the phone ring in my study—the room next to Connie’s and my bedroom—and, when I have got to it, the hoarse voice of old Chikka. At such times I could almost feel the sweat that runs down his face, because I have rung him on the same account in the early hours of other mornings, and the cold sweat has been pouring from my own shaking body as the old man at the other end of the line has tried to comfort me. It is this sort of thing which welds the spirits of men as they try to hold their secrets together, in our case the secret of ‘Puggi’. Of course, there have been other late-night or early-morning calls from our children, but they are part of the world all parents know, and although they can sometimes be quite shattering, they are of a different ilk. You will be able to see that from my story below.

TO get back to Chikka and the story of Puggi Mahomet, which has caused the annual meetings in Sydney, the visits between Chikka and me, and the occasional phone calls, let me say that the whole thing goes pretty deep. The sort of event which happened was so outside the ordinary and the legitimate that it has caused us the pain we have known down through the years. At the time we never believed it would bring pain in memory. We never saw it as a thing of evil then, and I think you will have a hard time evaluating this strange account.

The seven of us were part of a Sigs Unit attached to Brigade Headquarters, and we were called ‘Line Section’. We had an allocation of thirteen miles of telephone cable, but were supposed to confine ourselves to nine miles of laying and using it, keeping the other four in reserve against bombing and shelling. We first had to lay the line from our Section Office to various units, such as the Headquarters of an Infantry Battalion and of an Artillery Regiment, along with smaller associated units. Cable communication was pretty important, so we were on our toes most of the time, especially when the war we had anticipated broke out between the Allies and Japan, beginning with the Pearl Harbour happening.

When we disembarked from the *Queen Mary* troopship at Singapore, early in 1941, we were just about ready for action, but at that time Japan was only a possible enemy. It was first at Port Dickson and then later at Mersing that we grew into a crack Section. It was at Mersing we first met Puggi Mahomet, and the meeting itself seemed natural enough at the time. It was Puggi who introduced us to the mango tree. If we had been Queenslanders or had hailed from the North Coast of New South Wales, we would ourselves have known the tree for what it was—the bearer of delicious yellow mangoes.

Where we met was part jungle. By this I mean that it was an old rubber plantation which had almost reverted to jungle. Some rubber trees were there, but because of neglect most of them had died or been cut out, and in their place was the usual high, coarse grass we called *lalang*, and vines and undergrowth was thick. Quick-growing softwoods had blotted out the plantation lines. In fact, apart from the narrow road, it was nearly impenetrable. In a way this was good from an Army point of view, because our signals cable terminal-board was hidden from prying eyes. The British Signals unit had buried the cable lines, and all you could see was the brick pillar with its solid iron door that made it as strong as any bank safe. We had to locate it by compass, as there was no defined path leading to it. Each time we needed to use it, we would have to hack our way through by means of *parangs*—heavy-bladed instruments which we kept razor sharp. In other battle zones I think they called a *parang* by the name of *machete*.

OUR first visit was one of sussing out the cable pillar. It took us a couple of hours, and we were soaked heavily in our jungle greens. Clouds of mosquitoes and gnats stung and bit us; the lawyer vines scarred our legs which were clothed only in shorts, long socks, and puttees, and the heavy humidity made it difficult, as we were in battledress with side-arms. In addition, we had to carry weighty equipment. To begin with there was the usual rough humour—Army badinage—cursings and complaints about the difficult task, and finally just the steady hacking away with our *parangs* and tough Army tomahawks.

I still don’t know why it was we surprised Puggi Mahomet at

the cable pillar. You would have thought he would have heard us approaching. Not, of course, that we would have thought it unusual to find a Malay in the centre of jungle, but there seemed to be no special reason for him being there, except it were for the cable pillar. Maybe he heard us coming, knew he could not escape without us hearing him, and decided to brave it out. Anyway, we saw him standing in front of it, staring at it.

Sproggie, who was good at Eastern languages and the Malay language in particular, *salaamed* Puggi with the traditional Islamic peace.

Puggi nodded happily, but he could speak some broken English, and said, pointing to the cable pillar, 'What you call this, eh?'

I said, 'Oh, just an old Army thing.'

I don't think he liked my offhand tone, because he stiffened.

Sproggie said, 'How come you are here in the jungle?' When the Malay did not answer he asked, 'What's your name?' The closest we could get to it was 'Puggi Mahomet,' but when we asked its meaning he refused to tell us.

By this time we were all physically exhausted, and sat down on the track we had made. Puggi stared at us and our equipment. He was deeply interested in everything. For our part, we weren't going to let him see what was behind the thick iron door of the pillar with its telephone-line terminals. Blower got out the blow-lamp, from which he had derived his nickname, and soon had it roaring, boiling the water for our billy tea. Puggi was intrigued with that and was happy to have a cup of the brew—milk, tea and sugar all boiled together. He seemed to like the large Army biscuits also. In fact, he seemed happy about the whole social affair.

When we wanted to get on with our testing of the terminal points, I suggested to Puggi that he might like to move on, to vamoose. When he pretended not to understand, Sproggie gave it to him in straight Malay. We heard him move through the jungle, but more silently than we had come.

In a few moments he had returned, just as silently. Chips Chinnery was turning the key in the lock when Puggi started his chuckling, pointing up to the tree under which the pillar was situated. 'Very good mango,' he was saying.

We were startled, on looking up, to see the tree was laden with large yellow mangoes. We wondered how it was we had missed seeing them. Then we saw the ripe fallen fruit in the tall *lalang* grass around us. Puggi wouldn't let us touch it. In a flash he was up the tree plucking and throwing the mangoes to us. Then he sat with us and helped us to eat the scrumptious fruit. We had a new view of the young man. After a time we opened the stout iron door and began testing the lines. After a brief stare at the terminals, Puggi made his second exit. We scarcely noticed him go. We were linesmen, and were fascinated to work out the system of cables as we linked up with the various units. I made out a chart of the connections to units, numbering the cables so that we could use the test point if any of the lines were to go out. Then we began connecting new cables to unused terminals, to give alternate surface-lines to those on the system which were buried.

After we had finished these connections, we set the blowlamp going again and toasted tinned herrings on our Army bread, and washed the lot down with fresh billy tea. We collected fruit for personal eating, keeping the secret of Puggi's mangoes to ourselves. Then began the laborious work of laying the land-lines.

MERSING in those days was little more than a fishing town on the south-east coast, but its fortification had been well planned. It had been anticipated for years that the Japanese would try to take Malaya, and that they would infiltrate to Mersing from a village called Endau at the entrance of the Endau River. They would also come directly by sea to land on the Mersing beach. The British had erected a large Army barracks for the troops, and had set up a system of gun emplacements along with the cable system we were now using. Australian troops had just replaced British ones, and our Aussie Brigadier had planned an even better system of fortifications. He reckoned we could hold out even more securely than the Allied troops who were at that time holding their own in Tobruk.

It was essential that no information be given to the enemy, which was why we were reluctant to let Puggi Mahomet identify our signals pillar under the mango tree. After one or two visits to

the cable assembly-point we concluded that Puggi was just an ignorant Muslim. That was until we heard him speaking pure Mandarin in the bazaar, the local marketplace. We had gone there to enjoy the cool sea breeze, the drop in temperature and humidity, and the exotic foods which outclassed our Army diet. Puggi had not noticed us, and when we saw him talking excitedly to a tall Chinese stall-holder, we were amazed. Sproggie was fairly proficient in Mandarin, and his eyes narrowed as he listened.

'Puggi's no fool,' he said. 'He is well educated. I think we may have underestimated him.'

'Like in the jungle,' Chips suggested. We agreed with him. Later we discovered that the tall Chinese stall-holder was really a Japanese spy, although at the time we didn't know whether he was Japanese or Chinese. I do know he spoke excellent English, the kind of English you would not have expected of a bazaar stall-holder.

Puggi would visit the camp a lot. He would make friends with almost anyone, especially the cooks. He sort of put himself on a level with the cooks. Of course, all camp information comes from the cooks. They received Puggi well enough, and he had good Malay recipes for using the local food—curries and that sort of thing. We were more out of camp than within, but one day I found him in my tent. When I opened the flap he was sitting on my folding bed, looking at some of my photographs—snaps I had taken in Australia, and a few on our journeys around Malaya. My entrance didn't seem to phase him, and we talked equably, but I was worried. I had left my keys in my haversack, and when I felt for them, they were in a different place. I had always kept them in the right-hand corner, being the methodical chap I am. At least they were in the haversack—that was the main point. It was only afterwards that I felt the smooth stickiness of soap on the keys, and at first I thought he had taken an impression of them. Then I thought the idea to be silly. Puggi was little more than a youth, and I doubted it would have been him.

BECAUSE we were mango-lovers, we would often invent an excuse to go out to the terminal pillar. It was an important unit, and we would keep testing the cables through it. What

worried me about it was that some of our cables were joined to the civilian lines and we had superimposed circuits by means of them. Often, however, we would find these extra circuits did not conform to our planning. I worried whether it was a technical matter beyond my knowledge, or that somehow someone was altering the system. It may have been the Sig. boys from the battalions or the regimental companies. After a time we would get things righted.

All this was happening before Japan came in on the war, so that in a way it did not matter. Having readjusted the cables we would have our jungle lunch, gorge ourselves on jungle mangoes, and go back to Mersing. What worried us was that Puggi had really become part of the camp, and he had even got to the Brigade Major, who was a pretty hearty sort of fellow. The Intelligence Liaison officer was far from hearty, but even he and Puggi were friends of a kind. Down in the bazaar we worried when our Malay friend spent time with the tall Chinese stall-holder.

It was Bobby Brixton who gave us our first clue. He was by way of being a language expert, and was knowledgeable about Sino-Japanese folk. One night when we were having ices in the bazaar, he observed dryly, 'Your Puggi Mahomet isn't a Malay at all. He's part Chinese, part Japanese. His Mandarin is good, but I bet he speaks Japanese even better.'

We had no way of knowing that, since the two never used that language. We did know there were Japanese residents in Mersing, but no one could object to them being there. For all we knew, they may have been the ones who caused interference on our circuits. Sproggie wondered whether Puggi was in the pay of AIF Intelligence, so I talked to the Brigade Major and told him of our troubles. He was a bit disturbed and chatted with the Brigade Intelligence officer, who assured him that Puggi had not been enlisted as a spy.

Chikka and I were the closest of our seven team members, and we slipped out one night before 'Lights Out' to see whether there were night visitors to the precious terminal pillar. We sat up in the branches of the mango tree, and because the moonlight was brilliant we could see what was going on. In fact nothing was

going on, at least not until dawn when we saw three Malays make their way to the mango tree. We froze in the upper branches whilst they pulled mangoes from the lower branches, laughed their heads off, and finally set about trying to open the terminal post.

In the moonlight it was difficult to see who they were. Certainly the tall Chinese stall-holder was not there; nor was Puggi, but their attempts to open the pillar were serious enough. There was a lot of guttural conversation, but finally they left. We slid down and worked up our blood-circulation with some physical exercises. At least we had learned that the terminal pillar was known.

Day by day we were being lectured in groups about the coming war with Japan. No one doubted that it was due to happen—perhaps any day. Sproggie and Brixton noted the disappearance of most of the Japanese. Puggi still talked to the tall Chinese, and it seemed they were even closer together. I worried more about the terminal board in the jungle. If we were to be a defensive garrison, then it would be the nerve centre of all line communications. Our wirelesses were good but they were subject to weather conditions. We had scramblers on our phones, and even if the enemy tapped in on our lines, they would find it difficult to understand our conversations. This would not be the case with the wirelesses, although there were codes used with the Morse keys.

AT the beginning of our story, I told you that Chikka and I often ring one another. We do this because one or other of us wakes up from a nightmare, sometimes in a lather of sweat. If it is not Chikka, then it is I. We keep talking to one another until the trembling ceases and we are able to get back some semblance of sanity and peace.

You see, not even to this day do we know whether we did the right thing. We just can't be sure, and there is no way of discovering whether our action was justified. If you remember, we were not at war with Japan, and even if we had been, we had no way of knowing whether Puggi was a spy or not. We still cannot be sure—that's our problem. I guess the seven of us must have

killed Japanese during the declared war, but at that point there was no such war. Killing a man out of war amounts to murder, whatever else you may like to say.

We had set out early in the morning—before dawn—and were listening to conversations on the cables. We had an instrument which pierced the cables, and brought the traffic to our Fuller-phones. There was no way anyone would know we were plugged in and were listening. What puzzled us was that some of the lines had gone dead. Even if there had been interference, we wondered why this should be. We had no notion, of course, of the coming Pearl Harbour disaster. Nights later, we were to hear the information that a Japanese fleet was making its way to the Thailand Coast, but at the time this was all in the silence.

I warned the fellows that we had better go quietly, which we did. We had made many tracks through the jungle, but no main one, so that we would not lead the enemy to the strategic terminal board. We had learned to move quietly. If we hadn't, Puggi would have known we had come upon him. As it was, he was tinkering with the terminals. One look showed us he was an expert in our game. His set of tools indicated that, but his transferring of cable terminals showed us he was out to do mischief.

'Don't move, Puggi,' I said. 'Just don't move or you are dead.'

He stiffened where he was. He did not turn. Then he laughed. 'It is great to see you guys,' he said. 'I guess you are after more mangoes.'

Sproggie said softly, 'The mangoes are finished, Puggi. They've been finished for weeks. You ought to know better.'

I saw he was turning his head, and that there was something in his hand.

'Don't move, Mahomet,' I warned him. 'We have our guns on you.' Six of us had loaded .303 rifles, and I had a pistol. The rifles had bayonets fixed.

Puggi began to laugh. 'What are you guys at?' he said, but he put up his hands. 'I don't know why you should be so scared of me.'

'Turn very slowly, Puggi,' I said, and he did that. His look was a puzzled one. I give him credit, even now, for his stare of innocence. Perhaps he was innocent. At least he claimed he was.

'I came here for mangoes,' he said, 'and found someone had been playing with this board.' He laughed his boyish laugh. 'Even found a key here in the dirt. Someone had opened the pillar door.' He paused and stared brightly, 'Maybe I scared them, eh?'

'Them?' said Sproggie. 'How many of them?'

Puggi shook his head. 'I wouldn't know,' he said cheerfully. "They must have heard me coming and beat it.'

I think Chips was inclined to believe him.

Puggi shrugged his shoulders. 'I wouldn't know,' he repeated. 'They must have gone fast. They even left their tools.'

I walked closer, wary of the so-called Malay. 'Why were you tinkering with the cable terminals?'

He looked surprised. 'No tinkering,' he said. 'Just screwing up the ends they had unscrewed.'

We sat around him, and he knew there would be no mercy. I said, 'We'll take you to the Brigade major. He'll try you.'

I saw the sudden flash of triumph in his eyes, to be quickly covered over by a submissive look.

'Yes,' he said. 'You must do that.'

Sproggie said, 'We'll pull in your mate at the ices stall, too.'

There was sudden alarm in Puggi's eyes but he quickly recovered. Not, however, before we had seen it. 'I think the Brigade Major and the Intelligence officer will tell you I am OK,' he said. There was a bit of triumph playing around his lips. Chips and Chikka picked that up.

'He's guilty,' they said. 'He's going to try and con the officers into believing him. They'll let him off.'

Blower said slowly, 'Not if we have our way.'

I saw the fear, then, in Puggi's eyes. 'OK,' he said quickly, 'OK, I am a spy, but then a counter one. I'm getting information from the Japanese and feeding it to your officers.'

Sproggie spoke some words in Mandarin. 'This is what you told the man at the ices stall,' he said.

The fear extended in the staring eyes. 'You're not even Malay,' said Sproggie. 'You are half Chinese, half Japanese. You are a whole Japanese spy.'

This put some spunk into the man we had surrounded. His voice held high scorn. 'You take me to the Brigade Major,' he

demanded. 'He will settle this. You—you are only other ranks. You have no right to interrogate me.'

He was, of course, correct. We also suspected he may have been in the pay of the Australian Army, but not for altering the terminal signal board.

Joe had been silent to this point, but now he spoke up. He ignored Puggi. 'He'll get off, sure as eggs,' he said. 'Cunning little bastard he is! If there had been others here first, we would have heard them in the jungle. I reckon he and his mates have white-anted our Mersing Tobruk. I say we ought to finish him off here.'

Puggi was more scornful than ever. 'Your type is the scum of the Army,' he said. 'You'll never get me shot. I know too much for that to happen. I'm too valuable for your Army.'

Joe nodded. 'That's what I reckoned,' he said. 'That's why we have to finish you here.' His mate Don R agreed. 'He'll crawl out of it for sure. No, we have to deal with him here.'

HOW many times, down through the years, I have thought about that event, and Chikka has also! As I said before, Sproggie, Blower and Chips got theirs in action. Joe and Don R had to live with the thing for all the years they worked on their sheep stations, but they never wrote to us, or rang us about the matter. Every Anzac Day we would not mention the subject, because there was no way of settling the matter. We would just sit together in the Botanical Gardens in silence, thinking about it.

The seven of us agreed that Puggi was a slippery cuss, and would worm his way out of any trial. What was worse, he knew the whole signal system now, and if the Japs came we were done for, with that sort of communication.

The six men said to me, 'Danny, we make this decision together—the seven of us—but only you can veto it.'

In a way, the decision was left to me, and I knew we had to do something. We were not at war with Japan, but give us a few days and we would be. Of that we were all sure. To let this man go free meant disaster.

'The court decides against you, Puggi Mahomet,' I said, but even then I felt a bit sick.

It was then Puggi rushed us. He was an expert in karate, and had Chips and Sproggie toppled in a second. He grabbed Sproggie's rifle to keep us at bay. This decided the other men, and in a flash Blower's bayonet went through the old 'point, withdraw' exercise. Puggi fired his .303, but the bullet went into the air. Joe and Don R rushed him with their bayonets, and we were all sick in the moment that we had done it. Whilst he writhed, I fired a shot and that finished him.

FOR a long time we sat in silence. We wondered what we had done. How had it happened—all so suddenly? None of us had ever killed a man.

We had been 'blooded', as they say, and none of us liked the experience.

Sproggie said, 'He was a very, very dangerous man. I can tell you some of the things he said to his spy-friend in the bazaar.'

Chips agreed. 'But the Brigade Major would have listened to him. The man was a con artist.'

We all knew that in a way we were justifying ourselves, but we were convinced the man was a dangerous spy and would not have been convicted.

'Look at that tangle,' I said, pointing to the terminal board. 'That would be dangerous enough to convict him, if the Major were to listen to us.'

'He wouldn't,' said Sproggie, and we all knew it was the truth.

The silence went on between us. Blower got up and started up his blowlamp. 'I'll make some tea,' he said.

Don R said, 'First let's bury him and tidy up.'

I watched them draw him into the jungle, and heard them with the *parangs*, pick, axe and shovel we kept in our cable-van. Whilst they prepared the grave I worked away on the terminals, calling and testing, testing and calling, and setting the ends to right. Even that wasn't completed before the grave was ready, so I left it.

'I don't know whether he was a Muslim or not,' I said, 'but death equalises us all.'

That was the short sermon and we left it there, not even knowing how to pray for the dead.

If you can describe it that way, we tidied everything. I cleaned the barrel of the pistol whilst the men purified their bayonets.

We were grateful for Blower's tea, and sat in silence as we drank it.

Just at that moment we did not know what the night might bring. As it happened, it was the next night we heard of the Japanese fleet heading south through the China Sea, ready to break through into Thailand, Malaya and other places. Two days later we heard the news of Pearl Harbour. That would seem to have justified us for the death of Puggi, but still there remained a faint element of doubt.

That is why Chikka and I, over the years, have woken—one or other of us—in the sweat a nightmare brings. We see the dead man, the bewilderment of his death throes, the stabbing of the bayonets, the oozing blood and his body being dragged into the jungle, rolled into the grave, and finally the dirt thrown over his face and body. We try to reassure each other. We go over the whole thing, time and again with our mental toothcombs, but somehow we never fully succeed. The pictures of Puggi do not dim with the years: it is possible we may have killed an innocent man.

In my heart of hearts I am convinced we did the right thing, even if it was not in accordance with the Army Manual—*King's Rules and Regulations*. Even so, it is going to be hard for me—harder than before—because Chikka died the other day. It was peaceful, his death, and I know because I was there when he came to the end. I was there in the cemetery, and I gave the oration, dropped a Flanders' poppy on his casket, and listened to 'The Last Post' and 'Reveille'. It was all very moving, but I came away thinking myself to be the loneliest man in the world. There must be nothing lonelier than handling a death like Puggi's on your own.

Naturally I keep wondering whether the old nightmare will come back and I will need some help, as Chikka and I used to have from one another. Somehow, strangely enough, I don't think the nightmare will come.

GUERRILLA

THE tall sergeant, Ray, was as dreamy in his eyes as the colour of the sky. 'You'd swear there was never going to be a war,' he said.

Tony, the youngest, was almost wistful. 'No war, Ray? My oath there'll be a war.'

'They'll come any time now, and good luck if they do.' This time it was Terry, the number-one on the gun. Terry wasn't wishing the enemy good luck, but he always had that feeling that the enemy needed luck, especially when it came to fighting the Australian; Terry believed that there was no fighter in the world like the Australian, except, perhaps, the Scot.

THE section drowsed because it was good to drowse. The sky in this place was never completely unclouded, but today it was almost clear blue, swerving away from their eyes, a holiday blue, and reflected in the sea which washed around the coast, skimming the slim strip of rich yellow sand, a tiger-stripe of colour.

'And a helluva chance we'll have here, any of us,' Ray said discouragingly, although he knew it a sergeant's duty to be the opposite. The habit of grumbling did not leave you with stripes. 'You won't find the brass hats coming out here as they did in the exercises,' he said.

'Don't want them,' said Tony suddenly, excitedly. 'They'd mess everything up. It's going to be good here by ourselves.'

Terry laughed in a way which made Tony feel angry, if not more sure of himself. Terry was powerfully built, but Tony was small and dark, thin nearly to wiry, always filled with an energy which never found full outlet but flowed in gushes like a badly timed pump. Terry was always sure, as though that were the duty of a number-one Bren-gunner, but that did not serve to pacify the small soldier.

'Look,' he said, and he pointed down the coast to Endau, that quiet village at the end of the neck of land. 'Look at Endau now. Wouldn't you like to be raiding it?' he asked. 'Wouldn't it be better to attack it than be defending?'

'This isn't a game, Tony,' the sergeant told him. 'It'll be tough when it starts, not like the books you read.'

Tony shut up after that, but the thought had taken possession of him. He wanted to sweep down on the village, to make the encounter, not to be caught with his back to the wall, no matter how powerful the wall. In a way he could not believe the small Japs could do anything; that they might was a picture which taunted him—the Japanese sweeping down upon the village.

HE kept thinking about it, even when the boys flicked a pack of cards and began poker. He was able to lie, his body pressed against the rotting softness of the damp jungle. He was thinking it would better to be on a hill, somewhere, and the village, although not necessarily Endau, in the heart and bowl of a valley. Then the village would be surprised. For him it would be that glorious emotion of sweeping, a gull on the wing, an eagle poised and swooping. Not too easy, either, the taking of the village, whilst you pressed in with your guns rattling, rat-tat-tatting. Ray and Terry had tried their gun across the river and the fugitive natives, those refusing evacuation, had fled shrieking through the swamps. In such a way, were a village attacked, the inhabitants would fly.

Something of the Cossack might have been in his veins, something of the old plunderers, although he was only just large enough for an Australian regulation soldier, let alone a full-blooded Cossack.

Before the game of poker finished the bombers came. It was the first time they had appeared. Ray showed plenty of interest. Terry tried not to, but his eyes betrayed him. Marshall stared at them, his lips fearful, but he kept an eye to his cards, too, although he might not have seen what they were. Tony was almost in an agony, staring at them, not afraid, certainly not as scared as Marshall, but knowing at last things must be happening.

Now the planes were the eagles, sweeping, swooping and curving. Soon they would rat-tatter, and when they did, the boys

did not bother shifting, but kept dealing hands, as though to do otherwise was to lose face and prestige. And the planes were disappointing. Their staccato gunning, their movements high up, had little beauty. They were wheeling to find targets, and when they did, there came the sickening lurches of sound as the bombs dropped. Tony felt the passion die in him.

BEFORE the planes departed, flying northwards, two more arrived from that direction. They had the same dispassionate purpose as their departing comrades. They tried to find the five men, Ray and Marshall, Terry, Tony and Pip. Pip sat over his cards, his legs crossed, his eyes sleepy, and he seemed not to have heard the planes.

Tony watched them carefully, the four others. He trembled, when the planes approached, from sheer excitement. Marshall trembled too, but he was not excited, this tall boy, tall almost as Ray, sitting and dealing as though wondering how he had grown to where he now was, dealing cards amidst bombs.

'They'll be coming down from Quantan, see if they don't,' Ray said suddenly.

'That's where they're coming from,' Tony said. 'They're coming from the north.'

'The Army, I mean,' Ray said, and he did not take his eyes from the cards. He threw them down, and changed his hand. 'They'll come through the scrub and stuff, although these know-all civilians say not.'

'That's right,' said Tony eagerly. 'That's the way they'd come. It'd be harder, of course.'

'Ah-h-h-ch,' said Terry, and he wasn't concerned with his cards much. 'You muck me up, Tony,' he said. 'You talk, talk, talk. We'll see what'll happen when they come.'

He threw down his cards, restless now as the others were restless. Tony thought that perhaps they hadn't been interested in the game, but, like him, were thinking.

He flattened himself instinctively as the plane roared down upon them, but the bombs dropped thirty yards away, although that was too close to be good, especially their first time under bombing.

Going back to their section-post they could see Endau, absurdly quiet, fronting the sandy roads, half-hidden by palms. Tony thought sadly that it was empty now, or nearly, anyway, the soldiers alone occupying any of it. He thought it a pity, too, next day and the days afterwards, that the planes should smash it so. He should smash it so, leaving few houses, whilst at night it was a village without lights, no village at all but trees only, and they a tumbled mass in the perpetual half-light of the Malayan night.

RAY was right about them coming down from Quantan. They were seen on the other side of the river. The men on the gunboat saw them, but the Nipponese had not fired or shown fight. Later, the gunboat reported their being seen in greater numbers, massing probably, and so sections went across the river, but the five had to remain at their section-post.

Pip was given a Tommy-gun. He showed it to Tony, sideways, with a sort of cunning secrecy, as though he were a tipster at the races—that sort of quiet cunning. He spoke out of the side of his mouth. 'This'll touch 'em up, see? This'll give 'em what for, see?'

Again Tony was excited, and wistfully envious. Here was a man independent of Terry and the Bren. Terry always carrying a Bren as though it needed Terry to carry it, his chin squared and stuck out, as though, too, it needed that. Now with a Tommy-gun it would be different; and Tony dreamed, and wished Pip would let him have it, but Pip, for once, was surprisingly attached to something.

They were all different, in a way, waiting for something, or *the* thing, to happen. One day, they knew, they would have to evacuate down the road to Mersing. Armoured cars and carriers would cover their withdrawal, whilst the other troops would evacuate down the river, drawing the enemy after them into the certain ambushing net of the Jemaluang Valley. Tony could see the high hill reaching into the clouds, and the hidden soldiers waiting .

ON the other side of the river the Nips kept piling up, silent, as though not welcoming contact; but they were contacted, and the first casualty was an Australian soldier, slashed by a

Nipponese officer until two comrades cut him in half with Tommy-gunfire. Tony danced when he heard that.

Then, when the heavy rain came, there was a momentary respite from the bombers. Tony felt, somehow, that those planes destroyed his dreams. They came, day after day, commencing at dawn, and not ceasing until the evening.

They flew even into the dusk in their relays, and just before the rain they commenced coming at night. There could be no lights, no fires, and scarcely a cigarette, never one out in the open. The rain, if it brought freedom from the bombers, intensified discomfort, filling the low-lying marshes and creeping across to where they were entrenched on the coast. After five days they had to get out of the trenches.

'We'd better ring headquarters about it,' Ray said.

Headquarters was out of communication. 'You can go, Tony,' Terry said, although it wasn't his business.

Tony didn't mind going, and it meant he would see Endau again.

At Endau the fish were still stinking on the roadway. Sun-dried once, they were now soggy with the rain, and the flies played over them, but there were no bare native feet to patter on them, and the wharf where the fishermen unloaded was quiet as the grave. Only the bombers in perpetual flight made a sound.

WHEN he reached headquarters, the sound of gunfire came from the sea, and the hovering planes swooped on the gunboat. The small craft fought furiously, turning its heavy guns into ack-acks. Tony left the worried major who had ordered immediate evacuation, and turned towards the coast.

Then he saw a man of his own battalion running towards him, his arms raised in alarm, and his voice also.

'They're coming!' he shouted, and his eyes glared wildly. 'They're coming.' He opened his arms to signify better. 'Millions of them!' he shouted, and he ran past Tony. 'You'd better come with me,' he screamed. 'We have to evacuate to the river.'

Instructions had been to evacuate towards the river to a place called Halting Bungalow. But there were Terry and Ray,

Marshall and Pip. He would have to tell them. The infantryman was shouting frenziedly to him to come back.

'I've got coppers over at the coast,' Tony told him.

'They've been told,' the soldier shouted urgently. For a moment Tony was tempted to believe him, but then he knew it could not be so. This man had told no one especially. He was thinking about his skin and about the landing hordes.

He unslung his rifle and slipped a round into the breech. He held the weapon in his hands and moved quietly through the scrub and *Jalang*. He came on to the water, and it rose above his boots, soaked down into them, rose above his knees. There was a stillness across the swamps, and the stillness might have concealed an enemy. Perhaps not, too. He gripped the rifle, held it a little high as the water rose up his thighs.

TERRY and Pip, Ray and Marshall had been told, all right! They were gone when he reached the camp, and they had moved quickly, too, for the signal equipment was smashed as though they had been unable to take it. Tony had a moment of wishfully thinking Pip might have left his Tommy-gun. He coveted Pip's Tommy-gun as he coveted a raid upon some village.

But Pip had forgotten something, a bandolier of Tommy-gun ammo, and this Tony slung as he left. Returning over the swamp was really creepy, because it was deadly quiet, with only the far-away gunfire as a background. Here the enemy might be hidden, but as he toiled through the water he saw no sign of them, and when he reached Endau it also was deserted.

Now, however, he heard the gunfire quite close, and realised with a strange inrush of feeling that it was Nipponese machine-gunfire, the peculiar rising and falling, foreign to the guns he knew so well. He realised then that the force had left, or was leaving. When the sound of gunfire finally receded, downstream probably, then he wanted to laugh, standing there as he was, one alone in a deserted village. After a time, he decided it was no laughing matter and that he had better make towards the river. He never reached the river.

There was a crying and a shouting, a sound of gunfire, and a

sharper, more brittle sound. When the Nipponese came through the scrub and *lalang* toward the kampong, they were laughing, thrusting up their arms and shouting, 'Banzai! Banzai!' ridiculously like children at play, waving their flags, boisterously happy. There was also that about them which did not strike Tony as childish. It was not terror he knew as he watched them approach. He had the queer feeling that he might have to die, and he did not wish this, although also he did not fear it. Then the situation seemed comical and untrue, as though suddenly thrust upon him and therefore unreal: the evacuation, the incoming of the Nipponese, and he, Tony, left standing alone in the kampong awaiting their coming.

He knew the jungle well, the palm groves, the *pardi* and the half-jungle of scrub and *lalang*. He knew how to get through to Mersing without going by the river, although he guessed the road bridges would be blown by now. Then there was the bridge over the reservoir, which also would be blown, and to escape he would have to circle through the jungle, far upriver. He moved away quickly into the jungle, bent on avoiding the oncoming enemy.

HE had not gone far when darkness fell, suddenly as always on the peninsula. It halted him somehow, as though for the first time he was really thinking, and a faint line of fear which had been running through his being was suddenly erased. He could see Terry laughing, and hear his scornful 'Ah-h-h-ch,' as though every blessed thing he, Tony, said was infantile. Well, they had gone without him, leaving only the bandolier of ammo. What he wanted was Pip's Tommy-gun.

It was after that thought that he knew he had to go back to Endau. There might be a Tommy-gun there, in the Japanese clubhouse, perhaps, where there had been a case of primed grenades. No one had wanted that case of bombs, or even to go near the clubhouse, especially when the bombers were about.

It was by instinct he moved towards the kampong, for the jungle was dark.

He heard the sounds of the enemy before he reached Endau, and he was amazed at the noise, laughter, and even shouting. He

felt angered by the confidence of their sounds and the contempt with which they must have held the enemy, to be shouting so. Lights, too, were blazing in all the huts. He felt then a violent fury, for he and the boys had been forced to sit in darkness for weeks, and here these others were grinning about their fires as though beacons of triumph had been lit.

He moved cautiously towards the clubhouse, and as he edged in from the jungle a few fowls squawked and muttered. He wondered absently how they had remained alive and not been eaten. Then he thought of the grenades, and no one going near them. Well, there were no bombers now. He crept to the verandah.

The grenades were still there. He felt them, gingerly, his hand caressing their roughness. A load of pineapples. He grinned at that. Fifty yards away a hut was burning, but the thick growth shielded him from its light. There were Nipponese about the hut, and in that moment he remembered the wounded Australian and the officer slashing at him with a sword.

INSIDE the clubhouse he had to feel his way. His hand came against a rifle and then a small heap of pistols. He wanted to slip one in his belt, but he had no ammo for them. Gloves for despatch-riders and, unbelievably, Tommy-guns. He felt two of them assembled, and then boxes which may have contained unassembled guns. It was wrong, these being here, but he had more to do than worry. He had to take those grenades before the Nips found them.

On the verandah he tried to lift the box, but it was too heavy. He slung the Tommy-gun and quietly relieved the box of some of its contents. He was able to lift the partly emptied box and stagger with it to the jungle growth.

There he felt hot, the sweat sticking his clothes to his body, but all the time there was growing within him the dream he had had, time and again, about sweeping down upon a village. There would be no sweeping here, only a half-case of primed grenades. They were intended for the laughing little men outside the burning huts, and all those inside the huts, eating and talking, laughing and shouting, the small men who had thrown crackers into the air and waved little flags. Those who had followed the

gunboat downriver did not matter, for they would die at Jemaluang, in the valley.

Without quite knowing why, he carried the box through the growth, skirting the rear of the kampong. He passed almost within touch of Nipponese, but he kept his grenades, for he knew he wanted more than these. Finally he set down his box of bombs and crept into the village.

Towards the river, and almost to the deserted Customs house, stood a residence, probably used by a former Customs officer, and it was large, two-storeyed, with bungalow verandahs. A great fire burned in front of this building, and over it was spitted a pig. Close by it, and using the flames for light, were crouched a number of Nipponese officers peering at maps and papers. He could see they were officers by the tailored dress they wore and the leather leggings so well polished. About them, at the fire and on the verandahs, were other ranks of the enemy, but Tony sensed this was their headquarters. He had a moment of wanting to discharge his Tommy-gun into them, but refrained.

As he stood there a peculiar sense of triumph crept into him. Until now he had worked by instinct almost. His jungle training had given him silent feet, made him noiseless, and even led him to appropriate the ammo and Tommy-gun and carry this box of grenades, but his plan had been shadowy, circling through him as a stream does in the earth towards the light. With some pressure the water becomes a gushing spring, and this indifference of the Japanese suddenly made his hatred gush forth, but even stronger than his hatred was the powerful realisation that he was separate, a strong individual entity, not bound by Army rules, not subject to orders, but acting on his own.

It was an old dream come alive, about to be fulfilled now that his spirit was emancipated from Ray's command. This quiet power absolved him from Terry's scorn, Pip's tolerance and Marshall's curiosity. He was completely cut off from their personalities and existed at last as himself.

Triumph was a sweet emotion. The Army and all it stood for faded. Out of all that training remained only the common thought of the enemy.

He listened with dislike to the guttural, almost staccato accents

of the officers. The lower ranks moved obediently to orders, and their very subservience infuriated him, but even that emotion was subdued by the queer feeling of exhilaration which was creeping through him. He was beginning to live as he had never dreamed of living; he had an exhilarating sense of his loneliness and a powerful sense of completion.

HE went back to his box of grenades and worked slowly through the undergrowth with them until he was seated watching the officers.

Thoughts passed through his mind. It was madness to hope ever to escape; it was crazy to think he could get away with anything. Bridges were blown, rivers had to be crossed and a thick jungle to be traversed. Then there was the unreality of sitting here when not long before they had been playing poker, ignoring the bombers and their bombs. Now he was a lone, voluntary guerrilla without relationship to a force or movement. Still he watched.

The mosquitoes troubled him now. Trained as he was to let them bite, he had a maddening desire to move, unsettle them, swipe them away, as though, of all things in the world, this was the most desirable. Yet his other desire kept him still. He would not move a fraction until the troops had finished their meal and were gone inside. In the distance he could hear the persistent laughter of other groups, but his mind was set now, sternly and gladly, upon this house and its group of soldiers.

The spitted pig had been dragged from the fire, bowls of rice and stew set before the officers. They ate hurriedly and, before the meal was generally finished, rose and left the camp. Tony's heart sank at that, but he consoled himself that they would not be long gone. He watched the others eat, engulfing their food, until hunger began in him like a dull pain in a pit, but he fought it, promising himself better things, thinking only of the box of grenades at his side.

The fire burned low when the orderlies and servants left it, and after a time the singing in the distance died and the soldiers in the house seemed to sleep. The officers had not returned, but he divined they would and began moving quietly, allowing the blood to run through his numbed limbs. Then he unslung his

Tommy-gun and began lifting the case of grenades. About him was the vast silence of the jungle, the marshes and the village.

HE worked through the grove of palms which led towards the house. The fire flickered on him as he moved, but he hurried from palm to palm, grateful for the shadows; but the box was heavy, and, he began to think, too heavy. As a man who runs will keep running from the sheer anguish of it, so he persisted with the heavy weight. He felt the blood draining from his body and rushing to his pounding heart, but he did not dare lower the weight to the ground. He swayed as he walked, his step almost drunken.

In the jungle he had walked soft-footed as a panther, but here his boots seemed to ring on the ground. When, finally, he bridged the seeming miles and was almost to the verandah, it seemed his heart thudded louder than his steps.

He felt almost naked crossing from the palms to the verandah, and then he had the terrifying sense that someone was watching him, but destiny would not allow a withdrawal, and he staggered on.

His feet on the verandah boards were dull and hollow, and the sound made him pause. Any moment the bayonet; yet he lowered the box to the floor, knelt beside it, and heaped the grenades gently so that the pyramid could be seen by him in his jungle hideout.

As he moved again towards the concealing palms, he heard the low voice of some soldier and then, in reply, guttural accents, but it was not of him they were talking, for there was laughter and, after it, silence.

Relieved, he crept towards his position in the jungle, and, when he thought he had arrived, commenced searching for his Tommy-gun. He had a moment's terror when he could not find it, but was reassured when cold steel pressed up against his hand.

Whilst he sat, watched and waited, he removed the magazines from the bandolier. In the silence he thought about Pip and Ray, Terry and Marshall, making towards Jemaluang or Mersing. It would be different in those places—they would not be Endaus.

Nor would Ray and the boys know an experience such as this. He smiled when he thought they might never know of this, either.

When he had almost begun to believe the officers would not return, they came along the road, talking noisily and gesticulating. There was some argument in progress. Now he could take aim with his Tommy-gun and wipe them out. That would be easy, but he did not want it. The old dream persisted of the confusion he could cause, the brilliant denouement, the everlasting glory.

He watched them enter the camp and go towards the building. At the same time other soldiers awakened and came through the door of the front verandah. He had a sickening feeling that they would discover the grenades and his plot, but they seemed not to notice the box. It was only when an officer approached the verandah that the box was discovered. Even then, Tony hoped he was more curious than alarmed. Then the officer shouted something and his fellow-officers crowded around him.

Finally one stood, shouted something, and pointed towards the jungle.

Tony muttered angrily, 'You don't know a thing,' and tightened his grip on the Tommy-gun. He felt he could not wait another moment, not even if his life depended on it, so close he was pressing to his triumph.

If he did not fire then he could escape. Unsuspecting, they would not search for him. One burst of the Tommy-gun and they would know and be after him. Well, they would never get him.

AS he pressed the trigger he felt the upsurge of joy, the rush of complete happiness, as though, through all his tenseness and apprehension, a power had crept which justified him for ever in his action. It laid waste all his minor moments of fear and made him feel powerful, as though, too, no man might ever have felt this. Then, when the gun sounded, he knew his mistake. There was no stutter of fire, only a single shot.

Quickly he clicked across to automatic fire, and this time his gun sang. He saw the falling forms of the Nipponese, some of them dead, some of them instinctively taking cover. There were

bursts of pistol-fire, but no rifle shots. They had not expected the moment.

He replaced a magazine and moved from his original position, spending the new supply. On the third magazine he took steady aim.

Now there were soldiers running through the night, shouts and screams and orders being barked. There was rifle-fire, but he decided it was panic-fire, for none came from the building. The building itself was illumined now by the fires, and at the windows along the top verandah the soldiers were crowding. There were more in the building than he had dared dream for.

Then he saw a soldier running towards the jungle, straight for where his first fire must have shown.

His first impulse was to shoot at the soldier, to alter his aim, to defend his life, but he conquered the feeling and took careful aim at the verandah. By now the soldiers were pouring from the house, running around the walls, but none followed the lone fighter who was making for him, firing as he came.

There was an eternity almost as he took his aim—between the pressure of the finger and fire—a century which rolled solemnly around before being expended. In that moment he thought of nothing, not even the man coming towards him, only the crouched heap of soldiers near the box of grenades, the ones he had killed and the others who had not been killed but only thrown into momentary bewilderment.

Then he fired.

At first there was no response, not for another eternity in which the running soldier had passed the palms and was on the edge of the jungle. He remembered the time that must elapse between the setting off of a grenade and its explosion.

THEN the explosion came, not, as he had thought, a repeating roar, but one concerted roar, with smackings of sound as though mortars were bursting with it. The building smashed outwards, flinging debris into the air, and with it came screams and shouts and a great glare which must have lit the entire village. He trembled then with joy and did not even care about the matter which fell near him, which dropped through the trees and padded

into the ground. He heard the shriek as some of it flew overhead, and then he saw the running Nipponese hesitate. He shot him in the same moment, and, as though possessed, gathered together another magazine into his gun, slipped the remainder into the bandolier, and ran crashing through the jungle.

MADNESS AT MERSING

I WONDER why the Mersing mood is on me today. Occasionally it visits me, but quickly passes. However, today it is on me forcefully, and every detail of those days etches itself clearly, almost brilliantly. Even so, behind that brilliance is still something evasive. Time and again I have sought to grasp it, but it has slipped away, something pensive, something slightly mocking in its elusiveness.

Why today the events should flood back to me, I do not know. Seated up in these Himalayan hills with ghost tips of the snow-clad mountains is not really evocative of Malay as it was, hot almost to steamy, thick, matted jungle so contrastive to these cool conifer-clad hills. Who knows, anyway, the secrets of evocation and association?

Mersing, I should tell, was a very beautiful place. I remember most the casuarinas along the shoreline. They had a kind of music of their own when the sea breezes blew through. It was an altogether beautiful place—Mersing. Almost, you might say, it was unique in its beauty.

I SUPPOSE Bluey Lannard stood out most to me of all the men in my section. As they say, Bluey did not have much culture. He was a bush-bred Aussie and arrogantly proud of it. His vocabulary was bush words and farm lingo. Sheared sheep with the best he had, and the worst. Somewhere back of his history was wild Irish blood, now scarcely tamed by the 1940s.

Later, in the prison camp, he was always out on sorties, thick into the black marketing, taking suave English officers captive with his purloined goods. By that time—in the POW camp—he had developed into a sophist, quite a con man, as they say. He

would have set in a hard, brittle mould had it not been for his rough humour. That was what kept Blue human.

When I met Bluey in the early days, the time when we were in RRD ('Raw Recruit Department', as we called it), there was something about him which was almost virginal. I reckoned that for all his self-protective gruffness and his loud country voice, Blue had been untouched by human pretence. He was real; he was genuine and simple. He had never made sorties into sensuality nor the slick ennui of the city-bred men. They detected a kind of maiden simplicity in Bluey, and set out to rubbish him. They got more than they bargained for. Blue had some sort of human power in his simplicity; much the same, I guess, as a virginal maiden has in her untouched purity.

After a time the clever ones left Bluey alone. They would listen to his rural diatribes against city slickers and just shrug their shoulders. Perhaps they had a hidden envy of him.

Not that you would have envied much of Bluey's outward appearance. He was coarse, stocky, unshapely. His arms were Esau-like in their rough hairiness. The same hair showed itself above his putteed stockings, below his Bombay bloomers. Every part of him was freckled. The one singular feature of Blue was his eyes. Ice-blue they were, and incredibly penetrating. They were steady in their gaze, as though untroubled by guilt.

I WAS glad to have Blue on my cable team. He loved the cable-spewer as it flipped out the insulated line like an unchanging stream of red fluid.

He was fascinated by the clear, sheer action of it. On the rare occasion when it tangled, he would give a roar. The truck would stop. In a flash Bluey was out into the tall *lalang* grass, untangling the cable.

He was good at soldering. Better than all of us. It was understood that Bluey would do the soldering. He was surprisingly neat for a man of his rough ways. Neat, I mean, in soldering his cable joints.

When we were free, we liked the evenings in Mersing, down from the Rest House, sitting around the tables near the ices man. We liked those ices, those coloured ices, ground on the blade of a carpenter's plane.

I can still see Tall Man grating the ice over the blue-steel blade. The grated ice would pile up until he half-filled the glasses with it, added water and coloured syrup. Sometimes he added sherbet. It was a memorable concoction. We liked the cool relief it brought.

Most of all, Bluey liked the Tall Man. He was Chinese—so far as we could tell—and unusually tall. His extremely intelligent face should have told us he was a Japanese spy. Not that he looked at all like a Japanese. He was, however, from Nippon. Later we discovered that, but then it was almost too late.

I know that the elusive element I seek in my Mersing evocations is related to the Tall Man. He seemed to have the same virginal simplicity that Bluey possessed. Together, talking, they were like identical twins. It was a bit stunning for me. Tall Man seemed to have affinity with Bluey from the very start. I had no reason to be jealous. Bluey was no soul mate of mine. Larry was as close to being a soul mate as anyone I had known, but Larry does not stand out in my memory like the carrot-headed country boy from the back of Bourke, back of the black stump.

They would even get their heads together. Bluey held nothing back. Tall Man had long ago agreed that the Japanese were unmentionably evil, and little more than congenital idiots. This had surprised Bluey, who was wholly egalitarian when it came to ethnic matters. He was different to the ices-man in this matter. If Tall Man saw it that way, then that was the way it was. He conceded there might be something missing in the race of Nippon. That there might be something missing in his own Southern race did not ever enter his mind.

I think it was the trust he placed in Tall Man which allowed Bluey absolute interchange of ideas and information. They would talk endlessly and animatedly between the grating of ices and the pouring of syrups. I was young and largely undiscerning, so I was puzzled when I would sometimes catch Tall Man looking at Bluey with a quizzical gaze, tinged, I thought, with some kind of despair and even an element of sadness.

SUDDENLY it was on us. The war, I mean. There were three of us out in the jungle, laying line. I can remember having slipped into a stream hidden by branches and piled-up leaves.

I was wet and confused. We pierced the cable to test the lines, and there was the news. A convoy of ships moving down the China Sea. There was nothing about Pearl Harbour. This was before that event. We knew it would break soon. The alert was given to the Endau and Mersing areas, and also at Jemaluang.

Before long the Zeros came screaming across. They lacked no ammunition or dynamic intention. They were prepared to give a bomb a man if it required that. We fussed up and down the road to Endau from Mersing—about twenty-five miles. We repaired old lines and spewed out the new. Communication was indispensable. The team worked as a single entity, flawlessly harmonised.

IT was then Blue came into his own. It was the day our section commander called for arson. 'Burnt-earth action,' he called it. We had to burn the houses that obscured the trench-lines. We needed clear sight when the Nipponese Navy appeared on the horizon. The big howitzers were pointed out to sea. Lines and trajectories of fire had long ago been worked out. We also had criss-crossed the whole area with sig. cables. Some of it was underground.

We watched the refugees stream out of Mersing. The first sight of people fleeing was very touching. Bluey was plainly angry. He called his rough, rural vocabulary into play. Now he knew that what Tall Man had said was true. The news of Pearl Harbour had roused a fire in him.

Even so, he did not want to burn the houses on the foreshore.

'We could win quickly,' he said. 'They could be back in no time.'

When we went to burn the houses and the shops, he seemed plaintive. 'I'm crazy, Paul,' he said to me. 'I've always been a firebug and now it's gone out of me. I just can't fire this.'

One of the things that depressed him was the departure of Tall Man. The previous night he had just left his stall, not dismantling it.

'What's the point?' he asked. 'One can do nothing on the way. No ice, no people drinking.' He paused. 'Maybe one day we will all come back.'

He did not seem to believe it.

We hung on in hope, wishing it might be. We watched Tall

Man following the bicycles and barrows of possessions.

'Strange,' Bluey said. 'He has no cycle. He doesn't even have anyone with him.' He seemed depressed by this.

We had been to his home a few times. There had been friends of his and a servant or two, but no family. We just hadn't thought much about it. Now we were considering the matter quite thoughtfully.

Larry said, 'There's something mysterious about that guy.' I agreed with that.

Bluey prickled a little. He would have no criticism of Tall Man, not even implied.

'He's an unusual man,' he said, 'but straight as a die.'

'Straight as a die,' I said. I didn't want Bluey aroused.

NOW, looking back, I can see the humour of the situation. When we tried to start fires, the houses wouldn't burn. They were made of timber with *attap* palm roofs. I had thought they would go up at the flare of a match.

Bernie, our largest cableman, was frustrated. 'All my life,' he said, 'I've wanted to be a firebug, but I've never had the guts to do it. Now, when it's all legal—fair and square and above board—it just won't happen!'

Blue went to get the jerry-can of petrol. That certainly started a fire. We moved to the next house. It took quite a time to gather paper and clothing. After a time the black smoke broke through the *attap* and the house was ablaze.

There were a lot of houses to go—and some shops also. Bernie and Larry were rifling the shops. Most of the goods had been taken. I can remember Larry's eyes snapping at the sight of pure pekoe tea. Also there were bamboo shoots in tins, and canned lychees. Later on we were going to need that food. They stacked it slap up against the cable-spewer. Larry discovered a crate of tinned pineapple pieces.

WE knew we had time. We wanted to burn empty houses before the Jap Navy could use the fires as a directional beacon. I wandered a few houses ahead, with the vague idea of piling up papers and clothes.

It was then—about five houses ahead—that I found the cache of short stories. At first I thought it was childish, an amateur teenager writing in romantic idealism, but when I began to read I was gripped powerfully.

Looking back, I know it just doesn't make sense. What was a Japanese writer of great prowess doing in Mersing? I uncovered some correspondence with a Nipponese journal. Curiously enough, almost everything was in English—as good English as the Tall Man had spoken to us.

I guess I hadn't spent a lot of time reading before I heard the noise. I went on reading without looking up.

Then I said, 'Bluey, you won't believe this. There are short stories here which are superb.' They were quite the level of any short-story writer I had read—of the Russians, the French, the Spanish and the English. I knew short stories. I wrote them and even had them published, and I was still very young.

Bluey said nothing and I looked up. It was Tall Man standing there. He had a Thompson machine-gun in his hand. It was not pointed at me.

'Tall Man!' I said involuntarily. He smiled, but there was something about the smile that I didn't like.

When he kept staring at me with the faint smile about his mouth, I said, 'I thought you had gone.' He nodded slightly at that.

While I was talking, I emptied a box of photographs. They were Japanese, too. Once, when I looked up at Tall Man, I noticed his muscles had tightened. His face was hardened. Even so, I found myself fascinated by the photographs.

It was then I saw Tall Man, standing next to the woman. She was petite and very beautiful. I found my own muscles freezing. There were tremors in my body as it tautened. I kept the photographs trickling through my two hands. Any moment now the Tommy-gun would put an end to that.

'This man is a superb writer of short stories,' I said. 'He could easily be a world figure.'

There was no response. I stared at a photograph which told me Tall Man was a husband and a father. I kept the photographs trickling. In one of them Tall Man was a Nipponese officer with a samurai sword.

When I looked up, Tall Man had the sub-machine-gun pointed at me. I guessed it was aimed at my chest. He heard my sigh.

'In a way I am sorry about this,' he said. 'It needn't have happened if I had gone.'

'Why didn't you?' I asked, not that I was greatly interested. I just thought it was a great pity. It was foolish to die like this. I had wanted to see the howitzers boom out at the Nipponese Navy.

'There are things that I need here,' he said. 'Things I buried.' He did not elaborate.

As a sergeant I had my own Tommy-gun, but it was away from me, in a corner. I had no right to the pistol in my holster. That was not regulation issue. The story of how I acquired it does not much matter now.

'Don't move,' he said. 'I like you better down there.'

'Bluey will be disappointed,' I said. 'He really trusted you.'

The eyes were impassive, but I thought I detected a movement, a faint shadow of sadness. It may not have been; I was a long way from him.

'That is all a pity,' he said abruptly. 'Bluey should have reckoned on things like that.'

LOOKING back, as I said, the details etch themselves clearly and freshly. I pull up the blind of memory and my amnesia vanishes.

I hear the rich crackle of burning. I think, 'That must be next door. They will let that fire burn and any moment they will be here. I must divert this shy, intelligent man, this pseudo Chinese, this true son of the Sun. It will be difficult. He is extremely clever.'

'Tall Man,' I say, 'why, as a spy, do you bring all these materials with you, these short stories, these revealing photographs?'

For a moment he does not answer me. He seems to have gentled a little. 'Maybe,' he says, with a faint smile, 'I am a writer before I am a spy, a husband before I am a patriot.'

I remember what I had called 'virginal innocence'. For a moment I wonder how a human being can seem to have personal integrity and warm humanity and yet be a spy. At this moment I

cannot understand. I am young enough to be hurt, even angry at this injustice. Later I will understand, at least in part; perhaps, that is, when I am more realistic, more tolerant. Perhaps it is the beginning of cynicism.

'But you are a patriot,' I say, thinking the word is a bit cold, a bit formal, even stiff.

'I am a patriot through and through,' he says. 'Every day I send the information and the messages to my superior officer. I also smile at you Australians. I think you are like baboons, very uncouth, very naïve.'

'And Bluey?' I ask.

This time his eyes do soften. 'He is a good man,' he says, 'but also very gullible.'

Then he hears the noise. He switches his eyes and body towards the door. Then there is a burst of fire, his hands gripping the Tommy-gun and his eyes losing their habitual calm.

In an instant it is all over. The naïve Bluey has not come in by the door. He has crept along the verandah from one end. Bernie has advanced from the other. Larry has made the noise in the room but not at the door. Larry keeps strictly away from the door.

I THINK Bluey's machine-gun burst reaches Tall Man as my pistol fires. We do not try to check on that. It is the first man we have killed in battle.

Even so, Bluey stands looking down at him. I expect him to explode with his versatile vocabulary. I expect him to curse this man up hill and down dale. I expect anything.

Bluey simply says, 'It was him or us, especially you, Paul.'

I nod solemnly. 'Especially me, Bluey.' Bernie and Larry also nod, as though agreement is important.

I CANNOT say that Bluey actually lost his integrity at that point, but I have the curious idea that had the incident never happened with Tall Man, then Bluey would have kept his simple sort of innocence, his virginal gentleness and the dynamic it contained.

Perhaps he ought to have let fly with his anger then, but he didn't.

Instead he said suddenly, 'I want to burn these places down, all of them!'

In a moment he had turned into a volatile pyromaniac. I guess that in wartime nothing surprises you. It is part of the mystery, part of the depravity, and part of the elevation of war that human beings suddenly do things that seem out of character with them.

NOW, as I sit in the calm hills of the Himalayas and look towards the melting snows of Kashmir, I am again back in that last day of Mersing.

I am watching Bluey and Larry and Bernie as they go about their business of the holocaust. Larry and Bernie act as a foil to Bluey. They are fairly matter-of-fact about what they are doing, almost casual, you might say. Not so Bluey. He is like a red demon with ice-blue eyes, ice that is grated and fragmented and glittery. He is like a man possessed. He keeps ferrying-in jerry cans of fuel. Mind you, he is not in the least bit foolish. When he pours petrol around and soaks a house, he stands back before he lets a burst of fire loose.

Then comes the explosion, but by this time he and the others have fled.

What I notice most of all is that he keeps going back to the Tall Man's house, which has become a kind of funeral pyre. None of us searched the house further, or tried to discover the intelligence material he had buried.

We had immediately set about making the fire. We had piled those unique and powerful short stories, those rather moving photographs and the others bits and pieces. We had piled them all on the Tall Man—now so inert, so pale of face and bloody of body, and it was a special sort of cremation. For me there was something of a salute in it, respect mingled with shattered affection.

What I see at this moment—and behind it all flickers and glides that elusive element—is Bluey, the red demon with the ice-blue eyes, rushing here and rushing there, picking up loose timber and flammable rubbish and throwing it on the fire with some kind of a supernatural energy that he has summoned up or conscripted into action.

I can see his eyes, I can catch the bent of his head, glimpse the fiercely sealed lips, but I do not know what he is feeling, whether it is hatred and bitterness that is urging him on, or whether there is some kind of honouring in his actions, the last gesture he can make—however dumbly—towards a fellow spirit.

I really do not know. I simply watch the conflagration as I have done these numberless times, and try to grasp the elusive thing that lurks behind the fire. Maybe one day I will understand. Maybe I will never break through it or comprehend the deeps which a human being knows, and in which his integrity lurks, always seeking to find its ultimate fulfilment.

THE MIND OF MATSUOKO

‘**M**ATSUOKO?’
 ‘Ya, Matsuoko!’
 ‘Matsuoko in there?’
 ‘Matsuoko in there!’

Another area then of jungle to penetrate, vines to be hacked from the ancient trails where it was easy to swear no man had set foot these twelve months. Nor any animal, either. And yet it had not been months, weeks only, in fact, since the tall jungle had hidden its swarms of small yellow men. Yellow men who were no longer, now, in their swarms. Driven back, pressed upon, starved, defeated, captured. Except, of course, Matsuoko.

‘This time we find Matsuoko.’ Small Ben, the squat Javanese, was certain of it. His brown eyes assured us merrily.

An occasional hack with a *parang*, cutting a vine, knocking back the thorned fronds of a palm. Then stepping over the dead, rotting body of a yellow soldier. Conn’s quick look at it, his suspicious glance at small Ben, and then Ben nodding his head in negative fashion. ‘Not Matsuoko. Not Matsuoko certainly.’

Not Matsuoko; neither in the flesh rotting, nor along the thin track, nor in the trees, nor hidden waiting, nor ever to be found. Matsuoko to be devoured by the blue flame of the lanky white man who pursued him.

‘This Matsuoko,’ I said after a time, daring to say the question that had puzzled me. ‘You know him, Conn?’

‘Yes, I know him,’ Conn had said gloomily.

‘M’m. But not just another follow-up?’

‘You could say that.’

‘But Matsuoko means more than that to you.’

‘Matsuoko is the last of them. The biggest thing yet.’

And, after Matsuoko, no more Nips. There was a pleasant thought if you liked! ‘Mopping up’ would be over. Just Matsuoko, who had committed an atrocity.

‘Eight men were killed through him.’ If a monotone can convey intensity, Conn’s voice did.

‘You know all about them, don’t you, Conn?’

‘Very bad!’ said small Ben in Malay, but Conn seemed not to hear him.

When Conn did not answer, Ben said, with the smile gone from his face, his eyes staring at Conn speculatively, ‘Maybe Matsuoko dead, eh?’

‘No!’ said Conn.

Little Ben drew back from his eyes and then laughed, not nervously, but with understanding, and with great jocular confidence, ‘Oh no! Matsuoko not dead. Certainly never!’

‘Certainly never!’ Conn bent forwards again, kicking at a fallen limb in the path, hacking at a vine, pondering his own mystery of Matsuoko.

The silence of the jungle falling heavily in the late afternoon. The faint sounds in the undergrowth distinct above our soft walking. Ben chatting by our side, and the whole thing unrealistic, its intensity for me lost in the familiarity time brings to places.

Then we came to a clearing, and in the clearing were huts, a whole kampong, in fact, and children playing in the centre of the village. As we appeared they ran up the fragile steps of the huts, and a few squat Javanese appeared.

‘What news?’ shouted Ben happily.

‘Good news,’ they said, returning the formality. Conn stared at them without expression.

‘Matsuoko,’ said small Ben, his brown eyes gleaming, his face lit with joviality.

‘Ah,’ they said. They nodded and began speaking savagely. Ben listened to them, his head cocked to one side, and Conn never blinked an eyelid.

‘There,’ they said, and pointed to the jungle. They appeared immensely relieved, as though the shadow of Matsuoko was

about to depart from their lives, which, of course, it was.

'Matsuoko,' they said, '*tida bagoose.*'

'Very bad,' I agreed, and Ben clapped his hands and gabbled softly. Their eyes lighted with real pleasure. When Matsuoko went, that would be the last of Nippon and the dread occupation of their jungles. The tapioca would be theirs, the corn, the yams, and the *pardi*. Ah, yes, the *pardi*.

'And the *pardi*?' Ben asked.

The laughter left their eyes and they stared speechlessly at the jungle, at the ground, and finally, fearfully, at Conn. His eyes were very blue now, inquiring.

'*Pardi* through there,' they said.

Ben spoke something in Malay, but they shook their heads. They knew nothing about the *pardi*, only that it had happened somewhere. And the *pardi* was green now, soft and flowing. We could see it through the stems of the graceful fronded palms. Only beauty on the waving green. They shook their heads slowly.

Conn nodded to them. 'Matsuoko,' he said in a strange, dry voice, staring at the field of mud and rice.

Matsuoko hidden in the last of the jungle, the beginning of the new jungle which rose towards the hills, the vastness of it spreading away. To remain in it could be only death by starvation for Matsuoko, and yet it was understandable that he should try to hide. Through the strip that led by the *pardi* and into the leafy thickness of the new jungle the Malays led us. Then, when we had gone some distance, treading the thickness of undergrowth on a scarcely used track, they stopped, and before us was Matsuoko.

Strangely enough it was not at Matsuoko I looked, but Conn. I expected hate and triumph, but there was neither of these. His eyes did soften a trifle, and his lips did relax, but it seemed more relief than anything. Then he said, almost good-humouredly, 'Ah, Matsuoko!'

He was seated on a bamboo platform, his legs crossed, yogi fashion, his skinny arms resting in his lap. He wore a loincloth of sorts, but it was covered with his own filth. His skin was dried and yellowed, like aged parchment. His eyes were huge in

their sockets and hot as they stared. His face was black around the mouth and chin with a growth of thick dark hair, longer even than the hair of his head which had been not long since shaven. He was a haggard animal, worn out by dysentery, and drooped there on what might almost have been his death bier. The covering above him had rotted and left him exposed to what sun filtered through the gloomy jungle.

It was queer seeing this Matsuoko there.

'Five days without food,' one of the men muttered to small Ben. 'When it finished, no more food.' He thrust out his hands angrily, deprecating the necessity for explanation. Ben nodded assuringly, and the group fell silent.

'Ah,' said Conn again, almost tenderly this time. 'Matsuoko.'

It was impossible for Matsuoko to read any meaning into those words. I could not read them, but Matsuoko, still and watching, would not take his eyes from Conn's face. Dry petrification in that cruel flesh, perhaps, but in the eyes, knowledge. The remainder of us did not exist.

Then he said in a dry, harsh voice, 'Kanamoto, me.'

The natives looked surprised, almost offended. One of them said indignantly, 'Matsuoko!'

The Nipponese on the platform shook his head with strange dignity. 'Kanamoto,' he insisted.

'Kanamoto,' said Conn slowly. He passed his tongue across thin, dry lips and shook his head, not without belief, but with faint incredulity. 'Kanamoto?' he repeated wonderingly. Then he smiled gently.

The sick soldier seemed to gain assurance from that. He straightened perceptibly, as though gathering his dignity fully about him. In a way, I was forced to admire him.

'Ha!' said Conn suddenly. He stepped forward and took between the thumb and forefingers of his right hand a hair of Matsuoko's face. I thought he was going to pull it. I had seen that happen often, though not with Conn. Conn retained it, looking into Matsuoko's eyes, but he did not tug. 'Kanamoto, eh?' he said quietly, without the trace of a sneer. 'Matsuoko, I think,' he said.

When the soldier made no response, he said suddenly, in the

same harsh voice the sick man had used, but in Japanese, something which made the sick man start. He looked fully at Conn and shook his head. Conn let his hand drop slowly. Then he said to the kampong natives, 'Carry this man.'

They seemed reluctant to do so, staring at Matsuoko with hate and some fear. Nevertheless they wrested some poles from the platform, some *nippah*-palm, and improvised a stretcher. At the kampong they made the stretcher more secure and we followed it in silence, Conn staring down at the prisoner, but not speaking. When we reached the camp, Conn took him to the hospital instead of a prison cell.

'I can't understand you, Conn,' I said.

He looked at me a moment, frowned, and said, 'Matsuoko's a sick man.' He smiled, becoming a soldier again. 'Or Kanamoto, as he liked to be called,' he said mockingly.

IT took three weeks to save Kanamoto from dysentery and debility, and make certain he would live; then two weeks to strengthen him, and another month to fatten him to normal strength. He had been a sick man for a long time, and yet the power of his personality had forced those kampong Javanese to take him food when they hated him.

I could easily visualise the sick Kanamoto seated upon his platform, seeing the Nipponese planes disappearing from the sky, the sounds of war fading, with him brooding over a *pardi* field and eight men bowing to him and the glory of Nippon, bowing until their noses touched the cold mud. Bowing even deeper. And Kanamoto watching, whilst he remembered, hoping the leaves would part and white rice be thrust before him, with perhaps a mess of tapioca, a tasty slice of white pork or the rich salty tang of dried fish. But no food, no human being, no soul to hear him groan and writhe as the disease bit deeper.

In the early days of his treatment Kanamoto was silent, and even grateful for the treatment he received. Then he became arrogant, contemptuous of soft usage. Conn, who had nearly wept at Kanamoto's lapse into unconsciousness, now stared at him thoughtfully, and even more thoughtfully when he transferred the patient to the prison cells.

Conn's treatment of Matsuoko puzzled me. On the one hand, I could conceive of him trying to save the Nipponese in order to have him tried and hanged, but because I knew Conn better than others, I was sure there was more to Conn's care of the prisoner than that. He had even dressed Kanamoto in Nipponese soldier dress and given him a sergeant's rank, so that Kanamoto could fairly claim to have been rehabilitated in mind as well as body. It was apparent to me that Conn saw something special in Kanamoto.

Nevertheless, I was surprised when Conn sought me out one night and began discussing the matter.

'This Matsuoko,' he said. 'You know, there is no way of proving he is Matsuoko.'

'You have photographs,' I said.

'Oh, I know he's Matsuoko,' he said, 'but it has to be proved. Most of them don't keep up the pretence long. Usually they admit it, as you know, and are proud to do so, especially if they know they are bound to die.'

'And Matsuoko'll do the same, eh?' I said.

Conn sat staring for some time. Then he said, slowly, 'Oh, no, he won't.' He looked at me with eyes surprisingly gentle. 'I think his crime was too personal to admit.'

I knew Conn had some private knowledge of the working of the Jap mind, so I did not contradict him. His statement on the surface was incredulous. 'Yet,' I said, 'any Nip would have done it.'

'Oh, yes,' he admitted easily, 'any Nip *would* have done it. To execute eight airmen would have been an intense delight—for the glory of Nippon.'

'Then you'll get him,' I said triumphantly. 'He'll be glad to admit it, later.'

My enthusiasm scarcely touched him. 'Yes, I will get him,' he said, 'but not in that way. Matsuoko won't admit it that way. He killed the airmen for Matsuoko, that's what he did.'

I shook my head. It was difficult to follow Conn.

'Say,' Conn said, 'we failed to prove he was Matsuoko. Then he would be just any prisoner. He would go free. If he went free, then he would be free to kill himself if ever he wished, and so be

happy. Or, on the other hand, being the queer individual he is—and he is an individual—then he might prefer to keep his life and his memories.’ Conn stared at me and said in a dry voice, ‘He is not one of Nippon’s honourable ones, you know.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I’ve seen Nips made to confess before today.’

He stared at me.

‘One man,’ I said, ‘pulled out a beard, hair by hair. Mind you, Conn, he had a brother in a Jap camp, and he felt badly. Another time he whipped the calves from a Jap’s legs. Tanaka was that Nip’s name.’

‘Yes,’ said Conn. ‘I know. But that isn’t right.’

Conn saw I was amazed. ‘He was only doing what he feared himself,’ he said. ‘Just equalling the crime,’ he said, ‘so that in the long run the Nip really won.’

I could not understand that, and Conn knew it. At other times I suppose he might not have cared, but because he was in an unusual mood, excited I think, he began arguing the matter.

‘You’d hate a big skunk of a Nip to stand over you when you were helpless,’ he said, ‘and you’d only see him as cruel and merciless. Yet you would do the same now and feel justified.’

‘Now, I’ll tell you something,’ he said suddenly, and his eyes had lost their ice. ‘I’ve never told this to anyone, Tony. We won’t be together for long now and when we part we might never meet, and even if we do, I’ll be in different clothes and you’ll think then that I am different.’ He paused, and then said in a tone of exultation, ‘I will be different, too.’

He began a sort of story. ‘I was an insurance clerk before I enlisted. I suppose that surprises you. Well, it surprises me, too. When I enlisted I suppose I came to life, if you could call it that, for the first time. War then was going to be glory for me, like it is to you and some of the others. I was going to go over the top. I was sure for the very first time that I was really alive.’

‘There were others with me, too, those who had escaped their wives, families, the monotony and the work of life. They were just as keen. They came to life, I suppose you could say. You could talk to them, over a drink, at nights on bivouac. I suppose they talked as they hadn’t done before.’

‘When final leave was over I was glad, but looking back on it

sometimes, Tony, I think it is as unreal as my old clerking days. The ship that took us to Singapore, the moon on the ocean at night, the guns sticking up above the top deck, beer everywhere, men talking, and at heart anticipating. Then Singapore Island, green like these islands here, and natives clamouring for our pennies. Then the train taking us north.

‘We moved off in the night and went across the Straits of Johore. I thought that night was the very best in my life. It was like dreaming properly for the first time and even having that dream come true. The lights on the waters of the Straits, the smell of it; the smell of the East; and on the northern shore of the Straits the buildings and palaces in the late evening, lit with stars it seemed. Then the jungle.’

‘I sat in the last carriage and stared at it, and thought all life was very wonderful, very mysterious. But it was all imagination. It’s wrong, though, Tony, for a man to lose his sense of mystery and beauty, and have to put it down to imagination. Strangely enough, it was the most real thing that ever happened to me. I could see a whole world of beauty reaching down to the South, and it was for us to defend. Even when we trained, or went on leave, or hit the high spots, it was still the best thing I had known, the very best thing.’

Conn Webster, as he spoke, had become human. Now his head was resting in his clasped hands as he stared at the ground. His lips had resumed their normal decent fullness, and his eyes were warm and living. I wondered, almost wistfully, about the strange days of that ghost force up on the Peninsula, and yet it was difficult to envy them. Nevertheless, they had had an experience which could never be ours. Most of all, I wondered about Conn Webster, and why he should be sitting there, talking to me about his hidden past.

‘We thought then that they’d leave it until after the monsoons, but they didn’t, of course. Long before they landed, long before they reached us, I had begun to wonder about fighting. Most took it for granted, as most still do, and some seemed scared when you caught them unawares with a question, but I never knew properly what my feelings were. At the back of my mind, I wondered if I was all I had believed myself to be.’

Conn had been talking to me, but more, I think, to himself. Now he looked at me and said, 'You know what it is to be scared of being scared, don't you, Tony?'

'Yes, I do,' I said. 'Most of us do.'

He nodded. 'Well, I was. When the balloon went up, we were on our battle stations. Different, see, from going on the offensive. Waiting all the time. I began to think I couldn't do it. I began to remember I had been an insurance clerk, that I was, underneath, still an insurance clerk at heart and not the great Conn Webster, that born fighter. Looking at the others, the confident ones, I began to think they were the really born fighters, and that I was outside them.'

'I managed to fight these thoughts at times, and then when the Nips did land, it seemed all so easy. We actually ambushed them in places and wiped them off with artillery barrages and laughed at their silly waving of flags, their cries and their shouts and their crackers. I knew then that I wasn't scared. Then there wasn't much fighting in our area, as the other coast had been broken in its lines and we were forced to retreat to the island from the mainland.'

'It was a week before they landed on the island, but that week worked on me. We were cooped up in a small area, bombed and gunned and shelled continuously without much ack-ack defence and with no air defence at all. That part didn't matter, though. It was the fighting I was thinking about. Then they landed.'

'The magic had gone out of the Straits then, Tony. The whole romantic dream was drivel. But I still believed I was a soldier and I wanted to be that more than anything, as though it was what counted; and it was, too.'

Conn was talking to himself really, although he fancied I was the only listener.

'When they landed it was terrible. I was down on the beach on a Bren. We kept at it until our magazines gave out. Then a runner brought us more, and we started again. After a time our Number Two was killed. We kept firing until they were so thick we had to go. We raced back into grass and scrub, carrying the gun, firing here and there. After a while there were only two of us left, and I wasn't firing. Harry—that was his name—he kept working, and

I was feeding the magazines—all in a blaze of glory, too. Until they were nearly on us.

'You could see them coming, all right. They didn't care. There were too many for them to care. They threw their crackers into the air, and fired tracers, and laughed and joked like the devil on a holiday, and screamed and shouted and cheered, and whirred rattles and flung bungers. You'd call it funny now, but it wasn't then. Think of it, Tony, the first to face that sort of thing, something which we know now, but didn't know then.'

'We kept firing until Harry was killed. Somehow nothing seemed to hit me. It was my big chance. There was still some ammo but I didn't wait. I left everything and ran. Can you see what I did?'

'Anyone would have, Conn,' I said.

He shook his head, but when he spoke he was arguing with himself, going over an old discussion, assessing facts, summing up, condemning.

'No, a born soldier may be careful, but he doesn't care in those moments,' he said. 'I did. When I got away from them, I ran like a little kid and I cried like one until I was well out of danger.' Conn stopped and looked up at me. 'You know,' he said slowly, 'I had the feeling those Nips were laughing at me, that they knew what I was.'

I remembered Conn's cold stare at Matsuoko, and Matsuoko's unwavering stare in return.

'You might think that silly, but it stuck in my mind. I wandered through the scrub and stuff until I met up with others. Things weren't going to schedule, but we settled down and waited for them to come through. It was early morning and they didn't. Then, when the sun came up, we withdrew quietly to what they were always calling "appointed positions".'

'We did that for days, losing ground all the time, being shelled and bombed and machine-gunned out of positions, being pushed back inch by inch, and I was never wounded. That was the strange thing about it, Tony: never wounded. You'd have thought I'd have been glad about that, and that I would have risked more than I did. But I wasn't glad. I kept thinking all the time that it was useless, anyway, and that I'd escaped so far, and I'd make sure I escaped altogether.'

'Escaped altogether!' Conn echoed those words, almost as a question. His eyes dulled, his face relaxed. 'It's hard to tell this part, Tony. We got pushed back properly and the battalion broke up. We re-formed into another battalion back at base and went forward again, but we were a different crowd. There were reinforcements who panicked at the slightest thing. You never knew where you were, but I suppose you'd say I was lucky. I was with the best of our old company, in the one section. We moved forward in the late afternoon, the sort of afternoon you spend at home playing tennis or chatting over afternoon teas, or taking your girl on picnics. It was cool and had a soft light about it. Then, when darkness fell, we went forward. This time we had to attack and break through. It was madness, of course, and I knew it, and I think most of us knew it, but what I knew, more than any of them, was that the end must come sooner or later, and why not in the very best way?'

Conn stopped again and stared at me, his eyes no longer dull, but filled with accusation. 'Why not the best way, Tony? To charge and be damned! That's what the others thought, and when the guns began, the artillery and the machine-guns and the mortars, they didn't care for officers, anyone or anything. They charged, all of their own accord. They'd been told it would come to that, and it had. I was in the section, but I didn't go forward. I told myself I was waiting for orders. Waiting for orders, Tony! And then some of us fled, and I was with them. When we were past the supporting troops we were able to sit down and rest for a time, but I didn't wait to rest. I went on into Singapore itself, where there wasn't any fighting at that time. I just walked into Singapore.

'It's funny, I suppose, but I remember getting coffee at a hotel. There were plenty of soldiers there, and some kid—a newly arrived reinforcement, probably—spilled it over himself because his hand was shaking. Then he began to blubber. The old lady who was serving the coffee came across and put her arm around him. She smiled at him and said something. The kid had got up by this time. I could see he was going back. When she looked at me, the smile went off her face and out of her eyes. She just went back to her coffee.'

Conn laughed. 'I suppose the kid went back and was killed. I never went back. I waited in Singapore for another day, and then I got on to a boat that was taking civilians. I was dead by that time. I had ceased thinking, or I only had one thought, to get away.'

'I never knew about this,' I said.

Suddenly Conn seemed different, as though his life with us had been a weird pretence.

'So I suppose I did die,' he said, walking away, staring into the camp compound. 'Anyway, I was dead on that ship. I lay on the decks night and day until we reached Java. I was just alive enough to see it all, time and again—what I had run away from, from that moment when Harry was killed. I wasn't bomb-happy, and I wasn't scared. When the seas were rough, or the bombers came after us, it still didn't matter. When we were taken off at Java and put into cells, it still didn't matter. When they put us on the boat to come home, I didn't care—not until we reached the Heads at Sydney.

'It was seeing those Heads which brought me to life. I knew then that something had gone wrong, what it was almost, but I couldn't believe it. Strangely enough, it was all mixed up with having been an insurance clerk in a quiet city, a soldier racing through the jungle that night, running from the shrieking Nips, coming into Sydney through the Heads. I knew there could never be another chance.'

'Why couldn't there?' I said.

'Malaya had fallen,' he said. 'I couldn't go back there and fight it again. I couldn't even start that war again, or be one of the captured prisoners. It was ended for ever.'

Conn looked almost pitiful. 'You'll have to hear the rest of it,' he said. 'They didn't know whether or not to put us in prison. I had some vague idea of blotting out the past, and when I volunteered to go north they let me. Others didn't want to go. I went back into infantry to begin with, and fought pretty well. No running away this time, and it seemed good to be on the offensive.

'Then I thought I'd like to get closer to them. As you know, we never saw much of them in infantry, not to speak of, anyway. I wanted to know if they were braver than us—as brave as they

made out—at rock-bottom, below the training of fanaticism. I started to learn the language. It didn't take long. Strange that, when you think I couldn't learn simple French at school.'

Conn stared fully at me. His face was composed, but there was a slight cynical twist to the lips. 'Well, that's it,' he said. 'That's all.'

'All?' I echoed.

'Yes,' he said. 'Now you can see why I just can't whip a confession out of Matsuoko. He has the upper hand, morally.'

'You're a queer cuss, Conn,' I said. 'Granted you missed the bus in Singapore, but what about what you have done since?'

'And what have I done since?' he asked, his eyes beginning to turn cold.

'Well,' I protested, 'you have two mentions to your credit.'

He laughed. 'Bravery,' he said. 'What's that? What's in driving yourself on, or being driven because of the thing that is nagging at you, the old fear of fear, the fear of failing again, of adding sin to sin, so that you can never live with yourself when it is all over? That isn't bravery.'

'You're crazy,' I said. 'Of course it is. You just weren't experienced. Why, I've known cases . . .'

'So have I,' Conn said. 'You're a fool, Tony. I thought you'd understand, even if the others didn't. Don't you see that when Matsuoko had those men before him, he had the upper hand, everything in his way? Then he told them to die, and they had to die—because Matsuoko said so.'

'Because Matsuoko said so,' I repeated mechanically.

'And now Matsuoko has to die,' Conn said; 'but he has to die because he is not worth living with—living with himself. Matsuoko has to pay for those little Japs who made me run,' Conn said slowly. 'He will—to prove to me that I was wrong, that they would have done it, too, that I wasn't any more pitiful than they would have been.'

'And that helps?' I asked.

'Listen, Tony,' Conn said. 'If Matsuoko had had me in the *pardi* field I wouldn't have cringed. I wouldn't have cared, or been afraid, not like I was in Singapore. I could have thought clearly as I do now, as I never did at Singapore. Matsuoko can

think clearly. I've often wished to die, but I couldn't. You might say it was written that I couldn't. Matsuoko doesn't want to die, but he will, and he will want to die honourably, but he won't be able. We don't commit *harakiri* to escape our deserts, Tony, and Matsuoko won't either.'

'Then I can't see it, Conn,' I said. 'It's all too complex for me.'

'You'll see,' he said calmly. 'Just watch Matsuoko.'

'Those eight airmen,' I said suddenly. 'Where are they buried?'

'Remember the *pardi*?' he asked.

I remembered it and the downcast looks of the natives.

'We don't know where,' he said. 'Even little Ben doesn't know that. He only had it on hearsay. But Matsuoko knows, and he knows we don't know.'

'We could dig,' I said.

Conn laughed, his old icy laugh. 'So we could,' he agreed. 'But we won't. It would take a long time. No, Tony, we won't bother to dig.'

I did watch Matsuoko—and Conn. Before the Nipponese was transferred to the cell, and in his last arrogant days in the hospital, I watched him and Conn. Conn always took me with him.

Once with Matsuoko, he would simply stare at him, a cold, meaningless stare. At first it confused Matsuoko, but later he became almost triumphant about it, not that he showed it in expression, but you knew, even felt it. It was as though he wished to unnerve Conn, but I knew he would not succeed. For myself, I had a great contempt for the little sergeant. I knew, with Conn, that he was a murderer at heart, and that his atrocity was personal, a gesture of personal hatred or fear. Conn would have known best what it was.

When Matsuoko went to the prison cell, he seemed no less arrogant. He expected water when he wanted it, and even cigarettes, and would attempt to bully the guards. They ignored him, and he seemed to think that was a great triumph for him. Perhaps he wanted them to dance attendance, but I think not. Gradually I became interested in Matsuoko, almost as interested as Conn. Only the guards had little time for his tactics. 'Why don't you starve the fat bastard?' they asked him.

'He'll be better for the killing,' Conn told them; but I knew it wasn't what he meant.

After a time Matsuoko began, I think, to look forward to Conn's visit with a fascinated dread. I would have hated to have had those cold eyes upon me, neither commanding nor inquiring, eyes without purpose, you might say, yet some purpose lurking behind them. There was no personal hate in Conn. But there was nothing, either, on which Matsuoko might feed his pride as a son of Nippon, his own individual arrogance. At first he had been able to think Conn soft for saving him, and then it might have dawned upon him that it was for a killing, but he was cunning enough to know he was safe. Some second instinct must have warned him to murder the few natives who had seen the killing of the airmen, even the one who had spoken, in a prison, to little Ben.

How Conn knew that Matsuoko could speak English I do not know, but I saw the sergeant start when Conn said to me, in his cell, 'This man will be known as a coward when he goes back to Japan. He has surrendered.'

Matsuoko almost spoke, but his fingers compressed into his palms.

'But they are all like that,' Conn went on calmly, 'when the fighting is over. They fight under hysteria.'

Matsuoko was giving Conn small, darting looks.

When we left the cell, I said, 'You had him there, Conn. It's the first time I've seen him roused.'

'Of course,' Conn said.

I thought Conn should have followed it up immediately, but he had different plans. There were times when I saw the very sweat stand out on the head of the stocky Nipponese, but he never spoke. Often Conn would ask him, almost dully, 'You Kanamoto, eh?' and always Matsuoko would give his small secretive smile and nod.

'Me Kanamoto.'

Conn would smile, too, faintly, and the Nip never seemed compensated for his small triumph.

One day Conn told him that Matsuoko, when he was found, would be hanged for the murder of eight airmen and many

natives. Kanamoto seemed politely interested. Time and again I could have smacked his fat face, but Conn seemed not to care.

The next day Conn said to me, in English, and before Matsuoko, 'This man is afraid to admit his crimes. For the true son of Nippon it is no crime. Only to the boastful who murder. They were helpless, but he did not know Nippon would lose; otherwise he might have thought better.'

He turned and regarded Matsuoko with a cold stare.

In the cell, on the second day, Conn gave me a talk, in English, about the theories of Nippon, about honourable death, and those Japanese ethics so familiar to us. If I had not known it was for Matsuoko's benefit, I would have been bored.

The third day brought the report that Matsuoko refused to eat his food. Conn went to the cell immediately, and asked Matsuoko in politest tones to eat his food.

'We wish to return an honourable fighter to his homeland,' he said, 'and if you do not eat you will die.' He stood for a time gazing at the sullen sergeant.

The next day Conn asked him a question. 'You will be a great hero when you return to your homeland, eh?'

Matsuoko regarded him with slow cunning. 'I do not think so,' he said, and Conn knew it to be ambiguous deliberately.

Matsuoko ate because of the bayonet at his stomach. While he ate, Conn talked to me about the Matsuoko who, when he was found, would be hanged, and who would be unable to commit himself to an honourable death. Conn shook his head and looked at Matsuoko.

I thought Matsuoko would never break, and that all Conn's efforts were doomed to be fruitless. In his own way, Matsuoko had the upper hand. We were convinced he was Matsuoko, but we had no worthwhile evidence. Nor would we have cared much. Matsuoko could easily have died, one way or another, but that Conn would not allow.

Ben was brought in. It was evident he disliked Matsuoko, but he seemed not to show it. Instead he was uproariously humorous, as indeed Conn intended him to be. Immobile, Conn would stand and regard the prisoner, and Matsuoko showed both contempt

and bewilderment, although gradually the contempt died. Ben would withdraw silently and Conn would stand watching him. Conn was always careful to explain that this Ben had been a Nipponese prisoner, and that while in prison he had been told about the execution of eight airmen by one Matsuoko.

Then, suddenly, Conn seemed to have changed his tactics. He began a rapid-fire of questions to Matsuoko. Did he have a wife? Would he be glad to go back to her? Did he love the Emperor? Did he like fighting? Was he glad it was all over? Did he fear death? Did he believe in the old-time religion of Nippon? Then Conn cracked a few jokes at which he laughed himself, uproariously, as though, with Ben, he seemed to share some tremendous joke, but the sergeant regarded him without a smile, and seemed, if his eyes betrayed anything, to be even more fearful of this new development.

Ben was allowed to come in occasionally and look at Matsuoko, to nod his head smilingly and say, 'This Matsuoko. Oh, yes, certainly.'

Perhaps Ben was the last straw. Matsuoko began to lose his calm. He had long lost his customary arrogancy and swagger. He would not refuse meals, but ate them with pitiful relish. The guard reported him as staring through the window continuously, as though on the outlook for Conn. When he saw Conn coming, he would pace his cell, although by the time we arrived he would have fairly well concealed his agitation.

I was growing excited. I was involved almost as much as Conn. It seemed something hung in the balance, and was to be decided by this experiment.

One morning Conn went up to the sergeant, nodded and said, 'Good morning, Matsuoko.'

Matsuoko said nothing. The next morning little Ben came, nodded towards the prisoner, and said, 'Him Kanamoto,' after which he roared laughing. He crouched on the floor in imitation of the sick Matsuoko and said, mimicking the prisoner, 'Me Kanamoto!'

Then, looking at Conn, he said, 'Him good Nippon soldier.'

When Ben had left the cell, Conn peered through the window of the door to see where the guard was stationed. He was nowhere near the cell. Conn walked up to the sergeant, stared at

him, and waited until Matsuoko positively trembled. Then he walked towards the door, but somehow his pistol became detached from the holster and clattered to the floor. Conn was extraordinarily slow to act, and Matsuoko was onto it before he turned. Then Matsuoko backed away, grasping the pistol, snarling gutturally.

Until then, I suppose, I had never fully understood the depths of Conn's experience, nor his claim to another experience which would cancel his past shame. It was as though, in those moments, I fully understood the fear which had been his, the shame following it. Long ago any of us could have whipped a confession out of the yellow prisoner, but it may have been, too, that Matsuoko would have defeated us. I don't know. We would never have got it in the way Conn did. When he faced Matsuoko, he never moved.

Instead, he looked at Matsuoko, and Matsuoko at him. The contortion in the Nip's face died to smoothness. I was helpless, too, having no pistol. The guard was too far away to know what was happening. To shout would have meant death to one of us at least.

Conn continued to stare, his cold eyes on the small yellow man, and the small yellow man, pistol in hand, began to show fear. Then his hand trembled. At first I could not believe that, but when I thought over those weeks of staring, strange questionings, contempt in his eyes more so than in his words, I began to understand. I knew this Conn was not the man who had run at Singapore. He was a man of whom anyone might have been afraid, and with justification.

Conn did not speak. But Matsuoko did. 'I am Matsuoko,' he said in perfect, though lilting, English. He smiled triumphantly at Conn. He listened for the guard's tread, and when it did not come he said, 'I have killed many.' He smiled again, and his eyes were on Conn. I doubt if he could have shifted his gaze. 'I would shoot you,' he said, 'but it is not honourable, seeing you have saved my life.'

Conn said nothing, and Matsuoko was disappointed. 'It is true I committed some killings of airmen. It was very good. They died as all men must die. I gave them honourable death.'

His fear of Conn seemed to have died. 'Now,' he said, 'I die honourable death.'

It was queer watching him place the pistol to his stomach—not to his head or heart, although he placed his free hand over his heart—and it seemed queerer that it should happen in a prison cell where he was a prisoner, and where, only a dozen yards away, there was a guard. Perhaps I should have shouted, but that would have been incredibly foolish, so instead I watched the incredible escape from dishonour of the fat Matsuoko, no longer diseased, but in possession of full health and his mental faculties.

‘You will not die now,’ said Conn slowly. He kept Matsuoko’s eyes to his. He will hypnotise him, I thought; but it was madness to think that. Such moments seem to move slowly, so much thought can be crowded into them, so much understanding, as though, throughout the business of life, nothing is irrelevant, unrelated. Let him shoot himself, Conn, I was saying. It is better for him to die that way. Then I thought that Matsuoko might want to kill us as a last fine gesture to the Nippon whom he had nearly betrayed.

But Conn had taken the courage from him. If he could wound himself, then courage would immediately return.

‘There is no death for you, yet, Matsuoko,’ Conn said, and I was reminded, strangely, of the Conn Webster asleep on the ship, with his shame haunting him, and wanting to die, not knowing or caring, living and dying being the same, both terrible, yet both to be desired and hated.

I could understand now. Here was Matsuoko escaping because death was honourable. But Matsuoko would never have killed himself had not Conn awakened that shame within him. ‘We can’t have that way out,’ Conn had told me. ‘We can’t commit *harakiri*.’ And again he had said, ‘He won’t admit his crime. It was too personal for him to admit.’

But Matsuoko had been any man then, arrogant in his power, abusing it, striking fear or courage into the hearts of dying men, yet making them die, nevertheless. It was nothing to do with war, as Conn had said. It was too personal to admit.

Then Matsuoko squeezed the trigger. His eyes were upon Conn’s, fearfully, pleading almost to be allowed that escape, but

when he pulled the trigger there was only a click. Rage broke in Matsuoko and all his proud arrogance was shattered. He forgot his marvellous doom, and pointed the pistol at Conn. It clicked again, and with the fury of desperation, his eyes gleaming in live rage, he threw it.

It caught Conn on the shoulder and dropped to the floor. I picked it up. Conn never moved. His eyes were on the trembling sergeant.

Cold eyes. Eyes of white-blue flame. Flame within ice. But above all, eyes that knew the secret and the shame of Matsuoko.

Then Matsuoko broke. His hand gesticulated, clawed, words poured like a torrent from his lips, babbled, stuck in his throat, emerged in anger, in rage, but mainly in babbling terror, and all the time Conn stared at him, speaking not a word.

I looked down at the pistol, and marvelled at the foolish Matsuoko, the foolish Conn. There were only two empty chambers, and the pistol had been set for them. Whether deliberately or not I did not know, then or ever.

‘Get a guard, Tony,’ Conn said. ‘We’ll take him there while he’s like this. He can dig the bodies up, with his hands if he likes. I think he would.’

Conn had begun to glow, as though life, long withheld in the back reaches of himself, was now beginning to flow, to warm him. It was as though a vacancy was being tenanted, and with a living being. Yet his eyes upon Matsuoko were cold, although his voice, when he spoke, was almost genial.

‘He can grovel in the mud if he likes,’ he said. He nodded Matsuoko into temporary silence and repeated, as though in some form of symbolism, ‘Grovel in the mud, Matsuoko.’

THE WOMAN AND THE MAN

THE figure was between him and the sun. It was not yet the setting sun, but the late sun, the sun of the afternoon before the sunset. She was dark from behind, like a silhouette. He could see her, full and black in every part of her outline.

She was not crouched, so much as gathered together in herself, slightly bending, and looking forward. The clear outline of her head, her shoulders bent forward, and the full line of her cloaked and seated body—all that he knew well. For years he had known the outline of her, standing motionless as she often wished to do, or seated motionless, as she often was. Sometimes she was walking, but very slowly, her head bent ever so slightly forward as she thought, or held upwards with what men call pride or self-assurance, but which he knew simply to be fullness of life. But then she was a full person.

So he watched her while the heat was still in the sun, until the dark form of her caused his eyes to ache as he sat behind her, at a distance, just watching.

He had watched her for these two days. Rarely had he taken his eyes off her. When he was hungry he would go for a time, or if nature called him with some bodily pressure, but when he went, it was only to return, and to sit and to watch, and to wait. He had his reasons for this constant watching, whether she knew them or not, and whether she cared or not. He would watch and watch until his eyes ached. If, when they ached, he ever lifted them to the sky, there was a white form, full-bodied, of the same shape, and the same mode and the same intensity, and he would look at it in the skies, and wonder. Then his gaze would drop to her again, and the white outline settled over the dark outline, and

was black and full-bodied, as it had been, especially over these past two days.

HE was the man. She sat on the ground, her legs bent forward, and she was sitting on them so that whilst she appeared to be sitting on the ground, she was in fact seated with her thighs above her calves, and resting upon them. For another woman this would have been difficult. Other women that he knew sat on their haunches, or they squatted, or they simply sat on the ground, cross-legged, or with their legs fully forward. Other women, too, could be contemplative. However, he had never seen a woman in contemplation like her. He had never seen a woman like her. As far as he knew, there had never been such a woman.

Yes, he was the man. Perhaps that is why he sat behind her, content, in a manner of speaking, just to watch her. It was not that he knew, altogether, what she was thinking. Some of her thought he knew, because over the years he had gathered some of the categories in which she thought. Nevertheless, and because this event was different, it was not easy for him to understand her thinking, so he did not try. He was content—if you could call his mood contentment—just to watch her, and even think proudly about her.

He was the man. He was the man who was great and big, especially around his chest. His chest was strong, and it was swarthy where the loose shirt fell open to reveal shiny, jet-black hair which curled in a riot of strength and masculinity. His shoulders were wide also, commensurate with the promise of the chest. His arms were consistent with chest and shoulders, but they had nothing of the animal about them. His hands were wide, but his fingers long. His forearms were hairy to the elbows, and then muscled in strength up to where they met the shoulders. Had he stood, he would have been tall enough, but not tall as men are counted tall. When a man is strong and wide, he does not look as tall as another man who is lean and wiry. He was truly a man, every inch of him.

It was the head which gave nobility to the body. The nose was aquiline, not proud or haughty, but strong and well-muscled, so

that the nostrils could twitch under strong emotion. The nose was well set into the eyebrows, from which sloped upwards and yet backwards the strong, high forehead. This was the man, but a thinker-man. The head was not rounded, but the hair flowed over it, giving it the shape of nobility, and setting it out as a man who had endurance. In this man there might not be brilliance, but there would be thoughtfulness. In fact, he had the same angle of crouching, the same slightly bent-forward stance of the woman. Maybe it was an unconscious imitation. It may even have come from barely sensed empathy. Endlessly he watched the woman. She was the man, and he was the woman.

HE tried to remember when he first met her. Perhaps he had seen her many times. This would have to be the case, seeing she belonged to the same clan as that of his father. Doubtless he had seen her in the village, or even in the larger town where his father had gone, monthly, to barter, and to dispose of his merchandise, the wares he had made, and the crops of vegetables and grain he had harvested. He must have seen her, even as a little girl, but that first time he could not remember. However, there was a time he did remember. It was the first time he had seen her consciously, but then, in keeping with her being as the woman he had come to know, she had seen him, rather than he had seen her.

At that age she had seemed mature. The maturity of her body was not in doubt. The clothes she wore were of their tribal culture. They were loose-flowing, intended to minimise the feminine elements. They maximised mystery, but minimised attention on the elements which constituted that mystery. However, he found, curiously enough, that he saw her as a woman, but not merely for the sake of femininity. If it were for femininity, then another message was coming through to him, telling him that he had misjudged femininity. He took it that femininity was another thing, and a thing apart from what he had known as womanhood.

At the same time he had become puzzled about his masculinity. If what she was showing was authentic womanhood, then he had to change his understanding of manhood. Even now, as he watched her outline—filled with darkness—he had to marvel

afresh. That a girl of seventeen could change his thinking was a thing to be wondered at. It was, in itself, a thing of astonishment. He kept thinking of her on that first conscious encounter. She had looked at him, and he had looked at her, awakened by her look. He had immediately been awakened, and at the same time knew a long, thin line of fear piercing him and puzzling him.

Why should he fear? Why should he be puzzled? He had not been able to answer the questions at the time. This was the mystery he had experienced, and he cherished the memory of the mystery. Looking at her, he knew the mystery had not dissipated over the years. It had not vanished. Instead it had grown. The closest and most intense familiarity he had known in his being with her had not diminished that mystery. At this very moment it seemed, if anything, to grow and enlarge, even to swell until his mind could not encompass it. It seemed, rather, to encompass him, and in this he was contented.

On that day she had looked at him, her stare long and quiet—even cool. She had a dignified calm. You could call it regality, for that was what it was. Even when she stooped to lift a heavy bundle of merchandise, she had not lost the regal stance. If anything, her poised head, her straight shoulders and her upright body had spoken to him of royal origins and queenly pose. As he thought about that, he permitted himself a faint smile. As far as he knew, there was no regal blood in her, but then this was not a matter so much of blood as of spirit.

YEARS later he had been visited with a miracle. It was the kind of miracle men dream about, down through generations, century after century, until it becomes the dream of a thousand years, and then flows into the vision of millenniums. It was the dream of a woman of depth, a person of beauty, a personality filled with unusual character, but kindly, and humble and courageous. It was the dream of being united with such a person, and united down in the depths where it seems two persons meet with the greatest of understanding, and tell the truth that to be human is the most wonderful gift of all.

His parents had arranged a marriage. The culture did not allow even the name to be uttered, not even the family name of the

parents. Young men went in fear of being faced, on the wedding night, by a woman of older years than their own, or of a woman whose complexion was swarthy, or a woman whose parents had sought unsuccessfully over many years to wed her to the son of a friend. Other young men waited in an agony of dreaming. They had great faith in the ancient custom of mate-selection by the parents of the man and the woman. Their culture was tried and tested. Mature elders had the powers of discernment which the young rarely possess. They could understand the residual troubles and character traits of a man or a woman, and they knew the sorrows that could result from a hastily selected partner who would be unable to meet the needs of his or her spouse. So they spent much time and thought and discussion.

It is true that sometimes the woman was swarthy or a little old, and even lacking physical beauty and general bodily symmetry, but the years proved the wisdom of the selection. As they grew older the couple would deepen in their affection, their sharing of the children, their knowledge of life. Any initial disappointment would give way to a deep and rich relationship. He thought now, with some sorrow, of the recent proof of these things, and shuddered slightly at the mode of that proof, and of the sad events which supplied the assurance.

The miracle was not even evident to him in the marriage feast. She had sat beside him, and had been very quiet although, of course, calm. Also she had been gentle and humble, without being lowly and obsequious, so that he had been at peace concerning her. In fact, whilst he had anticipated he would have a burning curiosity, that curiosity had not come. Yet he had not suspected, even slightly, that the woman they united to him would constitute the dream of millenniums.

That night they had faced one another. She was the woman: he was the man. She had entered his room quietly, her mother bringing her to the door. Prior to this he had been greeted by her parents, and she by his. A small ceremony of hands crossed over the elbows of the parents had signified the eternal nature of their union, so that from this time forward they would never draw back. The relationship could not be broken. As they were joined, so were their families. Two great streams of relationships had

flowed into one. Behind them both then were the families, with their protection, their maturity, their wisdom, and their warmth of love and concern.

The mother had brought the woman to him and, as was the custom, when the mother had gone, he lifted the veil. It was then, of course, that he saw her, and for a moment he was so startled that he could not immediately remember the girl of seventeen at the market, looking at him, and drawing him into a mystery of womanhood without rousing his physical feelings. At the moment he looked at her, there was nothing of immediate physical feeling, but only of strange wonder, tinged with fear, but fear that had more of reverence in it than terror, more of assurance than misgiving.

Neither had talked. They had looked at each other, calmly. He had wanted to cry out, 'You!' but that was not fitting. He knew it was not fitting, but he cried it in his heart, as the great dream began to be enacted. He then took her hand, kissed it gently, and remained, with her, thinking.

From that night onwards they had lived in their dream. In it there was nothing, absolutely nothing, of infatuation. There was no image-making, no idealising one of the other. There was only a quiet and calm and full acceptance each of the other. There was understanding, and that was all that was needed. She was herself, and he himself, and neither thought to enslave or possess the other, and in not possessing they forged the deepest bonds possible.

As he watched, the sun was moving purposefully to the west. Early in the day it had hurled itself into the sky, already greatly heated, and somewhat angry, as though it could not agree with what it saw beneath it in the village where the woman and the man lived. Over many years this sun had come and gone with very little for complaint, but on this day, as indeed on some of the recent days, that ancient giver of life seemed angry with an embarrassment which was foreign to it, especially in these parts which it had known so well. Now the sun was pressing west, slipping down in the vast bowl of the heaven and sliding towards the great skyline with its trees, and its palms, and the unusual

smoke which was burning upwards and outwards from the jungle and the edge of the fields where the crops had been ripening.

As the sun moved, the woman did not. The dull redness of the early-gathering sunset filled her form, her form that had its back to him. It filled that form with a kind of solidity, so that it was calm, even stolid. He knew that the night would grow cold, and still she would be looking forward, and down at what lay before her, her mind groping at understanding, or grasping understanding and seeking further to know what was now to be done. Something was telling him that her body and her being were set in this mould for eternity. She would not move, and he would perpetually watch, as unchanged and inconclusive as her, yet, curiously enough, glad to be this way—glad to be this way for ever.

He knew that if it was not this way for ever, then something must change, and they must change, and he could not bear even to think of the pain that would come, and the endurance which would be required. At even the faintest suggestion of that thought his face would grow sad, and the person before him was not just dark in silhouette, but filled with pain which was unspeakable, and unbearable. So he preferred to think they could sit like this for ever, exchanging one known reality for another which was not yet fully known. As he watched and thought, he had no doubt in his mind. As the man, he surely loved the woman, this woman behind whom he sat, and upon whom he looked.

ONLY the insatiably curious would want to know why they sat in this manner. There is a curiosity, certainly, which is a mere impertinence, or a deep impertinence, but the fault lies not in having seen something of the man and the woman, but in not having seen enough. There are some cultures where it is commonplace to be busy and active, and in these, quietness and contemplation are unusual, and even unknown. In other cultures contemplation is not only the mark of maturity, but indeed the way to maturity, and even its very mode. So to be curious of these two as they sat and contemplated—if indeed that was what they were doing—would be, in their culture, a sign of immaturity and thoughtlessness. It would also be a loss of richness in living. To know that man is not a thoughtless and irresponsible creature

in a profound world is the real discovery that comes from true thoughtfulness, but only those who think through the sorrows of creation, the pain and the shame of injustice, will know that humanity is indeed the sphere of unusual greatness.

Others passed them by, seeing them, partly understanding, but leaving them to their despair, or their greatness, or whatever it might prove to be. They saw the woman endlessly looking before her, and the man endlessly looking at her, or himself looking down at the hard and dry earth on which he was seated. The ones who possessed wisdom simply saw them and went on their way. Occasionally they would give a faint nod, sharing it between themselves as they passed one another. The nod was speaking praise and understanding, and was the fruit of a natural empathy and a wisdom about man and his suffering.

Those who were as yet young, and especially those who had been hurt by the things of life, looked at them pityingly, or tried not to look, as the sun had seemed to look away, and they hurried on angrily. These were not only the young in years, but even older people who had not learned, and were inclined to think that circumstances which come upon a man are to blame for his fate, or are able to withhold high destiny from him. Some even point with quivery hatred and scorn to the things of heredity, as though the genes from their parents, or the days of other years have fateful power over even the wills of men. These, as we have said, were the ones who did not understand.

The man sat on, watching the woman, seeing the sun roll further back in the sky, knowing that this would go on for ever, or something, something like another miracle, must happen. Without the miracle it would have to be perpetual acceptance of the things which had recently happened. Rejection of them could bring no answer at all. Between acceptance and rejection, the miracle would have to happen to release them from the bondage of rejection or the perpetual suspension of true life in the domination of acceptance, lone and lonely acceptance.

HE had watched with great marvelling the growth of her almond-shaped body, the smooth swelling into the beautiful pear-like lines caused by the child within her. If she had carried

unchanging mystery for him before, that mystery had increased, deepening into the most satisfying knowledge which had ever come to him. He watched the quiet confidence of her, the gaze which meant she looked out into a world of eternal quality. There was nothing businesslike about conception or pregnancy or preparation for delivery of the child. Somehow, in her gentle and humble way, she was quietly pouring into the person within her all the riches she had unconsciously gathered over the years.

She drew upon him too. She called out of him those reserves which he had not even known were there. There was a wisdom which had come on its own, not by contemplation but by his contacts with the world he had known. He had lived fully in relating to the creation about him. He could never remember a time when he had been angry with his world. Even men with their selfish injustices, their greediness, and their feverish desires to acquire had not greatly disturbed him. What they did seemed so foolish and pointless that he felt pity. He did not despise them, as though he knew they had better thoughts and powers than the ones they used. It was not that he loved or hated them, but he knew, somehow, that it was unwise to disturb the rivers which flowed deeply within him.

In this way he had quietly gathered wisdom. She had come to him for that, and had added it to her store, and then quietly had poured it through her own being into the child who was coming. Possessed by this mutual secret, wisdom and power, the two were building for a great day, that day being the coming of the child. And come the child did, and how unforgettable its coming. How simple was its coming, but how beautiful, how complete, and yet how astonishing.

At first he had thought of the baby as a baby, and naturally enough as a little boy, when to his astonishment he realised that, baby and boy though it was, it was also a full person. That was not only astonishing but bewildering, for he had thought that one day it would become a full person. Instead it was already a full person, but becoming what it would be out of the fullness of what it already was. It was more than simply the idea of potentiality, for the potential, that is, the power, the gifts and the graces, were already there. Such a conclusion in his thinking

gave him an understanding of himself. He was mildly surprised that he had rarely thought consciously about himself. Now he saw that he had always been a full person, and not just becoming one. It was the process of realising himself which was the outworking of his own store of gifts and graces.

As for her—the woman, his wife—she too blossomed out of her own fullness. The pear-shape had slipped away and she was young and strong and vibrant again. Whilst they deeply loved and were aware of that love, it was the boy that mattered at the moment. Later it might be different, but now it was the boy. He marvelled at the fresh things he learned about her, and the new insights she gave to him. They did not mind the hours they spent with the boy and over him. Indeed, that was when they were most aware of their relationship. The boy seemed to make them even more one than they had been.

That was the miracle that the man and the woman had always wanted, and they lived in the miracle. It was a time of deep contentment.

THAT was three days ago. Until three days ago, the contentment. Then the miracle ended. He could not remember when it began to end, or figure just how its ending was completed. The whole happening was so bewildering. He had scarcely been prepared for the avalanche when it came. He had never seen an avalanche of snow or of any kind. Indeed, he had never seen snow. He did not know that the sudden, sharp vibrations of sound could cause a landslide to begin, and then to gain power, and then to overwhelm everything below as it gained momentum and came upon it, and covered it so that there was no longer any breathing but only sudden death in the roar, and after the roar, silence.

They had first heard the noise out of heaven. It was a thin crackle, a nervous stutter, an increasing 'Yammer-yammer,' and then explosions. It was smoke rolling across the green forest; it was roaring from in the jungle, and roarings upon the jungle. It was a growing roaring, moving upwards and outwards. It was planes suddenly coming out of the sky and causing devastation. It was a high-pitched song, a droning of silver birds in the utmost heights. It was the black things screaming out of the sky,

shrieking in a death whistle. It was the earth rocking and shaking and swaying, and breaking up.

The high-pitched screaming came from over the hills, whistling past as an asthmatic cries for breath, and the whistling zoned in upon an object, and the object saw it coming, hurtling, then knew no more. Those nearby heard it, and the great 'hrrump!' and the shattering of the air, and then the silence as stunning as the impact of its blast.

After that, he had seen the men, grey-clad, and crouched and running, running past the village, chattering and crying and even barking as they slipped through the orchards, the clumped trees, and the long grass on the edge of the crops. He had seen their heads, all moving at the same level as they crouched in the crops, and as they hastened towards some goal. He would never be able to say what was the goal, or why they ran, or what happened when they arrived at he-knew not-what, or where.

All he knew was that she had come running to him, and he had gone running with her, running at her side, seeking to keep up with her, his own breath whistling in his hot lungs, his dry throat and in his frightened chest. He had heaved and gasped and shed tears because her face had told him what he had to know, but which he never wished to know.

When he saw the boy he knew the miracle had ended. He knew it was time to wake out of sleep, and to face the grave and sober reality of life as it is in the world in which men live. He looked down at the boy who looked as though he were sleeping. Well, sleeping he was, but the sleeping was for ever. For ever and for ever.

THAT was when she had looked at him, and he at her. Neither tried to comfort the other, and in a way they did not know how to do that. In their culture, physical comfort was somewhat rare. It happened, but generally it was not part of the normal way of life. Tragedies happened in their society. Of this there could be no doubt. The ordinary human jealousies, rivalries, hatred and angers all had their place and operation. Men were killed, families met tragedies, hatreds were passed down through generations. Of this there could be no doubt. However, such had passed them by.

They had seemed unusually complete and serene in the processes of living their miracle.

He looked at her, and understood her. The boy had been the focus of their lives. Neither had been jealous of the other. Both had loved him and cared for him. When, now, he was still and unmoving, when his face was calm but dead, they did not know how to cope. He did not know what to say to her, and she did not know what to hear from him.

After gazing at each other, they held hands and looked down at the boy. They were human enough in that moment. They asked the questions. They tried to find their way through the strange and complicated maze. They tried to find their way back to their old world. They tried, but that world was hidden for ever. They could not find a way which led them closer to it, but only farther away. It was a terrifying time of not recognising anything they knew. It was all different, and so different that they felt helpless and weak, and even bodily they trembled.

The people sat and watched them. They sat afar off and watched. The men stared dully at the earth which was dry and bare, but the women were gently vocal. They kept giving sibilant sighs, the wind softly whistling through their mouths, over their tongues and teeth as though the hearts were issuing long and plaintive messages. The children wandered around, trying to understand this new thing, and feeling its powers very much. Then after two days the people went away. They went back into the village and left the man and the woman alone.

Perhaps they knew that was the best, and that was how it was to be, and that, without this silence and being alone, the two could not find the goal they sought, or arrive at the understanding they needed.

That was when he began to think about motherhood, and womanhood, and even wifeness. He looked into her back, seated as he was behind her, the sunset staring at him over her head and shoulders and flowing around her full-bodiedness as she half-sat, half-crouched, and looked down in silence at the child before her.

All the time she had been aware of him. She knew he was there, the man, and she knew he sought to help but could not.

She had been aware of his pain, as she had been of her own. She knew he could give her not one answer to the thing which had happened. She knew he could not stop the ceaseless round of questions that were moving in her mind. She knew him to be strong and firm and mature, yet as a child in his helplessness. She had let him sit behind her, and had wondered whether he would always sit there, if she were also always to sit there.

Had the nights not been cold, had the days not been kind, the child would have corrupted. That was part of this scene that she would always remember with wonder. When they told her later, 'Three days,' she found it difficult to believe. It may have been three days of course, or many, many days, or just a long, endless moment as she watched and pondered and wondered. Behind her, he had continued to watch, and as he watched her, he was watching the little boy, and he was watching the pain or the numbness or whatever it could be called.

IF he had been able to express it, later, he would have said the miracle began again when he did not seek to understand. In the former years he had just accepted the creation about him, and the man within himself, and the God of it all. In fact, he understood none of these, nor felt any drive to understand. He lived in these things as though he were one breathing in what he needed, and breathing out what he no longer needed.

He remembered that when he had first seen her, at seventeen years of age, in the market place, he had not wanted to know her, what she was about, or anything. He had felt a deep reverence, and a thin line of fear with it. Of course, he had wanted her, but not in the way that often men wish for a woman. Theirs is a hunger which once appeased is momentarily quiescent, but the very appeasing of the hunger increases its emotion, its tempo and its demands, until ultimately there can be no satisfaction which is deep and which leads to peace. There is no serenity in that other kind of desire. But that was not his kind of desire.

He realised now why the tinge of fear had been there, all those years ago. He had recognised the depth of her, instinctively, and knew the demands she would make on him would be greater than the knowledge and understanding that she herself possessed, and

he had thought he would have nothing of the measure that she herself possessed. Now he knew this crisis which he had feared had come upon him, and, curiously enough, he was not afraid. He watched her, the woman, as she half-sat, half-kneeled, looking down at their dead child. A very deep understanding was quietly flooding him, penetrating down into depths he had not known he even possessed. He was not at all afraid.

What he was realising was this, that he did not have to understand her. To put it even better still, he did not have to understand femininity. Nor did she have to understand man, his masculinity. In a way there was nothing either had to understand about one another, or even about the child.

Before he had not just understood. In the early days he had just been content to live, and to meet each experience as it came. Then he had felt he ought to understand all things as they came, and even if they did not come. He had to envelop them in his mind, and encapsulate them so that they were his.

The delight which was coming to him was that he did not have to understand. He did not have to know how her mind worked so he could help her, or please her, or lead her. What he had to do was just to be what he intuitively knew himself to be—a man, the husband of the woman, and the father of the child, even though the child was dead. In the moment he saw this, the black silhouette before him seemed to lose its mystery. Rather, the mystery became something known, and the bafflement dissipated. It went away from him for ever.

It was the closest he had ever come to thinking aloud. Just a little more of that thinking and he would have said, 'I don't really have to understand everything. Wisdom is not knowing things but rather knowing how to act, when the time comes.'

The time had come. He stood, walked slowly but firmly to where she half-sat, half-kneled, and then he went in front of her to where the child was before her. As he looked at the child he knew that this was only a body, and not the full child, so he picked up the little corpse. He could see the ravages of three days upon it, and wondered why he had not acted sooner, but then how could he have acted? He had not felt wisdom rise into his mind and activate him.

He gathered up the little body, quite tenderly, and quite purposefully. He looked up at the woman, gently, and strongly. Her hands had almost gone up in protest. But then she dropped them. She looked at him, peering to make sure of what she saw. What she saw caused her breath to come a little more rapidly. Her lips parted, as though she were about to speak. Now, however, there was no protest in her. She knew that this man knew what was needed. She watched him, therefore, as he folded the cloth around the little boy, the wide cloth on which he had lain.

When he had the small body cradled in his strong right arm, crooked as it was at the elbow, she knew that his wisdom had come through before her own. His thinking was now stronger than hers, and he knew what had to happen. So she stood, and followed him, and they both went into the forest and down the track that led to the burial grounds. In former times they had not noticed the heavily scented tropical flowers which hung from the trees, nor the clusters of wild lilies which were clumped along the bank of the river. She had not noticed the brilliance of a sunset in many days, but now it was unusually brilliant, and almost as brilliant as her eyes into which new understanding was flowing.

When they had buried the baby, smoothed out the earth, and marked the grave with a large stone, they both stood together, looking down at it. Rarely did they hold hands, but on this occasion they did so, and in a special way. Her fingers were intertwined with his, as though that were a symbol of their persons—intertwined. She knew now that she trusted him. She knew now that he was standing erect, and he also knew it. The faint line of fear, that grey tinge, had gone from him. He was no longer awed by her, nor aware of dimensions beyond those of his own.

He looked up at the sunset which was setting slowly and peacefully. Then he looked at her, and their hands communicated all they needed to impart to one another. Nevertheless, they also smiled, which was a rare thing in their culture. In that smile was the knowledge of their universe, and an understanding of suffering which required no one to rationalise it to them, nor to make the creation's God inept within His own work. They knew in simplicity that things do not have to be explained any more than that they come as hostile happenings and portents of fate.

What she knew beyond anything was that wisdom had come to him, and because of that to her.

Their fingers were still intertwined as they left the cemetery just prior to the sky turning from deep rose to a gentle grey. Again she looked at him, and she smiled. He also smiled as they left the quiet place and went back to the village, the place where their old miracle had happened, and where, now, a new miracle was having its quiet, yet strong, beginning.

THE RIM

RUNNING out of a dream, or in a dream, running; the swift flashing strides that take you towards inevitable doom. So does a man hurry to his death, gloriously, as the scribes say, for their fearful imaginations reckon man's destiny as no less wonderful, and the power of his doom majestic.

And yet in a soldier running there is no conscious thought of glory or power or dominion, or world without end, for that matter, because the trained mind has accepted the minor responsibility of death and the major fact of courageous living, although, God knows, there are many types of courage.

This type, for example—the terrific upsurge of joy, an Olympian grasp of power, heady and dangerous as the wine of the gods, and with a sacrificial tendency. So we ran; so they ran; so I ran. And the lips of all of us that had been stopped with the strong realisation of impending doom were suddenly unsealed, so that we babbled and shouted and some of us sang. We ran to the enemy, shouting as though we believed the words we uttered.

In the lives of all men there is a desire for greatness, whatever form it may take, and if the chances of greatness are rare, they are greedily snatched at when the time arrives, and so it is, or was, with us—the fighting soldiers. As in the same dream, we see what we shall never see again: a thought to carry us through the years which never again will be as brilliant or filled with the same solitary purpose that makes life at least comprehensible. Or, as a poet of ours says, 'You shall know what you know, and that will be your reward.'

AS we ran, there was havoc about us, the havoc of war which is a background, and which fearfully oppresses the mind, weighing it down with perpetual questioning. Back in the native

kampongs, and back in the big city itself—crouched, smoking Singapore—there is wonder as every bomb drops whistling and every shell shrieks doom to flesh. If these are words of power, then even more are the thoughts powerful, for with all, everywhere, is life loved and death hated, except in those strange moments which come to man and forever lift him from the ruck and the rut. It is for others to argue whether it is worthwhile when all is said and done.

So we ran towards the Japs, and their guns sang, a yammering, rising, falling sort of song that has never died away, and the singing guns had deadly beauty, as the men who ran and died seemed to have beauty, whereas in ordinary life they were hated as well as loved, despised as well as adored, merely tolerated by some and really admired by few. Certainly not as we admire them now at the setting of the sun and in the dark-blue dusk of early night. Nor do the hymns we sing have much to do with them, but there was something unforgettable in their hurried rush to death.

The gun near to us seemed like a challenge, not of impersonal menace, not of hot steel—although in our minds it was clothed something like that. Rather, it was a challenge of intense personality, as real as anything living, for indeed it seemed to live. I hated it as I have never hated an animate being, or life itself, and with the others I was determined to get it. So we ran, and for the first time found that time did not exist—not, anyway, in the ticking seconds nor the prolonged minutes; but time was like wind falling through a valley, or rushing through a cavern; it was the gentle sun over fields, mild for the moment, stayed in the air.

Time, then, was every thought recollected as though man were gathering about him, with dignity, the clothes of his thoughts, the garments of his entire recollections. He was girded with dignity, co-ordinated beyond any measure hitherto known. So he rushed at death, or the gun, or the other enemy soldiers, with the conviction that his destiny in that moment was godlike.

What then, if in other years he should see this a splendid lie, as falsehood now proven, as not worth the candle, as irrevocably wrong? For the moment it was altogether true, so true that today's doubt fights against revised certainty.

Yet the gun was impervious to threat, insensible to the charge,

without fear and undefeatable, because it could not die. Its song might cease in its throat, but the famous moments of that charge might never be recalled—the dead men uprising into life and the shadow of breath drawn into the nostrils. Yet we charged it, and, with the rest, gloried in what may seem an idiocy of the gods.

THEN the gun wounded. I felt a fury of shock, the left leg buckled and I plunged to the ground. The sustained glory of the moments before, on the waves of which fear rode faintly, was suddenly ended. The wind in the valley rushed on and was no more heard, and the glory of the sun in the light air was stopped, and the old reality was there—a wounded man on a smooth black road, a leg smashed, blood running, and the cries and sounds of war again about the ears, the threatening drone of a plane, the explosion of mortars, the incessant shrill shells.

These words as thoughts are hated in peace, whether rightly or wrongly is not easily decided, but hated they are, for one thought is that another's courage is to be hated, his experience to be considered a threat to the vanity of those who have not fought. Yet that is wrong, for all is not vanity with humanity, notwithstanding the opinion of the ancient Preacher. Vanity dies when true pity or sorrow enters, for that is the lesson of pain.

Pain is personal, and yet a man in pain believes it is a thing, a living experience parasitic on the body, challenging every thought. Thought, too, seems to be a battle, a struggle upwards to regain normality, as though this battle is unfair, pain having the inescapable hold. Yet in that moment, it was not to measure pain against the experience of charging, and find on what side and in what direction the scales were weighted, but to see your leg twisted beneath you as though it was another being almost, which has become dislodged from the extraordinary person which was formerly you.

AS I lay there, there was no more running, no more men dying, none fighting, and the hated gun had to be silenced, its threat stuffed back into its flaming throat. Yet the damage had been done, not only to the leg, but to all the men who lay there. They were all dead except those, possibly, who had gone to

cover. And if other noises still raged, and earth was churned with mortars and exploding shell, there was also a strange silence which meant to me that life was withdrawn, not from the body, but from round about. It was easy to wonder if the dead men were already risen, clothed in spirit, and looking down on me; but when I lay, not daring to twitch for fear a Japanese bullet might find me, I saw a sniper in a tree. His face half-hidden in the leaves must have been watching me for movement.

Yet, I thought angrily, what would I matter now, with a leg smashed? If the enemy came through they would bayonet me, that being their terrible sort of mercy. If I moved, I would be shot, if I did not move, the blood would flow, and that would be another to join his comrades, the gathering roll of dead who have never been understood.

Yet the sniper did not move either, as though for a few moments his thoughts were mine; as though in spite of language differences we knew the same words.

If he were motionless, so was I. If he strained not to twitch, then I was as the other dead men. The rifle had fallen along my body with me, and its small muzzle pointed at my head, so that it would not have been a great effort to raise the rifle and fire. Yet it would have been dangerous, for one slight movement would have brought a bullet, although I might have managed a first shot, but then vengeance was not a thought now, for had we not invited death as they also, in a way, had asked for it?

Nor was it a survival of the fittest or the unfittest, for in these moments even crippled man gains a stature which is beyond meanness. No, there is no easy explanation of why a man should think to shoot at that moment.

Then I thought he would surely get me, and if he did not, then his fellow soldiers would, so it would be best to end my own life, denying a certain satisfaction to the sniper, whilst I would be out of the reach of torture. But to fail to shoot myself properly might bring greater agony, and would be foolish. There might never be an end to the terrible seething of pain. Better then to do nothing, for as people say at some time or another, 'While there's life there's hope.'

And there are dreams as well as hope, dreams of recuperating,

dreams of kindly nursing, and of basking in a kind of heroic convalescence, very comfortable to think about—the relief of shedding a tremendous burden. These are the dreams, and if the voice that says ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is strong, the dreams are stronger.

YET the little sniper remained motionless, an almost indifferent spectator to these thoughts. It was as though his arms were folded and he were waiting patiently until all reasoning had reached its conclusion and it was again time for action, time to suddenly shoot me, and so start me upon the business of whatever is beyond death, that which is woven irrevocably with the fabric of life. I could not bring myself to hate him, because it was his business to be a sniper, just as I had made fighting my business.

If he had the upper hand, then that was fair enough in war, and, in any case, he did not necessarily have the upper hand. If I had been able to banish my pain, fight against that hot flood of agony, and in normal manner lift my rifle, I could have killed him with the same amount of opportunity. Of course, he had the advantage of having his face leaf-hidden, and I would not be able to read his thoughts, nor even watch some of his movements, especially the hand that gripped the rifle.

The rifle was not aimed at me, but pointed near me, and could easily be moved. How was I to know, anyway, that the rifle which I held in my left hand might not be too heavy for me, the strength having flowed out with that thick blood seeping down the road? Yet my brain was clearer than ever before.

The thoughts came in a constant rush, as though the loss of blood actually stimulated them. It was as though, too, there was a power left over from the amazing experience of running and charging, to remain co-ordinate, as though I had lost that wretched sense, present in most of humanity, of never knowing why we live, and move, and have our being. No, I was quite clear in thought, relieved of actual worry for my life and responsibility for others. At last I had handed over, as it were, to the reasoning of the brain, and it in its turn had a calm acceptance of the situation.

So I can say I was not fearful of the sniper, nor yet had I that

sort of hopeless fatalism, familiar enough in danger, that what would be would be. I almost felt then that I would defeat the sniper, either by my death, or perhaps his, and I did not know then how close I was to the truth.

The sniper was by no means insignificant, but the thought of death was. Nor did death have an anaesthesia which prepared me for leaving the body, for I had no desire to leave it, any more than I feared to live.

Instead, the very agony in the leg made me take in, in detail, all about me—the smashed bracken, grey with dust upthrust by bursting shells and mortars; the wheeling planes above, seeking out positions to bomb; the valley which dropped away from the road, some of its bracken still green, some of it gold, but everywhere the ground gouged and torn; the sunken figures of the killed almost hidden by the tangle of fern and grass and soil; the tall jungle giants towering above the sedate rubber trees, in one of which was the watching sniper.

Then the gold and grey of the bracken, the pure blue of the sky, the colour of the trees and sun were gradually blotted out as the thought gave way to swirling greyness, a new silent world pivoting, it seemed, on the very pupil of the eye. Then the grey closing in until it reached the pupil-point, needle-fineness, and quickly, thought and sight were inverted, and everything became nothing. Yet nothing continued to be something, as though the thought of life and death and the sniper were not far away, a being still existent, carrying on a greater and more powerful struggle than before.

WHEN I came to, Gerry was beside me. Gerry had run with us, but had dropped behind, into a drain. His common sense was greater than our foolish, or splendid, courage. To us the moment had been desperate, needing desperate measures, but to him the moment was never that way, and life would always be ahead, and other times when, possibly, desperate action might be really warranted. He had not died like Larry and Ted and the others. Here he was alive, much more alive than I.

Then I remembered the sniper. It suddenly became wrong for that sniper to be looking at us. Nor did I feel very philosophical

about death. Gerry had brought me back vividly to the life which I purposed to hold, to which, anyway, I had returned, as a man does who walks along the rim, the very border of death, who stares, even, with mild eyes, into the valley below.

'There's a sniper in that tree, Gerry,' I said urgently, and I dared not even point.

Gerry was alarmed, but in an instant the alarm had died. 'Over there, eh?' he asked, and he pointed to the tree where the sniper was: where he had been, for the sniper was no longer there.

'You shot him, Gerry?' I asked. It did not seem to matter, because the past was already becoming unreal, more unreal than ever it would be in retrospect.

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'I've been watching him. He's been dead all the time. Then he fell out of the tree.'

I DID not want to sit up because of the leg, but for a moment I was able to raise myself enough to stare across at the dead sniper, lying at the foot of the rubber tree. He seemed stiff on the ground, his face set, and his eyes probably staring up at heaven. I could not see his eyes, but I did not care then whether he looked silly or dignified in death. Nor was I relieved.

'You thought he'd got you, eh?' said Gerry solemnly. He lowered me slowly.

To me it was like a story unended, and yet I could not get it out of my mind that the sniper had understood my thoughts as I lay there, that his eyes had been watching mine, which, of course, they could not have done. Nor do I mean by that that there was some mysterious secret, half-revealed to me, of what the senses may accomplish even when death has come. I looked up at Gerry, grateful at least that my dreams would now come true, but at the same moment there was an overpowering wistfulness, as though, almost, I had lost something, as though, as I said, it was like a story not quite ended.



Days as Prisoners of War

THE CATFISH

JOHNNNO grinned so that the crinkles around his eyes showed in a hard network. His face was like waxed parchment. He grinned at Denny and said, 'S'welp me, Denny, it's true what I say.'

Denny shifted uncomfortably on his bed. He decided to grumble. 'I'd never make it,' he said. 'The old leg would never take it.'

They both looked down at the offending limb. It looked thin and fragile in its Thomas splint. Johnno put his longest finger and thumb around the thigh and they met.

'Guess you could be right,' he said. He still had a grin on his face. It kept the crinkles static about his eyes. 'Better than it was,' he commented. His voice was contented.

Something stirred in Denny. 'How come they all don't know?' he asked, looking around the ward.

'They've given up thinking,' said Johnno. 'Given up even expecting.'

Denny thought of the long nights they had expected, indulging in wild, foolish dreams. There had been expectancy of release, hope of liberation from the prison camp. His eyes stared across the broken spirits and bodies in the beds around him. Then he shook his head.

'Sounds strange to me,' he said. He looked at Johnno. 'How could it possibly be?' he asked. 'Now you tell me,' he said. 'How could it be?'

He felt a tide rising within him, slowly, almost imperceptibly. He knew it was rising. 'Tide of hope,' he thought simply. He took another look at Johnno. Johnno had his grin set like a mask, dry but shiny. He suddenly wondered what it was that made Johnno tick. He had never seen the man in depression. Johnno was always cheerful, unchangeably extroverted.

His eyes dropped from Johnno to Flicker Finn, who always

hunted for bugs. Flicker had a small bottle with a screw-top lid on it. When it was filled with bed-bugs Flicker would stare at it solemnly. Sometimes he would even stare for hours. No one ever traced what he did with the bugs. In the evening he would go out into the dark with the bottle. Every morning he was on the prowl afresh, seeking out the small creatures. The sickly sweet smell of them was perpetually around Flicker's bed. Denny thought he might have bred the little parasites, so preoccupied he was with them.

Johnno read his thoughts. 'Let him be,' he said to Denny. 'Stops him from going mad.'

After a time Johnno slid from the bed. He stared down, grin fixed. 'It's your great chance, mate,' he said. 'Never get another.'

After he had gone, Denny set his leg straight in the bed. He had a book in his hand, but the print was lazy. It didn't form into words. His whole being was feeling the dull ache of the hunger. Unremitting it was—that feeling—like no other pain in the world. A simple pain but full of endless threat and misery. Grey pain, you might call it.

When they brought the midday meal, there was silence. The orderlies measured out the shadow soup, conscious of hungry eyes staring at them. They were wary of giving more to one than to another. The small rice-cake seemed to dwindle to nothing on the enamel plates. After that there was the brown tea without sugar and milk.

He remembered the early days, when the Japanese had herded them into the camp. He personally had escaped much of that, carried in on a stretcher from the ambulance. At night they had heard the machine-gun fire—close by on the beach and in the distance in the jungle. He would always hear that kind of fire. The thought of it baulked him from fulfilling the dream he had.

But the dream grew. It grew until he could rest no longer on the bed. He sat up, but quietly, not wanting to awaken a suspicion in his mates. Some of them were reading. A few were moaning gently, hoping against hope for a gentle orderly and a soft sedative. 'Not likely,' Denny thought. He swung his leg—splint and all—over the edge of the bed.

Flicker was on the prowl, hands and knees on the floor,

peering short-sightedly. Denny knew bugs rarely moved in the light of day. They came voraciously in the night, making sudden, sharp forays. He limped past Flicker, his dropped foot flipping slightly as he walked on the hard concrete. Flicker seemed not to see him, so intent he was on the bug hunt.

Denny's job was to get strong thread from the book-repair room in the library. That was his special thing. Johnno knew all about that thread. He knew it was like fine cord. 'Triple it,' he had said, 'and it will do the trick.' Somewhere Johnno had found some wax. Johnno knew where everything was.

Denny found a crumpled ball of the thread. It was loose and light in his hand. He thrust it down into his pocket. Then he limped on—to Johnno's ward. He sat on Johnno's bed, not saying much. Secretively he slipped the fine cord to the smiling optimist. Johnno looked at it with delight. His eyes slewed shrewdly to Denny. He pushed his palms together and said in suppressed glee, 'It's ours tomorrow, mate, but first thing, mind you, before the tide goes out.'

That was what had puzzled Denny. How could you catch a fish inside a prison camp? It just couldn't be. Johnno was a con man. Johnno wanted that white cord for something else. Denny could not imagine what.

He walked back to his own ward, feeling tired, sensing the deep ache of hunger. Flicker was on his back on the bed, the small bottle gripped in his hand. Stares met him from other beds. There was no suspicion in them, only a grey blankness. Hope had died. Nearly everything had died. Grey was the paramount colour. Only here and there did life exist. Denny noted with dull surprise a rapt look in one pair of eyes.

'Wonder when he will die?' he thought, but almost immediately the idea dissipated.

He was tired because of the work. He lay back, trying to think himself into the part. Nothing happened. Always he came to the same blind. It was pulled down. Memory was cut off completely. The blind was bland and blank. You almost believed it to be opaque. Sometimes you nearly saw through it, and then it prevented you, warning you off.

He sighed at having to live in the present. There must have

been some good things in the past. He was almost sure of that. What power was it, then, which was cutting them off from the past? Finally, as he slept, the word 'mercy' slipped into his mind. He nodded in his heart. 'Mercy' was a good word.

The strange thing about that blind was that it blotted out all memory but for the matter of food. At least that was for the others. Night-times they would all talk about the meals they would one day eat. They would talk about the food places where they had eaten—Lowe's, Old Joe's, Fravelli's—and of course some talked about steak and eggs, floaters, pasties and pies.

He would turn his face away from them, but the talking went on endlessly until he could have wept. The pain from his wound was nothing like the pain in his vitals. He never knew why they tortured themselves, but he was never angry with them, only pitying.

It was not always that way. Some days the inner pain would vanish and marvellous thinking would come to him. Sometimes a book triggered him into a mental ecstasy. Other days a fountain welled up and overflowed. He knew it had, just by his own feelings, but then he saw in the startled looks of his fellow prisoners a surprise that was good for him, and them. He saw—or imagined he saw—flickers of hope.

Others were afraid of hope and turned away from him. They didn't even hope for death. They remained neutral, timelessly suspended. They had learned not to feel life—not its pains, its hurts, its fears, or, for that matter, its rare joys.

JOHNNO helped him dress, that is, to put on his shorts, and he strapped the splint for him, gently slipping the leg to the floor. Denny's walking stick had a rubber tip on it, cut from an old tyre. No one heard them go. Johnno followed behind, watching that Denny did not slip. They made their painful way from the ward to the short, harsh *lalang*, the grass that served for a lawn around the building.

Denny knew no panic. He could see the Japanese guards on the catwalk, but they were not caring about the prisoners. They were tired, waiting for the early-morning relief. For all they knew, the prisoners were on a special fatigue.

Climbing the hillock was not easy for Denny. Johnno was

strangely solicitous. He gripped Denny firmly, pushing him upwards. Denny was moved for the first time in months. In fact he was shaken in his cynicism, if not out of it. Why was Johnno so solicitous? The soldier could have gone on his own more easily now that he had the cord. He could have brought some of the fish later, when he had caught and cooked it.

Johnno found the experience pleasant. He liked Denny. He liked his quietness. He had come on some of those rare occasions to see his fellow prisoner, often when Denny was a bit rapturous. Johnno had no envy. He was a born realist. He had lived in Surrey Hills all his life, in the heart of what was a Sydney slum, but life had never crushed him. Self-pity was a luxury for some, but he knew intuitively that it was not for him. He had to face reality and he did, generally aggressively, but never bitterly. His cheerfulness was genuine, but then no one was to know that. No one understood how Johnno ticked. Nor, for that matter, did Johnno himself. He despised introspection. He was a *natural*.

Over the hillock Denny drew his breath. It was like a dream to him. True, the barbed wire of the fence stretched for hundreds of yards, but the undulations of grass, with their sparse coverings of stunted shrubs, was like a paradise of freedom for him. He wanted to run into it and express the liberty he had felt on his rare and wonderful occasions. Instead he just stood and stared at it. He wondered why he sensed tears to be close.

Johnno led him gently. Denny stumbled in the cushion of the turf but his fellow prisoner gripped him firmly, holding him up. It seemed that the two of them, alone, were people of another world, another time. They had left blank despair behind. They had walked into another dimension.

Then they were there, wonderfully, at the creek. Unbelievably they were there. They watched the salt water, brown almost to black, pulsing up the creek, a waterway lapping up against the coarse grass with a wash of white, winking foam, tracing swirling patterns landwards.

Denny's eyes took it all in with delight and fear. Suddenly he knew he was afraid. He was afraid of everything because it was all a delight, a fierce, strong delight. His very leg seemed to expand and strengthen with better, more masculine pain. His whole

body trembled with a power he had not known since the days of battle action. The enfeebling ennui was gone, replaced by new and terrifying libido. He knew it all boded ill. Given this sudden hubris, this visitation of power, he must relapse, any moment, into the old weakness.

Johnno was looking at him in delight. 'Atta boy, Denny!' he cried.

Here on the grass-dunes, hidden by the scrub trees, they were free! 'Free in a prison!' Denny thought, and the hubris was not waning.

They began drawing out the triple cord, knotting it around small stones for sinkers and tying in the crude hooks Johnno had patiently made from fence wire, borrowed pliers and iron file.

It was the tin of worms that fascinated Denny. Johnno had promised two duck eggs to fellow con man, 'Troppo' Bates, who went out daily on the work party. The Nipponese guards were careless at times, or even human you might say, so Troppo had scabbled in the jungle on the edge of the airstrip in the rich black humus, and Denny could smell the humus, its pungency reaching his sensitive nostrils.

The worms were fierce on the hooks, quick and flashing like no earthworms Denny had ever seen. Confidence surged in him, to be added to his hubris. Their lines flicked out across the tidal stream, sinking into its swirling depths.

Denny had lost his watch when he was wounded, but Johnno had the time. 'Thirty minutes to rollcall,' he said softly, and kept his eyes on the water and the line in it. 'What's more,' he said, 'we'll do it, Denny.'

His grin seemed to come unfixed and to be real. Johnno of Surrey Hills was on the make. He was encapsulating a huge delight, unable to express it except by winking at Denny.

'You little beauty!' he chuckled. 'You'll be in that pan soon, see if you won't!'

It was then it happened. Denny felt the pull on his line. It was a slow, heavy pull, like the take of an eel. His hands trembled and the hubris ebbed away. A cold, grey fear came in its place, supplanting the new, transitory joy. Somewhere his leg throbbed as it always did in rare excitement. Denny felt the sweat come as

he tugged back against the pull on the line. Somewhere inside he was crying, tears washing about in him, flowing from despair.

Johnno became silent, predatory. His breath came in hisses. 'Play him, Denny-boy,' he prayed steadily. 'Oh, play him, sonny-boy. Just play him.'

So Denny, his splinted leg straight out before him on the hard *lalang*, played the thing in the water. He could feel the steady anger of the fish or the eel or whatever it was. Once, when the pressure loosened, he nearly cried outwardly, but Johnno hissed encouragement and he was in the fray again. He recalled the slack of the cord-line, craning forward with skinny arms and shoulders until he was jackknifed over his legs. Johnno's sharp look encouraged him. He felt the heavy pull again.

He struggled back into the upright, his thorax tense with pain. He pulled and pulled, taking handfuls of the line as his breath came in hoarse gulps. He ran it around his fingers, clutched it in his palms, tangled it around his wrists. Johnno showed a huge, fearful delight. 'You little beauty!' he kept saying, 'Oh, you little beauty!'

Suddenly, unbelievably, it was on the bank—the huge, frightening, flapping thing.

'Catfish!' shouted Johnno. 'Watch it, mate!'

Denny watched it, all right. The angry thing was violently making its way down the bank, flipping towards the restless water.

'Oh, no you don't!' Johnno shouted. He grasped the cord between Denny's hand and the fish. 'Careful now!' he warned, and Denny was not sure whether he meant the fish or him. The wide mouth of the creature opened and the cat-eyes stared in the midst of its whiskers. Denny was both repelled and attracted. The mouth kept opening and shutting.

When it lay gasping, strengthless, Johnno slipped the hook from its mouth, cutting away with the sharp knife, his own line around a wrist. He kept looking at his watch. 'Might make another,' he kept muttering.

They made another. Denny watched his fellow prisoner clean the two creatures. They were fish, no doubt, but then they were not fish. Denny felt the lines of terror and joy meet within him. He stared as Johnno skinned the fish, gutting and filleting them, assiduously avoiding the poisonous spikes, the hurtful fins and the

rest. Finally Johnno had the large fillets, flesh yellow and white, gleaming, glistening in the Malaysian sun.

He came across, crouching in front of Denny. 'Denny, my boy!' he was saying. 'Oh, Denny-boy, we'll have 'em in palm oil before you can say "Don Bradman!" We'll have 'em in deep fat, my lad. Just think of the smell of them, the sweet, sweet smell of frying fish!' Johnno's eyes leered with dreamy joy.

Well, Denny could see that, all right. Johnno was nothing if not an artist with words. It was as though Denny too, in spite of his stiff, painful leg, were there in front of the fire, the hot pan filled with yellow palm oil, and it all melting. Johnno had even dusted the fish fillets with rice flour and it was all turning to gold, a bubbling kind of fish gold.

Oh yes, Denny could see that, all right. No doubt about that. But what he could not understand was the line of fear and dread that was beginning to spread through him. He knew it should have been all joy, looking at those fat fillets, knowing that any moment the incessant ache of his hunger, the perpetual anguish of his starved body was about to be relieved. That was why he should be filled with steady joy or maybe hilarious happiness, but instead he had this fear mingled with despair.

At first he could not analyse it, but then understanding came. He knew it was guilt, huge grey guilt that kept spreading into every part and branch of him. It was guilt for no hunger, guilt for eating whilst the others were starving. He knew it to be a crazy guilt, but it *was* guilt, and there was little he could do about it.

He felt weak as Johnno helped him to his feet. Johnno had the fish, the lines, the gutting knife and the precious worms.

Denny made it with difficulty over the grassy hillocks.

JOHNNNO was dreamy with anticipation as they walked to where the rollcall was to be. Johnno's eyes were on the small fires where he would cook the fish.

Denny kept moving towards the same fires, sometimes hobbling along, sometimes swinging his leg stiffly, as though to avoid unnecessary pain; but inside, the pain was growing, another pain, the anguish of guilt, and it was about this he kept thinking. It was about this he was wondering all the time.

THE SKYLARK OF TAKAFAU

IT was at Osaka we first saw the small brown bird in a cage, Len told me, and we knew what that was like, because we were behind bars; and just as the small bird saw the small yellow men, so did we. The bird was able to sing in its cage, and that was the difference. We could sing seldom.

At Osaka they huddled us into Taisho camp, making us march a mile to work each day. We were always tired and thin and deadened, and I might not have seen the bird had it not been for Jock Travers, who belonged to a Scots regiment, but was a friend to all Australians.

He nudged me as we passed through a side street of Osaka. There were brown shops, close together. 'Look at that bird,' he said.

I saw it then, hanging in a wickerwork cage; slim, gilded cane shaped into a cage like a fish basket. 'It wouldn't make a meal,' I said.

'Don't be daft,' said Jock. 'Listen to it; there's no need to eat it.'

We wanted to eat birds then, but I tried to listen, to catch some sound through the crunching of our worn boots on the rough road surface. Small children were laughing, running about the gutters happily, as they do in any big city. There was plenty of noise, and we were past the bird before I caught a trill, faintly silver, but pure music.

'God,' said Jock, 'but that's lovely!'

'I hardly heard it,' I said.

'You're deaf to music and blind to beauty,' said Jock.

'No, I'm not, Jock,' I said, for my eyes were fixed hungrily to the west, where the long, dark line of the hills showed. I could

easily remember the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, as Jock could easily remember the Scots hills.

'Aye, but it is a country for little yellow men, and not for us,' Jock said.

'We're here, anyway,' I said wearily.

AFTER that, we tramped stolidly. Some with beriberi scraped their feet along the ground. Others were just dull with hunger, dead anger and weariness. Then we swung into the big iron mills, and forgot about the bird because the furnaces flared out at us and the roar of the mills blotted out thought.

We saw the bird again that night, dimly through the last light. It did not sing then, but when we passed it next day, it cut across our marching with clear song.

'God knows how it can sing in that prison!' said Jock.

I said nothing because of the inrush of thought, quickly emerging from the association of song. I saw brown birds flying after the single-furrow plough, hunting for upturned worms. The song followed us down the alley, and along to the steel mills.

Jock and I weren't the only ones who saw it. Every head of that tramping column of prisoners turned to the small cage and the brown bird. It is true to say it passed into our inner beings as some symbol of spiritual living, a refusal to be depressed by bars.

'That bird isn't happy, anyway,' said Jock.

'It can sing,' I said.

We never saw the small bird again, because Osaka was bombed. The large silver bombers sailed high over us in terrible serenity. Their bombs fell into the city while the ack-ack fired upwards without effect.

Looking from our camp we could see a glowing arc of fires, a fearful half-circle of crimson and gold. In the day the small brown buildings were murky in the smoke. There were only sadness and a haze in that city. We never went to the steel mills again, because they were burned out.

INSTEAD we went north, about three thousand miles, travelling diagonally towards the west coast to a place by the hills called Takafau.

When we passed into the high hills, I almost forgot the past because of their beauty.

'They don't compare with the hills of Scotland,' said Jock doggedly.

The ranges were misted with blue haze; rugged and soft, beautiful and peaceful. That is a lot to say for hills, but it was all true. The filth and murky living of Osaka dropped away, and for a short time we knew some sort of serenity.

'There's brown heather in my own hills,' said Jock, 'and it is soft and quiet in good, ordinary colours. This is only green brilliancy.'

At Takafau the camp was still a prison. They had barred the windows with thick wooden slats. We could see the blue skies through the slats, and looking about us we could see the mountains, for we were in some sort of a valley.

'It is still prison,' said Jock.

'Maybe it won't be long now,' I said. 'They're bombing Japan heavily.'

'I hope they bomb it from the face of the earth,' said Jock savagely.

We had little time for talking and as little for thinking, engulfed in the clamour and toil of the great manganese mills. Our heads ached, contracted and expanded with the roar of the great rock-crushers. Our nostrils were harsh and our mouths bitter with the smell of the fertiliser by-products, the raw odour of the lime and the perpetual manganese. We toiled before the great furnaces, and some of the thin men fainted after five minutes of that terrific heat.

One day when we sat in the barred hut, Jock pointed to the men eating their rice.

'You'll never see the like of that again,' he said.

'I don't want to,' I said, and suddenly I knew I had never really seen these men before in this manner. Any sad and sombre adjective might describe them. Simply, they were tough brown skeletons with dark pits where the eyes were.

'Maybe it's better than Taisho camp,' I said.

'You remember the brown bird,' said Jock. 'I wonder how he managed to sing.'

'Maybe these chaps sing a little,' I said.

'Don't be a damned fool,' said Jock. 'Do you call that singing?' He pointed to the men.

Looking at them I wondered. Although they weren't singing, I could see they were still living, and not merely existing—as life fights for its own right. Perhaps they did not understand the reason for these desperate and weird days, but they were not conquered by them. They might have been fighting a rearguard action, but they were still fighting.

'Maybe that bird sang because it wasn't beaten,' I said. 'And you can't say these men are beaten.'

'No,' said Jock slowly. 'You may be right, but then, who could sing in a place like this? Only a bird.'

IT was then the skylark began to sing, with an uncanny kind of relevancy. It was hot and still, and behind the song were the curve of the hills and the glowing blue sky. Two poplars were soft green spires bellying somewhat at the centre, but still, steadily set against the sky, and between the twin trees, rose the lark.

It rose from hard sword-grass which, when we had walked in it with bare feet and bare legs, had slashed our feet and made thin, cruel gashes in our legs.

Jock's face was like a child's, soft and gentle. He said, whispering, 'It may have a nest down there. It's a skylark, like the little bird we saw in the cage at Osaka.'

The bird was fluttering. The sun shone through its outstretching wings where the feathers at the extremities were thin and, seemingly, very frail. It rose higher, and all the while incredible song poured from its small body.

Some of the men forgot their white rice and looked through the bars. The bird flew upwards in starts, its song changing with the fluttering movements, yet nothing of its music lingered in the air. It seemed like a silver arrow flung down to us, complete in itself.

'That's a skylark,' someone said.

Nobody spoke until the bird soared up high, almost out of sight, a faint speck in the bright blue sky.

'Shelley wrote about a skylark, didn't he?' Jock said thoughtfully.

'That's better than the bombers over Osaka,' I said.

Jock looked troubled. 'Where is it all going to end?'

'I don't know,' I said. I felt listless. What was to be would be.

'Wait,' Jock said, 'it's coming back.'

It dropped, plummet-like, as do all larks, in stages. Its song threshed out and spread. Finally the bird was within hut-level, shrilling sweetly. Then there was silence.

The camp roared about us again, and the Japanese guard made us wash our dishes before going to the furnace and the fertiliser.

'Have you ever thought,' Jock said later, 'that when we are free, we will be freer than we were before?'

THE thought remained with me, and each day the skylark rose between the two poplars as we ate our midday rice.

Sometimes the wind moved down from the mountains, and the poplars swayed, but always the bird would rise, fluttering at first, and seeming to stare into its nest, after which would come the clear gush of song.

One day the bombers came roaring above us, winging northward. We watched, inwardly fearful, for we were really afraid of the American bombers. We had not forgotten Osaka and the bombs. This deadly assurance, this perfect serenity of silver wings above was a terror of superb infallibility. Our shredded nerves quivered with the memory of the whistling incendiaries and the sudden upthrust of bursting steel.

The bombers passed us, and although no bombs dropped, we found the skylark had gone. We watched each day, hoping for its return, but it had gone with the bombers. It was queer that their noise had frightened it.

'The war must be nearly over,' I said to Jock.

'Where's that skylark gone?' he wanted to know.

'It wasn't here just for our benefit,' I said.

'Wasn't it?' said Jock.

Somehow, the disappearance of the lark depressed us. Mostly we had become used to disappointment, and our policy was to

expect nothing and so avoid disillusion. We even went farther, and guilelessly painted conditions darker than they were, with a kind of inverted optimism.

With the skylark it had been different. We had placed trust in it, because the human mind seizes quickly upon symbols.

'That's the end,' said Jock.

We grew thinner, and the days were long, outdrawn with wearying work, until the night came, and we could see little beauty in the hills and only dull monotony in the manganese of the little yellow men.

THEN the skylark returned.

We did not see it but we knew its song. It began in a soft, timid trill, gathering strength as it rose, fluttering, from the grass.

The men in the hut stopped eating rice. Jock said immediately, 'It means something.'

'You're mad!' I said.

Suddenly someone burst into the hut.

He stared at us. 'This isn't a rumour,' he said, faintly pugnacious. He stared at us queerly. 'The war's over,' he said.

'What did I tell you?' said Jock.

'It's over,' said the staring skeleton at the door. 'Doesn't that mean anything to you blokes?'

There was only a silence. A dream come true is not real. Outside, the skylark sang and everybody heard it.

The man at the door was babbling, lean, thin arms gesticulating, thin hands helping the words as they tumbled out.

'The Nips say it is all over. Our planes are coming to drop food. Not rice; food. Bully beef and stuff in tins, maybe chocolate and that sort of thing.'

He paused, solemnly staring at us. 'This is all fair jonniky,' he said.

'It is, too,' said Jock.

We listened because we could hear the skylark, and I saw it moving upwards between the two poplar trees. The trees themselves were very still, and only the small brown bird was moving. Its wingtips were golden with the light of the sun through them, and its song was shrill and sweet. Behind it, however, was

another sound, not of the factory, nor the great engines, not the pulverisers smashing the stone, but the drone we knew and dreaded, the drone of planes.

'Bombers,' said someone, voicing our thought. 'Just our cursed luck.'

'It's over,' said the man at the door. 'Those are planes with food.'

'They're coming this way,' said Jock.

We crowded to the window, pressing our faces to the thick wooden slats and peering through them.

The lark was immediately in front of us, beating out its rich song as it rose, and directly behind it, but far away, was a formation of bombers. They merged into an arrow pointed at us, with the silver head slowly and inevitably moving towards an invisible line between the two green poplars where the skylark sang.

THE MAN FROM POONA

I REMEMBER the Indian Army Officer so well. Looking back on the time of the happening, I can still see and feel the hilarity of those days. Even now, some of us might reckon that we have never laughed as much in all our life as we did then. Laughter is a great thing, and you will want to share in it, so I will tell you how it happened.

It was during the early days in the Japanese prisoner of war camp in Changi, on Singapore Island. I won't go over the grimness of those days of war, of surrender to the Japanese and our entry into the camp. No sooner were we imprisoned than Australian wit came to the fore in the form of the AIF Concert Party. There was a vast amount of talent amongst the troops, both from officers and other ranks, and with them a lot of ingenuity in making props, arranging decor, gathering an array of musical instruments—even manufacturing some of them—writing scripts, practice, and so on.

I can remember the first concert some of us walking wounded attended. It was in the open air with an improvised stage, and of course we had to sit on the grass, because there were few chairs. The stage lighting was superb. I thought it unbelievable. One could have been back at home, or in any other Army concert in a non-prison situation—so well managed it was.

The Japanese guards were there—watching. I guess humour and laughter are universal, and even if our sense of humour differed somewhat to theirs, it didn't matter. They knew we were about fun, and they could pick up something of the drama, even if their understanding of our language was limited. It was one of the times we didn't mind too much having them around.

Of course there were difficulties with the Nipponese guards.

In the first days our woman impersonators were so good that the Japanese on duty would not believe they were not women. You can imagine the enquiries backstage, the arguments, then the discovery that we hadn't smuggled women into the camp for the occasion, the high chortling, and finally agreement to let the show go on.

They were certainly great concerts. For a couple of hours the ache for home, the sadness of memory, and the pangs of hunger were lost in oceans of laughter. We lived in another world, brought to us by skilled artists. Some of the actors were amateurs but it didn't matter; they were good! When the show was over we would drift back to our quarters, eased by laughter, relaxed by fun, and feeling our unity in a rich way.

Of course, my story isn't just about concerts, although they figure largely in it. No, it is about 'The Indian Army Officer', Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius. As the men said, he was a bit of a character. When we describe him as an Indian Army Officer, we do not mean he was Indian. Far from it; he was very, *very* English. In the days of the British rule in India, the Army consisted mainly of Indians who were trained and led by British officers. The officers were very attached to their troops, and the troops—for the most part—to them. When Singapore fell, the Indians were imprisoned on their own, just as European-type troops were segregated on their own. Most of the Indian Army Officers felt lost without their men.

CERTAINLY Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius missed his company of infantrymen most deeply. To put it mildly, he was lost without them. Perhaps it was for this reason he could never rest. You would see Captain Cornelius walking—or should we say, marching?—around the camp. Backwards and forwards he would go, his eyes ever peering, as though by this kind of searching he would find his lost men. He seemed very businesslike, very determined, but no one quite knew what he was about. Sandhurst trained of course, *don't you know!*

To look at, he was a comic figure. When captured, he had come into the camp with the minimum of clothes—an Army hat, a pair of shorts and sandals. That was all. He always carried a

small haversack slung across one shoulder, his right hand resting on it when in repose, but when he walked his arms moved in military marching fashion. He was a credit to the British, was Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius. You could not help but admire him, and you felt impelled to say in a high, drawling English accent, 'Jolly fine show!' You were sure you were looking at the cream of Indian Army Officers.

In those days the humorous magazine *Esquire* depicted the typical English officer as a man whose eyes were bulbous, whose cheeks were puffy, whose eyebrows were white and full, and—of course—whose fair moustache was also fat and drooping. The *Esquire* man's expression was vacuous, tinged with a trifle of astonishment, but very much out of this world. I think he was meant to look pompous. Well then—believe it or not—Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius fitted this picture very well. In fact, altogether too well.

NOW if the description of Captain C. is a bit ludicrous, then mention of his accent is more so. He had the long, drawling, half-apologetic, half-insistent speech that is called 'Oxford', and which few folk who are not English believe is genuine. It seems unnatural, affected, and unreal. But, of course, it isn't. When Adrian Cornelius saw anything happen in life—in the war, in the camp—he always compared it with what had happened at Poona. You received the impression that everything began and ended in Poona. Of course he had been many years in Poona.

Almost every utterance of the Sandhurst man began with, 'You know, you fellows, when I was in Poona . . .' When he said 'Poona', it came out something like 'Pooo-naah!' All over the camp men would greet each other and say, 'You know, you chaps, when I was in Pooo-naah . . .' or, 'Oh, I say, we never did it like that in Pooo-naah!'

At first the Australians agreed that the man wasn't genuine. They insisted that he was a cunning man of humour, taking off a 'British officer and a gentleman'. They liked that. They greeted him humorously, though of course without salutes. Aussie troops neglected saluting when British officers were around. Captain C. did not seem to mind much. He appeared not to notice

anyone else—whether British or Australian. He just kept going—red face, sun-tanned body, shorts, sandals, hat and haversack. That was Captain Cornelius, and a fine stamp of a man he was, crossing to and fro the vast compound of the prison.

After a time it dawned on the Australian troops that he was not a humorous man slyly taking off a jolly fine Sandhurst man. He, surely, was the very man on which *Esquire* must have modelled its cover personality. The only alternative to this was that Captain C. had modelled himself seriously on the *Esquire* cartoon officer. Of course, this could not be so. You had to believe that Cornelius was innocently, guilelessly and unselfconsciously his own unbelievable self! We were forced to that remarkable conclusion and left him to himself. He was just a natural eccentric, and we accepted that fact.

HUMOUR is necessary to life. Mimicking is one powerful form of humour. The Concert Party used it to great effect. They mimicked everything and everyone. Take, for example, the time the coconut trees were being raided by some nefarious thief in the Forces. Army regulations were that coconuts were only to be harvested by an official party. The thief persisted, and a trap was set. They caught the man, but he had not scaled the palm. He was at the base, looking up it, trying to appear innocent. He was placed on a charge-sheet and tried in the camp Army court. The charge? '*Looking up a coconut tree with intent to steal!*' Of course, this was played out on stage.

Or take the time when large snails—gathered by the working parties—had their price fixed at two cents each. A few officers kept ducks, and the most prized duck food was snails. When a black market grew in this commodity, the officers promulgated a law: 'Snails must not be procured or sold without a licence.' The Concert Party depicted a scene where a private was charged in the Army court for *selling snails without a licence*.

There was great humour with the Japanese also. What of the time when a Nip officer spoke of the shelling of Sydney Harbour by the Japanese submarines? He told the saddened Aussie listeners that the middle pylon of the Harbour Bridge had been knocked out! Then there was the other informant who told the troops,

'Darwin—bomb! bomb! Sydney—bomb! bomb!' He added with glee, 'Melbourne—bomb! bomb!' In answer to enquiries, he said that Brisbane, Perth and Hobart had also been 'bomb-bombed!' When a sly Aussie asked, 'Snake Gully—bomb? bomb?' the officer nodded his head vigorously and said, 'Huh! Snake Gully—bomb! bomb!'

It was inevitable, of course, that one day the Concert Party would mimic Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius, the famous Indian Army Officer, and that by so doing they would rescue him from his perpetual state of unconscious eccentricity. Of course, there would be no venom in taking him off or sending him up, or whatever the term should be.

The night came when the audience sat breathless, waiting for its programme of it-knew-not-what. In the front rows, as is right and proper, sat the commissioned officers—British and Australian. Behind them, at due and respectful distance, sat the non-commissioned officers, and then the troops. The tropical evening was abuzz with conversation, laughing, talking, shouting, and ribaldry. The problems and rubs of the day were forgotten in the pleasant anticipation of entertainment.

The orchestra began its tunings, its raspings, tinkerings, wailings, grumblings, rumblings and beatings, according to the particular instruments. This gave way to finer tuning, a closer approach to music, and then, at the wave of a baton and to the accompaniment of concerted attention, the orchestra broke into patriotic music such as 'Colonel Bogey', 'Roll Out the Barrel', 'Rule, Britannia' and 'Waltzing Matilda'. The troops exploded with feverish and false jingoism. British officers clapped and cried, 'Jolly fine! Jolly fine!' Aussies stamped their feet and applauded. Smartly clad Japanese officers nodded as though they understood it all, and not-so-well-clad Japanese other-ranks shook their heads in doubt; but everyone knew it was another grand-opener for a wonderful night.

And a wonderful night it was! The great curtains swept apart, and there, standing in the sight of all, but alone on that vast stage, was the redoubtable, unique, and clearly recognisable Indian Army Officer, the one and only Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius.

For a moment there was dead silence. It was the silence of awe. It was the quietude of recognition. It was the moment of appreciation—contemplation of the one and only living *Esquire* Army officer. The Japanese had doubtless seen this man many times on their rounds. Englishmen had recognised the cream of Sandhurst and fine Army tradition. Aussie troops had admired the calm detachedness of a man who kept to himself, but bravely maintained the best of traditions of the Poona Army base. All of this recognition, applied study, appreciation and joyous unbelief occurred in those first few suspended moments.

Then came the deluge! A great roar broke out. Laughter ascended from a giggling base to a shrill and shrieked crescendo. People throbbed with laughter. Some even wept. Others slapped their thighs in glorious unbelief. None was left undelighted, and wise men stored up these moments to be recalled in the difficult times of life that come to men in a prisoner of war camp. Wave after wave after wave of laughter flowed across the great outdoor auditorium.

Through all this, Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius stood silent, sandals on feet, shorts at waist, slouch hat on head, one hand upon haversack, and the other strictly at attention. The depiction was so faithful, so lovingly attentive to every detail of the true and genuine Captain C., that the audience could not but believe it was the Indian Army Officer himself, when, in fact, they knew it was not. They looked, they gazed, they gaped, they stared and they wept.

Then a great sigh swept over the audience, and they were very quiet. Here and there a giggle broke out afresh, but was quickly silenced by men who knew how to be reverent when an occasion calls for such awe. The silence was a proud tribute to the Concert Party, whose present delight knew no bounds.

Then it began. Of course the voice of Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius was at first tentative, somewhat apologetic as becomes a modest and unassuming Indian Army Officer of Sandhurst tradition and stock. He opened his mouth and said warmly, in his drawling, fruity Oxford and Sandhurst accent, 'I say, you fellows! You know, when I was in Poo-naah . . . !'

Hysterical shrieks. Unbelieving laughter. Cries of pain from

those whose laughing muscles had been strained. Uninhibited joy and unrestrained tears broke out across the multitude. Stamping and cheering—so much so that the Nipponese officers showed slight alarm, and even a little grimness. Japanese other-ranks shook their heads in doubt and despair. They would never understand these foolish Westerners.

The living replica of Captain Adrian Rothny James Cornelius resumed his speech. 'You know, you chaps, times were pretty jolly in Poo-naah. Wonderful, really. Of course, we had none of you Aussies. Pretty dull by comparison, really.'

Gales of laughter, storms of stamping, cyclones of hysteria, much slapping of thighs, and finally helplessness, weakness and moanings, and then gasps of 'Oh! Oh! Oh!' The Cornelius replica chattered on in a high and serious voice, but no one heard him any more, and he finally dropped his hand from his haversack, stood smartly and stiffly to attention, executed a precise military right turn, and marched off in Indian Army style, arms swinging high. As he left, he turned his head to the right and saluted the officers and the rest of the audience. His exit was accompanied by cheers, whistles, stamping and the last waves of weakened laughter.

THE next morning the Concert Party woke weary-eyed to their meagre prison breakfast. They smiled wanly at one another. They drooped over their rice gruel and unsweetened, non-milked tea. The morning after the night before!

After a time they warmed to their primary topic: entertainment. They pushed back their empty plates and began an impromptu evaluation.

One artist said, 'Jolly fine show last night, you chaps!' It was a weary imitation of Captain A. R. J. Cornelius.

Another concert-party member said, 'I think we overdid it a bit, you know.'

There was a chorus of protests. 'Not at all! It was just as he always is. No, it was a fair go.'

Someone said, 'Yes, but the guy must have been pretty hurt. He was there, right in the front row with the Brigadier.'

'But did you see him?' another asked. 'He was laughing his

head off, slapping his thighs. He thought it was hilarious.'

A quiet voice said, 'Yes, but you never know these English. You never know what they're thinking.'

At that moment in walked the Indian Army Officer, Adrian Rothny James Cornelius—Captain.

Silence fell across the whole group. Some concert-party members stared at the floor. Others looked up at the ceiling. Others just found things of interest on various walls. None looked into the eyes of the Oxford-Sandhurst man. None spoke. Each, in his own way, was a little perturbed.

Not so the Englishman. He was totally unperturbed. He stood there, in the 'at ease' position, hand on haversack, sandals on feet, and hat on head. His somewhat bulbous eyes shone with a holy light. His moustache twitched visibly, and his eyebrows elevated and lowered in turns.

'I say, you fellows!' he cried. 'I never laughed so much in all my life. Jolly fine show! Jolly fine, I say!'

The troupe members seemed stunned. Without moving their faces, their eyes swivelled one person to another—first to the right, and then to the left. Amazement registered in their eyes. A faint sort of relief broke out on their faces, but they waited. They knew some crunch was about to be delivered.

The Indian Army man prattled on. 'I tell you again, chaps, I never laughed so much in all my life.' He looked around at them, gathering all in his earnest gaze.

Then he went on warmly and enthusiastically, 'Of course—you know—the cream of the joke is that *I knew a fellow in Poo-naah the dead spit of him!*'

Having delivered himself, he beamed upon them all, waited for effect, dropped his hand from his haversack, stood smartly to attention, did a military 'about turn', and marched off, arms swinging high, until the silence closed over him, and them—a silence you might call 'unbroken', or even 'eternal'.

THE POWER WITHIN

I FIRST met Scotty McLean at Port Dickson, up where the beaches are unbelievably beautiful, edged as they are by coconut palms and the musical casuarinas.

Scotty was on his own, and for that matter so was I. Incredibly idealistic, many of my images were unreal, and yet I clung to them. I guess I enjoyed dreams, nostalgia and images all in a pretty thick mixture, and this day I was scuffing my feet along the beach, having left the fellows in my section who had invited themselves into one of those Chinese mansions just back from the beach. I found that kind of sociality beyond my immature relationships with people. I kept wanting to live in my own world.

Scotty wasn't like that. He was a man with fixed ideas, strong opinions, and unswerving morality, which was morality without much religion to it.

Scotty was carrying a coconut with a hole in the top of it. He offered me a drink, and although the humidity was about eighty per cent, one kept being thirsty, so I drank gratefully from it. We sat down under the coconut trees and watched the Tamil coolies shinning up the coconut palms, dropping the heavy fruit and gathering it to make copra or something.

Scotty said, 'I sometimes find it hard to believe they are humans just like us.'

'Well, in some ways they are not like us, but they are very much humans,' I replied.

He agreed with that. I knew him to be in our Brigade group, and so we needed no introductions. Scotty, because I had already decided that he belonged to a certain type, evoked little interest. I simply put him in the category which Australians have for Scots. Then I discovered he didn't run according to type. For instance,

Scotty was quite poetical. He had been scribbling something, and when I looked at it—expecting it to be doggerel—I was surprised at its quality. It was not only good writing, but also thought with real depth. I looked at him with new respect. I had had the idea that maybe—in all the Brigade group—I would be about the only poetic one.

Scotty was in LAD, that is, the Light Aid Detachment. It was composed of older men than maximum Army-joining age, which was 39. These men had skills which were useful, particularly in mechanical engineering. Scotty, like many another Scot, was a whiz at fixing vehicles. He was skilled in engine repair. So he got to be very much in demand, and, since he had integrity, had made quite a reputation. It was only his contempt for human weakness which got him into trouble from time to time. Some officers thought their rank entitled them to special respect, but Scotty took a man as he found him. He was a private and could have been a sergeant major, if not even more, had he played the matter well, which he hadn't and didn't.

OFTEN we would make our way to the beach, and lie on the sand and chat. We would see other fellows; they were living life as they saw it their way, and why not? I guess they knew it might not be all that long in time before they would be in action. Maybe they would be called to the Middle East where the action was happening, or suddenly the Japanese would descend upon the Malayian Peninsula. Even if that seemed a bit far off in those early 1941 days, it was at the back of the mind, just as at present the nuclear threat seems to be at the back of many minds, determining the way people go about life. So, some of these fellows treated it all as a holiday, but most saw it as a time in life and world history when they were called upon for an unusual task. I doubt whether there was any despair in them, other than humans know in the course of life. Maybe they wanted to fit all the joy they could into their existence, for fear that later they would face other things—even death. On the whole, I think there was little of heroics—just the general Army humour about grog and women and the daily things of service life.

Scotty was a deep thinker, all right. He had little time for

things that the other fellows were out to do. I think he understood why they did them—mainly out of some natural zest for life, but also out of boredom with the humdrum routine of the Army. At the same time, he didn't approve. In fact he was critical.

He had no time for the brothel crawl, or for things that went on with some of the Chinese women. Some of those women were gracious enough, but things happened that met Scotty's disapproval. Most of all, he disapproved of men who surrendered their virginity to the current views on sex. I remember how savage he was against this sort of thing.

'You'll be knowing,' he said, 'that some of these fellows think they're not men unless they go where the women are and do what the other fellows do. It takes more guts and spunk to stand out from them or against them, than to go with them.'

Looking back, it seems even more strange to me that Scotty should stand for such high morality. As far as I knew, he didn't have a speck or spark of religion in him, yet he was very strong on the moral score. Since those days I have learned about the Stoics, and I would say, now, that Scotty was a natural Stoic. He had no time for emotion, for religious enthusiasm, but he had a strict mind for self-control and natural morality. I call it 'natural morality,' but it always seemed strange to me that he should be so strong on morality when it didn't seem to connect up with any religious system. It was just ethics, and Scotty had developed the system pretty well. It all made sense to him, and in a way to me also. I was a most moral person. My ethics linked with my faith: they were spiritual ethics. Scotty's weren't, but the curious thing was that they were just about identical.

I don't want to give you the idea that Scotty was a severe or dreary man. To the contrary; he had a rich sense of humour and of fun. His irony was close to unique. He could say the most outrageous things without blinking an eye. There were some of the fellows who took him on verbally and soon regretted that they had. This was especially so if he were in an icy mood. When he was in a warm mood he had us all in stitches. There were few men funnier than Scotty when he was in a warm mood. Words, jokes and riposte would ripple from him. I guess these things endeared him to me. I was glad to have his friendship.

WHEN we went to Mersing on the east coast of the Peninsula, we were busy people. I was busy running a line detail, and our project had us learning lines the British had laid, linking up with the civilian line system, and tapping units into both Army and civilian cables. We had a line running twenty-four miles to Endau. Brigade wanted to keep in touch with Battalion there. We even had to run company lines within that Battalion, which was not normally our job. I saw little of Scotty because of this, but some nights we would meet in Mersing village under the white petrol lamps at the drinks stalls. The fraternising with the local population that we had known on the west coast was toned down in Mersing. We had an idea that we were not all that loved by the local people and that the coming of the Japanese would not be strongly opposed by some: better the Japanese than the British, many thought. Japanese were at least Asian, and we weren't.

Even so, Scotty and I had great talks. Scotty kept up his idea that ethics were what would hold the world together. He hated the politics he found in the officers' ranks, the conniving for place and position, the struggle to prove oneself better than another. To this day I don't know how much of Scotty's thinking arose out of fact and how much out of unjustified suspicion. These days I have the notion that humanity, as we know it, is a pretty varied mixture and we must come to terms with it, being neither gullible nor cynical. When Scotty was around, the issues seemed pretty fearful.

In action, Scotty was superb. At least these are the reports I received, because we were not able to see things first-hand. We were caught up in a busy round of keeping communications going. In the signal office they were doing this by wireless for the most part, but we had to keep the lines going for Morse Code, Fullerphone, and the new scrambled interchanges. Some nights we didn't sleep, but then it was fun. Scrounging food other than Army food took a little of our time. We had to cook with the flame of the blowlamps covered. Japanese Zero fighters would spot the slightest light, and they seemed happy enough to use a bomb or two on a person or two. They were tough and demanding days, especially as air coverage was nil, and ack-ack coverage extremely limited.

As I said, Scotty was good in action. He earned the appreciation of his fellow LAD men. For their part, they were courageous and hardworking. They kept the vehicles going, fixing them when they became crippled, substituting parts whilst the bombing was all around them. I suppose Scotty was sure that the British way of life was the only true way. In those days he was not alone in that kind of thinking. This seemed to add to the assurance that we were fighting for the best. The kind of thinking which came later—rightly or wrongly—at the time of the Vietnam War was totally absent from our mental concepts.

WHEN we had to go back to Singapore Island, we were stunned. Our fortifications at Mersing—we thought—could have helped us to make another Tobruk. We would have been impregnable. Suddenly we were hauled out of that situation, making our way through Jemaluang down the road to Johore, and across the causeway. Blowing away part of that causeway wasn't greatly helpful. After softening things up with a relentless artillery barrage, waves of barges swept towards the northern shores of Singapore Island. The Allied machine-guns yammered ceaselessly at the hordes of Japanese infantry as they climbed on to the shores, but sheer weight of numbers, artillery and small gunfire began to win the night, and then the day, and then the days. We were forced back until there was little land left. Finally, we capitulated.

Nobody was more shocked than Scotty. He had acquitted himself well in action, showing little, if any, fear. The Brigade captain said he had been recommended for a decoration, and that didn't surprise me. Scotty, they told me later, was really dejected over the capitulation to the Japanese. It was galling for him to see some ninety thousand of us herded into the newly formed prison camps. He held on to the thought of former British history. When he saw the Gordon Highlanders and Blackwatch regiments march into the camp, his spirits rose a bit, but he was working hard to rationalise such an abject defeat of our forces. The news from further south seemed to indicate that the Dutch empire in Java and Timor was breaking up. The fearful prophecy was that Australia would soon be swamped.

I MISSED Scotty because I had been wounded. This had happened some days before the capitulation, and we were separated from the other prisoners. Our own medical units were trying to look after us. The massacre of the troops, patients and medical staff of the Queen Alexandria Army Hospital was still a horror in our minds. We were glad, in a way, that the fighting had ceased. It wasn't until we were taken to the prison camp at Changi that I met Scotty again.

He commiserated with me, noting that I had lost stones in weight. There had been loss of blood, shortage of rations, sudden malaria and terrible dysentery. The story of it has been told too many times to need repetition from my pen. After commiseration, Scotty launched into a diatribe which was aimed at our conquerors and then at some of our troops. He was bitter about the decline in discipline, guts and spunk. He blamed it all on the loss of British character. In those days, Aussies were proud enough to be called British, although they refused the term 'English'. British meant 'part of the British Empire'. They had grown up under imperialism. It had been a scheme of thinking, a strong context, the true way of life. That was why there was a sudden change in ways of thinking, a loss of certainty, a change in integrity.

Scotty said, 'It all began in that world Depression. Men lost confidence. Men joined the services to get away from poverty, and to make a place in the sun. But the guts had gone out of many of them.'

He pointed back gloomily to the troops on the *Queen Mary* as they sailed from Sydney. Previous troop-sailing had all but destroyed the inner beauty of that famous old liner. Every removable part had been souvenired by the rumbustious troops. Capetown had been done over in the same spirit. Then there were the debacles of Greece, Crete and the Western Desert. Scotty had totted them up in his mind, and he was greatly depressed.

I WAS naïve in those days. What would you expect of a lad of twenty-three? It was true I had been a person of faith, but that was soon to undergo its own test. It wasn't of much help to

Scotty. Not, either, that he would have expected that of me, nor, for that matter, wanted it. I watched his battle without great interest. I had been wounded badly, and what with short rations, no pain-killers after the first few weeks, and with constant dysentery, malaria and dengue fever, I wasn't really in the mood for discussing Scotty's problems.

THEN Scotty went north to the Burma–Thailand railway. He went in one of the enclosed trucks where men suffered the agony of thirst, dysentery, weakness and death. He missed the event which was later called *Miracle on the River Kwai*. I don't even know how he would have handled that. Possibly it may have meant religion to him, and he may have steered away from it. I just don't know.

What I do know is that he came back with a wasted body, and an ulcerated thigh. It was a small ulcer when I first met him after his return. His face was one which was not that of a zombie, as so many became. I don't know how much human creatures are expected to stand and still retain their humanity. I guess, these days, I could say a lot about that sort of thing, but then I was without the knowledge I needed. I had been battling fiercely, as fiercely in my own way as Scotty in his. What saddened me were the zombie faces of so many of the men. They had been worked under the utmost cruelty, deprived of dignity in living, used as human machines to build the railway line and its many bridges. They had worked under unbelievable conditions. Many of the sick and those with fearsome tropical ulcers had to sit and strain on the ropes and cables that helped to support the growing bridges.

I only tell these things told to me to show you what Scotty faced, and what confronted him. After only hours of pressures and impossible conditions, men were reduced to animal status. The pressures that came upon them changed their minds, or drew out what had always been there, but which hitherto had been unknown to them. The battle and struggle for life raged in a way that had not been seen before, even in the Singapore prison camps. This story is not confined to the hell-holes of Burma and Thailand. Man's cruelty to man has always been, and, for that matter,

will always be, until some power beyond himself change him.

I cannot say Scotty was paralysed in his thinking, but something, somewhere and somehow, had stopped abruptly. Probably some inbuilt mechanism had sought to save him from too intense a shock. He had drawn back from the horror that had turned men into zombies. Some stern spirit within him had helped him to face the horror he had witnessed and had not let him be destroyed; but I wondered.

Night after night I wondered as I tried to analyse his situation. For myself, I had gone through hell from the first moment I had sensed the ethical defection of so many. Rations for the sick had been stolen from the stores, cooks had worked rackets with the bare supplies of food, fattening themselves without mercy on others. It seemed there were few who were not in some racket or another. Some reasoned cynically that if everyone would be in rackets then things would even out. What I did not know in my naïvety was that this was nothing new in man's history. Living a fairly protected life, I had been fondly sure that British integrity was impregnable. I had read history with rose-coloured glasses, if not with applied blinkers. Once I remembered a teacher who had sought to debunk British history, only to be fiercely opposed by our headmaster, who was an Anglophile. It had been bewildering to the class, especially as we were deeply attracted to the history master.

So what was Scotty's problem? What was my problem?

IHAD come to terms with my own problem, but only after a struggle so deep and bitter that, fifty years later, I still remember it. The principles I learned have never left me for one moment of any day. They condition all my thinking and set the nature and quality of what others call 'ethics' but I call 'life'.

What was Scotty's problem? It was the same as mine. It was keeping integrity in a world which seemed to have abandoned standards as though they no longer mattered, or had never really mattered. It was seeing the self-delusion of men known as 'righteous', as they rationalised their self-saving acts, making them out to be ethical. It was the triumph of the lie over truth, in the interests of what they called 'reality'.

Scotty never seemed to waver. He watched the corruption about him without emotion. In fact, he had driven his emotions down deeply until they no longer seemed to exist; except, that is, in the anger that often leapt to his face. If ever he seemed pleased, it was when he saw me. I think I must have been the only one, apart from his wife and child at home, for whom he had warmth; yet he could keep a depressed ward of patients in fits of laughter. There was no doubt about it; he kept himself from bitterness and cynicism on the surface, and still exhibited those qualities of honesty, fairness, and what he called 'truth', in spite of the hunger we suffered, and the pain of his ulcerated thigh.

I WAS there on two occasions when the surgeon scraped his ulcer. It was done with a spoon whose bowl-edge was sharpened to razor consistency. When they exposed Scotty's thigh ulcer, you could see the greenish-grey diphtheritic slough at the centre of it. The surgeon would have to clear it without giving any anaesthetic, either general or local. Scotty was a Stoic, but sometimes the pain made him whimper. Day by day this diphtheritic ulcer ate away at his emaciated leg. His legs and his arms had already been gripped by beriberi, so that he could not move them without aid.

One day we knew he was paralysed; that is, his body was paralysed. Scotty McLean was not paralysed. He could talk, joke, laugh, share in riposte and repartee. He could go hungry like so many and at the same time enjoy the little food he received. Because he was so far gone, they decided to give him special diet. 'Special diet'—so-called—was little more than the ordinary diet, except it was better in quality. Scotty took it without joy and without protest.

IN regard to Scotty, I was faced with an ethical quandary. I had a great problem which related to him. By this time I had resolved my own personal problem, and without any doubt that difficulty had been ethical in its roots. For some months I had put all forms of religion behind me. I went out into the terrible joyless limbo where there is said to be no God, and man is no longer trusted. It is the most fearful void in all time, place, and history.

It is Eliot's 'Waste Land', and worse than that trackless country. There, faced with his own mind, and denying his origins or his creaturely orientation to his Creator, man, in a sense, ceases to be man. This experience is the closest to utter dereliction that I know. I have been there, and let no one say I do not know the terror of godlessness.

What then was my quandary? It was this: I had one possession I could sell, and the only way I could sell it was through the black market. I disliked the black market and had never been connected with it. Scotty loathed the black market: he had never sold anything through it, nor received anything from or through it. I knew we were close to the end and that that end would be either death at the hands of our captors, or liberation from them by the Allies. Japanese troops had been pushed back gradually and painfully from island to island, fortress to fortress, and no one doubted the war was nearly over. The tragedy was that men continued to die from sickness and starvation when freedom was almost in sight.

I could see Scotty was finished unless extra food was given to him. I had learned how to cook food from greens, from flour, *towgay* beans, and fish *blachung*. Many of us had tried to grow greens in the leached-out soil of that prison camp. We lived in palm-covered huts under the tall rubber trees, and growing vegetables in the shade thrown by the trees was not easy. We shared the nightly accumulation of human urine. Many would be up at dawn, pouring it on their little patches of earth. The pittance we received for the work we did each day bought almost nothing. Many used it on the vitamin-destroying tobacco sold in the canteen. How then could I get nourishing food for Scotty?

I owned one wonderful possession. It was a typewriter. It was a sort of miracle that I should have come to own a typewriter. A ser-major in a unit other than ours had looted a dozen of these portable machines from an abandoned retail store. This was in the midst of action. I had no qualms about receiving it from him, promising him I would pay him for it when we returned to Australia. I guess it rated highest in value to me because of the way I could express myself on it and accumulate fact and fiction for the future.

Many a time, when hunger became intolerable, I had been tempted to sell it, but I had not. Now I felt it would help Scotty. If, however, he were to discover that I had used the black market, he would not eat the food. I had to risk that. No one was going to suffer by my act of selling the machine, so I went ahead and sold it. As usual, the transaction was disappointing. The money fell far short of what I had hoped to get, but I shrugged that off. I set about getting food for Scotty and some others.

Scotty never questioned my gifts of food. He ate them hungrily. I guess he trusted me beyond any other person. He knew I had somehow established integrity. Of course, I am not speaking about perfection. I am only speaking about a man who has tasted the bitterness of human autonomy, the separation from God which destroys his true being. The man who has known this bitterness finds dependence the sweet alternative. Anyway, Scotty trusted me.

I USED to find his paralysis a worrying thing. Nothing about Scotty seemed neurotic. It was the unbroken and unbreaking autonomy of the man that I dreaded. He seemed to have a triumph of his own which cut off the rest of the world of humanity, and in some way I was included in that. As the Allied triumphs grew, Scotty seemed to gather strength, and it was that strength which should have delighted me. In fact it deeply disturbed me. On the one hand, I was glad he was not going to die: on the other, I sensed the self-righteousness that drains a man of his basic humanity. Gradually I came to see that Scotty was a Pharisee.

Judgement of one man by another is a fearful and a dangerous thing: that I have learned. Let no man judge any other man. He does not know what moves human beings in their depths to do the things they do, nor does he understand those depths. He cannot even understand his own depths. How then can he know those of another person? I knew these principles, *and I was not judging Scotty*. Even so, the truth stared me in the face: Scotty was a godless Pharisee. He believed he had kept his integrity, and that he had kept it by his own resources of character and personhood.

So he had, but the cost was lethal. He was Henley's man of invincibility:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced or cried aloud:
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

The difference between Henley's Stoic and Scotty was that Scotty never thanked any gods for anything. Nor could he see any scroll 'charged with punishments'. He had kept his integrity. That was what mattered.

I was uneasy, because I wasn't sure he *had* kept his integrity. As a moralist and an ethicist, yes, he had kept it; but is that keeping one's integrity as a human being? I had travelled through the sterile land of moralism and found no comfort: only terrible dread. I was not likely to forget that. I know no man keeps his integrity as a man from birth's beginning to death's end. Somewhere, at some time or another—or many times—he fails in the kingdom of his mind, in the hiddenness of his secret heart. I had the sickening sense that Scotty was hiding himself from himself. What made it worse was that I knew Scotty didn't know that he was.

AN incident in the camp at that time greatly moved me. A Dutch doctor who regularly used hypnotherapy to anaesthetise patients for surgery would give commands to paralysed patients to raise an arm or leg, and they would do it. This seemed uncanny to me, a layman. What power lay in the will of one man that he could command another to do what his own will could not accomplish? 'Could not'—that was the phrase that worried me. I wondered whether the power of action lay in the will of the doctor, or in the patient himself, his will being aided or motivated by the doctor. I did not know. I still do not know. What I knew then was that men who should never have died, died of faint-heartedness, and many who were clinically dead lived to see freedom because of the strength of their will. I was discovering something about the latent power of the soul, the spirit of man working from his own resources. I have also learned the power of

the occult in moving human beings to incredible exploits. It is a power man ought to avoid, but the power of Scotty McLean was not godly or occultish. It lay within Scotty himself. That was what troubled me.

IN hindsight, I can see what I should have done. I should have tried to penetrate the self-righteousness of my old friend. Self-righteousness isn't a rare thing, of course. Every human being is likely to live in it from time to time, but it does not stand the test of time and human experience. Scotty's case was quite different: I could see that *he could never afford to be wrong: he could never afford to do wrong*. What terrified me was that he had accumulated mountains of guilt, vast wastes of sterility that would shatter him if ever they were revealed. I saw in frightening moments that Scotty's paralysis, whilst physical, was also, somehow, psychical. He had to be paralysed: maybe deeply down it was guilt which had paralysed him, and not the diphtheritic ulcer. What convinced me that I had discerned correctly regarding his guilt was the growth of his self-justification. He would talk to me for hours about his integrity, his acts of justice, his unswerving adherence to what was right. At the same time, he would be scornfully critical of others. Certainly he tolerated them, but only from his high pinnacle, his lofty eyrie. It seemed no other human being lived in that rare atmosphere.

Often I was close to tears: he was impregnable. As the news grew of Allied success, he became firmer in himself. He was admirably stoical about his pain and physical affliction, but the gleam in his eye showed that nothing could touch him. Remembering my own painful pilgrimage to humility, I ached for him, but his pride defeated us all. We just accepted his self-evaluation, his claimed integrity, his humour in the face of adversity. He was just Scotty McLean.

THEN they came, the planes. For months they came, in silver splendour, high up in the heavens. They shone silver to our straining eyes; they moved majestically as the impregnable fortresses that they were. They showered death and defeat on the enemy below. They shot the little Zero fighters out of the sky.

And on land and sea, the liberating forces crept closer to us. The news from our hidden camp wireless was good. Scotty enthusiastically ate the food I was giving him. Perhaps he was strengthening physically. Anyway, aid was close at hand.

All of a sudden it was ended: that deadly war had ceased. Japan capitulated. The generals in their various zones made their particular acts of surrender. Only the Singapore area-commander refused to acknowledge the Allied victory. Anxious as we were, we sensed it would only be a matter of days, perhaps hours, until he would do the same. Certainly something was in the wind. Supplies of food were being rushed to the camps. Suddenly we had Quaker Oats and butter; we had supplies of sugar; rice was plentiful. Even so, the surrender had not been signed on our island.

Scotty had no doubt it would take place. Every minute was a vindication of his years of integrity. He had lasted the three-and-a-half years without the crushing moral failure so many had known. I saw no gentleness in him for others, but only a steady pride, an invincible belief in himself, and I turned away, sick at heart. I really had a high regard for Scotty and, of course, pity for him in his suffering. I wanted to make another attempt to talk to him, to tell him what had happened to me, but I knew he couldn't hear me. He had a quiet assurance that he was the one man—perhaps apart from me—who had kept his integrity. I knew that he considered me too soft, and he despised the fact that I needed what he called 'religion' to keep me in the face of the pressures about us.

THEN it happened. It happened quite suddenly. Someone rushed into the hut, shouting loudly, 'It's all over! It's all over! The General has capitulated!' The word 'capitulated' had been a bitter one for us, from mid-February 1942. Now, in August 1945, it was sweet, very sweet.

Everyone was shouting and cheering, weak ones were whimpering and many were weeping. Scotty was shaking one fist in the air: it was a gesture of triumph. He had made it! His eyes shone.

Then there was another cry. 'There's a plane coming! It's coming around the camp! It's low. You can see them!'

Sure enough, that was no rumour. Some of the medical orderlies rushed outside, peering from under the *attap* roof on the verandah of the hut. There, with British markings, was a plane. The ack-acks were not shooting at it. This was proof that the news was true. The hatch door of the plane was wide open and cameramen were taking a film of the camp.

I looked back towards Scotty. I could not believe what my eyes were seeing. Scotty had thrown off the sheet that kept the flies from his wounds. This paralysed man was getting out of bed, without assistance. He was running along the aisle, between the beds. Then he was on the verandah. He was running down the steep steps, and he was out in the open where rubber trees could not hide the sky, the very blue sky, with its touches of foaming clouds.

He was standing, waving his arms and shouting. I stood on the verandah, the tears coursing down my cheeks, but inwardly I was afraid—scared of, and by, the enormous resources that were in this unbeatable Scot. I watched him waving his arms, shouting and sounding what seemed to be a battle cry.

I also saw the silence fold over him as he collapsed. It was like watching a slow-motion camera as the power went from him and he sank to the ground. Then he was a small bundle of limbs, and although his eyes were open and still staring, I knew they were seeing nothing, and would never see anything.

THE CAT AND THE CLOWN

ALL were skinny, but some were long and skinny, as was Ray. He looked down at the English colonel, and the English colonel looked up at him.

‘Jugged cats,’ said the colonel, and he began to laugh.

‘I’ve heard of jugged hare, sir,’ Ray ventured politely.

‘Heard of it!’ said the colonel, amazed. Then he stared at Ray, his blue eyes becoming keen. ‘You were at Kamburi, weren’t you?’ he asked.

Ray nodded.

‘No jugged cats there, eh?’ the colonel shouted.

The tall Australian was mystified. ‘No, sir,’ he said wonderingly.

‘Look,’ commanded the colonel. ‘Cats! Cats everywhere! Damn foolish Indians lived in this camp before.’ He gestured, embracing in the one movement of his arms the entire prison camp. ‘Never eat cats, apparently,’ he said soberly.

Ray drifted away from the English colonel. He remembered him now, doggedly retaining his pack on the long trek in Thailand. Very red in the face, the colonel had been. Probably dreaming of jugged hare.

THE CATS were thin, but they were very trusting. Too trusting. The colonel and others lost little dignity in catching them. Three days in the ground, the cooler the spot the better, and then cook ‘em. The colonel and his friend, if they did not fatten, at least felt some satisfaction, and undoubtedly they discussed the dish in epicurean manner.

‘Puss, puss, puss.’ They had formerly been spoken to in Hindustani or Nepalese, or something, but they responded to ‘Puss,

puss, puss,' as though the words were universal, and they universal cats.

The Yanks greatly rejoiced as the cats grew scarcer; Hank especially. He and his fellow soldiers reasoned that a benign Providence works in wondrous ways. When cats are gone—and who does not like a cat?—then the rats will come. Hank, the musical Yank, offered one dollar—in Japanese currency, of course—for a rat, small or big.

Hank had even offered Ray a bite, big Ray who would rather be thin than have cats or rats on his conscience and in his stomach.

'But you see,' Hank explained, 'it's all done by science. When it's titivated and done up, it might be anything.'

'No,' Ray said gloomily. 'I'm hungry, but I'm not starving.'

'Some people,' said Hank, 'never know when they're starving.'

'A good thing,' Ray observed.

'If you had a cat now,' said Hank, intending to be cruel, 'what would you do with it?'

'Nothing,' said Ray truthfully.

Hank would not believe that. 'A whole big cat?' he asked incredulously.

'A whole big cat,' Ray maintained.

'But you would get nine dollars for it,' Hank said.

'Very, very nice, too,' said Ray. 'But all the cats are gone.'

'All gone,' agreed Hank wistfully. 'But there are the rats.' His eyes brightened. 'They'll come. They're bound to. They can fatten on soap. Soap's fattening.'

'You can't eat soap,' said Ray sadly.

'I'm not so sure,' Hank said.

AND THEN it was Ray saw the kitten. At least it seemed to him to be a kitten, but probably it was a small cat. It parted the leaves of some tapioca plants and peered out. It was probably, Ray thought, the last cat. The cat, too, might have thought so. It stared at Ray without suspicion, but long and seriously. It withdrew slightly when another prisoner came to where Ray was.

'A cat,' he observed. 'I wish I had time to catch it.' He looked at Ray enviously. 'Lucky,' he said.

'Time?' said Ray. 'Haven't you plenty of time?'

'I have to go to the Nips' cookhouse and cut wood,' the prisoner of war said, licking his lips. It paid to cut wood at the Nips' cookhouse.

'You could do it easily,' he told Ray out of the corner of his mouth. 'If you watch Yostler.'

'Why watch Yostler?' Ray asked.

The other soldier began to laugh softly, as though he, too, knew the joke, but appreciated Ray's gesture of humour.

'Old Yostler, eh?' he said with rare good humour as he departed.

'What has Yostler to do with it?' the tall Australian wondered. The kitten emerged again, and he saw it was not small or thin, a remarkable state of affairs.

'Kitty, kitty,' he said, almost automatically.

The kitten looked at him. The last cat, or kitten, longed, seemingly, for company.

'Kitty! Kitty!' Ray said.

And archly it came, back curled sinuously, eyes voluptuous, tail moving slowly, an innocently wicked enchantress.

'Meow!' It was a faint sound, but a sweet response.

'Oh, kitty, kitty, kitty!' said Ray soothingly, foolishly.

Kitty seemed to know it was all in order to be stroked. She rubbed her smooth softness against his skinny leg. She caressed with her silky fur the nubble of his ankle. She liked his fingers moving along her back. She looked up and flirted gently.

'Kitty,' he crooned.

Then he remembered; watch Yostler. Kitty continued to smooch, even when he lifted the *chunkel* in businesslike manner, tilling the ground.

'You would be very tender,' he told her reprovingly.

NINE DOLLARS, Hank had said. Nine dollars. It was like selling your soul. Yet not to sell would be madness. Poor little Kitty. He spared a moment to stroke her.

'Go away, Kitty,' he warned. 'Go away! Shoo!'

Kitty was most coy. She arched her back in friendly manner. She refused the warning.

'I'll be glad,' said Ray desperately, 'when the gong goes.'

After a time the gong did go, echoing across the camp, but Kitty did not go. Nor did she stay. She followed the tall Australian across the freshly tilled soil. Both she and the prisoner had no premonition of what was to follow.

He suddenly picked up Kitty and placed her in his shirt. She nestled there, still purring. She was exquisitely soft against his ribs. Perhaps she had gone to sleep. He hoped so when he saluted Yostler. Yostler did not seem to see him. He was smoking a delicious cheroot and was, consequently, dreamy; possibly thinking of geisha girls.

It was inevitable Hank should turn up from somewhere. Hank, living in the same camp, was bound to strike up against you. Hank, with his uncanny gift for smelling out the unusual; but even then Ray had no thought of connecting Hank, Kitty and nine dollars. Yet some impulse prompted him to withdraw Kitty from his shirt.

Kitty awoke. She stared up at Ray, then, almost arrogantly, at Hank. She yawned impolitely.

'Ray,' said Hank earnestly, 'I thought you were only a child in these things. I'll admit defeat.'

'Oh,' said Ray.

'That,' said Hank ungrudgingly, 'is the best cat I've set eyes on ever, bar none.'

'It's a nice cat,' Ray said.

'Worth five dollars any day,' said Hank.

'You said nine this morning,' said Ray, remembering.

'Ha,' said Hank. He stared suspiciously at Ray.

'And if this is a better cat than you've seen . . . ' Ray said.

Hank looked at him, 'I used to think you were a chicken,' he said, 'or a clown.'

'Well!' Ray said indignantly.

'Kitty, kitty, kitty,' Hank said hungrily.

Then his eyes widened. 'That,' he said, 'is Yostler's cat.'

'No!' Ray said.

'Nestles up on his bed every night,' said Hank. 'Yostler loves that cat.'

'Well!' said Ray a second time.

'Poor old Yostler,' commiserated Hank. 'And he's the best of

the bunch, too, though that ain't particularly difficult.'

'Fancy,' said Ray. 'Yostler's cat, eh?'

'Well, now,' said Hank in a businesslike manner. 'If you came in on this cat, we could pay you so much, and you could take the rest out in cat and vegetables.'

'Vegetables?' said Ray.

'Pawpaw, cooked green. A little tapioca.' He stared solemnly at the Australian. 'And,' he added powerfully, 'some *towgay*.'

'Oh!' said Ray.

'Say five dollars without the meal, three with it,' Hank suggested.

'You wouldn't kill Kitty!' said Ray.

'You are a clown!' said Hank. 'I love some of your jokes. Now what about the price?'

Ray looked down at Kitty, up at Hank. 'A little thing like that.' Then he added hastily. 'Plump, of course.'

'Yostler was a good master,' said Hank.

'Yostler,' said Ray slowly, and he was decided. 'Ten dollars or nothing,' he said firmly. Hunger gnawed at him, too, as it had at Hank, as it had at all the poor pussies, with the exception of Yostler's pussy. Also Yostler was very fat, and smoked cheroots. There were cheroots in the canteen, though highly priced. Still, with ten dollars . . .

'Aussie!' said Hank in a pained voice.

'Listen,' said Ray firmly. 'One cat, ten dollars. No vegies, see? No food. Ten dollars. I want cheroots.'

'Now, look here,' said Hank.

'Ten dollars,' Ray said. He began to see now the whole plan: the wide merriment of the English colonel, Hank laughing at him, Kitty carelessly appearing from the tapioca, Yostler ignorantly happy in his own world and soon to lose his lover, and he, Ray, soon to calm his edged nerves on the cool, sweet flow of cheroot smoke. It was all very wonderful.

'Ten dollars, then,' said Hank, and he stared curiously at the Australian. 'I can't make you out, Ray,' he complained. 'Still, when you're hungry, you'll do anything.'

'So you will,' agreed Ray. 'Anything,' he added, and he accepted the ten dollars. Nevertheless, for a moment he looked at

Kitty nestling there in a stranger's arms, and he felt a delicious regret steal over him.

KILLA T'PIG, GEORGE

FOUR men in the hut. Four men hunched, their knees drawn up, all staring at the weak glimmer of the lamp. This tin, then, is a lamp, the tin with the hole in the top, and a piece of canvas tent-material drooping through. It is no match for the brilliant Malayan moonlight flooding through the break in the *nippah* palm thatch.

Four men mooning, thinking about everything, for there is more in a prison than anywhere else about which to think. Yet the four rarely talk about what they think. They speak in the present, except when it is to torture themselves with memories of good food.

Tony, the one who has his hair cut short, would to some be laughable to look at, so large are his eyes, so narrow his head. But the three have become used to closely cropped heads, and two of them remember Tony when his hair was black and shiny, curly. In those days, his face had been smooth-skinned without being drawn tightly over bony contours. They do not laugh at Tony.

'Remember Luigi's?' says Tony, and the two remember Luigi's, because they nod.

'A strange name for a Greek,' says George. George, having spent most of his time with cattle, knows few Greek names, and Luigi is not amongst them.

'Omelettes,' says Tony. 'He could make omelettes.'

'He could make omelettes,' says Harry.

Harry is bigger than Tony, but his bones are as apparent, or more so, for Harry is longer in the bones. His skinny arms weave about his hunched knees. Harry used to hold a Tommy-gun in those big hands so that it seemed little more than a pistol.

Only Ben Ib Id, who knew not Luigi, is smooth-fleshed, almost chunky; small, however, and seeming ready to pounce.

'Your Luigi,' he asks, 'did he make good pork?'

There is no need to start at the mention of pork, for it is hidden away with all the other dreams for the days to come, if ever they will come; if ever, even, they could come. Hunger is never real in the final experience. It is pain, and pain is pain. The thought of hunger is the more fearsome.

George says suddenly, 'What do you know about pork, Ben Hibberd?' and Ben Ib Id chuckles as though the secret is his own for ever; but, of course, he will later tell it.

'Pork with curry, with pepper, with chillies,' he says shrilly, mingling his words with his ridiculous laughter.

They watch the lamp, and Ben Ib Id nearly bursts with pride for his friendship with these three men, these Australians. Let the others know—his people back in Java—and they will not believe him. Friends with the *tuans*!

'I told them about pork,' Ben Ib Id will say. 'About how to cook it with curry and the chillies. I had a little of the salt, not much salt there, you know.' Ben Ib Id has three chillies in the ragged pocket of his worn green tunic.

Tony, Harry, and the other large solemn fellow, George, are staring at the lamp, the little light that the moon almost kills. They are too solemn.

George says, surprisingly, 'When we were at Kranji—when the fighting was on, that is—I killed a chook and ate both its legs. You cooked it, Harry, remember, and you had the breast, eh?'

Harry remembers. The legs were thickly plump and white even when cooked, although the breast had browned crisply, so much so that it was a trifle leathery, like cooked newspaper. George remembers the actual mouthfuls he bit and chewed.

Well, if the moon should withdraw into itself, inverting and narrowing so that it becomes only a point of light, not affecting them, yet would they still sit and stare at the lamplight.

Food, George thinks, can kill a man's spirit if he is not careful. Can make it, too, if he is careful. It is not wrong to want food, to think about it, even. It is only wrong when you wish to have another man's food, or wish you were man enough, or

devil enough, to take it. All this talk about Luigi's! Luigi, so calm, so smiling, daintily dispatching the eggs from the hot iron to the plates, and then from the plates to the tables. And then, thinks George, what about everyone dispatching them to their mouths, their bellies? Down the hatch!

He looks at Harry's hands, rough, calloused with pellagra, and Harry's eyes, tired, yet sane. Harry had eaten quietly and gently at Luigi's, and had been as thoughtful as he now is, only not so weary.

'Pork,' says Ben Ib Id, 'I saw it today. Many porks in fact.'

'Ah!' The three faces turn now, the eyes peer at him. Little Ben Ib Id, his knees tucked under him, his arms clasped about his chest, holding in the joy which is all his own, but about to be imparted.

'Ben Hibberd,' says Harry. 'What do you mean, eh?'

'Three porks,' says Ben Ib Id. Oh, he is happy. He is telling them about the little porks he saw today. He has seen porks before, scampering about the brown legs of his children, but he scarcely noticed them then, although, now, when he thinks about it . . . yes. Perhaps these men think about their little children.

Big George is still ever so solemn.

'You and your porks,' George says. 'What do you mean?'

Pride, pride swells, and Ben Ib Id clutches himself more. 'I saw the porks down near the vegetable garden. The big pork and the little ones. They sucked her. They grow fat that way.' His hands drawing apart to show how fat they grow.

'The piggery!' exclaims Tony. 'By God, yes!'

George thinks about the piggery, and then says, 'Takahashi.'

Takahashi! They see him. Forever, they think now, his face will be with them. Then what is forever? Takahashi, little man, squat man, strange man with broad face, with gentle lips, with a terrible smile in his eyes. The yellow runt. The strange, silent guard who smiles instead of snarling.

'Yes,' says Tony, 'Takahashi'd know.'

Takahashi knows everything. He looks as though he knows nothing. Four men afraid of Takahashi. Three fighters. Ben Ib Id afraid also. His joy dies from his eyes. He unclasps himself, but looks at George.

'You killa t'pig, Chorge?' he says plaintively.

'Porks! Pigs! I saw the pigs,' says Harry suddenly. 'By hell I did! I saw the little beggars. They were nudging the tapioca that grows over near the piggery. I saw one of their snouts, their little pink snouts. They'd make a great feed, only you'd never get one.'

Takahashi would know . . . Takahashi mightn't know.

'If you could get some tapioca,' says George to Harry, 'and you could get some sweetbucks, Tony, and if Ben Hibberd could do the cooking . . .'

'Do the cooking,' gulps Ben Ib Id, gladly. 'I have curry and pepper,' he announces shrilly. He pulls chillies from his pocket, three chillies, long and red. 'I shall make a fine meal.'

George suddenly discovers he has a store of spirit. Why do they sit crouched around this little lamp? Why are they hunched and sad and hungry, and why do they think, perpetually think? The pigs that nudged. He can see their pink noses, as easily as if he were Harry watching wonderingly. Twinkle, twinkle, little nose.

'Tomorrow night?' says Tony.

'Tonight,' says George. He knows that all tomorrow they will be working in the hill, and thinking. They will rest on their *chunkels* and look down at the vegetable patch. They will be wondering if and when it will come off. Sick with excitement they will become, and then Tony may work himself into another malarial fit, which he can so easily do.

'You get the vegetables, you two,' he says, 'and I'll get the pig.'

'You killa t'pig, Chorge,' says Ben Ib Id excitedly. He clasps himself in joy and fear. He worships George and all his quiet ways.

When the others go, he cannot stay still for long in the hut. He moves around, hunched, crouched, holding his belly, fearfully evading the brilliant patch of moonlight. He keeps fingering his chillies, looking down at them, lifting them to his eyes, looking at them nervously. His thoughts of the brown children are forgotten. He bites his nails, clutches and releases himself, moves and fumbles with the chillies.

Tony and Harry go together, heading for the vegetable patch,

and it is like crawling through the night again, with the enemy ahead. It is like blotting out a misty suffering, clothing lean shanks and bony arms with good flesh, and the spirit with eagerness. The enemy is anywhere this time. Takahashi is the enemy, on guard.

As they crawl, there is no clattering of guns, no brittle noise of firing, no fearful excitement; only the quick, measured tread upon the guard's catwalk. No rifle in the hands, no bayonet. No defence at all. The guard shouts in the distance, but that does not matter; it is in the distance.

There are no pigs by the tapioca, George sees. The piggery is a stilted row of pickets, washed in moonlight, and inside the pickets sleep the big pig and the little 'porks'. The old sow is whining, her breath in long, uneasy draws. The moonlight is oily over the little pigs and the large black sow. Funny, little Ben Hibberd saying, 'Killa t'pig, Chorge.' Frightened little Ben Hibberd. The business of food.

Tony and Harry in the vegetable patch almost freeze with horror, and they are weaker than their unsteady limbs. The little pig screams and screams. His screams must be heard everywhere. George swears and throws the thing blindly, hitting it against the fence.

He had meant to catch it by its hard little mouth, hold in its alarm, bash it on the head, again and again, if need be, with the large goolie in his hand. Now he hits it hard against the fence, swinging it angrily until it stops squealing, ceases jerking, and lies still.

George stands still, expecting them to come at any moment, and there is no fear, for that has died. He feels calm, and can almost hear the bells again, as he heard them many a Sunday evening, calm about their own business in a half-empty city. No bells, however, and no Nips running, no shouts and no angry cries.

He walks, trembling a bit, toward the hut. He crosses the double fence of barbed wire, and he does not know that, behind him, Harry and Tony are as filled with terror as he when the pig screamed.

'You killa t'pig, Chorge!' Ben Ib Id, small and afraid, is

wide-eyed in incredulity. Awed, he embraces himself, but not with joy. 'You killa t'pig!' He almost whispers that.

'You killed it, then,' says Tony. He stands at the door of the hut, and holds his stomach, as though in pain. Perhaps the tapioca, more than the fear, is a terrible burden. Food for everyone—a limp pig, and sweetbucks in Harry's shirt.

Ben Ib Id hastens. He lights a small fire, making sure the twigs blaze and have no smoke, that the blaze is guarded by a tin surround; then he hurries the water to the boil, and plunges the pig in the largest of his many pots. With his knife he scrapes and scrapes, taking off the hair, making the body clean and smooth and white.

George and Tony and Harry watch him, breathing heavily because they can only believe this is a dream. They have forgotten, almost, what meat tastes like. Yet there is the truth with them that the guards may have heard. They cannot believe Takahashi did not hear. They know he heard, but they cock a finger at fate and Takahashi. They watch Ben Ib Id slit the belly and draw out the guts, laying the blue mess tenderly aside.

He puts the pig, whole, into his concoction of water and condiments. Each spoonful of curry is lovingly measured, served into the belly of the pot. He crouches and stirs. It seems he is stirring forever before the smell comes, and the smell makes them start almost, and they stare at Ben Ib Id, and at the pig gently boiling, humping in the pot so that its white back often shows.

George begins to forget about the pig screaming and about himself standing there, waiting for Takahashi or one of the little runts to come.

Ben Ib Id seems to have forgotten them all. He peels potatoes slowly and thoughtfully, dropping pieces into the pot as though just at their appointed time and not a second out. He stirs and drops, drops and stirs.

The smell must be all over the camp. And what if the others do smell it? They will think the Nips are having a spree. The little yellow fellows can have pigs, the men will think, and that will be all to it. They, for their part, will try to sleep through the terrible smell. Remembering places like Luigi's, they will try to fall asleep. Others will wonder when it is all going to end.

They hear Takahashi's footsteps come right up to the door. The moon dulls about that moment, and the silver on the floor fades. Takahashi sees the fire, Ben Ib Id over it, and the strained faces of the men who are almost sick with hunger and thought. His rifle crashes to the floor and the bayonet rattles.

He stands, smiling, in the doorway. Ben Ib Id turns and stares up at Takahashi. He remains crouching, primitive and afraid. Takahashi smiles squarely and nods, and the men stand and bow, knowing it is all a farce, that Takahashi knows everything, that he heard and has waited.

All Takahashi has to do is to turn on his heel and go marching to the Commandant's office. They will hear his tread on the hard catwalk. Then the guard will come marching down the same catwalk, and take them to Kanamoto, and Kanamoto will blaze in anger and bash them, and then put them in a closer prison, and there will be lights in the camp, and shouting, and everyone will turn out, and officers will be running here and there, whilst fear will be at large again, larger than it was before, and the sick men, helpless upon their beds, will wonder, and finally the tale will be told, distorted and enlarged, but such a tale cannot be distorted, nor, perhaps, enlarged. It is all distorted, this hunger business, this killing a little pig.

Nevertheless, Takahashi keeps smiling, and he returns the bow, ever so slightly, and he goes over to the pot, and smiles as he sees the pig. He bends down, prods the white cooked flesh with his bayonet, and then draws the pig from the pot, stuck through by his bayonet, its body curved like a bow, its legs sticking outwards. The white steam wreathes about it in the firelight.

'Pig,' says Takahashi, summing up the whole event. He looks straight at George. 'You kill, eh?' he asks.

George stares at him a moment, then nods.

Ben Ib Id, mouths, over and over again, without articulation, 'You killa t'pig, Chorge!'

Tony says, 'I kill pig.'

Harry says, 'I kill pig.'

Little Ben Ib Id, a brown bundle in his ragged uniform, crouching away from Takahashi, fear in his small dark eyes, and sorrow too, says bravely enough, 'I killa t'pig.'

Takahashi continues to smile. He shakes his head a little, which might mean he is believing or disbelieving, but he looks at George and smiles. He caresses the pig, wonderingly, on the smooth flesh.

He chuckles a little, and then hoists the pig from the bayonet. Still chuckling he sits on the floor, and he pulls the bayonet from the boss, hacking away at the pig, gleeful, it might appear, as a child at some game.

A leg he throws to George. A leg to Harry. Another to Tony, tossed. A leg for himself. Some of the small chest for Ben Ib Id. The remainder on Takahashi's knees.

'Pig,' chuckles Takahashi. He bids them eat, for they hold the pieces in their hands, wondering, not thinking of eating, not daring, perhaps.

They eat, then. Might as well eat. George eats, although his gorge rises. He bites savagely at the flesh, hungry as he is, sick as he is. Tony, watching the little Nipponese, bites savagely at his. Ben Ib Id rocks a little, and weeps almost, because he cannot understand.

George is the only one who thinks a great deal—about hunger, perhaps, about food, about what it is, and what food will do to you, and all the queer happenings of the night, and the unreality. Real enough, though, you might say, with that hound eating there. The others think that it is always like this, always for the worst. Perhaps . . . perhaps.

Takahashi makes the best of a bad job, cutting it up as though he knows the English custom of sharing. He wipes his lips and smacks them, eats and grins, looks at George and Harry and Tony, and even has a strange glance for the small Javanese.

George is sure he will vomit. The pig is not pork, is not sweet, is not biting on the palate for all Ben Hibberd's curry. It is all as dead as his dull mind.

Takahashi seems to have finished, except that there is a great licking of his fingers, a matter of smiling, and then he stands. He keeps smiling at them, and saying, they-know-not-why, 'Pig, pig,' as though they understand. But they do not understand, and are silent, watching him fix his bayonet, hoist the rifle to his shoulder, go to the door, turn again, chuckling, and then disappear.

None stirs. They forget the stew in the pot, the potatoes and the tapioca and the bones they might suck. The fire might die and the stew become cold. The moon might blaze again, flooding the floor, and Takahashi go walking up the catwalk to the Commandant's office.

The queer feeling of expectation. The smile of the smiling Takahashi. The men silent as they were before they thought about the pig or killed it. Ben Ib Id rocking himself in fear, although a little time before he had been brave.

No one says he wonders what the little bastard will do, for he thinks he knows, and none has ever trusted Takahashi, never will trust him. Small hopeful thoughts grow, as ever they grow, once their minds are freed a little of paralysis.

George's mind has a terrible anger in it. He would like to smash the smiling Takahashi, smash him, yes, but he may not. He will never forgive the grinning barbarian. He will never forget his humiliation, or even the way in which he stood, himself, killing the pig, and being afraid for a moment of running, gesticulating Nips.

They hear Takahashi's footsteps upon the hard walk, but not on the way to the Commandant's office. Perhaps then, to get the guard and take them; to procure the guard on duty. Perhaps not, too. George does not care.

He is exultant, angrily happy. He might want something to happen, the way he stands there, as though that something might whip the sullen, deadly quietness which is his. Well, it is happening; it is happening.

Takahashi going along the catwalk, but not coming back, leaving them with their thoughts.

IT SOMETIMES HAPPENS, BUT NOT OFTEN

ONE day someone is going to read this story. He is going to put down the volume, pick up his pen, and write a letter. He is going to write firmly and steadily, his hand penning the words, with perhaps his lips pressed in firm disapproval. I imagine the words he will write will be something like this:

‘Sir,

You have written the short story of the century, the truest, most wonderful short story of the century. I accept the fact. Indeed, as a man of God I glory in what you have written; but sir, what right have you to be so blatant, to literally purloin an event which happened when you were not there, when you did not see it? It was not your story to write. In it there is no acknowledgement of its source, no mention of its original narrator.’

Should I ever receive such a letter I will of course be filled with shame, and burning shame at that. Nevertheless, at the same time I will steal a look at the name of the writer. I too will take up a pen and write as firmly and steadily to him as he has to me. I shall tell him that for years I have wanted to discover the original narrator and, if possible, the original participators in the event.

I doubt whether such a thing will happen. Whilst it is true that I was there, perhaps even in the same prisoner of war camp, yet I did not witness the event. Someone told me the story because it was told to him. He said he heard it in a beautiful parish church, built of South Australian bluestone, old by reckoning in that State of that country; and he had heard it on a rare and golden Sunday morning, when the sky was a brilliant blue, washed pure by a

summer downpour of rain, and when the drops of rain on the old rosemary bushes were each like gems of golden fire.

He told me how gracious a man was the minister, a vicar of no mean order and the very jewel of a storyteller. He told me that this man had enraptured his audience as he skilfully described the event. Whilst it is possible that I have forgotten some of the details the listener recounted to me, it is not possible that the story, generally, is not a faithful recounting of the original.

The perspicacious reader of this story—and you may be that one—will surely ask, ‘If you know the church, the original retailer of the event, and the man who told you what the vicar had told him, then why not trace the story to its source? This, surely, is possible?’

Ah, my friend, I agree with you. Even sadly I agree with you. Yes, of course you are right. I have it in my power to do so. I have by me, in fact, an old Diocesan Registry. I can trace the name of the English clergyman who originally told the story. In the interests of authenticating the narrative, I certainly should write. Nor is it—in this case—my natural laziness which prevents me. My predilection to carelessness in such situations is not the real cause of my hesitation.

Since you have so mercilessly pinned me down, I am forced to make a confession. Frankly, I am scared to write, for fear the story is not factual. You can see how embarrassing it would be for the original storyteller if his story was but a fanciful flight of his charming imagination. More, it would shatter the delight of us all; for the story, if we set aside its grim aspects, is as charming a chronicle as has been told in all history. Hence I hesitate to write in order to authenticate it, for fear of loss of the incredible.

If you ask me bluntly, ‘Do you really believe this story?’ then I must answer, ‘Yes, with all my heart. Things like that happened in those days, and also I believe in God.’ That may amaze you, but then you do not know me. You may not know that a man can believe the truth of a story and yet at the same time ‘believe not for joy’, as is recorded in another place.

There will be those reading these lines who by now will be impatient, even disgusted. They will think the writer is in his anecdotage. And sadly true it is, what they say. I beg their

pardon. I apologise deeply. I hasten to tell the story. Yet I trust—oh, I trust!—that they will believe it as indeed I also believe.

Let me add, however, that I will be glad to receive that letter from the original storyteller should it ever arrive.

THE scene itself was grim enough. The long lines of huts were covered by plantation rubber trees. Between them walked or limped or shuffled the prisoners of the nation of Nippon. Their thin, starved bodies, with the feet flopping, the hands hanging heavily, were slow in locomotion. To look at the eyes was to read the souls of those who made their way to the prison vegetable garden. The soul of a man can often be seen when you penetrate his gaze, but in this case nothing was hidden. It was open for all to see. The days of pretence were past. The naked truth was laid bare. Yet few cared to read that truth.

The partially ill worked in the garden each day, their *chunkels* rising and falling in slow, painful rhythm. They were cheered on only by the fact that the vegetables would find their way, some day, to the mess of the hospital camp. There was *towgay*, tapioca and tropical spinach. There were other vegetables also, some whose names were unknown. At the far end, the north end, was a grove of papaya, but the fruit never reached its golden glory and its natural juicy softness. It was picked when green and used as a vegetable.

Not all was grimness. Even the guards could not repress the inevitable humour. They were naked souls, you might say, describing the captured soldiers, but you would have to give them credit for unending humour and the incredible variety of fun they could invent to counter the grimness of their days. Often the laughter rang out. Some of the guards took it personally, becoming irritated and angry, but then they too would fall to laughter at the ridiculous antics that were sometimes performed. They would nod their heads vigorously, as though in agreement, and they would laugh heartily.

Inside one of the huts, a man was dying. He was wasting away, dully waiting for the end. The strange fact is that he was not dying of a disease. He was dying of wanting to die. He was dying because the great lethargy was claiming him.

The great lethargy is difficult to understand, especially if you have never been in it. 'Loss of spirit,' some people have called it, gently. Others say, 'Dropping the bundle.' These terms do not cover it, however. My own assessment is that people see suddenly that the purpose they had has dissolved, or the goal they desired to achieve is utterly impossible. They lose heart, which is a way of saying they relinquish purpose in life. Thus everything is hopeless.

There are other features. Some personality weakness or flaw has appeared. The desire to cope is defeated. Despair—which is faith's opposite—takes over. A blankness fills the mind and the spirit. The person seeks a state of non-being. The 'courage to be' has departed and the mind cuts off all communication, going out, as it does, into the limbo of uneasiness. Vague anxieties float about it. Further effort is made to reach nothingness. Meanwhile, the ego has been loosing all its connections with the reality it has known. It has receded from persons, relationships. It is sailing in a vast, lonely sea. Then it is not even sailing. There is no sea; there is nothingness.

The Dutchman, lying there on the narrow bed, was not an ignorant man. He was a man of great knowledge. Indeed, he was a university professor, a man of nimble mind. His friend, the English chaplain, had a deep affection for his afflicted comrade, and this kept him at the bedside. He was genuinely concerned, but utterly helpless. There were those occasions, as he watched, when the eyes of the professor opened, but then there was a devastating blankness. He was a man *incommunicado*, and not, so to speak, a true man. There was no recognition in the eyes, and no response in the limp hand held by the padre.

It had gone on for days. The men who attended the professor simply shrugged their shoulders. After all, they had seen this before. To their way of thinking it was the way of bland futility. A man ought to desire to live. They stopped, on occasion, to force water through the limp lips. Up went the head, lifted and supported by capable hands. The eyes opened blankly, the close-shaven head lolled like that of a rag doll. The water dribbled through the mouth, some of it spilling out on to the bare chest. There would be a faint sigh, a further refusal to be awakened to

reality. The head was laid again on the pillow. Silence closed over all things again.

Sometimes the chaplain drowsed. After all, he was a tired man, as weak and starved as the others, but he insisted on clinging to the professor's life, whilst it passively insisted on escaping. He would pray endlessly, sitting there, watching his much-loved friend. He would talk silently to God. Sometimes the ward orderlies saw his lips moving, but silently. He prayed on, scarcely knowing how his prayers could be answered, but knowing that they would.

'God is good,' he would murmur, reassuring himself. He would nod drowsily and repeat it: 'God is good.'

He was in heavy sleep when it happened. Somewhere, down in the depths of his tiredness, he sensed a miracle, but it was there in the dream realm rather than in the world of reality. As he opened his eyes, he expected to see something; what he did see surely had to be fantasy.

You might well agree with this, his first response. You might well ask the question, 'When does a man see a little brown hen in a prison camp?' Up in the guards' quarters perhaps, or where the officers live, but never, never in the prison hospital ward.

The chaplain saw the hen nestle down on the feet of the Dutch professor. The legs were stretched out on the bed. The feet were together. So there, nestled about the ankles, the little hen sat determinedly, and it was laying an egg. Unbelievably, it was laying an egg.

What puzzled the chaplain was that no one seemed to have seen it, neither when it flew in nor when it nestled on the ankles. He shook his head to ensure he was not dreaming. There, however, and still nestled, was the hen.

Having laid the egg, it flew away, silently. It did not cackle proudly nor advertise to the world the wonderful thing it had done. It was as humble as it was determined.

The chaplain swore that the professor had opened his eyes partly, and that he had seen the hen and then the egg. The professor made no admission of these facts. When the chaplain stretched out his arm and took the small, warm egg, the professor had gone off again into his self-protective coma.

The excitement of the man of God knew no end. He knew it was the answer to prayer. He hurried away to prepare an eggnog, a concoction of beaten egg, salt, pepper and water. He had another ingredient which was so rare, although its name would be universally known. This he also incorporated. Then he took the fresh new shell and pounded it to a fine powder, pouring it into the eggnog, and all was ready.

It took something to awaken the professor. Long ago he had refused to eat food. Amazingly, in that place of starvation, he had rejected food entirely. The chaplain talked, thumped, called to him, pummelled and shook him until the large, lazy frame showed faint signs of life. Then he talked to his friend from Holland.

'Adrian,' he shouted, 'an eggnog for you!' There was no comprehension in the eyes. He knew the Dutchman had loved eggnogs. He shouted again. He fancied there was a faint flicker in the withdrawn gaze and he shouted yet again.

The shout reached the haggard man. There was a faint flicker of interest, a touch of annoyance, and an element of surprise.

'A hen!' shouted the chaplain. 'It sat on your ankles and laid an egg!'

The shout reached the orderlies, who grinned at one another. Good old Padre! He used all kinds of methods. Well, after all, what was wrong with a holy lie now and then? The end justified the means, didn't it?

The professor pointed at his ankles with a faint, limp gesture of his drooping hands. His look was bleak, but at least it was a look. He kept looking towards his ankles whilst the padre poured eggnog into his mouth, and down the throat.

Then the professor was gone. The sound of gurgling was finished. The Dutchman was away again, into somnolence. The brief visit into reality was ended—vanquished by the rapid flight back to nothingness.

The chaplain was disappointed. After a time he could not sit and watch the failure of a great miracle. He went out to find some men and talk to them. They always seemed to need him, as at this moment he needed them. After awhile, however, he returned and submissively resumed his vigil of prayer.

The next day he was sitting again, watching his inert friend.

The Dutchman gave a slight twitch now and then, and his inertia seemed, if anything, faintly disturbed. The chaplain did not allow himself to be overly moved by such faint stirrings. The loss of spirit seemed so complete. It was as though the professor was drawing close to his pointless goal—a tip-over into the realm of human death. The chaplain had been long troubled by this. He knew there was a time to be born and a time to die. To die in due time was to reverence death as it was to reverence life. To cheapen life by escape from it into death was to cheapen death also. The chaplain never saw death as a dark intruder, but as the quiet friend of men of faith.

As he meditated, the little hen appeared again, fluttering high on raised wings, faintly awkward, chattering only slightly and alighting with as much grace as can be known in a hen. This time it did not settle on the ankles but on the abdomen. It nestled in with not so much as a sigh and began its earnest work of laying an egg. The chaplain held his breath, trusting no one noticed the hen. The amazing fact was that the hen seemed *incognito*, although it was there just below the Dutchman's navel, and, literally, as large as life.

The chaplain watched the Dutchman. The sick man stirred a trifle, though not enough to disturb the small brown fowl. An eye opened. The chaplain's heart gave a slight leap. The eye was actually looking. Then, as though ashamed of its temerity, it closed, only to be opened again, hastily. In fact two eyes stared, amazed and a little terrified. It was as though two forces fought for supremacy. One was the escape-by-death wish, and the other was hope. The chaplain believed that hope in life, and hope for life, was returning.

The eyes closed, this time tightly, but their tightness betrayed the professor. The old limp and vapid stance had altered somewhat. Prayer and the little hen seemed to be winning, even though the margin gained was as nothing compared to the Dutchman's desire for death.

There was a faint flutter of wings and the hen was gone, whether to heaven from whence it had possibly come, or to the fowl-run of the Japanese guards, the chaplain did not know. He simply saw the small egg, not quite pink, not quite brown, warm and translucent,

calm and sitting on the belly of the skinny Dutch professor.

Marvelling, he hastened away, bearing his precious capsule of yolk and milky white. He beat into it the simple salt, pepper and water, and added his rare touch of spice. He hurried back to the sleeping man and shook him boldly.

'Hey, professor, my good friend. Here is your egg from God, your heavenly eggnog. Drink it, you great oaf!'

The professor, surprisingly, awakened. His eyes had a gleam in them. However faint it was, it was a gleam. At first there was a weak protest, a hesitant, scholarly protest, a touch of the old academic stance. That and nothing more. He took the eggnog in the rusty tin cup and drank it. A passing orderly expressed surprise. He had counted the professor for dead. He had read the signs, giving him a day or two.

'What do you think of that?' asked the chaplain eagerly.

'Very goot,' said the professor. His voice was thin, cracked, reedy, but it was a voice. It was a long time since the professor had spoken.

'Now you must get strong,' said the chaplain.

'Strong?' said the lanky Dutchman, a tear coming to his eyes. 'I am for death, and not for life.'

'Nonsense!' said the chaplain, his voice at once both gruff and sharp. 'You are for life.'

He saw the eyes grow rheumy, and the brow furrow. It seemed that a great sorrow, even despair was bearing down on the bony academic. The chaplain knew this could be fatal.

He said angrily, 'You saw the hen, didn't you?'

The professor looked at him. 'Hen? Did you say *hen*?'

'I said *hen*,' replied the chaplain. 'The hen sat on you yesterday, and today, and each time laid an egg. Those were the eggs you had for eggnogs.'

'Oh, Gott!' said the Dutchman faintly. His eyes rolled in fear. 'I saw the hen,' he whispered. 'Oh, Gott! Oh, Gott!'

The chaplain patted his hand. His own palms were wet with sweat. 'Take a rest now,' he said. 'Don't exert yourself.'

The Dutchman closed his eyes.

After a time the chaplain tiptoed from the ward. He went to see the men again, and to talk with them. Also he wanted to visit the

small bamboo chapel and offer praise to the heavenly Father.

When he went, the Dutch academic felt under his pillow. Long ago he had put something there. It was a wallet with photographs in it. His fingers kept fumbling. Later an orderly found him, exhausted and asleep, his fingers clutching an unopened wallet.

THE third day the hen came. It flew and alighted on the chest of the Dutchman. It made its nesting place among the silver-grey thatch of thorax hair. It eased itself onto the bony ribs, and remained in earnest endeavour.

The professor opened his eyes wide at the little hen. It looked at him boldly; you might say, regally. There was neither scorn nor compassion, just a business-like practicality about it. Having completed its triad of operations, its threefold mercy, it was on its way to wherever it had come from. It went, never to return.

It had run the gauntlet of hundreds of hen-hungry prisoners, yet none had seen it but the chaplain and the apathetic Dutchman. It was as a dream, but dreams do not leave us with new-laid eggs.

The Dutchman had watched it from beginning to end. He had lain still, afraid lest the hen be scared away. When it had gone, his nerveless hands had fumbled towards the warm, smooth fruit of the fowl.

'Oh, no!' exclaimed the chaplain. 'Don't touch it. It's too precious.'

Nevertheless he did let the skinny Dutchman feel it with his long, spatulated fingers, and then he took it.

'Wait for the eggnog,' he cautioned cheerily, and went away to beat the ingredients together, to grind the precious shell into lime-powder, and to make the drink complete and nourishing.

The Dutchman was sitting up, this being the first time in many weeks. An orderly had arranged a couple of pillows for him, borrowing them from empty beds.

'Praise be!' the academic was saying. 'Praise be!'

'Praise be!' agreed the chaplain. 'Now drink this up.'

The professor needed no urging. His hands trembled as he held the rusty cup, but he insisted on holding it himself. He kept sipping and sucking and sighing, and then heaving away with asthmatic joy.

'Gott is goot!' he said eagerly.

'He is good!' agreed the chaplain.

He watched the last precious drops disappear into the pink mouth of the patient.

The Dutchman was rubbing his hands together soulfully, gleefully.

'A hen, eh?' he said. 'Just a little hen, eh?'

He chuckled to himself, and then shook his hand feebly towards heaven.

'What a humour, eh?' he asked. 'The goot Gott He sends the little bird to lay eggs all over the old professor so that the old professor must not die.'

'That's right,' said the chaplain, scarcely knowing what to say.

He added, 'The good God needs the old professor, eh? He doesn't want to lose all that training, all that wisdom, all that knowledge.'

The Dutchman stared at him. 'You t'ink that, hey?' he asked. He looked admiringly at his old chaplain friend, shook his head and went off into his asthmatic gurgle.

'Oh, the Gott, He is goot,' he said. He kept chuckling. 'He is very goot.'

Then he remembered the hen, and his gurgling became deep, even more asthmatic. After a time he was gasping, and the tears were coursing out of his fine old eyes, and on to the silver-grey thatch on his torso.

'Oh, so goot,' he was saying in helpless joy. 'Oh yes, and oh, so lovink.'

When the chaplain slipped away because he could not hold back the tide of his own tears, he heard the Dutchman repeating to himself, like some endless refrain: 'Oh, so lovink. So lovink.'

A LIFE IN THE DAY OF A PRISONER

‘THE dawn comes up like thunder,’ he mused as he lay flat on his back. ‘Dawn does come quickly on the Island,’ he mused, ‘just as night falls quickly like a blanket.’ He rather liked the combination of Kipling and himself. For once, the pain in his right leg was dulled almost to nothing. Talking of blankets to himself, he savoured the last few moments before ‘Reveille’. He had an inbuilt clock which told him the time, and it was saying the wake-up call was due.

Down below the long *attap* hut on its wooden stilts there were men moving about silently. He knew what they were doing. They were filling little cans with human urine, pouring it carefully around their plants on the small vegetable plots they tended for themselves. He had a small plot also, but rarely could beat the others to the ‘rose-bowls’, as they called the containers. Time and again during the night, he would visit them to ease the bladder which so quickly filled from the draining oedema, the fluid which puffed out his limbs—the sign and proof of beriberi.

As he moved into the day, the dull ache of his healed leg-wound began to sharpen. He gave a wry smile and leaned over to the man in the next bed.

‘Wake up, young Toby!’ he said gently, and the other soldier whimpered and drew his blanket more closely to him. Toby liked to get out early, but this morning sleep had claimed him in a sweet tyranny.

Every morning they awoke, and every morning the faint dream of release was with them, and the heavier dread of the coming end. They were dully conscious of the machine-guns

trained on them from all corners, and the cold hostility of their contemptuous captors. This morning, no less, dreams and dread locked them into nameless despair, despair that they would have to fight and defeat in order to survive.

The shuffling began—some forty of them from this one hut—making their way to the showers and the boreholes, whilst others poured out of their wards. Some had the pain of old wounds, some showed the tired indignity of being prisoners of war. Their dulled eyes watched the Japanese guards on the catwalk, and they dropped their gaze in distaste as they completed their morning visit to the latrines or bathed under the cold-water showers.

Because it was a hospital camp, only those of the staff had to present themselves on parade. The Duty Officer would hand in the list of patients and sometimes a Nipponese guard would check them, but mainly they disliked entering the wards, fearful of contracting illness. This morning as the parade took place a routine check was made in the huts. Guards were everywhere, rushing in and out of wards, turning over the gear of the patients beside the beds, searching, looking up into the rafters that supported the *nippah*-palm roofing, and peering into empty tin cans. Blankets were tossed aside from the skeleton-like bodies. There were guttural cries, guards calling to one another, checking off the patients. Finally they were gone, having discovered nothing. Some groaned and cursed the invasion, whilst others wearily tidied their gear.

Denny had dressed, carefully strapping on his leg calliper. He was a convalescent patient-worker who attended the mess-line. Cup and plate in hand he limped his way to the serving tables, and Toby was silently at his side. Toby was always the silent one, but when he spoke it was generally worthwhile. Easing their way along the queue was a mixture of Australian and British troops, with a light mingling of Hollanders. An occasional Indonesian or Eurasian was present, but for the most part the conversation was in drawling Aussie or fruity British accent—London Cockney or provincial dialect.

Denny caught sight of Alf, the Singaporean, and he nodded smilingly. Alf was a competent ward orderly, neat, precise, fussy, always on edge lest anyone should seem to show

superiority in his presence, but loyal to the last with a friend. He, Denny and Toby shuffled past the table, receiving the rice-pap, yellow with palm oil, and the small spoonful of sugar, along with the black tea. Denny stored his sugar in a small container. He had not tasted sugar in a year, trading it for a little palm oil or the savoury *blachang*—the high-smelling indigenous fish paste. He still marvelled that he never craved for sweetness.

The three of them went back to the hut, and sat on the verandah, Toby and Alf dangling their legs over the verandah whilst Denny had his right leg out of the way of passers-by. They mouthed the small portion of the rice that had been boiled to a pap. Nothing ever seemed to satiate the longing for food. Even though their stomachs had shrunk, they still dreamed of and ached for a good meal. As men had their tiny fill, the levels of humour began to rise. Human common sense began to assert itself. Denny always marvelled at the resilience of men who had been through so much. He listened dreamily whilst veterans returned from the Burma-Thailand railway recounted unbelievable stories—almost all of them humorous. He kept storing them away in his mind for a time when he could write them.

Write them! The thought flicked him into desire. This was another day when he could hardly wait to get to the officers' library. When his leg had healed they had made him a librarian. Back in Changi he had been in charge of both libraries—the officers' and the other-ranks'. He had coveted the position, and used it well. His appetite was omniverous. He had been a freelance writer—of sorts—and he continually dreamed of writing stories, poems and novels which would one day bring him special recognition.

Toby and Alf were talking about their time together last night. A group met each night to talk about life and what it all meant—the indignity, the horror, the pain and the suffering. There was a lot of humour in their meeting, a great measure of encouragement along with candid confessions of fear and longing. It just helped to talk.

Last night their talk had been about Andy, the brilliant pharmacist who had never been freed from his mother. Even in the prison camp he talked about her ideas. He would test what he

thought, and make his decisions by the training she had given. He had not been physically hurt, but had been emotionally wounded by the brief weeks of action. The sight of shattered bodies and bomb-happy soldiers had torn his domestic and mediocre world to shreds. Unhappily he sat in the midst of devastation and refused to come to terms with it.

'He ran around naked last night,' Toby said.

Alf pursed his puritan lips and said stiffly, 'That is always the end. They always die the next day.'

They were silent. This was the next day. They felt sorry for Andy, but remembered how he had tried hard to get special diet—the most coveted in the hospital. Denny would often dream he was on special diet, but he was too tough and resilient. The doctors knew he would survive without it. The diet was for those who would probably die, but to whom this last chance was given. Andy had been at death's door more than once, and the doctors had taken pity on him. They warned him, when he became well, that the diet might not be there in the future if he starved himself to weakness.

Denny thought about Andy's wallet, stacked with sterling and dollars, and jewellery that could have been flogged on the black market to give Andy food beyond the dreams of others. Andy was keeping it all for a rainy day, and now, last night, it was raining and he still didn't know it. He had virtually given himself over to death.

Denny, Toby and Alf sat in silence.

Toby said, 'You can't talk to him now. He has said he is deaf and dumb, and that he can't see well, when in fact the doctors say there is nothing essentially wrong with him.'

Denny thought of Andy's mother, and of Andy's immaturity. He wondered where Andy's father could have been. Andy had never mentioned him. He remembered his own surgical ward, and men in deep pain. Some of them had cursed God, and others had ground their teeth in anger. Most of them had cried, like little children, 'Mummy! Mummy!' He had wondered at the time, 'Where have all the fathers gone?' and had concluded that these grown men were their mothers' children, and not sons of their fathers.

After a time of silence Denny said, 'I've talked to one of the officers, and he's letting us have the X-ray clinic room tonight; in fact we can have it every Wednesday evening.'

They both looked at him, astonished. 'How did that happen?' said Toby.

Denny grinned. 'I own one book—all of my own. The officer in charge has been looking for this book for over three years, and I'm lending it to him.'

Toby said, 'Bribery and corruption!' whilst Alf looked a little prim, slightly shocked. He was nothing if not ethical, was Alf.

He protested on Denny's behalf. 'Denny would never be in a racket,' he said.

Denny and Toby grinned, exchanging winks. One of the unspoken conditions of their group was non-participation in rackets, especially in black market trading: not that they had anything to trade. They often discussed the rightness and wrongness of rackets. All their talk pivoted around the human problem. They were obsessed with humanity.

HE was on his way to the library. No matter how grim things were, the library was a delight to him. He made his way towards the officers' quarters. They were on the north-west side of the camp. The camp itself was contained in a rubber plantation. The huts were concealed between rows of rubber trees, and probably could not be seen from the air. That frightened some of the prisoners who watched anxiously on the days when the silver Flying Fortresses passed high overhead. Today the skies were clear, a light blue, and beautiful. He looked through the fronded branches and thought wistfully of Australian open spaces—the wheat, sheep and cattle country. Malaya to him was country of intense vegetation, everything crowding everything. The greens were vivid to dark, the roads almost canopied overhead by high rubber trees or encroaching jungle giants.

Even so, he loved the country, remembering with relish their days of freedom when they had traversed jungle country via the rivers, when they had laid line through plantation, rice fields, and matted jungle. Now they were enclosed by the trees, hidden from sight, trapped in timelessness.

A guard was watching him closely, not with suspicion but with interest. Something within him quickened. He bowed to the soldier, careful not to smile, for fear it would seem to be undue familiarity, or even contempt. The guard bowed back, but there was the faint suggestion of friendliness. Denny smiled faintly, and the man rewarded him. The Australian passed on, aware of what it is to be human with another human.

On the other side of the catwalk was the camp garden with its rows of tropical vegetables, its tapioca shrubs, bananas, and papaya trees. The prisoners were wielding their *chunkels*, the mattock-type tool that broke open the earth. Some looked painfully thin, excessively weak. When they relaxed, some of the guards would shout '*Kurra! Kurra!*' Others were digging human faeces into the soil, or pouring urine along the rows. He would have liked to be in the garden, but his leg did not allow that.

He saw Billy the Slops with his yoke of kitchen refuse, making his way to the piggery. With a grin he remembered Billy when he was a walking skeleton, staggering under his load of mess-waste. 'Every picture tells a story,' goes the caption, and Billy was faithful to it. Day by day he gathered strength. Day by day he cheated the swine of their due. They had enough, but less than they would have had. Now Billy was strong, muscled up, stout and replete. Denny sighed with envy, watching Billy pause in a grove to have his fill of the slops, away from the eyes of all.

At the library he drew out his bookbinding materials from a cupboard, set up the catalogue and checked out the cards left from last night's invasion by the medicoes. Then he extracted his typewriter from another cupboard and set it in the middle of the desk. The typewriter was one of the marvellous miracles of the incarceration. He remembered the day the warrant officer had stopped by his bed, back in Roberts Barracks Hospital, and had watched him writing.

'A bit of a writer, eh?' he had asked.

Denny had nodded. He was a bit of a writer, a freelancer in fact.

The WO nodded. 'How would you like to have a typewriter?' he asked. He bent low over Denny, and said in a strong whisper, 'A brand spanking new portable typewriter. What about that, hey?'

Denny looked up, as out of a dream. All he could stammer was, 'Oh!'

The sergeant major looked at him triumphantly. 'You can have one within the hour,' he said.

A trip-hammer was beating away in Denny's heart. He still did not trust himself to speak. He remembered his ancient model at home, and choked on the thought of a new one.

'There's a condition,' the sergeant major said. 'You'll have to pay me for it when you get home.'

Denny tried to stop the tears welling, but couldn't. Even a small thing could sometimes bring him to tears. The warrant officer was a trifle embarrassed, and coughed.

'All you would have to pay would be the current market rate at home—when we get there.'

They both knew they might never get there. A typewriter in the hand . . .

When he went, Denny lay back, blinking. Within half an hour the WO was back with a typewriter in its case. He put it on the bed beside Denny.

'Never even been unpacked,' he said. He smiled importantly, and with pride. 'Got it in Singapore during the blow-up. Should serve you well.'

Denny had a picture of the looting, the antidote to lost freedom, the desire to acquire. He looked at his new benefactor with all the interest of a psychologist.

Almost every day Denny relived the miracle. A prisoner with a new portable typewriter! His heart would sing. It sang again this morning, as he thought about it. He used the machine for the library cards, but—better—he used it for his stories, his poems and his novels. Four hours a day he would write—never less, rarely more. Four hours a day he would read, learning more and more how to write. Four hours a day he would think—gathering material for knowing man, himself, and his world.

He knew it would come to an end one day. Either the yammering of the machine-guns would eat them up, or sickness would suddenly be lethal, or—dream of all dreams—they would be repatriated home. Sometimes he would feel liberated beyond anything he had ever known. Free in a prison camp, liberated within

the encircling catwalk! He wondered how it had all come his way.

When he glanced up, the Colonel was looking down. 'What do you have for me today, sergeant?' he asked.

Denny was immature enough not to want English officers to order him about, but the man's question was innocuous. He told him about the non-fiction books which had been returned overnight.

The Colonel shook his head. 'I want a good novel,' he said.

While Denny was considering, the officer melted a little. 'I like something to relax me,' he said. 'I'm really not much of a reader of non-fiction.'

Denny was surprised. He knew medical officers were experts in their own field, but few of them were catholic in their tastes. He was surprised that they lacked good reading tastes. He had silently tried to lift their sights to good literature. Sometimes he would spend time telling them about a book, quietly urging them to better reading.

Denny found him a good book, received the curt nod absently, entered the title, and went back to his typewriter. He was thinking about the early days of the library. In the last days the troops had lived in civilian homes during the fighting. They had gathered up books when the capitulation of Singapore to the Japanese had happened. Army Education Officers had gone about the camp, gathering up the books, leaving one to a person for exchange purposes, and then organising the central libraries—one for officers and one for men.

Singapore civilians had been fairly discerning in their reading. Denny had had a feast of reading, especially when in bed. His leg had taken months in healing, and he had read two to three books a day, blotting out some of the pain and a lot of the problems he was gradually having to face. It was a world into which he could escape—fine fiction—and he was glad of it. He felt he was investing his future in what he was learning. He was also extending his reading in psychology, philosophy and history. Theological books were hard to come by, but he was finding some.

What he was especially remembering this morning, because of the Colonel, was the reading of many of his Aussie mates. 'Deadwood Dicks' they called the detective and mystery yellow-backs,

and that was all they wanted to read. Exhausted after a day's work, they wanted something which could be easily read and understood.

After a time he noticed they tired of this cheapjack kind of book. He led them on to what he would have called second-rate novels. They liked them. Some of them began to read Dostoevsky, Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf. He was surprised that they could understand such writers. Others passed on to non-fiction, devouring new ideas, trying to find answers to the problems which faced them in the camp, and within themselves, of human behaviour. Some of them had terrifying memories of war-action, of comrades suddenly killed, of fear, of self-saving—often at the expense of others. Others wondered why they were breaking down under the pressures about them. Many tried to handle the shame and indignity, the loss of honour and normal human pride. Within the camp they had ethical problems, problems in relationships. The library became a source of life to them, draining as they did the minds of men and women who had tried to write about life. Denny marvelled at the storehouse of human wisdom that lay in a library and was there at a time of human crisis, and for what it could do. Not all of it had depth, but at least it gave relief of humour or emotional escape from the immediate pressures.

For himself, Denny discovered the fascinating medium of story writing. He knew the fascination tale-spinners had always aroused in the hearts of their listeners. Stories were really histories—the saga of lives, the behaviour of man—and it was from these that the human race could learn. Experiences were heaped up in books—both of fiction and non-fiction. Denny began to move among the minds of others, not only in the camp, but in these written treasures of the human race.

Sometimes he scarcely knew a person had come into the library, chosen his book, registered it, and was gone. Often an officer would recall him from his typing, sometimes impatient to be served, sometimes intrigued by the young man's absorption in his writing.

One of his closest friends had been in bookselling, an agent of an English university press. They would spend hours talking

about books. Then there was their famous literary society, a polyglot collection of individualists who met fortnightly and presented their poems, stories, essays or book reviews. He felt a bit awed by them—they knew so much—but they seemed to respect him, and some seemed to like his stories. One man—the most unpretentious of the lot—taught him the simplicity of writing, just how to see human beings, their environment, their foibles, and their excellencies. He knew that all his life he would owe a debt to that man.

After a time, the literary group had disbanded. Some of them had gone away on working parties. Others had fallen victim to despair and cynicism. Some preferred simply to develop alone. He wondered about the fitfulness of the human spirit, its frailty and its subsidence into death. He had watched many die because they wanted to die, and this to him was a mystery, even though a self-evident fact. He had spent time discerning the spirits of his friends, and the few who disliked him for reasons he could not understand. He rather liked the store of knowledge that was building up within him, and without which he could not properly write.

IT was time to return for lunch, and he went back to the hut for plate, fork, spoon and metal mug. The Nipponese guard was still on duty on the catwalk, much to Denny's surprise. He had thought his shift would have changed. The guard looked at him, scarcely holding back the faint smile, and Denny knew it was not dangerous to grin. He bowed first, and then nodded. The guard nodded in return and smiled. Denny knew some of the guards were homosexual, but instinct told him this was not the case with this one. He felt warmed as he went to the hut.

Toby had worked in his little garden and was flushed with satisfaction. He told Denny that Daniel Stetson, the chaplain, was looking for him because Andy had died during the morning. The padre wanted some pallbearers, and he had included Toby and Alf in the team. Because Denny had been one of Andy's closest friends, the chaplain had wanted him to go up the hill. The war cemetery was 'up the hill', but Denny had never been there. He wondered how his leg would take the climb, but his pulse

quicken as he thought of going out of the camp, even if it were for a funeral.

Andy's death troubled him. He wondered how men could plan their own death. Some sort of a fatalism seemed to grip them. It was because Denny thought more about destiny than he did about fate that men with a death-wish worried him. Even though the men talked about these things at nights, they could find no solution.

They ate their small meal in silence. The usual relish was gone with the death of Andy.

Toby said, 'I wonder what they will do with Andy's wallet.'

Alf said primly, 'They keep it under lock and key, and return the things after the war.'

Denny had a pang of regret. Andy had brought death upon himself, trying to save himself by making sure he qualified for special diet. He would refuse the general diet, decline, and then be eligible for the better food. This time he had weakened himself beyond recovery. The doctors had refused special diet and the man had died—with his purse filled to bursting with the means to life. Denny thought something about those who save their life only to lose it. He had often thought on this theme, along with his close Army mates.

As he was returning to the library, he saw Conn Anderson, a small, stooped and aged infantryman who was looking for frogs. Each day he scoured the slit trenches which had been dug as shelters for the air-raids. He grinned as he thought of the times they had rushed to the trenches when the great bombers had soared in silver formation high above the camp. Alf, the Eurasian, was known for his special piety. Generally he carried a large black Bible with him, and the men had come to know him. They affectionately called him a 'bible-basher', but that did not phase Alf. He rather liked that kind of recognition. When the air-raids were on and the sirens were wailing, the men would quickly look for Alf, and especially for the slit trench in which he was crouching. They would dive in with him, and get as close to the bible-basher as possible.

They would say, 'I'm coming with you, Alf. The good Lord looks after His own, and you sure are His own!' Alf would smile and be glad of the company.

Denny stopped for a moment to see if Conn had caught frogs. For a time Denny had thought Conn was selling the frogs to the duck-owners in the camp, but Conn rarely, if ever, caught one. When Denny asked him why he was looking for frogs, he let fly with his anger.

'You hear them, Denny! You hear them every night! Yet when the day comes, you can't find them.'

When Denny showed his surprise, Conn looked at the trenches in disgust. 'The lousy rotten things keep me awake all night! As soon as they start I know they have me in mind. They just try to get at me.'

Denny didn't smile. He knew prisoners of war would often get mad about one thing or another, and they just couldn't be logical about their *bête noire*. Some would nearly go mad with the smell of a bed bug. They would wake up at night, smell the creatures coming, and be unable to go back to sleep. During the day they would be out, pouring boiling water over the beds, going through the blankets, trying to kill bugs and squash their eggs.

Conn would stamp around the trenches at night, trying to mark where frogs were, but frogs are accomplished ventriloquists and to date Conn had had little satisfaction, so evasive they were. Denny peered into the trenches with the frog-hater, but he, too, was unsuccessful. Conn didn't even show gratitude. Mild by disposition, and not blasphemous by nature, he went close to being the world's most noted frog-vilifier.

AT three o'clock Denny had to excuse himself from the library. He had a shirt with three stripes which he kept under his pillow. He wore this, and borrowed a slouch hat and special belt. Feeling as though he was in ceremonial dress, he followed the bier along with Stetson, the chaplain, and they wound their way up to the hill.

Padre Stetson had been with Andy over the past weeks, and was distressed at the unnecessary—though inevitable—death. He had been shocked by Andy's screaming at the last, telling the demons to get away. This was the Andy who, seemingly, had lost his hearing, his voice, and much of his sight. At the last he

could hear demons talking, see apparitions, and he had fled through the camp, naked as the day he had come from his mother's womb. Padre Stetson was an emotional man, and he felt he had failed his patient in his need. Denny knew it was Andy who had failed himself.

Denny, Alf and Toby kept thinking about Andy, remembering what a man he had been in the early days, and how fear and anger had enlarged as the months went by. The further time separated him from his mother, the lower his spirits seemed to sink. What puzzled them was his hanging on to his possessions, never letting his wallet out of his sight, always afraid the guards would one day take it from him. Andy was not unique in this respect. Others guarded their possessions jealously, but they used them to preserve their lives where they could.

When Denny pondered the matter, the thought of Tony—another poor little rich boy—came into his mind. Tony, however, was no fool. He was bright and alert, always out to make a buck or two. He was the one who would swap *blachang* and palm oil for Denny's sugar, and then he would go off and make money on the sale or barter of the sugar. Tony always had cheroots, the deadly little cigarettes that looked like cigars. Tony had been in the racket of making cigarette lighter flints out of fencing wire. It never worried him that they didn't work. He would blame some retailer outside the camp.

Tony had more tin cans than anyone in the camp. In fact he had thirty of these, of varying sizes. Often, at nights, he would sort out his cans, lining them up for all to see. At these times Denny would think sourly, 'He is flaunting them before us all.' He saw many an eye gleam with envy, but to him they were empty things. He knew they were possessions, and that was how some ran themselves—by the things that they possessed—but he wondered how they could live under such an illusion. He felt nauseated, but knew that he himself had possessions, even if they were not material ones. He vowed, as they trudged behind the pallbearers, that he would never flaunt them before another human being. He knew Tony wouldn't end up in a premature grave, but in a way he was pretty dead already. Tony was a restless con man, driven on by an irresistible compulsion of self-preservation.

At the top of the hill they paused, and quietly let down the burlap burden. Death was just about a daily event. It wasn't that they were immured in regard to it, but they could not afford emotion every time it happened. Those who had returned from the Burma-Thailand Railway had seen more death than the human spirit can accommodate. They still needed time to comprehend the tragedy of pain, of deadened minds, of vast cruelty, and of dignity brought down to the mud and slush of inhumanity. He had talked with many who were so numb that they could not think, so debilitated that they could not make decisions, so far away from other humans that it would take years for them to come back.

He looked down at the remains of Andy and felt the tears rising. Suddenly Chaplain Stetson could not handle it. They watched him trembling and weeping, feeling sorry for him but liking him for it. Denny took the proffered prayer book from him, and began to read where it was opened:

'We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'

He thought about the words he was reading from the psalm:

'Lord, thou hast been our refuge: from one generation to another.'

It all seemed so sad. He heard himself saying,

'Forasmuch as it hath pleased almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection . . .'

The covered corpse was lowered into the grave. Alf was praying. The bugler played the 'Last Post' and they all stood to attention. There was a pause and 'Reveille' began to be sounded. The bugler was crying, 'Get out of bed! Get out of bed!' They wondered about Andy and the resurrection. As the soil was thudding on the burlap, Daniel Stetson rallied and began the singing of 'Rock of Ages', and the small party joined in with him. Denny thought soldiers were extremely sentimental people, but he liked the idea.

The service was over, but no one wanted to go down the hill. Some began looking at the wooden crosses, painted white with the names in black, stabbed into the grass-grown mounds.

Denny stood looking down across the Island. The sheer, soft blue of the sky, the miles of tree-covered land, and the utter quietness of it all gripped him. He suddenly realised how confined he had felt over the past few years. Each prison had seemed like the whole world to him, and he had wondered how the bombers overhead could possibly have missed their camp. Common sense told him that they would know the sites of the camp and evade them, but the Island had seemed so constricted, the prison sites so vulnerable.

Now the camp below seemed so small—a tiny bit of acreage in the vast square miles. He wondered at the commerce in emotions, in relationships, the criss-crossing of personalities upon such a small spot. Up here he drew in new life, was soaked with different thinking, absorbing a new perspective. He wanted to fling arms in the air and jump and shout for joy. Then he wished to stand still and never move again, being quiet within himself forever. The inner aches had gone, the fears dwindling to a small tiny point, and then vanishing forever.

The men around him were quiet, too. They tasted their freedom wistfully, wanting the moment to be continuous—never to end. It was one of those few occasions when they dared to remember. Memory—beyond all other things—was deeply painful. Now memories came floating, unbidden and unrejected, across their minds, but they did not bring pain.

‘If anything,’ thought Denny, ‘they bring hope—hopes of reunion, and of a new world.’ Somehow, in history, there had always been the possibility of a new world.

He realised, as he was ruminating, that the silence was gradually diminishing. A sound was growing, but it was coming from far away. He lifted his head and saw the silver gleams of an aerial armada. In a series of V formations, the squadrons of planes were heading towards them with a faint hum, and then a rising droning.

Suddenly, below them the sirens wailed, rising to a crescendo, beating out, rising and falling.

The response of all was reflexive.

Daniel Stetson said, ‘Hurry, men—to the trenches.’

They began to run, weak as they were, headlong down the hill. Denny felt the handicap of his leg, but Toby was at one side and Alf on the other. They passed by the vegetable gardens which were now deserted. There were cries in English and Japanese.

The planes were coming closer. Suddenly the Island seemed again constricted, and they could hear the screams of the falling bombs, the shrill, unforgettable whistle and horrible ‘Crump! Crump!’ in the distance. The earth trembled and shuddered, and though the planes were gone it seemed that the whole Island had erupted. He could hear the ‘Chug! Chug!’ of something approaching. They hurled themselves to the ground, not having reached the slit trenches. Alf half-covered him with his body as the terrifying noises burst around them.

Memory of other occasions came to him, and his reflexive thought was, ‘They’ve hit an ammunition dump!’ The delayed explosions were not of the bombs that had fallen, but of shells and ammunition that had been hit. He lay stiff as the explosives exhausted themselves. After a time silence closed about them, and they wondered in the stillness how many had been killed or wounded.

Miraculously enough, none had been hurt. Some trees had been razed, and others battered severely, but no one had been lost; nor had anyone been wounded. Not even a building had been touched. They wondered about that.

IN the late afternoon Hank Cornelius came bursting into their hut. ‘Yam for tea!’ he shouted, ‘Yam for tea!’ Tea was their evening meal—if it could be called a meal.

‘Calm down, Hank,’ an Aussie said. ‘We’ve had yam before.’

Yam was a lily root, soft and tasteless, but at least welcome roughage, a little more bulk in a bulkless world.

‘Yam!’ shouted Hank. ‘We’ve had no yam before.’

The men in the hut looked at each other and winked. Hank saw it and was outraged. The great length of the bony Hollander glowered down at them.

'Tell me,' he shouted, 'when have we ever had plum jam?'

'Plum jam?' they echoed, unbelievably.

Unaccountably, the Japanese, rattled or sympathetic because of the American bombing and the vast explosion at the Naval base ammunition dump, were showering the prisoners with plum jam.

Down in the cookhouse the cooks had their heads together, trying to make something out of the meagre rations of rice flour and palm oil. When the meal came on, there was jam pastry. Eyes rolled, stomachs rumbled, salivary glands watered, and the troops lined up. With the rice there were small dried fish—herring-size—into the bargain, and although there was an argument or two over the lack of a missing fish-head, the evening meal was delectable. Even the shadow soup had a trifle of substance in it.

Toby, Alf and Denny wandered up to wash their plates under the tap near the showers. Every so often they gave them a special treatment, and Bill—the funny man from Blayney—was scrubbing his enamel plate with dirt and water. His plate had a section missing, and the sharp serrated iron was showing beyond the enamel.

He put his plate under the tap and turned it on full. The plate was dashed out of his hand, and landed on the cement block below the tap. Reflexively, Bill resented the action of the water which hurt his hand as the plate was ripped from it. Bare-footed he lunged with one leg at the plate—and missed! Had he connected, he might have lost a toe or two.

The three men could see the terrible rage in his face. The man from Blayney addressed the plate.

'Lucky for you I missed, you bastard!' he said. He looked around, daring anyone to laugh, or tell him he was a liar.

Denny wrote it down at the back of his mind as usable data for a future story. They left Bill lecturing his broken enamel plate.

Denny gave his meal gear to Toby to take back to the hut. He wandered off, going across to see his favourite medico, and to talk to him about poetry and books. Cotter-Harvey had some coffee made from burned peanuts, and as Denny's was always from burned rubber-nuts, he noticed the difference. Cotter-Harvey's brew smelt like genuine coffee.

Cotter-Harvey was Denny's best customer at the library. He did a bit of scribbling himself, but he believed firmly in Denny and encouraged him. They talked about Australian writers, and then about contemporary English and American poets. Cotter-Harvey opened up the subject of Andy's death, and the death of others less fortunate than the former pharmacist. They talked about the men who had returned from Burma and Thailand, the neuroses they had had, and from which they were being rehabilitated.

On the way back to the hut, Denny suddenly felt faint. The day had been draining him, and he had not noticed. Now, in the dark, stumbling without a walking stick, he felt alone. The old pain of hunger came gnawing in, and he thought of Andy's wallet being stored away by someone honest against the day of their return to Australia. He could have wept for what the money and the jewellery would mean for the sick and the weak. What if some black marketeer would make money out of the deal? Some poor beggar would have been helped. In his heart he wondered whether the temptation might not be too much for a starving officer, or a penurious private.

He leaned against a rubber tree, and peered into the darkness for help. There was no one to help. If he blacked out he might lie there until morning. Perhaps no one would see him, and some were too weak to do anything even if they did discover him. He began to hallucinate, and whenever he did this, he was generally at home, on the farm, helping his mother, collecting the eggs, or milking Jenny the house-cow with his own hands, the creamy froth of the milk mounting up in the bucket. This time he was in the house watching his mother bake the homemade bread, and great steaks were being laid out for the meal, with lashings of onions, eggs and rashers of bacon.

His stomach churned with yearning, and a cold sweat broke out, and he looked for some quick oblivion which would relieve his pain forever.

When he returned to consciousness he was in the hut, on his bed, and the dim electric light was burning between the tattered mosquito nets. Toby was sitting on one side of the bed and Alf on the other. Behind them, standing, but with gentle eyes, was

Cotter-Harvey. Some of the fellows were around, looking down at him. There was a silent cheer when he opened his eyes.

'Was the coffee too much for you?' Cotter-Harvey asked. There was an envious murmur from the group.

Toby said, 'We found you collapsed against a tree.' His eyes were sympathetic.

Alf's eyes were passionate as only those of a Eurasian can be.

Cotter-Harvey felt his pulse and nodded. 'I guess it is a case for special diet,' he said, and the murmur was there again, this time approving.

Denny felt the tears near to his eyes. He looked at Toby. 'Guess I won't be making the meeting tonight,' he said.

Toby said, 'We could have it here.'

The wardmaster and Harvey shook their heads. 'Too much for him tonight.' They paused. 'There's always another night.'

After a time, some of the men drifted off.

Cotter-Harvey wrote something on the wardmaster's sheet and nodded to Denny. 'Take it steady,' he said. He slipped out of the hut, quietly saluting the men who, in their respect and affection for him, went close to worshipping him.

Toby said, 'We'll try to talk about Dostoevsky, and what he learned in Siberia, and his idea of maturity through suffering—that suffering is an essential part of life.' Some of the men grinned as though that was a bit too esoteric for them.

When they were gone, Denny lay with his hands behind his head, looking up into the shadows of the *nippah* palm. Some of the other men in the hut were talking softly, and after a time they drifted out—perhaps to the rose-bowls, perhaps to friends in other huts.

IT was then that Denny heard the nightly wails of the Hollander in Hut 27. The men of this hut were greatly feared by the Japanese guards. No one ever went near that ward. During the day the patients said little or nothing, but every night the sobbing cry came into the camp. It was near 'Lights Out' that the man came into life, or, Denny thought, into death.

The man would wail, 'I betrayed him, but I never meant to do it. I betrayed him, but I never meant to do it.' He would cry out in

Dutch but sometimes break into English, which was how they knew what the cry was. The wail would become a piercing scream, rising and falling but never ceasing. Somewhere the man was seeing his friend beheaded by the Japanese, and not understanding the betrayal by his friend.

Denny thought, 'It all came to Andy last night, but now it is all over. It was once, and now it is finished.' He thought, then, of the men up in the X-ray room. Group meetings were forbidden, and it would go badly with Toby, Alf and the others if the Japanese knew they were inside, but then the clinic had thick black-out paper on the windows, and they used only one light, and that was in an inner room.

He knew they were safe. He knew they would be talking, trying to understand the human dilemma—man, a devil, and man, an angel. Or maybe man, a sinner, and man, a saint. He thought of the words Daniel Stetson could not read at Andy's burial service, 'In the midst of life we are in death.'

Then he thought of Dostoevsky, tortured in mind, passionate in life, reaching out for the soul of his Mother-Russia. He thought of him believing that a people who had suffered so much must become great: must inevitably become great. His mind went back to the time when his friends returned from Burma-Thailand, with hollow sockets where their eyes were—back deeply into their heads—skin tightened over bones, some pellagrous, some with pudgy flesh or taut oedema. They were the living dead. They had suffered, but whether for better or for worse he knew not. Did suffering always bring glory, always make men great? He wasn't sure. He had to have more time to observe.

'Maybe when they come back into life fully, they will be different. They will see it differently,' he thought. His meditation had to be beyond the wild cry of the Dutch betrayer of his friend.

He waited for 'Lights Out' to be played, for it was then that the crazed Hollander ceased his wailing, and all was silence until the frogs sang their joy for Conn Anderson, and men shuffled along for their last visit to the rose-bowls—the last before the next.

He heard the men creeping in quietly and softly, and before the lights dimmed he saw Toby, Alf and the others, and their

eyes were bright. Himself—he felt drowsy. For the second time in the day he heard the ‘Last Post’, and he thought how eerily beautiful it was: just how eerily beautiful it was.

The sad man in Ward 27 had sobbed into silence. The guard was walking warily along the catwalk. Beautiful moonlight was beginning to soak through the silver-coined leaves of the rubber trees. It was all a delicate kaleidoscope to him, ‘a many-splendoured thing’.

KRANJI, NEW YEAR’S DAY, 1945

I AM wondering, as January the 1st, 1991 approaches, why it is that I have left this story forty-six years before writing it. I can really say it is a story, and last night all its ingredients rushed together as I was awakened. I could hear the strident command to get cracking and to write it now on this Christmas Day of 1990. When my lazy protest went unheeded—my protest that people would not read it after all these years—I was told sharply that all chronicles ought to be written, whether anyone wished to have them read them or not. We owed this to history, I was told.

Deep down I knew that to be true. The human race has a way of wanting to know its own story, and those who can write ought to write, so here I am, sitting at my computer, the memories all crowding my mind, demanding to be put together in an unforgettable way. It is not that I have not done this sort of thing before—I have! It is not that I cannot remember many of the characters in that drama of ‘45—I mean, remember their names.

I have in front of me a few Christmas and New Year cards of that year. One of them is an artistic work in green, yellow and red, adorned with Aussie Christmas Bells, and headed,

1944–45
A Merry Christmas and Happy New Year
to Geoff Bingham
from the ‘Boys’ of Ward 36, Kranji*

* For those who do not know the name ‘Kranji’, it is a place on Singapore Island, where—in the last 18 months of World War II—a convalescent hospital was established for wounded and sick prisoners of war, whilst the main body of prisoners was incarcerated in Changi Gaol.

There is also another in the same colours, entitled 'Mutt and Geoff Annual Celebrations, Jan. 6–9, 1945'. It was to celebrate the birthdays of Bob Mutton and Geoff Bingham. It has an ambitious menu within, which goes like this:

MENU
Savouries Rice
Nazi Goering Ubi
Ikan Curry
Kechang Ijau
Ubi Manis
Ubu Keyu
Kelapa
Pisal Kechil
Cake
Coffee

Bob Mutton must have written the menu, for he spoke—and wrote—good Malay. I knew almost no Malay. It must also have been a genuine list of eats, for Bob had ways of getting food for special occasions that I knew nothing about. What I really mean is that we pretended we had the same kind of food that goes under those names outside a prison camp! I was a child in those things, but I remember being grateful for a rare celebration where my starved insides would get a bit of relief. Today being Christmas Day forty-six years later, I need no stimulation to my memory for a mouth-watering menu. Frankly, I've long forgotten what those foods were. But I haven't forgotten the boys of Ward 36 at the Kranji Prisoner of War Hospital Convalescence Camp. The names of the celebrants of New Year's Day are written down, signed by their owners. They are:

J. Lear	William F. Goodwin	G. E. Littlejohn
D. Ellerman	Arthur Toms	J. S. White
R. F. Adams	C. L. Earle	J. Neilson
E. Kearny	D. Speers	S. J. McAlister
J. Robins	Murray F. Smith	
T. A. Hogan	Bill Sneddon	

Some of the men I remember clearly, but others are lost in that blur of memory which one has after forty-six years. Some were English, but most were Australian.

I CAN'T say the day began inauspiciously, because there had been something in the wind for weeks. For one thing, our secret wireless told us that things had not gone well for the Axis powers. The Allied troops were successful in Europe, and now they were being most successful in the Pacific Campaign. Citadel after citadel of the Japanese Imperial Forces was falling, and others were nigh on tottering—albeit at immense cost to the Allies. We had seen the USA air-armadas sailing tranquilly over the Singapore skies, and we loved the majestic sound of their droning. We had heard the bombs whistling down, and even shrieking across our camp, though not landing in it. One exception was when an ammunition dump was hit on the nearby Naval base and the exploding fragments had burst around us. I can still hear the dreadful sound of some of it chug-chugging towards us.

The point was that we knew victory was moving our way—even if its progress was painfully slow. Not that it was a great consolation, since the Japanese machine-guns were trained on our camp, as on other camps. It was all against the Geneva Convention, of course, but then so was about every other thing connected with the treatment of prisoners of war. We were starved thin, weak and bone-weary. We dreaded collapsing physically and—not being seen—of dying without aid.

At the same time, we had gained from the three years of imprisonment and maltreatment. Something of a human being resonates when it ought to be collapsing: it is resilient when it ought to be finished. Something of the spirit of being human rises continually and refuses to be browbeaten into nonentity. I mean the strange inner assurance that every human being counts in the eyes of God, history and eternity. It is an extraordinary feeling, and one that is contrary to all common sense.

I remember when some of the men had returned from the Burma–Thailand Railway event. Close friends had ceased to be recognisable. They had withdrawn from us beyond the perimeters of the humanity they had once known. Their heads were like parchment drawn across skulls. Their eyes had receded, and with those eyes, they also. They did not look at you. There was a self-protective blankness about them, even though they seemed

gone beyond recall. Gradually they rehabilitated from their inner death, emerging from that lost world, fearful in their homecoming, but also knowing the strange joy of recovery.

How could they think of having something special, some personal identity when they had seen their comrades dying in their hundreds of cholera—dehydrated, in terrible pain, collapsing into unconsciousness, taken to the funeral pyres where they were burned in a never-to-be-forgotten stench of incinerated flesh? How could they think that each man mattered, and mattered much? It would take some of them years to see this, and some would never see it, their lives being immersed in a bath of bitterness, of caustic and destructive memory and anger.

For many of us the sense of destiny was growing just when it ought not to have done so. I can remember waking that day of January 1st, 1945, and looking at the blue through the tall rubber trees, stirring out of bed in the *attap* hut which we called 'Ward 36', relieving myself at the 'rose-bowl', and wandering off into the camp. There were greetings of 'Happy New Year!' but these were from close friends. The others were perfunctory, and some sat in dead silence.

For me, the big celebration was not to come until my birthday on January 6th, but the Japanese had a little treat in store for us. Christmas meant nothing to them, but they understood the idea of a New Year's Day. The treat was a larger ration of vegetables, a little more of sun-dried fish, and—unbelievably—a tot of *saki*, that most potent of rice wines. Maybe this happened once a year, maybe less, but this day it was happening.

THE 'catwalk', as it was known, was the guard-walk around the perimeter of the camp. It was covered on both sides by six-foot fences of barbed-wire strands. It kept us in, and protected the guards—not that they needed much protection. Something struck me as unusual about the catwalk that morning. There was hardly a guard to be seen. The catwalk was almost empty—contrary to custom. The odd sentry or two seemed relaxed and even friendly. The harsh stare was missing, and the guttural snarls absent. It was then that the strange feeling began to build up within me. I sensed a festival of something in the air.

The cooks had it, too. We had a larger helping than usual of the rice gruel, and there was a spoonful of raw sugar. The news came that no one was to go out on working-party. With it also the news of slightly enlarged rations and the tot of *saki*. Bargaining began about that treat. There were—even at this late date—confirmed teetotallers in the camp. I was one of them and I was offered extra sugar, palm oil and even *blachang*, the exotic fish paste of the East. Not *all* of these, of course, but one or other of them. I was a librarian of our camp and was told that with others I was off duty for the day. Most of the medical orderlies were given a holiday. The cooks were busily at work, trying to give a festive touch to the rations.

At shower-time the rot began to set in. There were water fights and even some slow wrestling—slow, because few had any strength to do much. That, at least, was what we thought. After the midday lunch, meagre as it was, and more so after the siesta-sleep which we took when opportunity afforded, the troops came to life. They visited one another in the *attap* huts and talked of old times, and the times they hoped for in the future. Much of the latter was tongue-in-cheek, since we were always conscious of the machine-guns trained on us from every vantage point. Some of them we knew to be concealed.

Then the singing began. At first we wondered whether the captain and the guards would come with an order to stop. I suppose it has always been in my blood to sense—discern if you like—the moods of other human beings. I guess I have sometimes been too sensitive to these things, but much of our living depends on knowing what human beings are about. We can avoid danger; we can profit by the knowledge. Most of all, we like to know what is going on in the human race. Anyway, I sensed a steady build-up of human spirit. The singing seemed to liberate us. We sang Army songs, sentimental songs, bush ballads, patriotic songs, songs of childhood, romantic songs, and songs of manhood. Stores of memories opened up without warning, and old impressions were unaccountably liberated—brought out into the light of day. All of this without analysis—as though suddenly the past were flooding in on us unbidden and unlimited.

Because of my penchant for discernment, I knew thousands of

thoughts and numberless unexpressed ideas, feelings and experiences were now coming to the surface and being liberated: the separations from the homeland, being cut off from loved ones, the memories which had been thrust down deeply and deliberately hidden, the shame of some events of the war and the stimulation of others, and—most of all—the unconditional surrender of Singapore on February 15th, 1942. Added to these were the humiliations many had suffered, the steady starving, the sicknesses, the loss of mates, the erosion of self-confidence, the debilitation of the spirit—all of these were being expressed through this strange day of festival. I wondered why the Japanese had handed this day to us as a kind of gift. Did they sense the end was near? Could there be some sort of sympathy behind their severe and contemptuous eyes? I did not know.

While we were singing, an invitation came to a few of us to have coffee with one of the beloved physicians. Cotter-Harvey was a medical Colonel, and a famous lung specialist in Sydney. I had often had long yarns with him in the camp library, especially about writing and literature. Rarely did we who were in the ranks get such invitations to the officers' quarters. This one was written, and it invited Sergeant Bingham and a few of his close friends to coffee. Coffee! I knew it would be high-grade coffee—not that made from burnt rubber-nuts, but made from pure burnt peanuts! Costly stuff of course, but of the highest quality!

After a time, the men seemed to gather unusual strength and assurance from the community singing. They used every instrument available, hammering away on enamel plates, tin cups, metal dixies with spoons and forks, and a few warbled via their mouth organs. As the self-assurance grew in that community situation, the prisoners began spilling out of their huts. They seemed filled with an energy they had not dreamed was theirs.

That was when the cock-fighting began. One would hoist his mate on his shoulders and another would do the same and they were suddenly wrestling, trying to topple one another. I jumped on someone's back, gammy leg and all! I knew I could not have a person on my back—my leg was too frail for that. So I thought! No sooner had Gerry, my mate, fallen and taken me with him than I was up and helping to hoist him on my own shoulders.

The whole thing was crazy, but it was as though some hidden leadership was organising us, and giving us special and personal instructions.

Whilst prisoners of war knew a sort of camaraderie from the beginning, yet the old Army distinctions remained. A private was a private—whether called a sapper, a bombardier, a signaller or just plain 'private'. A non-commissioned officer was a corporal or a sergeant, or a sergeant major—no more and no less. And officers were officers: yes, sir! Often a nod took the place of a salute, but the rank was still recognised. Even sergeants did not have privates on their shoulders in cock-fighting, nor did the lower ranks dare touch one of the higher orders.

They did this day. Part of it happened because those of private's rank started cock-fighting with those of non-commissioned ranks. That was startling enough, but when officers mounted the shoulders of fellow officers and joined in the fray, it seemed the whole camp had gone mad. Privates grounded officers, and NCOs and officers toppled privates. It became a glorious—though unbelievable—melee. Something happened to us all. Prior to then, I had wondered how I could escape a massacre if the Allies were to approach and the Nips were to attempt a mass slaughter of us. 'Climb a tree!' I had decided. Then I would ask myself, 'How can you climb with your gammy leg?'

This day I did climb. I swung into a rubber tree and sat on the lowest bough. I could not feel the usual pain in my leg, and I scrambled up into high branches. Others had turned monkey too. Some of them ran up and down as though on a ladder. How to get down was my problem, but then it became no problem. I dropped onto the shoulders of an officer and he charged another couple, thinking I was mounted for cock-fighting. Suddenly I was struggling with my own surgeon. He had forgotten my gammy leg. He was pulling at it, trying to dismount me.

Once, I stood, collecting my thoughts, looking at the catwalk. A single private was making his way along it, stealthily, and the prisoners saw him. A great roar went up and the troops raced towards him. To everyone's delight he fled, his rifle trailing behind him. When another sentry came into sight, the roar was repeated and they rushed to the catwalk, but he had gone—running. Now

I saw that the catwalk was empty, and the thought struck me that the guards were afraid. They did not understand this strange New Year's Day ritual we were following. Their knowledge of our folklore—as they saw it—was meagre. They probably thought we were undertaking some religious exercises.

I have often wondered since, whether they became alarmed by the psychic forces that were unaccountably released in us. Dull-eyed prisoners had ceased their prison-walk—that stiff, zombie-like trudge. They had come to life—were human beings again. The guards must have seen the medley of privates and officers battling one another, and they must have wondered—but such a sight would be beyond their comprehension.

Especially the religious baptisms—if you could call them that. Without even thinking, some prisoners were ducking others beneath the water-showers. The pressure of water was high, almost stingingly fierce. Privates doused privates and officers officers, but when officers began doing it to privates and privates to officers, the watching Japanese must have thought it to be an intensely religious practice indeed! Perhaps it was a New Year purification rite. I guess they shook their heads in unbelief.

In a way we, too, were unbelieving. Not in all our Army days had we seen anything like it. Privates dragging officers under the shower, clothes and all—few as those clothes were—and keeping them breathless under the stinging sprays! Unbelievable! Yet it was like a ritual when you think about it, a grand catharsis, a hosing out of the Augean stables of human memory and humiliation. The fact that our Japanese captors were helpless in the face of this event made it even more wonderful. Some of the men wanted to rush the Japanese quarters—all in fun, of course. But others knew, even in that frenzy of ideas and actions, that they—the Nipponese—would open up with machine-guns, rifles and mortars, and that would end it all.

Those who were not there would put it down to *saki*. Unaccustomed to alcohol as we were, this was not likely. A few who had bartered highly for the tots may have found a slight alcoholic stimulation, but those few could not account for one of the strangest happenings I have experienced in my life.

That is why I wonder at myself for not writing this story

sooner. Perhaps it has been because I never quite understood that afternoon. I knew unleashed forces within me had had their uninhibited way. I know some psychologists could work away at the happening and somehow rationalise it, but I strongly doubt that they could properly account for it. I knew some of the forces within myself and within others. I recognised that such a day as this was badly needed for the prisoners. In the last eighteen months of the war I had stood on Kranji Hill—where later they were to create the Australian War Memorial Cemetery—and there had helped to commit bodies to the ground. Others had had their horrific experiences in Burma-Thailand on the 'Cholera Hills' of the infamous railway. They had seen countless comrades die in war and in prison days, and some kind of a catharsis was needed.

Well, I believe it happened! Bring on your brilliant psychologists to interpret the event, by all means, but it may be that such a happening is also beyond them. If not, then I think I would have written this story sooner. Naturally you will want to know the end and the aftermath. The main result I think, was the new gleam in many a prisoner's eyes, the new way of walking which many discovered—or rediscovered—and the new confidence and hope that seemed to have been born.

Of course the noise eventually died down, and a sentry or two appeared on the catwalk, and during the evening roll the new detail of sentries was instituted by the changing of the guard.

For me and my mates the main outcome was the warmth of the coffee-time with Cotter-Harvey and a few other of the great physicians and surgeons. We were all a bit exhausted, but still greatly exhilarated.

'Sugar, Geoffrey?' Cotter asked me, as though we had coffee every day with him and sugar was no problem for an officer of his calibre. That we were there with no court martial hanging over us, no charge sheet before us, was a miracle we all enjoyed. We knew some of the British officers had quickly withdrawn themselves and had deemed it prudent to be hidden from the eyes of all, but they were few, and they had missed out on the good time.

For some time Cotter and I sat a little apart from the rest and

talked above their animated chatter. He was interested in my writing.

‘What a story today would make!’ he said, his eyes gleaming.

Years later, after repatriation to Australia, I met the famous lung specialist. In fact it was in the famous—or infamous—‘Change Alley’ in Singapore, an alley which now, alas! is for ever gone. By a wonderful coincidence we were both on sentimental journeys, going over our old tracks. He looked pretty frail, for his age was far beyond mine and the war years had caught up with him. Even so he had the old gleam in his eyes, as I trust I also had in mine, and he shook hands. His left hand grasped a walking stick which helped to support him. He was still tall, still aristocratic, and still serene.

We did not talk for long. He had read many of my stories and enjoyed them, and in Change Alley he told me so. He gave me a bit of a questioning look, which I could not understand. Perhaps he wondered whether I had written a story called ‘Kranji, New Year’s Day, 1945’. He did not ask me, and it is only today, in recalling the events, that I am certain he wanted to know whether or not the story had been written. Maybe he thought it was not the kind of story that should be written, in spite of what he said to me over burnt peanut coffee on that memorable afternoon.

Right now I am wondering whether I ought to send it to the War Memorial Museum in Canberra so that it may be included in their annals.

Perhaps not.



From Prison to Peace

CHHI

ACTUALLY his name was Bobby Bree, and I don't know how he came to be called 'Chhi'. It happened somewhere back in his days when he was in the Militia, or, as we used to call them contemptuously, 'the chocos', meaning of course, 'the chocolate soldiers'. Not very complimentary, I'm afraid, but then we were volunteers and had little time for those who practised being soldiers and for the most part did not join the Army in time of war. Time of war was, of course, time of need. However, I'm not sure we had our facts correctly. I think most 'chocos' became members of the forces. It all sounds strange of course in these days when war is outmoded and it is very wrong to fight in an army, and so on.

To get back to young Bobby Bree. He was short, and he was stubby. He had merry brown eyes and a stubborn, rebellious chin which would flick out at a word. Tell him to do something and out came that chin. Apart from that, he was a gracious sort of person, or, as we used to say, a regular guy. He would work like a Trojan, in fact work himself to weariness, and then become quiet, stubborn, and a bit sullen. He would retreat into himself. When he wasn't working like that he was pleasant enough, in fact full of fun, and sometimes full of mischief. I guess everybody liked Bobby.

No one called him Bobby. They just called him 'Chhi'. He liked that. I often wondered why. Even now I wonder whether it was short for Chinese, and that was why he liked it. He had eyes which were slightly almond-shaped, slightly slanted. Yet I know for a fact that he was not Chinese. I had met his parents and his sister, and you saw no trace of Chinese in them. They were fine-looking people, especially his sister, and you could only call them Australian. Why then did Chhi like the fact of looking a bit Chinese? That is quite a question.

I have often wondered how different things might have been

had our unit not gone to Malaya. Chhi might have had a different view altogether. He might have accepted his Australian background, and settled down into it. For example, if he had been in the Western Desert there would have been none of that Chinese thing at all. There simply weren't Chinese in the Western Desert.

Mind you, I'm not blaming Chhi one tiny bit. We all thought the Chinese to be fine people. As European-type persons we always seemed so large, even coarse, against their fine-boned and delicately statured bodies. Their colour was so delicate, so even, so gracious against our variety of whites, puce-pinks, and freckled-reds. They were just so different, and not only in physical appearance. They were gentle, quietly intelligent, and efficient. I guess it was their millenniums of ancient culture that awed people like me, and fiercely attracted people like Chhi. From the very beginning he was drawn to them as fine steel to an irresistible magnet.

Even a Chinese might say I had idealised his race, because not all Chinese fit the description I have just given. Take the nights we played Mah-jong with them. They would shout, even scream. Their high-pitched voices would jabber away in high acceleration, and you would think a fight was about to break out. There you would be wrong. I never saw a fight happen on that score, indeed on any score. Except, of course, later when some of them emerged as Communists. But that was much later, and the circumstances were different. They looked different, too, with their long hair streaming over their shoulders and a certain wildness to their eyes. As I say, the circumstances were so different.

The days I am talking about are the idyllic ones at Port Dickson. Along those unbelievable tropical beaches with their clear sands and green waters and lazy palms you could have been in a picture of a tourist dream. Those Chinese homes of the rich were set back slightly from the beaches, and they were not your general, run-of-the-mill kampong Chinese houses either. They were beautifully built, dreamily architected, and very gracious. To sit out near the beach, or on the beach, and to chat with them—the Chinese of the upper crust—that was an experience any soldier might have coveted.

And Chhi coveted that fiercely. He knew a few families, and

one in particular. I can't remember names after all these years. I simply know the family name was Yeong. That's all I know, but I can remember the pretty, delicately chiselled youngest daughter who really loved Chhi, and to whom Chhi, for his part, returned that love. I wasn't often invited, probably because I was gauche and shy, and anyway because I used to dream most of the time I sat with them. Probably they thought I was taciturn and impassive. To tell the truth, I didn't know how to cope with social situations. For that matter, I have always had trouble on that score. I only mention my taciturn nature because I happened to go everywhere that Chhi went, but I was unable to be as Sinophilic as him. I admired these people, but then I never had the passion for them which was part of Chhi's make-up.

I wish now I had paid more attention to what was happening. You probably know that the Chinese are very family minded people; so much so that they really have very large clans, and they are very particular as to arrangements for marriages. It must all relate to the family, and so on. Our haphazard Western way of a mixed society does not appeal to them at all. I guess that is why they were very happy to have social intercourse with us, but would not have dreamed of admitting a Western soldier to their family. I never dreamed that Chhi would greatly covet being part of their family. I suppose I thought this tropical dream in which we were living would soon be over, either by recall to Australia at the best, or at the worst by some terrible act of war. That was all the thought I gave to it.

Circumstances broke our links with the Chinese families at Port Dickson. We were whisked away to Mersing on the south-east coast. All of us were put to work on setting up an intricate system of communications. The infantry dug in, making something like an impregnable fortress of that part of the Peninsula. Chhi worked with us on the lines, and we were too busy to have much social life in the district. We had a sense that war was close, and we would soon be involved in battle. The make-believe battle exercises had a touch of reality about them. The most we did was to wander in the marketplace at night, drinking the cooling ices, and sampling the sweet bananas. Others simply stayed back in their camps, whiling the hours away in the

canteens until the 'lights out' bugle. The humidity was, to say the least, enervating.

Even there Chhi linked up with the Chinese family he had known at Port Dickson. As I said, the clans are large, and some of the clan lived at Mersing, and some out at Endau, about twenty-six miles away. Chhi busied himself with them, but I opted out. That was a time in which I extended my writing. Some of it was dreamy poetry, but most of it was short stories. I think I had accepted Chhi's Chinese preoccupation as part of his way of life, and I left it at that.

CHHI, Col, Curly and I were in the jungle, laying line. It was midnight when we pricked our own lines to test them back to Headquarters. It was a weird experience as we heard an officer from Division Headquarters passing through the message of war. Even before Pearl Harbour, intelligence had discovered a vast convoy of ships proceeding south, heading for Thailand and the Malayian Peninsula. I watched all the faces under our flare-lamp, as I passed on the news. Col and Curly showed a certain delight, a delight of relief, but Chhi's eyes gleamed with excitement. In fact his face shone.

'About time,' he breathed softly. Then his head went up, and he looked through the trees of the jungle to the stars which barely showed through. 'This is going to be some war,' he said.

I remember those words now, very clearly, because it was certainly some war. Also it was some war for Chhi, and in a way the kind of opportunity he had looked for. I am still puzzled, not by his words, nor even by the war, but by the whole matter of Chhi. Thinking it over now, I see how little we really understood of one another, and how very, very little I understood of Chhi. I suppose my reasoning, at that time, was a fairly common one. It went something like this: 'Most Australians live in the suburbs. Most suburbs are dull, hence most Australians are mediocre. Chhi comes from a suburb. Chhi is mediocre. What difference would war make? Yes, how would war change a man?'

I was soon to find out.

I'm not going to go through the story of the action. It has been written down in many places, and by people who have an eye for

detail and event, which I do not. I have forgotten much more than I remember, but certain impressions remain. The spooky waiting for the Japanese to come; the first burst of excitement, the exhilaration that the issues were about to be joined, and all that sort of thing; but then, as I said, the spooky waiting. Were Japanese infiltrating our jungle defences? Had they made their way through those vast minefields? Would they suddenly show themselves where we were? We received no immediate answers to this sort of question, but suddenly the skies were filled with Zeros and small bombers, and we had little to return in defence. We hid in the jungle; we worked mostly at night. We waited for the ground forces to arrive, and all the time we strengthened our defences.

Chhi seemed to work with enormous strength, out of heightened excitement. He was everywhere, testing line, patrolling it, laying new lines which would keep us in communication even if the main cables were cut. And so on. In some mysterious way he had more information than any of us, and time proved his information to be right. It was only later, in the POW camp, that I thought it over and realised he had been in communication with the Chinese. They had their own intelligence lines.

The debacle of the north began. Troops began to move back down the Peninsula. It was a move designed to 'shorten the lines of communication' and to 'consolidate with an aim to advancing'. These military rationalisations deceived no one. We were on the run. It was not easy to surrender the old image of invincibility. So we clung to it. At Mersing we were making ready for a tropical Tobruk. We would hold out, come what may.

Our time there was exciting, as Japanese troops infiltrated down the east coast, spreading out long tentacles, whilst on the west side they were pushing down with strong forces. We kept the lines intact, following up the bombings and repairing the lines. We would have to duck into the jungle as the fighter-bombers zeroed in on us. Again, I won't describe the long days and endless nights. Unshaven, rarely sleeping, constantly watching the lines, we staved off weariness in the relentless demands of the moment. Nerves frayed, irritation set in, but behind it all was a determination to become a citadel for ever, even if the west side was forced back on to Singapore Island.

One day Chhi said, 'We have to get back to Singapore Island, or we're done.'

'You're crazy,' we said. 'We're not going to move an inch from here. They'll never dislodge us.'

Chhi looked serious. 'Fair jonniky,' he told us, 'we're done if we don't.'

We shook our heads. 'The old Brig. won't shift an inch,' we said.

An orderly came to our tent. 'The Lieut. wants you,' he said. 'We're off to Singapore.'

We were stunned. Even Chhi showed surprise. 'Might be a bit late,' he commented.

All the way along those miles we raced, trying to beat the column coming down from the north, reaching back as it was along the west coast. We had flashes of news, sudden reports of strange events, acts of heroism, bursts of victory to be followed by reluctant withdrawals. I watched Chhi as we retreated. He seemed to have changed. His stubborn chin was set permanently. His eyes had gone hard. His very head had a grim set to it. I never saw him sleep.

But then, neither did I sleep. I don't remember changing clothes in two weeks. A thick stubble grew into a flourishing beard of ginger hair, much to my embarrassment. I felt within me the same hardness I saw in Chhi. The other members of the team hardened too. Our days of mediocre suburban living were not even a thing of memory. They were blotted out. New and strange issues had confronted us and we were trying to cope with them. Life and death had new dimensions. We had joined the ancient race to which we had belonged, but which we had forgotten in the years of the Depression, and the years of existing in small houses with plots of grass, gardens and front walls. Sport and other issues seemed like the lifeless things of another world. We just did not think about them any more. We were working out old issues, deep down in our minds, but saying nothing with our lips.

THEN we were in Singapore. We had met the first elements of the retreat from the north. We mingled with them at Johore Bahru. We jostled with them on the causeway, trying to accept the

traffic control of the military police. Everyone seemed to live in a black smudge, as the smoke swept in from the bombed oil wells. Life was a sooty melee as we watched civilians crowd the road to Singapore, walking down one side of the main highway, whilst another stream of refugees walked away from the city.

We began the old job, laying lines, getting communications. Long ago we had left the textbook patterns. Sometimes we would lay line to a company, even to a platoon. We worked back to Division Headquarters, or forward to Battalion Headquarters, or, for that matter, anywhere. Chhi was everywhere, bright as a button, hard as a diamond, frenetic as a fever, darting, throwing out line through the cable-spewer, dragging it through the long *lalang* grass or whipping it through the rubber plantations, jumping drains, shinning up trees. He was ubiquitous, omnipresent, a bright, feverish threat.

Then they came—the Japanese. Someone had blown part of the causeway, but I guess they never intended to use that. They just came in their droves on barges, pressing, persistent, a hostile tide across the waters, getting to the shore, slipping back under the merciless throb of the machine-guns, the mortars, the heavy artillery, and even the hand-to-hand fighting. We were just behind the first line of defences, and we slipped back, keeping communication while the spitting of the Brens died, and the screams of 'Banzai!' and the rattle of crackers went on ceaselessly, shattering the night air. Overhead came the endless pounding of the heavy artillery from the Johore side of the Straits.

Chhi found a riderless Norton. He sat astride it, his short legs just reaching the footrests. 'I'm keeping this,' he said hoarsely. 'We're gonna need these things.'

I had always had one of them, and now I was using it most of the time. I used it until that last mad charge when I was wounded, and I saw Chhi no more. But I did see him before that charge, and what he did was most curious, although I guess now that I understand it.

He said to me, as we rode back to Brigade HQ, 'Corp, this is nearly the end. We've had it. There's no hope of things changing.'

I knew he was right, but didn't like to think of it that way.

'I hear some are leaving already,' I said. 'Some of them are deserting.'

He nodded. 'That's how it would be with some of them,' he agreed. 'It's the crisis that shows what a man is. A man doesn't change in a crisis. He just shows what he is.'

I looked at him curiously. I had never heard him say a thoughtful word. He seemed to live life rather than talk about it.

'What are you going to do?' I asked.

'Disappear,' he said.

'Where?' I asked.

He grinned. 'Where they'll never see me,' he said.

'You mean you're going to get one of those boats?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'Not likely! I know better places to go than back to Aussie.'

I didn't comprehend. 'Where else, then?' I asked.

He grinned, stuck out his jaw, looked me hard in the eyes, and shook his head. 'Can't really say,' he said. 'But before I go, I'll do some damage.'

That he certainly did. We were being pushed back on Reformatory Road, back towards the city itself, when he did the most incredible thing. We had just passed an Indian regiment which was listless, sullen, and completely demoralised. At the time I was scornful of them, but I have seen their point since. What were they fighting for, anyway? When we passed them, we heard the stutter of guns which was peculiar to Japanese weapons. Chhi pulled his Norton to the side of the road.

'Paul,' he said softly, 'I'm going through.'

'Going through!' I echoed. 'Going through to where?'

He gave a hard grin. 'Just going through,' he said. 'Just going through.'

He leaned his machine and his body towards me. 'It's been good being together,' he said, 'and I've always appreciated it.' He held out his hand. His eyes gleamed from his grimy face. 'There's still time before full light,' he said. 'I'm going through.'

He slipped a new magazine into his Tommy-gun, held it in his right hand against his stomach, slightly revved his engine, and then straightened up and moved off.

'All the best,' he said, above the engine, and shot off into the

darkness. I sat astride my own machine, weary but listening.

Then I heard it: first the peculiar noise of the Japanese machine-guns, and suddenly, across their noise, the unmistakable stutter of Chhi's Tommy-gun. I sat for some moments, trying to understand, until I noticed that the Japanese stutter and the Tommy-gun stutter had both ceased, and there was the faint but distant crackle of the Norton. Even now I could not swear to it, but if it was that, then it must have been a miracle.

I never saw Chhi again.

I SAID I never saw Chhi again. To be honest, I don't know whether I did or not. Many years later, at the time when I went to Kranji War Memorial Cemetery, I paced around the graves, trying to find his. I went into the silent arbour where they have the names of those who died, and I found it, sure enough. It had written 'SIGNALMAN R. W. BREE, MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD.' It had his Army number, his unit and section. Close by were other names, those of Col and Curly, and men of my section. I swallowed hard and walked away.

I say I never saw Chhi. Maybe that is not true. I heard about some friendly Chinese who helped some of our fellows in their black market purchases. Some of our men used to go through the wire at night, beating the guards, and getting out to where food was obtainable. They paid high prices in Japanese dollars, or they bartered the things we had kept. Here and there a watch or a bit of jewellery or some rare thing which was saleable. There were reports from them of a Chinese named Chai Hong who asked low prices and gave good food. He could even get some kinds of medicine. He led some of the more adventurous to where the petrol dump was, and on occasions brought a truck to them. He himself would never steal the drums of petrol, but our men did. They drove it to a place where another driver took over, and Chai Hong paid them well for it.

Gradually I began to get the idea that Chai Hong was Chhi Bree. It was a crazy idea, but you could be forgiven crazy ideas within a POW camp. You could imagine anything there, except becoming truly free. You could dream about that, but you could never really imagine it would happen.

The time I did imagine was when I had a high fever. If it had been only malaria it mightn't have been so bad, but it was diphtheria, or, more correctly, a diphtheritic ulcer. I didn't know you could get diphtheria in an ulcer, but I did. I watched its white, treacherous growth spread out like a misty stain across my thigh, until the thigh began to be eaten away. Almost daily they spooned out the horrible grey patch from the centre of the ulcer, and more and more I fell into a weary fever. In the middle of the fever I saw Chhi, alive, strong, and smiling. He was smiling at me. I did not understand. Chhi was dead. If he had survived those first Jap guns, there would have been more behind them.

When I came out of the fever I saw someone beside me. He had a linen bag, bulging. In it was tinned food, *towgay*, dried fish, and other things. There was medicine too, sulphur drugs—things which would have helped me. Weak as I was, I knew there was a treasure in that bag. The man who held it was one of my section. It was Hank Swain. He looked at me with pity and then said, 'Chai sent this to you. It's all for you.'

I stared at him, and then tried to sit up, but I was too weak. 'You're mad,' I said. 'Chhi's dead.'

He looked back at me. 'I said Chai,' he said, 'Chai Hong.'

'Oh!' I said weakly. 'Chai Hong.' Then I stared at him again. 'How come he sends this to me? How come he knows me?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Search me,' he said. 'How would I know?' His eyes became blank, as though he were covering something. 'Heck!' he said. 'If that Chinese fellow wants to help you, why do you complain?'

'Who's complaining?' I asked. 'I'm just curious. How come he knows me, and does this?'

He shrugged his shoulders, and pushed the bag under my bed. 'Look after it,' he advised. 'You don't often come by stuff like this.'

Come by stuff like that? Man, it was a dream! Even now I see that bag, bulging with priceless food and medicine. I could feel it under the bed, and then suddenly I was tired and slept. When I awoke, I thought it must have been a dream, but the bag was under the bed.

The miracle only happened once. It would be a lie to say I became strong through the food and medicine, but I know it was that which saved my life, and of course I was grateful. The fight with the ulcer was won, and I still have a weal, a long white scar to show what happened, but we won.

Some lost. They have a fine white headstone in Kranji Cemetery, and when I go there I think about them, and the battle they lost. It always makes me grateful to Chai Hong, or Chhi, or whatever his real name is.

WHEN the end came, it was dramatic. The most incredible joy welled up from somewhere. It had been hidden away there for three and a half years, but suddenly it burst out. Men went almost crazy, or they became dazed with joy. They watched the first commandoes come into the camp, then the Supreme Commander, and later the doctors, the nurses, and the food. Ah, yes, the food! That they found difficult to eat. All sorts of changes had to take place in their minds and bodies before they could feel themselves to be free and then start to live free.

My mind kept going back to Chhi or Chai or whoever it was. Some of us set out from our camp to find the good Chinese who had helped us. We searched through grove after grove, but found nothing of any Chhi or Chai. Instead we found bright-eyed, long-haired Chinese who were Communists. Some of them were searching out other Asians who had betrayed them to the Japanese through the long occupation. They were settling accounts, working out revenge, and naming enemies. We watched helplessly from the sidelines.

On one of these searches I wandered into a kampong. There was a beautiful young Chinese, pregnant, seated on the steps outside an *attap* hut. I had a weird feeling that we had met, and I racked my brain to remember. The strange thought finally came into my mind that this was the Daisy we had known at Port Dickson, that she was one of the Yeong clan. Then I knew that to be stupid. She had a child, a bright-eyed little fellow of about two years of age.

I said to her, 'Do you know a Chai Hong?'

For only a fraction her eyes gleamed. Then they became

stolid, impassive, uncommunicative. 'No, I don't,' she said in beautiful English.

On a sudden impulse I said, 'Do you know a Daisy Yeong?'

Again the flash, but again the quick concealment. She shook her head. 'I don't know,' she said, and the quaint lilt of her voice told me she was Daisy Yeong.

Of course, I could have been mistaken. It may just have been a big hunger in me to believe that Chhi was still alive, even if he had married Daisy Yeong and this little boy was his. That is why I stared at the little fellow, and of course he could have been Bobby Bree's son. Bobby Bree had looked so Chinese.

THREE days later we were leaving for the hospital ship. The excitement was so intense that the thoughts of Chhi had been driven from my mind. We were put into Army trucks, seated in the back, and our new belongings and our old cherished possessions were placed in another vehicle. We left the place in convoy.

I was scarcely seeing the country as it flicked by. In fact, I was in so much of a dream that I hardly realised the convoy had slowed down. Alongside the road the native population was standing, watching us. Long ago we had called out 'Hullo Joe!' to them, because they had called it out to us. Chhi had told me once that they were not saying 'Hullo Joe!' but some greeting which was gracious. We were answering their greeting, and shouting, 'Hullo Joe!' We had lived with them in their suffering for these years, and they were not letting us go without love.

Finally the convoy had stopped. Unbelievably it was near the kampong where I had asked the woman with the child whether she knew Chai Hong. Hank Swain looked surprised when our truck slowed down. 'That's where we used to get the food,' he said. 'The black market food.'

I felt a chilling stab in my body. 'Not where Chai Hong lives?' I asked.

He nodded. 'He's gone a long time,' he said. 'He went north with the Communists before the end.'

'What about his wife?' I asked. He shook his head. 'Never met her,' he said.

I looked eagerly to see whether she was in the crowd, but without success. Then I saw her, drifting out of the compound, moving towards the road. With her came a short, strong-looking Chinese with a jutting chin, and long black hair flowing down to his shoulders.

I fought my way out of the truck, and jumped, falling on the road; then standing up I ran into the kampong. 'Chhi!' I cried, 'Chhi, you old son-of-a-gun!' I ran at the little man.

I saw him hesitate. Then he shook his head. 'No understand,' he said.

'But you do,' I said. 'You're Chhi.' I pronounced the aspirates. 'You're Bobby.'

He shook his head. 'My name Chai Hong,' he said.

I wanted to cry out, weep, sob. The driver of our truck blew his horn. Then the other drivers began to blow their horns. Tears of frustration were gathering within me.

'Bobby,' I said, 'Bobby, you've got to tell me it's you. Tell me! Even if you want to stay here. Tell me! You are Chhi, aren't you?'

The eyes narrowed, and then went blank. He shook his head.

I looked back at the truck. In a few miles we would be at the wharf, then on the ship and on our way home. And here was Chhi. Or at least I thought so.

Tears suddenly came streaming down. 'Bobby! Chhi,' I said, 'come clean. Give me that satisfaction at least.'

It was almost as though he wavered. 'If you are Chai Hong,' I said desperately, 'then you know me. You sent me food and medicine.'

This time there was a gleam and a half nod. So it was Chai Hong.

The din was pounding away now in my ears, down in my depths. The blaring of horns, the cries of the men, the shouts of officers. Some of them were coming across the kampong.

'For God's sake,' I screamed, 'admit you're Chhi and let me go!'

Maybe I imagined I saw the eyes soften. I saw Daisy take in her breath. I always imagine it was Daisy, but then I wasn't absolutely sure.

A military police guard had taken my arm, 'Come on, mate,' he said. 'We've got to get you to that hospital ship. We're all waiting.'

That was when my heart went cold. My eyes were still crying out, but Chai Hong—or whoever he was—was not taking much notice. He smiled pleasantly and nodded to the guards. They began to take me, firmly, towards the trucks.

What happened then I will never be able to swear to. Yet I believe it did happen. I swear I saw tears in the eyes of Chai Hong, and I am sure his hands, his fists, suddenly gripped tightly. I am sure that the woman put out a staying hand to him. Most of all, I am sure I heard a soft voice saying, 'Paul'. I know it's crazy, but I am certain he said it. Then I saw him look towards his wife, and they did a most un-Chinese thing. They embraced, and he held her tightly while she clung to him, and the little fellow ran up and held his father's leg.

They led me to the Army truck, and I was laughing and crying at the same time, and wondering about it all. I can remember a medical orderly saying, 'He needs a sedative.'

Suddenly I was very, very tired—so tired that it seemed some enormous weight was pushing down my eyelids, and I was being forced away into another world, a world of sleep and oblivion. They said I fainted, but I knew that it wasn't just fainting. I knew an enormous relief had flooded me, and also a strong, pressing pain which was not a hurtful pain, but a pain in which both sorrow and joy were mixed.

Most of all I knew that this Chhi—if it was Chhi—was the truest man I had ever met. Often I have thought over that deep impression, and because of it I have realised that to be a man, especially to be a man like Chhi, is an experience whose dimensions cannot be measured. I knew that somehow no man is mediocre, not really, essentially mediocre.

I guess that you don't blame me, then, for going to Singapore, often, and you won't wonder that when I look man after man in the eye, especially men who are Chinese and about my age, who are short and stubby, with pronounced chins and bright gleaming eyes, that I will be excused for saying in my mind, 'That could be Chhi!'

Nor will you wonder that I really view every man differently from the way I viewed them before I met Chhi, especially as he seemed to shine out in the face of Chai Hong on the day we left Singapore.

FROM SINGAPORE TO SYDNEY

WHEW! Where can a man start on all that myriad of impressions? The thought confounds me, and yet there is material to fill books. I think impressions rushed in on us in those days, and after a somewhat placid life intermixed with cruelties of the little yellow enemy and the usual horror tales, we were rushed into a world of unimaginable beauty. I think it was the arrival of the Gurkhas at our prison camp that made us realise we were free men, although of course we had been well supplied with news from our hidden camp wireless set.

RELEASE! It rushed at us, that new world: little brown men with Sten guns and a hatred of the Japs, eager as they were to incite this enemy into a false move. We could hear the stutter of those deadly little guns. They smiled at us and said that soon the last shadows of Nippon would have fled from over our lives. Yes, we were free! After the Gurkhas came the Fannies with their mobile canteens, and we were suddenly in the world of women. We had, all of us, felt the incompleteness of man without his counterpart, and here they were to usher us into this new world. It was new because all our values had come to maturity over the years when we thought—thought quite a lot. Previously we had scarcely thought about the society we had known: now we understood. It is foolish to think that we came home sorrowful and silent men. It was an experience, and many of us are the better for it. Some, of course, lie on many hills, and we still seem to hear the 'Last Post' floating from amid the green trees, and the

urgent 'Reveille' that calls them to life immortal. We who are left and are free have happiness before the eyes, but our hands still grasp theirs in memory.

Yes, we were free. We began to eat good food. The old eternal round of rice meals was replaced by foods we had dreamed of in rash, wild moments. Here they were before us. We were dazed, could hardly believe the miracle of bread and butter. Chocolates and Virginian cigarettes—they were beyond conception! But no longer! Truly the shadows of our small oppressors had lifted from us, and the dread of the coming invasion and what it might mean for us: death had been so close to us in those days.

EMBARKATION. When the ser-major said to me, 'You are going home tomorrow,' there was an air of unreality. Dreams of those terrible years were to come suddenly true. I think our minds were beyond comprehension of those events. The senses had been rushed at by superlatives. We were confused with the terrible beauty of the whole affair. To hear a woman's voice really hurt. One chap, after listening to the first woman speaking to him after three and a half years, said to me, 'Come away; that's like honey. It's sweet; too much isn't good for you.'

We were going home, then, to a world where this was the so-called commonplace. In some ways are our values refined, our appreciations sensitised. We are new men in many ways, and yet no thanks to the enemy. It was the integrity of strong men that was not impaired but strengthened by the harsh years of testing. But free! Free to go from it all! Free to enter into a new world which had been a dream world. I think it had all the unreality of a dream about it; I think dreams seemed more substantial to us than the reality. Yes, we were free, and trucks were taking us towards Singapore.

For many nights, weeks of nights, we had been waiting sleeplessly for the consummation of the promise. Some of the humorists sang, 'Lord Louis regrets he is unable to land today.' Others sighed, 'Languid Louis, oh lazy Louis, when will you come?' He came, all right, and shook us with his big hand, gave us that warm smile of his, and then introduced us to 'the wife'. I was in

bed at the time, and Lady Louis smiled sweetly when I told her I came from Sydney.

'Where all the pretty girls are,' she said. That sent a pang through me.

This was all finished. Singapore town greeted us with Indians clad in jungle green. There were little Gurkhas telling the Nips to work hard and do the things we had done over the past years. One Jap warrant officer toiled at loading earth onto a lorry. The Chinese and natives stood about, jeering. A Jap working party trudged by, heads bent, and hopeless looks on their faces. The vendors were there, too. They shrieked their old wares at us. We had no money. We wanted nothing. The Red Cross had seen to that! Still they persisted with their long-hoarded black market gains. Old watches we had sold in the hard times now reappeared and were ours for a packet of Virginian cigarettes!

The truck rushed past them down the wharf, and there were sweetly smiling nurses with hot tea and biscuits, cigarettes, and nice words. Then we were on board ship, the *Oranje* standing in white splendour at the wharf. We stared at her from amid the wreck of dockage, so lately bombed by the Super Forts. The cries of Singapore were in our ears, but they were fading away, fading away, and our ears were hearing the soft murmurs of the new life that came in upon us like terribly sweet music.

The *Oranje* presented the direct antithesis to our former camp and life. There had been darkness and filth there; here there was light and cleanliness. We stared amazed and bewildered like yokels.

One chap muttered to the nurse, 'Why, that's a calendar, isn't it? I haven't seen one in years!'

She laughed and said, 'How sweet!'

That's what we were thinking about her.

Then we went to our wards, which were white and pure. We stared at white-sheeted beds, we goggled at silver taps and convenient cupboards.

Then we left Singapore.

'GOODBYE SINGAPORE!'

We pulled out from the wharf. Our hearts literally thrilled. The crowd waved to us. 'You can keep Singapore,' we said, and

yet in our hearts there were faint regrets, old memories that suddenly came crowding in on us, old memories returning from pre-Nip days. And then, too, were the memories of the huddled Singapore beneath the devastation of the cruel little bombers; streets lined with dead, contorted into a hideous effigy of the glory of war. We remembered those days and were silent, until we remembered we were going home. Then we waved frantically to those who were staying behind; those who would follow us. Singapore hooted its sirens, and the grim grey ships in the harbour nodded quietly as we moved out on to the ocean.

SHIPMATES.

One thing we may never forget was the sterling work of the sisters and nurses. They toiled for our well being, and we blundered about in a maze of friendliness and treatment we still could not quite absorb. I suppose we had become very analytical in those years, certainly introspective, and we were apt to squeeze the full content of joy from any experience. What experiences were these, then, and we could absorb in full content. We were dazzled with the luxury of life.

We wanted to see Darwin. We had almost become accustomed to the wonder of poultry and eggs, fruit and ice-cream, and goodnight smiles from the nurses. We had become almost blasé about it, and yet it was only a thin veneer covering the tremendous joy beneath. Through it all, we were hungry for Australia. We had dreamed about that country on many nights. Soon we were to pull into Darwin. The skipper told us we would be clothed there. We thought nothing more would happen.

'HULLO, DARWIN!'

'Hullo, you,' said Darwin as we pulled through the boom. Great Catelinas tore over the water to impress us with their heavy beauty. They screamed in delight over the ship. Long white streamers floated in the air and were silver strips in the sun. When they reached us, they were long unrolled strips of toilet paper! How we laughed! Then Darwin's Navy came out to meet us. Small vessels chattered up to us. Larger vessels hooted a heavy welcome. A torpedo boat roared about us. And suddenly

everybody sang! They waved and screamed and laughed, and all the time we shivered through and through in every nerve. We crowded to the sides, men in blue shorts and white shirts, some with only one leg, some without an arm, and others still thin from privation.

'Oh hullo, Aussie,' we cried. 'Hullo, Darwin and all this glorious world which is ours.' We were at Aussie at last!

The fleet ushered us in. The air sirens screamed joyously from the shore. The hills about were lined with waving soldiers and soldier women. The wharf was brown with crowding figures, and there on the wharf was a great sign, 'WELCOME HOME!'

It was that which broke us. We suddenly became alive. We shouted and screamed and nearly wept. When we were exhausted and close to the wharf, the band was playing. Ye gods! what was that song? 'Waltzing Matilda'. Thousands of voices sang it to us, and we listened, silent. The folk song of the most wonderful people in the world! We shivered in ecstasy. We felt a lump in our throats. Oh yes, that is true. We had a right to be sentimental after four and a half years. We had a right to gaze proudly upon these sturdy fellow-countrymen of ours. We had a right to thrill to the core, and we shouted in return, 'Thanks, Darwin, and hullo, Aussies!'

They swarmed the ship, of course. Even the vigilant provost could not restrain them. They clambered up the rigging, men and women. Others took shots from the wharf. Suddenly there was a girl behind me and a man with a camera. He said, 'Put your arm around her.'

I did; I needed no second bidding. 'This is the first girl I have had my arm around for years—four and a half years,' I said.

'Jot that down,' he said to his steno, an AWA girl with smiles.

'I can believe it,' said the lass I was clasping. 'Ah, that's better,' she said. The old technique had not been killed.

The men on the decks were showering Nipponese paper currency on the eager souvenir hunters on the jetty. Someone threw Nip cigarettes to them. They smoked them and looked slightly dazed. Then we were allowed to go ashore. We were allowed to put our feet on firm Aussie soil! Yes, you know how many years ago it was since we did that. We used to count it in days.

We were placed in trucks and cars and taken to Mindel Park. Amplifiers welcomed us with music. Prettily dressed girls came out and smiled at us, and we were no longer bashful. You simply can't be like that with an Australian lass. She has the unconscious poise of perfect freedom.

WE let them lead us to groaning tables where home-cooking yelled at us to be tested—scones and buns and sausage rolls that had only appeared in dreams hitherto. The girls talked and told us all we wanted to know. Yes, there were still some unmarried. No, there weren't many Yanks now. Yes, Sydney still had its bridge. (The Japanese had told us they had shelled the middle pylon away!)

Then we drank soft drinks, and ate fruit such as is not in any other country. We could eat nothing more. We sat and talked, and all the while the music played and the sea below the golden sands looked cool and inviting. Darwin surrounded us, trying to make us happy, but they could not do what they had already done. They had a dance waiting for us that night, a dance and a picture show and a concert, and anything else we wanted. Alas! We had to leave at five-thirty.

We hung over that rail until Darwin faded from sight! The girls at the wharf wept when we came in; they laughed and smiled when we went. Do you realise what all that meant to us? Can you really comprehend what that welcome said to us? We had thought at times in those years that we had been forgotten, and now Darwin said reproachfully, and yet understandingly, 'We are Australia, and we have not forgotten you.'

'Gosh, we'll never forget that welcome,' said hundreds. 'They turned it on properly,' said others. 'We never dreamed it would be like that,' said another.

Darwin had said, 'We are the front door to Australia. Enter in, veterans of a terrible war. We have not forgotten you.' The paper they sent aboard said, 'Men of the *Oranje*, we salute you.' That is why we will always love Darwin and the valiant garrison that guards her dry sands and beautiful shores.

The Catelinas saw us on our way. We steered slowly through Australian waters, reluctant to leave such a wonderful place,

regretful and wistful about that lost dance. Then we remembered there were Brisbane and Sydney, and the folk we were urgently waiting to see, and we said, 'All this, and heaven too?'

QUEENSLAND COMING.
QWhen we turned the Cape we saw the gently rolling hills of the east coast. To us it meant Australian shore. I think it was then we first realised the vastness of our land, and knew why Australian people were so large, and why they so much loved their own. We applied our new tests of values and found the old homeland A1. We watched the soft shores roll away into the distance and then we knew it could not be long.

THE DAY I FOUGHT KELLY

HOW could I forget, anyway, the day I fought Kelly? That day settled a lot of things for me. At the time I don't think I saw it as settling anything, only maybe the particular issue with Kelly himself. But then, curiously enough, I had nothing against Kelly and, as far as I know, Kelly had nothing against me. So we really didn't have anything to resolve between ourselves. Mind you, there was something to resolve as far as the men of my platoon were concerned. They wondered whether I could really fight Kelly. They wondered whether I was a phoney, for all the good physical training I had given them, and the instruction in both wrestling and boxing. One or two had had the gloves on with me, and there had been a bit of hard hitting, but on both sides it had been tentative. I was a bit of an enigma to them.

Let me go back to the beginning. I had joined the Army in 1940, and when a call came, in the first month, for those who wished to become Physical Training Instructors, I weighed in for the course. Our camp was a bit boring, and I liked PT and the wrestling and boxing that went with it. There was a history to all this, and I will tell you shortly about that. However, I went to the course, which was a bit of a stunner. You just weren't allowed to stand around. Everywhere you went you had to run. In fact they shouted out, 'Run! Run! Run!' So you ran. Likewise there was no 'Stand easy!' so that you could relax. Mainly it was 'Attention!', or, as a very great concession, and not very often, 'Stand at ease!' As everyone knows, if you keep that up you will produce powerful PT instructors, full of muscle and energy, provided you have some men left in the course at the last! We had

about thirty left in the course out of one hundred and sixty who registered. Amazingly enough, I was one of the thirty.

In fact it is simply false modesty which makes me write that last sentence. To be honest, I enjoyed every minute of it. The first few nights I ached, and was stiff in the early mornings, but that soon wore off and I felt I could have touched the moon had I cared to jump. I was jumping about inside my skin, mad to get at something. So when they made me a corporal—with two stripes—I began to take it out on the troops. Most of them had been in the Army only a few months, and they were not yet out of their office-or-store rhythm of life. To be suddenly set upon by an ebullient PT instructor was traumatic. They protested. They used the favourite saying, 'You'll keep, mate. You'll make shark bait.' That, of course, would be when we were on the ship, sailing for the battle area.

I can see their problem now, when I look back over it. Was this corporal all he made out to be? Sure, he could teach wrestling holds and all the good punches, but was he for real? They had other problems too. Sometimes they saw me reading a Bible, and since I never went near the wet-canteen they were getting the idea I was 'one of them'! I grin when I look back on it all now. But then it wasn't quite so humorous.

It was at this time that Kelly came. Don't think that Kelly was one of your wild Irishmen. No, sir. He wasn't even a wild Australian. He didn't have to prove himself. He was big; he was powerful; he looked clean and strong and tough. But then, strangely enough, he wasn't hard-tough, or even a bit rough. In fact, given the right opportunities he could have made quite a place in life. Perhaps he has. It is years since I've heard about Kelly.

'Kell,' they called him. Everyone respected him. The reason was that he had done a bit in the ring. Mostly amateur work, but not all. They had put him into my platoon. I thought, 'How am I going to teach Kelly anything?' Nobody had known any of the punches, and I guessed that Kelly knew them all. I guessed I would have to take him philosophically, especially if I ever had a bout with him.

I shivered a little at the thought. Then of course that need

never be, if I played the matter carefully. I could get him to teach the punches too. We could even give carefully prepared demonstrations. Those were the lines on which my thinking ran.

However, the platoon decided to work it another way. They made up their minds, and approached me when I was writing mail. I used to write a staggering number of letters. I was a bit insecure. I needed people to write to me, continually.

'Corp,' they said, and you could have thought they were as sweet as honey, 'you must be just one helluva fighter.'

'No fighter,' I said modestly, 'just a boxer.'

'Kelly's a fighter,' they said, 'and maybe he's a bit of a boxer, too.'

'Fancy that now,' I said, battling the tide. 'I guess he is a fighter from all accounts we hear.'

'Right,' they agreed.

'Guess I had better get on with these letters,' I said. 'I have quite a few to write.'

They even let me scribble away for a bit. Come to think of it, that letter I was writing must have seemed a bit disconnected to the person who read it later.

They started on it again. This time directly. 'Corp,' they said, 'why don't you take Kell on?'

'Take Kell on?' I echoed. I shook my head. 'Don't think I will,' I said, giving them no reason. I kept shaking my head, as though I was doubtful, but still thinking about it. I was trying madly to work out a good excuse. They waited. After a time I looked up. 'One of these days, maybe,' I said charmingly, 'but not now. Right now I have some important letters to write.'

They looked at me, stolidly. 'Fancy that!' they said. 'Fancy having such an important letter!'

After all these years I can't remember the exact wording they used, so I'll translate it into the modern idiom. They looked directly at me and said, 'Hey, Corp, you wouldn't be chicken by any chance, would you?'

I looked a bit surprised, possibly even a bit hurt. 'No,' I said definitely, 'I'm not that way at all. Just a bit busy.'

Kurt, who was one of the ringleaders, with a terrific sense of the dramatic, of fun and of frolic, said gently, 'Corp, suppose

you go on with your writing, and we make the arrangements?’

‘What arrangements?’ I asked.

Kurt was now really eager. ‘For a real bout, of course,’ he said clearly. ‘Proper referee and seconds for each fighter, and in fact a real ring—with ropes set up and everything.’ He was becoming enthusiastic. The group was with him, too. Their faces shone. They spoke brightly, happily.

‘Real ring and everything,’ they said, ‘with proper rounds, and breaks between rounds, just like a professional fight.’

I sat whilst they worked it out. I was thinking of Kelly, who had at least three stone on me (as we used to measure weight, that was forty-two pounds more than my weight, and I wasn’t light), and was pretty fit into the bargain. Route marches didn’t worry him, and judging from the bit of a work-out we had had on running and exercise, he seemed tolerably in trim. I didn’t think I was going to like it.

The group was looking at me, keenly, intently. They were watching my reactions. ‘Go ahead,’ I said briefly, ‘make the arrangements.’ I then had the strange and terrible feeling that my future in the Army depended pretty much on the outcome of the bout with Kelly. I guess I was faintly encouraged by the fact that it would be a structured bout. Nevertheless, I wondered about Kelly and those forty-two pounds. Good old Kelly!

But what about me? ‘Good old Paul!’ I didn’t hear anyone saying that. I wondered too whether I had been a bit hard with the PT and even the parade-ground drill. Looking back, I know I was. Doubtless I was a heavy disciplinarian. Mind you, at the time I didn’t admit that to myself. But I was wondering.

THEN came the day when I fought Kelly. Good old Kelly! That was what they were saying. Some had bets on the side. I didn’t like the idea, especially when I heard that the odds were against me. Kelly had a reputation and had been a bit professional; I was nearly unknown.

A lot of work had been put into making the ring. It was in our own hut. The ser-major had given permission and the men had gone to work. I had to admit a slight sense of the dramatic. It mightn’t be long, but I would go down fighting. I knew I had

enough stubbornness for that. I thought of the line of the poem, ‘My head is bloody, but unbowed’. I wasn’t all that cheered by it.

Deeper cogitation was taking place. I had realised that the troops were really trying to see whether or not I was a phoney. That was the whole idea, apart, of course, from the old fun of the gladiatorial arena. I accept that as part of man, or, as I like to say, fallen man.

I won’t go into the couple of days’ intense training I had. Let’s face it, I was as tough as a whip. Two of my mates, Curly and Col, had put me through the paces. ‘Keep that straight left going,’ they said, ‘and you’ll have Kell whipped.’

Now it is a fact of life that I had been trained up with a good straight left. Good old Barry B. had done that for me in the boy’s club I attended as a lad. Barry B. was a person all on his own. He not only taught me how to box. He also taught me how to write. He was an incredible person. I wanted to write his life when he went down in a plane during the war. I guess I half worshipped him.

‘That straight left, Paul,’ he used to say. ‘Keep it coming!’ He used to go through a whole ritual, whether I was practising on the bag, or on him. ‘Straight left! Straight left! Straight left!’ It was like a chanted ritual, again and again and again, until my ears ached, and my arm with it. And all the time I was practising the most unnatural punch I knew.

As a kid I had fought all my older brothers. Some of them were kind, pushing me off, patting me about the face. Fantastic, when I remember it all now—those long-legged fighters, all bringing me up to fight, not knowing that one day I would meet Kelly and my whole reputation as a person would be at stake.

We went out into the bush where no one could see us. There we practised. I would finish up in a sweat, but Curly and Col were delighted.

‘You’ll make it, man,’ they crowed. ‘You’ll trick him, even if you never hit him.’

As I was saying, the day came when I fought Kelly.

The long hut was crowded. Some sat, others stood. There was a vast audience, and a lot of blood-lust in it. We were both

tricked out in white shorts and gym shoes. Kelly looked fine, and large. He was well muscled, darkly tanned, and slightly taller than I was. I thought that maybe he had a little surplus fat, which I knew was not the case with me. I reckoned that I could be a lot quicker. But then I didn't really know. We had never even sparred together.

Talk about the arrangements! Buckets of water, towels, lemons, and real stools, to say nothing of the ring itself, as though it had been transported straight from Leichhardt Stadium! And the seconds decked out in white, the ref in a beautiful set of white slacks and polo-necked sweater! It was the talk of the camp.

They rang a bell for the start, and out came Kelly. He had no venom, I'll say that for him. A really friendly handshake, a grin, a slight look heavenwards. It might have been a prayer. I was considered an expert on the latter, and I was working on it quite furiously.

Then we were into it. Much to my surprise, Kelly's punch was not heavy, that is, when he got near me. I had been taught by Barry to dance—here, there, and everywhere.

'Get 'em tired,' he used to say. 'Make them follow you. Then wait your chance. Keep up a good guard, let nothing through. Counter the blows. But keep away as much as you can, until it is time.'

I was glad of the PT training course. I was glad I had gone for runs every day of my Army life. I was glad of the two days' preparation. I was glad of the screaming, shouting crowd which was mainly on Kelly's side. If they had been on my side, I would have been scared out of obligation to them. When I heard them shouting for Kelly I was back again at home. I was the boy again, amongst the older brothers. I was a bit mad at the unfairness.

At our school my next oldest brother, Norman, was the school fighter. He was long, lean, lithe and competent. We were day students. The real fighters were the boarders. They held the reins of sport, especially of the boxing. That is, until my brother came as a pupil. Then he literally fought his way up to the top. He belted his way up to the Cup. They called him 'the Boxer'. He

was something! Me? They called me 'the Boxer's Brer'. I guess I was proud of it at first, and then disenchanted. It seemed to say, 'As a boxer you're nothing. It's your brother who is everything.'

Mind you, I must say I was never envious of long Norman. I knew that, come a test, I might even beat him. I could do that easily in wrestling, but we never actually tried it out with boxing. Looking back, I don't know why.

So when the crowd roared for Kelly, I was back with my brothers, hurt with the unfairness of older brothers wanting to see their whippersnapper younger brother put in his rightful place. The unfairness seeped into all my life, and there, in that hut, it was back again, like some reactive motivation which had popped up from the past.

I felt a deeper tension in my whip-tight muscles. Suddenly, too, I heard the voice of Barry B. 'Straight left! Straight left! Straight left! Keep it coming!' It was like a tri-hammer in my brain, yet for some reason my brain was like ice, thinking clearly. If I had strong emotions giving a thrust to my arms and a dance to my legs, my brain was clearly, coldly incisive. It had to be. We were in our fifth round. Kelly was pummelling away like the pistons of a steam engine. But they weren't connecting. Looking back on it, I can hardly remember Kelly getting in a good blow. Not that he didn't get in his modest number, but nothing with a belt to it.

I knew I was getting tired. I had led the movement, and Kelly had seemed surprised. He was not a proud man, but he had figured that forty-two pounds, plus a few good connections, would be all that he needed. He had worked that out calmly enough, and of course he could have been right—but for that dancing. He did not get as irritated by it as the crowd. They roared out, 'Get him, Kell! Don't let him get away! Eat him up!' It was one thing to shout it. It was yet another for Kelly to do it.

My brain was working coldly. 'He's tired. He can't catch me. I can tire him out if he keeps coming. But then I'll be tired and I won't have any gut for the punches. What about that straight left, Paul, my boy?'

All the time, I was dancing away, taking a hit, feinting, giving a hit, and still wondering about that forty-two pounds.

To tell you the honest truth, the thing which amazed me most of all was Kelly himself. He was never rattled. He took no notice of the roaring mob. He kept a fine grin on his face. His only emotion was puzzlement. I had turned out differently from his original estimate of me, and he was the kind of person who needed time to think over a previously made decision. With this I was highly delighted. Also I saw respect dawning in his eyes.

I could hear Barry B.'s voice, as though he were there at the ringside. 'OK! OK!' I muttered. 'You just watch the Boxer's Brer.' Barry B. had been my brother's best friend. Here was I, reacting to Kelly just as I had, back on the lawn at home, to my brothers. Come to think of it, they didn't have any venom either. Maybe they just wanted to keep me in my place, but the reflex action wouldn't leave. 'All against me, eh?' I said to myself. 'Well, just watch this!'

It was the eighth round now, and they had opted for ten. I gauged the reserves I had and went into it without a trace of fear of Kelly. He saw me coming, and was surprised. He had traded enough hits during the other rounds, but this was different. Suddenly that straight left got into action like a constant piston action. Of course, if you know anything about a straight left, then you know it doesn't work like a piston. It just comes forward, suddenly, with a hammer at the end of it, and not too many can keep it up. Not unless they have been trained by Barry B.—and I had.

I saw Kelly reel back. Also the roar dropped. Maybe they were stunned. I kept dancing into Kelly now, and not letting up. I drew up terrible reserves from somewhere, and they kept that left moving. There is a straight right, also, and it is good for a change. There is a sharp right-arm jab which comes from the hip and the elbow quickly, and I was into that too, and an occasional uppercut.

The tone of the audience had changed. Col and Curly could be heard now. They jumped and shrieked and cried and advised and wept. I pranced on until the bell went, and Kelly collapsed in his corner, and my seconds did everything to freshen me. I could scarcely wait for the bell and the second-last round. I rushed to the centre, and it was on.

Kelly knew something, but at the time I had not read it properly in his eyes. He knew he had not been in deadly earnest. It was the nature and build of the man. He was kindly. Now he was not going to be kind any more.

At least that was his decision. He came with his extra forty-two pounds to finish it properly. No matter! I had triggered off that straight left and it was pounding away. Kelly would retreat, a bit baffled and a bit battered, if I may say so. I didn't know it then, but Kelly had become those four hundred pupils at my high school, and those four brothers of mine, and even my berry-brown father who used to watch from the back landing of our home, the landing above the concrete steps. He used to come down if anything was wrong and he would put it right, generally when we lost our tempers. He had a stance such as I had never seen in any ring, and he had been in the ring, too. We never quite knew how or when, although all sorts of rumours would float around.

'Paul,' he would say, as though he were losing his own temper, 'you cut out that rough stuff. You box properly or not at all.'

I would be blinded with tears of unfairness. I would fight on, scarcely controlling my temper.

I could see Kelly was whipping up everything he had, but I was not afraid, and I was not thinking of the crowd as unfair. I was not even wanting to win for winning's sake. I just wanted a record set straight which had not been straight for a number of years, and Kelly happened to be the means. Every punch I had ever known, every ounce of strength I had ever stored, and every movement I had taught my muscles over the years, went into that final burst. I say 'final burst' because neither Kelly nor I were going down for the count in it. 'Come here, Kelly,' I was saying under my breath, 'and you'll get it!'

And he did! He took it on the face, on the torso, on the back, behind the neck, close in, dancing away, high up, in and out. And he gave it! He hit every tight muscle I had, but I knew the power had gone out of him. I saw him back away and look at me, breathing in a terrible way. I should have guessed, but I did not. I stood there, having done what I had always wanted to do.

Suddenly I was very, very tired. Suddenly the will to fight had gone. I knew what was in me, and in the same moment I knew I was at the end of the resources which were mine. I thought, after all, that I would have to drop my arms and say, 'Kell, it's all yours. I've had it!' even though I knew I easily had the fight on points.

Then I could see my berry-brown Dad, my brothers, especially Norman the Boxer, and with him Barry B., and they looked at me, not sneering but quietly disgusted. I looked at Kelly and started it all over again. Maybe I went for a minute, and maybe for a minute and a half. Finally Kelly backed away. He held up a gloved hand, then he dropped both.

'Corp,' he said, 'I've had it! I'm done!' He looked at me. 'I'll never take you on again,' he said. He shook his head wearily. 'Not as long as I live.'

I could scarcely believe it. I had nearly dropped out ninety seconds before and here he was, beaten! I waited for the understanding to come, and then, wonderfully, I was flooded with an intense relief. It was like getting to the top of some Everest I had always been climbing in my sleep, never reaching it in my dreams, and here was I awake, on the top of it!

The crowd came rushing in. 'Good old Corp,' shouted the fellows of my platoon, as though they had always known, and in fact had been on my side. The liars! They had never really known, but to give them their due, when they did know, they were really glad.

I noticed some looking at me with awe, and that was a new experience for me. I didn't even try to cope with it. I just let it flow over me, grateful but astonished. I accepted the hands, the congratulations, and even the few who wouldn't believe that Kelly had fought it properly. I could hear them muttering about another bout, but I knew Kelly would never fight me again.

Suddenly I knew no one would fight me.

That was the day I fought Kelly.

WHEN you tell a story you generally finish on the climax, and why not? It's a good place to sign off, especially with a victory and all that. However, that wasn't the end of the story

and I hope you will stay to hear the full and authentic end.

I guess it started to go on when someone said in my hearing, 'Get a load of him! Get a load of Corp! The Battling Padre, eh?'

In a flash I knew something. Everyone had seen me read the Bible. They all knew I didn't go to the wet-canteen. Now they didn't just have a Boxer. They had a Battling Padre. I wasn't a chaplain, but then that didn't matter. I was an oddity. For some reason I didn't mind, either.

NOT long after that day we went to Malaya, sailing away on the great hulking *Queen Mary*.

Our unit was composed of sections which were allotted out to Brigade and Artillery Headquarters. Our own platoon had been much changed, and Kelly had gone to a unit joined to Artillery Regimental Headquarters. Our platoon had been allotted to Brigade headquarters. Roughly speaking, our job was to lay and maintain communications with the infantry battalions within our Brigade, and even to the artillery regimental headquarters.

I won't describe the life and times of our days in Malaya until war broke out with Japan. When it did, we were incredibly busy. My own job was to lead a cable section which laid and maintained cable between Brigade and Infantry Battalion Headquarters. Because we were at Brigade I had to apportion the use of the civilian overhead lines which had been given over to us by the postal people. They had gone, and we had stayed. The most difficult task was not only to apportion the lines but to see they took their correct cables; otherwise our switchboards could get horribly mixed.

The real problem was that the overhead wires had what was called 'transposition points'. This meant that the cables switched from time to time. A roadside pair would become a fieldside pair, and a lower cable would sometimes become an upper cable. Very irritating unless you followed them through, mile after mile! When you did follow them through and suddenly came upon another team which had commandeered your cable, it was even more irritating—a very mild word for how you felt.

Well, we did come upon a team who had commandeered our cable. Doubtless it was a competent team. In fact I knew it was,

because its corporal-in-charge was someone I knew very well. Believe it or not, there was Kelly! Kelly had a signalman with him whom I had never seen. He was a reinforcement, and therefore quite inferior in the eyes of the old guard who had been with the unit from its inception.

'Kell,' I said, 'it's good to see you.'

'Good to see you too, Paul,' he said, and he meant it. Kell and I had a real bond between us.

'Who's your mate up there?' I asked, pointing to the top of the ladder.

'Well now,' said Kelly, 'of course you wouldn't know him. He's a reinforcement.'

'Kell,' I said gently, 'tell him to come down. He's tapping in on our line.'

'No!' said Kelly, scandalised. 'Never!' He looked at me. 'Followed that line, we have, for about ten miles.'

'Pity,' I said sadly, shaking my head. 'But it's our line.'

Kelly cocked his head on the side. 'Real sure?' he asked.

'Real sure,' I said. 'Call him down, Kell.'

Kelly looked up the pole. 'Jacko,' he said, 'come down. That's not our line. It belongs to their team.'

Jacko was an experienced blasphemer. His volume of oaths was terrifying. But he remained calm. He put the finishing touches to the connection with his blowlamp and soldering iron. Then he turned off the blowlamp. There was a gentle but potent silence.

'Cut the lines,' said Kelly; 'I mean, our lines.'

Jacko told him that he would never do that. 'Not after all our trouble,' he said.

'Still, you had better,' said Kelly. 'This is Sergeant Olds here.'

Jacko said things enough to make any sergeant's ears burn.

Kelly looked sad. 'I think I'd be careful,' he said. 'The Serg is pretty good with his fists.'

'Well now,' said Jacko, 'I can use my own little fists a bit, if it comes to that.'

'Come down,' said Kelly suddenly. 'Bring the connections with you.'

Jacko shook his head. 'That sergeant don't mean anything to me,' he said.

Kelly looked up at him.

'He beat me,' he said. 'Beat me fair and square in a ten-round fight—ring, seconds, and all.'

Jacko gasped and almost lost his hold on the ladder. 'You don't say,' he said, alarmed. He looked down. 'Hey, Serg, it's all yours. I'll just snip these connections. See?' He held the severed lines.

I have never seen a signalman descend so quickly. He came across and peered at me. He shook his head. There was even awe in his voice.

'Beat old Kell, eh?' he said. 'Well, whadder y' know?' he asked the rubber trees and the *nippah* palms and heaven.

Kelly was grinning hugely. The two teams were grinning. Even I was grinning. Only Jacko was not grinning.

After that I didn't see Kelly for nearly four years.

WHEN I met Kell again I was in the Repatriation Hospital. I'll refrain from telling you when and how I was wounded, and how I carried a gammy leg through three and a half long years in a POW camp. That's old news now. Also I was thin when I was put into that hospital. My berry-brown Dad was there, visiting me. We had talked a fair bit, and we had more to talk about when Kelly came into view.

He was the same Kelly, remarkably enough. Somehow he had rehabilitated quicker than I. Maybe he was a cook in the POW camp. I never asked him.

Most of that half-hour he spent with my Dad.

Dad had been pathetically grateful to see me come home. I hardly understood this new side of him. He had always been a Stoic. That was how he had taught me to hang on in the fighting.

Kelly shook my fist, sympathised over my leg, asked a few questions, and then looked at my Dad. He sized him up in a few minutes. A proud man. A hard man. A man filled with tender emotions but unable to express them. He could see him looking at me, trying to do something for me, but unable.

Kelly said, 'Great fighter, that son of yours.'

Dad nodded. 'I understand he's been decorated,' he said.

'So he has,' said Kelly, 'but I didn't mean that. I mean he's good with his fists.'

Dad immediately looked modest. 'Yes, of course,' he said.

Kelly looked at him, comprehendingly. 'Don't tell me you trained him!' he cried.

Dad looked even more modest. 'Taught him a punch or two,' he said.

I could have hugged Kelly. Something had to happen to uncoil my father. He was too tight, too emotional, too unable to express himself. We had fought for days, trying to get to each other.

'He was slow at first,' said my father. I grinned. That was what he thought!

'But you taught him,' said Kelly, admiringly.

'That's right,' said Dad, with continued modesty.

'Well,' said Kelly admiringly. 'So that's how he beat me?'

Dad was suspicious. 'Beat you!' he echoed, welding an exclamation and a question into one.

'Beat me,' said Kelly firmly. Dad couldn't cope with this, not all at once—a haggard returned son, a whole new emotional situation, a son whom he had never really thought to be a fighter, and then Kelly telling him I had beaten him.

It was a long silence. Then Dad asked, 'Good with your fists, eh?'

Kelly gave me a secret wink. 'Did a bit in the ring,' he said, 'a bit of the old professional, you know.'

'No!' said Dad. He looked at Kelly admiringly. He was summing him up. He knew Kelly could use his fists. Then he looked across at me. I had never seen him proud of me before.

I remembered the day I had fought Kelly, and how I had beaten out my old problems. 'Hassles' they call them now, or 'hang-ups'. They had gone that day. That was why I could be so objective with my berry-brown Dad.

Kelly said, 'Done a bit yourself?'

Dad nodded. 'I was a southpaw,' he said. He recovered and said with some dignity, 'Still am, you know.'

Kelly nodded. 'Ever in the ring?' he asked.

Dad nodded. He bent towards Kelly. 'Quite a time it was,' he began.

As I said, I didn't have much time with Kelly that last time we met. They both sat on the edge of the bed talking, their faces away from me. I had never seen Dad so animated, and even now I don't know whether it had anything to do with me, or whether it was all about Dad's time in the ring, or what.

I do know Kelly showed himself to be better with his mouth than with his fists. I had never won a battle with my father, but Kelly did. They just talked on, and on, and on.

I was lying back, in a beautiful season of rest. I felt like a man who didn't have a scar from the past.

I guess I shouldn't have been ruminating the way I was while Kell and Dad talked on, but there, I was. I was fighting again, going through those rounds with old Kelly. I was savouring every minute of it. I knew Kelly bore no grudge and I knew my berry-brown Dad could scarcely believe it, but that he knew it was true.

I just kept on thinking about it all. Thinking about the day I fought Kelly.

RALPH HICKEN'S REVELATION

RALPH stood in the early dawn. He stood on the back verandah of their old pioneer home, and stared towards ancient Pirrawarrinni. That old giant of a mountain loomed largely through the grey of the morning, the faint ochrous colour that would give way to the brighter moment when the light would suddenly fill the poised air, and the magpies would cry, chortling, and—he could swear—the full-throated utterance of Andrews' bull would trumpet through from the foothills of Pirrawarrinni.

It was a strange feeling—being back at home. Stranger than most men and women would believe. It was an important strangeness, a significant alienation, something he could grasp at. It was different from the gentle sweetness he had felt at the 'Welcome Home' yesterday. That was Australian and 'North Coast' right down to its bones and its ragged trimmings. They were a sentimental people, his nation and his race. They came from a history of ancient invasions when they had been Celts and Picts and Scots, and then Angles and Saxons, with infusions of the Vikings, the warlike Danes, and the Romans. The flooding by the French, the strange landings of Spanish, and the many tribes which had grown up from these, had all given birth and colour to sentimentality. Then they had become Empire-builders and all the time they had filled their history with battles and wars, savage irruptions and strong conquerings.

The last they had done had been this warring across the entire world in two major conflicts. The first had ceased temporarily in 1918, and then twenty-one years later it had begun afresh, drawing in other powers both hostile and allied, and suddenly it, too, had ceased, and the world was beginning to breathe new and strange airs of liberty.

Looking towards the slumbering mountain, Ralph Hicken felt the mystery of everything—life, war, returning home, new days, and the enigma of man—biting at his mind. It was not that the war had made him come alive, that he had begun thinking when the world was falling apart. There was much more to him than that. He had always thought. Strangely enough, he had caught it from his father, the man who forever seemed old in life. He had married later in life than most, and, as far back as Ralph could remember, had lived in a world of his own rumination.

He nodded towards the mountain, some ancient spirit of worship gripping him. That was it; his old Dad had always seemed to battle with the constant confrontation of life which was about him. He felt everything deeply and seemed helpless to cope with it all. Yet the strange thing was that his father always seemed to emerge unscathed, unscarred. The memory of his mother's death flashed in on him, and he remembered the incredible tenderness and acceptance his father had had.

The magpies stood out on the old tallow-woods and gave their morning prophecies. Sometimes they were strident, awkward and harsh, as though they did not care. They would have their say. This morning they warbled. They were sweet; they, too, were welcoming home. At least that is how the young soldier heard them. Their warblings and chortlings were liquid joy. He could see their open beaks thrusting up, as though by some intense straining they could achieve a rich, musical victory.

Then Andrews' bull roared. It was a strong fellow, but a bit careless. It was the cry of the conqueror who sends out a reminder to his rivals that they had better give up trying. In Wirril Creek there was only one king, and he was it. There was a desultory answer here and there, but in fact more replies of bullocks than of bulls, and this morning investiture being completed—something like the changing of the guard—the countryside stilled into temporary silence.

HE could not stem the coming of his thoughts. Nor did he wish to do so. Memories were flooding him without effort. They came out of the past and flowed into him, and over him. Some of them were plain and bland, but some of them were bitter

and astringent. He shuddered slightly, like a man who eats his first olive, or mistakes dry ice for the cold, moist thing. The strongest memories should have come to him immediately, from the recent conflict, the years in Europe, North Africa and the Islands, especially those last years in the Pacific. They stayed where they were bidden, and the old memories came.

They were a strange mixture, a recalling of similar early dawns; when he herded the cows to the bails from the night paddocks; when he went off on fruitless errands trying to discover newly born calves in the high, harsh kangaroo grass and the tufted paspalum; when he drove rogue heifers and bullocks from the main road through the open rails, back into the paddock behind the railway line. They were ordinary memories, but rich to him as they came. He smiled, and a faint laugh came to him also.

Soon his father would emerge sleepily on the front verandah, bringing the bucket of hot water from the stove, and they would start to wash the udders of the waiting bailed cows. He knew the old man was wondering painfully whether he, Ralph, would stay on the farm, or go off somewhere on his own venture. He smiled again at that thought. It was something he could not reveal to his father; his father must not yet know his pattern of thought on this matter.

STARING into the now glowing dawn was something he relished richly. How many times he had dreamed of these moments, at times when his own mates were noisily talking of wine, women and song, and doing their tough Aussie boasting and exaggerating as they always did, with only a modicum of truth in their claims. Few of them were as tough as they made out, and he noticed that most of the boasters were not the men who made it best in battle: just some of them did.

This morning he loved the thin stretches of white mist that lay in the strata about the foothills. Probably it had something to do with the cold night and the warming morning. He did not greatly care to know. He loved the flaked whiteness of it, the layers of thin, smoke-like mists. He also loved the crisp air that was reaching him, with a faint odour of breakfast-fire smoke. It was all like nectar to him, feeding his hungry and active mind. He knew that

in a way he was curious, different, not the normal Wirril Creek person. Yet, even as he thought about it, a wry grin came to his face. Who—for goodness' sake—was such a person? The grey and grizzled farmers had always been there as a background to his life; the plump and strong wives who toiled from daylight to dark without modern amenities; the scraggy kids with whom he had gone to school, trudging the couple of miles from farm to Wirril Creek—all of these crowded in on his mind. Some seemed like types, but then, when you got to know them, they were not typical. They were just themselves, each having his or her characteristics, each a bit idiomatic. He had to grin when he remembered the differences.

Yet there had always been a gap. They were away from him. He liked them, they liked him, but he fancied they thought him different, and—for that matter—he was. It was hard to say why the gap was there and what it was made of. He did not know. He just knew that thought patterns were different. They always talked about things that didn't greatly interest him. Perhaps their ideas and interests were right, and good ones. Perhaps, if he had not gone to the war, he would gradually have come to be like them, and have the same mind and approach to life; he didn't know. He knew he had always been thoughtful.

He grinned, shrugged his shoulders, and remembered that that was the way his father had always been. His grin widened a little when he thought that that was how he might finish up—just like his old Dad. The grin was wry, turning to a frown. He didn't want to be just like his Dad. He wanted to accomplish things. His father always seemed to see himself as the victim, or product, of circumstances and the like. Ralph didn't follow that. When some good idea was in his mind, then other ideas crowded in with it. He knew he had always wanted to accomplish plenty, but not simply for fame's sake or for boosting his own ego. There had to be more to life than just being a successful person. His grin returned. He thought to himself, 'What a load of rubbish I think, really!'

LOOKING across the rails, he could see the cattle bunched up in the corner of the night paddock. He had better anticipate his Dad and bring them in to the bails. He was about to walk across

the near paddock to cross the creek and the rails, when something held him. He stood and looked at what was so dear to him. He knew himself to be a practical man, but somehow he could never get on with the practice of life without first understanding what it was all about; what, anyway, it was all about for him and his Dad, and the people in Wirril Creek, and then in the wider world. That was what the war had done for him. It hadn't turned him into a thinker, for he had always been that, but it had given him materials for thought, and he knew his mind was crammed with his war years, experiences, ideas and conclusions which might not otherwise have come to him in many years.

IT was then that the whole thing flashed in on him. He saw at once—as though in a brilliant light which instead of blinding him gave him unusual perception—the meaning and pattern of his war years and the world about him. If he had thought about it—edging towards some conclusion or solution—it would have seemed most strange to him. It had to come, unbidden, springing up from somewhere within. That he, at this moment, standing looking towards an old North Coast mountain, should have some kind of understanding that great thinkers strain to achieve, was, of course, ludicrous. Yet he knew in that sudden moment some kind of explanation of his world, some kind of rationale of everything.

What came to him first was the pretended toughness of humanity. The things they admired most they feared most: toughness, hardness, ruthless pursuit of goals, treading over one another to achieve those ends. Bigness was what many saw as greatness. He thought of the great leaders Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. These men showed a massive front to the world. They were not only protectors of their tribes and nations, but they gave greatness to them. Hitler and Mussolini had been of the same ilk, even if they were a little mad. The same went, in men's minds, for naval ships, bombers and fighters, ground armaments and weaponry. They were all big, threatening. Yes, 'massive' was the word. They stood for some kind of invincibility.

Instinctively

he looked towards Pirrawarrinni, but that massivity was

different. It was not cruel, ruthless, gaining some ends of its own. It was quiet, calm, almost slumbering; but Ralph knew it to be strong and fruitful without being tough.

As he saw the human worship of so-called greatness, he also saw what was true greatness. Anyway, to him it was true greatness. It was his father, pondering, puzzling and working. It was his mother who had worked hard and provided comfort and warmth for them. It was the Armstrongs, impossibly pompous, but not tough, not underneath anyway. It was the unbelievably patriotic Coolbucca Band and their fervent home-welcoming. It was young Hickey and his Mum, Dolly. It was old Tracey and his stiff, private being. It was these men with their dairies, their cream, calves, cows and milk. It was the men on Pirrawarrinni with their banana-growing, and others producing carrots and peas and the like. It was the Saturday sport and the Sunday worship, the Monday to Friday working, living, selling and buying, loving, marrying, having children and dying. It was the local politics and the suspicions of State and Federal politics, the conservatism that kept riotous ideas in check. Sure, it had faults—over-conservatism, neglect of the wider world, little of do-gooding, a certain inbred way of thinking—but then it was simple and even naïve. It was not, however, foolish or unthinking.

It all seemed over in the minute he had thought it. In a way it was like a vision: he had seen the mass of humanity in its foolishness, evil and suffering. There were hideous flashes of war, of bursting mortars, shattering shells, of breaking bombs, of mangled and tattered flesh, of seeping blood and strange groaning, crying out to whatever help might be in the hidden realms and powers. There was the cursing and hatred, bitterness and bafflement. With it, there was tenderness too, weeping, emotional tenderness that cried out for some great pity, some change in the ways of men and nations. Then there was silence; the silence in his own mind like the nameless quiet after a thumping barrage.

HE felt strangely at peace as he moved towards the cows in the night paddock. The dawn was breaking strongly now, and a touch of heat was in the air. He knew his thoughts had seemed jumbled, but for him their message was clear: simplicity and love

were what mattered, and not massiveness, toughness and ruthlessness. They were the pitiable things, and they had become the cruel and useless things.

He began to talk to the cows as though he remembered their names. He used the old ridiculous cry, 'Hoop there! Hoop there, won't you? Hoop! Hoop! Hoop!' Whether they remembered that cry, or whether old Mr Hicken had somehow kept their memories fresh or not, they responded, and began wending their way to the opened slip-rails, and through the underground cutting of the North Coast railway line. As usual, some of them mooched and others hurried, nodding their heads up and down as though working hard in some bullock team. Others looked around for a following calf, but all moved towards the bails, the promise of lucerne chaff, and ease to their milk-filled udders.

It was then he saw his Dad standing against the sky, looking down at him. His eye caught sight of a small dam, a catchment of water he had not seen before. He remembered the conversation with his Dad the night before, the talk about 'the little dam'. So this was it! It gave him delight. Also he heard the huge black cockatoos as they screeched overhead, and the competition of the great currawongs who had suddenly become vocal. The whole thing sounded like some prearranged orchestra. The magpies had finished with their own songs, but the kookaburras sensed their right time and they gave vent to their mirthful cacophony.

Ralph felt they authenticated his bit of philosophy—come through to him via his homemade ways of thinking. He wondered whether his Dad usually thought in similar ways; he imagined not!

The cows kept moving towards the dairy-bails. This time—and it was not usual—they had formed a triangle, the leading cow far ahead of the others, and then they—the other cows—following it in triangle formation. They were plodding as though that was what had been planned for them even before creation. It was a strange thought, and Ralph pondered it thoughtfully as he moved towards the bails, the milking, and his Dad.

OVER THE HILL

MARION was making cakes when Rosamund and Terry came racing down the passage. She could hear the slither and clatter of their feet on the long, polished hallway. The well-known gleam of that long, silent passage glinted for a moment in her mind, a vision of years of silence, of staring, polished boards.

She was making a cake for Tom. Marion's cakes were famous. They were light and fluffy and delicious, because she knew how to whip eggwhites into curly meringue consistency, and to heat ovens to just the right temperature until the soft yellow mixture in the cake tins had risen with heat and good management to high, rounded sponges, waiting only for thick cream filling, or maybe jam.

Her egg-beater whirled and stopped. For a moment she stared into the near distance. Yet her eyes did not see the garden with its last quivering cineraria, nor the cool green shape of the lawn, for the shining passage might have been a hallway down which she crept to years filled with old sorrows, quick and long apprehensions, chasing each other like shadows, barred across with sudden golden spasms of joy, which were of old memories, days before the war.

And now, again, after all these years, she was making a cake for Tom. Around her were sugar and eggs, while flour spattered across the table like dry snow. The butter, warm and ready to mingle with the mixture, was a still pool in a saucer. All this was food.

Food! How he must have dreamed of it! How his mind must have hungrily searched the past, longingly caressed old memories of winter nights, a table laden with rich foods, eggs, brown and

gravied meats, clean white rounds of bread, food and more food, and with it all, the gleam of china, the smiling reflected faces in spoons, the laughter of them all—she and Rosamund and Terry and himself!

So must he have dreamed in those prison days, hating the small yellow men who kept him from fulfilment of his dreams. Now it was no dream. He was home again. Tom was with them, looking at Rosamund and Terry; looking at her too, but—what a look! Her eyes were wondering as they remembered. No food, no thought of food; nothing could drive away such sorrow, such unexpended sorrow and sadness which lay in the eyes of the returned man.

The footsteps were almost at the kitchen now. Steadfastly she beat back the rising tears. He had laughed; yes, he had laughed, but his laugh had been surprised, then wondering, and then somehow empty. It had echoed across her shivering nerves, and because she could not fully define its quality she had been puzzled, and gradually little cold lines of fear had spread outwards across her being.

When he had held her in his arms, there had been immediate peace. She felt the joy surge through her, and suddenly those years did not matter. They were quickly, richly fulfilled.

She had whispered to him, 'Tom, Tom. I only want your happiness. It's all I've ever wanted.'

He had looked at her then, and some gleam of hope had shone in the shadowed background of his eyes. It was as though he had been searching, perhaps expecting to find something, and here he might almost have found it. Then the look had died.

Rosamund and Terry burst in. They screamed at her, 'Mum! Dad's smiling.'

She stared at them. Within, her heart was racing, and suddenly it gave a leap. The three stood silently for a moment. The troubling secret was out; they were united in its expression, a conspiracy of knowing, and now, perhaps, happiness.

Then Terry grasped her arm, tugging. 'Come on, Mummy, come and see Daddy smiling.'

He propelled her along the passage, and all the while her heart was singing and she was crying, 'He's smiling! Tom's smiling!'

As they neared the room, the two children pulled her to a standstill. Rosamund put a finger to her lips. Terry was grave. Rosamund's voice was sweetly confidential, hushed with the importance of her secret.

'Daddy was frowning and staring, and then the sun came into the room, and he looked out at the hill. You remember, Mummy, you told us he said he would come over the hill . . .' Her words were tumbling out in excited ripples, her eyes shining with the joy of her message. '. . . well, he looked at the hill and . . . and then he smiled.'

She stood at the door. Tom was in the large lounge chair by the window. The sun was perhaps behind the clouds. She could see him, his head was resting upon the cushioned back, his whole being relaxed. His fine, long fingers were upon the armrests. There was no movement in the closed eyelids.

As she stared, a golden stream of sun burst into the room. It bathed Tom in a gentle late-afternoon beauty. From where she stood, she could see the hill, moving away from the cool green of the lawn and the darker green of the trees.

'He is happy,' was her first thought and the joy came tumbling in cascades of foaming happiness. Every doubt for the past and the future was suddenly cleansed, and she and Tom were one again.

'Ssh, Mummy! Don't wake Daddy. He went to sleep when he smiled.'

She turned to the children. Her voice, when she spoke, was hushed. 'Run along, dears. I want to be alone with Daddy.'

They tiptoed from the doorway and she forgot them.

'Over the hill,' she had said, and now she knew that he was happy. Some sort of peace flooded her heart, peace which flowed in like the soft glory of the afternoon sun.

She would not wake him, of course. The fear in her heart was gone. Only for a moment had it lingered, but she knew now that it was better this way, to smile looking towards a hill, and then to fall asleep. The years rushed up at her, a quick promenade of what the future would be, and yet she was not afraid.

She stood beside him, watching his gentle features. The old sad years had fled from him, and now he was at peace.

A gentle whisper from behind almost startled her. She turned and saw the children, fingers to lips.

'Don't wake him, Mummy,' said Terry.

'He might stop smiling,' said Rosamund.

She nodded, because she could not speak. Then she motioned them away. As they pattered down the hallway and away into the silence, she bent over Tom, slowly. The sun flooded into her tears as she whispered, 'No, I won't wake him.'

Then she kissed his face, his face which by now had gone cold, with a last final coldness.

THE MAN IN THE WAR WARDS

INTRODUCTION: THE PENULTIMATE WARD.

He said, as he came out of the anaesthetic, 'This must be the last time—the last ward.' He thought to himself, drowsily, 'This might be the last time they operate on me.' He just wasn't sure. When he awoke the second time she was there—that wife of his—and she was looking at him anxiously. He didn't know why she was anxious.

After a few days he knew why she was anxious. He, himself, hadn't felt well. The patient opposite to him had read his medical notes which were tucked away in the wire frame at the end of the bed. He had read 'patient in danger', or some similar comment. Not until the terrible sickness had come upon him, and the awful pain in his back, did he realise there was something wrong.

Later he remembered the things that happened—the sister pooh-poohing this old man, telling him there was nothing wrong. Old soldiers were always apt to find something wrong. If they were not careful, this kind of thinking could become their life—their way of living. He hadn't cared much for that comment, seeing he was always urgent with life.

The ward was comfortable enough, and the care taken of the patients was reasonable, but he had an uneasiness. Lying on the barouche outside the X-ray clinic, he thought his back was going to break, so painful it was. After a time he was fighting for his breath. Then came the high temperature and the terrible sweating. Eventually they rushed him back to the wards.

They had a needle in his arm, and fluid flowing into him. The fan was blowing on him, cooling him. Then they applied oxygen to him. He knew there was something wrong. Doctors—including a surgeon—who were not on the case came to visit him. They were disturbed, and began to make enquiries.

After a time, they took him from that ward to another hospital, to have a nuclear scan, and they were careful how they handled him. Then he was at peace, secure in a new ward in a new hospital. Eventually he began to mend.

There was still some life left to him. He felt himself smiling. He liked his wife sitting there, holding his hand. Maybe this was the last of the many wards he had been in.

WAR WARD ONE: GILMAN BARRACKS.

The first ward he had been in was at Gilman Barracks on Singapore Island, and it was in February 1942. They had told him it was near Queen Alexandria Military Hospital. He hadn't known much about the geography of the place. There had been too much pain for that kind of thing, so he had just grinned when they told him the hospital was really an Army barracks.

'Very nice barracks,' he had said to himself, wondering whether he would lose his leg. In his bizarre freelance writer's way, he was always collecting short stories—about himself and others. Right now, at the very moment of suppressing his pain, he was shaping stories. He knew he loved stories. He wasn't quite sure why, but that didn't trouble him.

To him stories meant persons, characters, their natural unique beings, their special personal things. Take, for example, the Irish surgeon. He not only sounded Irish, he was Irish, and he was enjoying himself hugely. All around him lay wounded men, and he was joking with them. Mostly he was joking about them, in their very presence, and they seemed to like it. They were a bit pitiful, though. Some of the young English soldiers were absolutely terrified, and he joked mostly with them. He even joked with those who were 'bomb-happy' ('shell shocked' to you, if that is the term you know). He ignored their glazed eyes, and went on joking.

Denny heard him, watching him with some astonishment. The man was too rich in humour to be genuine. It must be some great act. Were all Irish like this? Questions such as this one kept irrupting like machine-gun stutter in Denny's brain. He grinned back at the surgeon, the medical major, as though that were expected of him.

The major had one of the sisters picking out about a million bits of shrapnel from a man's back, and the man was groaning, but not protesting. The back was bloodied with metal acne. Denny didn't want to keep looking at that back but couldn't take his eyes away. Besides, it even seemed to help him in his own suffering. The pain was, of course, intolerable.

'Major,' he said, 'when are you going to do something for me?' He meant, 'When are you going to set my leg?' Even from where he was, looking down at it, he could see it was a bit awry. It was smashed of course, much of the flesh blown away from the thigh. He had seen that before.

The surgeon gave him a bit of a sidelong look and then erupted into laughter. 'It's you Aussies,' he explained; 'you are a strange bunch.' There was nothing in his tone to give offence. It was just admiration: that was all.

'This big Aussie,' said the surgeon, as he was laughing, 'this big Aussie came in holding his head on. He had it between his two hands. "Let me look at it," I said, but he wouldn't let me take his hands away. "Doc," he said, "it will fall off if I take my hands away."'

The major was running his hands down the legs of a wounded Tommy. 'Take him away,' he said to a sister. 'He doesn't need an operation now. He'll be all right.' The nurse took him away.

Denny said, 'There's a fair bit of pain, Major.'

The major nodded. 'Bet there is,' he said. He added, 'It won't be long now.'

That was an old Army statement, 'It won't be long now.' It was for people who grinned foolishly and were airy about life.

It was long. About a million hours, that was all. Pain surged and kept exaggerating itself. He had hardly ever had pain; he knew so little about it. It was a new world for him. He had a world of his own now, in this pain, but around him there was another whole world: men crying out like children, and pitiful, looking for comfort. Denny had been taught by a Stoic father, so he only sought his right to have the pain banished. He wasn't angry about it. He was not even bewildered. It was his own damned fault, anyway. He had rushed the machine-gun nest and

the Japs had shot him down. Foolhardy stupidity! He had actually gloried in his idiot-rush towards the nest. 'Got to stop that yammering gun,' he had said. So he had, but they had got him like this before he got them.

THEY had hunted for a vein—that surgical major, and that altogether too beautiful English Army sister. They had giggled a bit about not being able to find the vein. The strong blue eyes of the major actually showed a trifle of pity, and the sister gave a beautiful smile which made him feel like a hero.

After a time, they found the vein somewhere deep down in the sunken flesh. They looked triumphant.

The major said, 'It's going to hurt a bit. Like a balloon in your chest.'

It wasn't just a party balloon or even an aerial balloon. It was a dirigible, growing in him. Now something like terror came to him. He nearly cried out, and this against his stern Stoic creed. His chest must burst. The pain and the thought combined horrifically. While they were doing that, the transfusion was resurrecting the pain about the ligature. The doctor was laughing at the blood as it poured down from the beaker connected immediately to the discovered vein.

He knew nothing about blood coming into a person so fast. The doctor was enlightening him, even though he was only addressing the sister.

'Ever seen this before?' he was asking her, and she was shaking her head, wonderingly. 'Hope he doesn't get an air-bubble,' he was saying with a chuckle. He glanced sideways at Denny and laughed. 'Could finish you, Aussie,' he said, but there was pity in his voice. A realist was the Irish surgeon—of that there could be no doubt.

Denny thought the relief must come now. The operation must soon happen. The sister was still finding bits of shell-acne in the sobbing soldier. They were giving anaesthetic to another of the wounded. Denny felt a great jealousy welling up in him. He broke his Stoic creed.

'When are you going to do me, Major?' he asked.

There was compassionate laughter in the Major. 'After a

while,' he said. 'Got to let the blood get around in you. Too soon right now.'

The sister gave him a bit of her love. She was giving it to all the serious cases. When the Irish doctor had gone for something in another room, she whispered to Denny, 'Can't give you a needle for pain. It would kill you if I did.'

Denny thought he wouldn't mind risking it, but he said nothing. Behind the pain, the love of the Tommy sister got to him. He kept enduring the bursting chest, even though his own breath was coming in heaving gasps. He thought he might die.

Most of eternity seemed to have passed when they wheeled the anaesthetic machine towards him. It was like a sweet and useful dream. It happened and yet it did not immediately happen. They left him for a time. Then it did happen.

'Keep breathing but not too deeply,' a voice said.

What he would never forget, even into old age, was the relief from pain. It had been fire in his veins, his arteries, his bones. It had been from tip to toe. It had been an angry storm, an excruciating surge, a wild fire bursting all over him, flooding him until he wanted to cry out. Only one thing kept him from doing that, and it was not his Stoic training. It was the knowledge that somehow this was how it had been meant to be. He was far from a fatalist, but he always had joy in knowing that this was how things had to be. He had always had rich predestinarian blood in his veins, and somehow it had remained.

He felt the pain drain away. The sweetest, richest thing in all the world and in all time is the cessation of pain. Denny had never known pain of any dimension; nor had he ever known the delight of pain slowly ceasing. In fact at that moment all life was ceasing and he was going into a beautiful white mist.

When he came out of the white mist, he was in a ward. He was at a loss as to what to do. Somewhere there was pain but it was localised. On one side of him was a Tommy, an English soldier. He had a large field dressing on his left thigh. Denny thought, 'He hasn't had his operation yet.' He felt everyone should have an operation. Then he saw the platform splint, and his own leg on it. It seemed like a foreign object to him, but he guessed everything was under control.

The Tommy said, 'You feel all right, chum?'

Denny nodded. His throat was dry but he could do more than croak. 'I'm OK,' he said briefly.

'I'm lying on my back,' he thought. When he was young he would get vertigo if he lay on his back. The bed would go around in circles. Here it was stable. Then the groans came to his ears. They were coming from everywhere. Some were muted and some weren't. He listened to gasped mutterings, angry cries, and pitiful pleadings. He saw a sister going about, jabbing people with needles. He thought a lot about needles. Then he thought about hospitals and their wards. Months ago he had been in a military hospital. He had contracted typhoid fever, or was it typhus? His mind wasn't working properly. Anyway, it had been feverish and painful. There had been lovely Aussie nurses. Come to think of it, they had been very kind. Drowsiness took him again, and he slept.

The next time he woke, it was to see the Indian in the bed on his other side. The Tommy was on one side, all talkative, but the Indian on the other side was rolling his eyes and saying nothing. He appeared to be filled with fear. After a time his eyes stopped rolling. Denny's heart contracted a bit when he saw that the sepoy had died. He was so still. After a time they came and took him and put another Indian in his place. That one was also about to die. The Indians seemed to die quickly. He wondered why that was.

He remembered meeting a British officer and his Indian troops on a tennis court—of all things. The Indians were Sikhs—fierce looking—and they were refusing to go into action. 'Cowards!' Denny had cried, thinking he was helping. They rushed him with their bayonets, but their officer swept them aside.

He was looking at Denny. 'Don't ever say that to Sikhs,' he said fiercely. 'They'll kill you for that!'

Denny had not been amused.

THE pain had come back of course, but it brought no storm with it, and Denny reckoned carefully that he could live with it. The other patients who were having needles would cease their pitiful cries. After a time they would start up again, and there would be another needle. Lots drowsed under the hypodermics.

She came to him in the evening, the little nurse with his mother's maiden name. She was Irish; she was sentimental; she was romantic; she was kind. Also she was practical.

'How is your pain?' she asked.

He said, 'I'm OK, Sister.' He felt he was meant to have pain, and because it was not the tempestuous pain which had been prior to the operation, he was content enough.

She was doubtful. 'You're not being the tough Aussie, are you?' she whispered. He rather liked the intimacy of the whispering but shook his head.

'I'm OK, Sister,' he repeated, and she left him.

THE noise had been all around them, the noises of war. They had not escaped them in this privatised place, the place with the great red cross painted on the roof. Somewhere there was the bursting of mortars. He knew that sound. Shells often screamed overhead and humphed somewhere in the distance. He could hear the sound of the Zeros, the deadly Jap fighter-bombers, as they hummed higher than the shells of the barrage. Sometimes a bomb dropped, not near, but his leg rolled and rolled on the platform splint. Once or twice the sisters rushed to him and held it, but the shaking was brief. He noticed the Tommy in the next bed was terrified. He seemed more terrified each time an Indian died. He would hide his face in the pillow. He wouldn't look as they took the corpse away under a white sheet on a stretcher.

When he talked to the Tommy, he had an impression of the soldier's guilt. That was strange, because the Irish surgeon on his round wanted to look at his wound but the patient waved him on to more needy cases. The major took that at face value and was grateful. He was a busy man. He nodded to Denny.

'Won't disturb your leg,' he said. 'We'll give it a bit of time first.'

Denny admired the young Tommy and yet wondered about the guilty look. Later the surgeon discovered that there was no wound to speak of, or anyway, only one about the size of a sixpence. It held a neat little piece of shrapnel. The surgeon's lips had curled. He replaced the field dressing without comment. Someone giggled, but the Tommy just stared at him.

LOOKING back, Denny thought that to be quite a ward. The shells thumped closer and then into the ground of the improvised hospital. Bombs landed close by. Mortars shrieked and so did Japanese voices. Then there was quietness and one of the orderlies went to get water from the swimming pool. Machine-gun fire drove him back.

They were given a cup of fluid a day. Fire began to visit their veins again. Some looked pitiful without water. Others kept pleading for fluid. Like him, they had lost lots of blood. At the same time there was a conspiracy of bravery. The nurses fostered this.

The lovely Irish sister gave him a needle one time. She came each night, whispering. She had a torch which was shielded. It shone somewhere near his face. 'You're in pain,' she accused him gently.

'It's OK,' he said, but his body cried for relief. There had been shakings and rockings from bombs and shells, and the pain would keep coming in surges.

'I think you're a liar,' she said in a whisper. He wanted not to cry, and he didn't. He was glad she knew. 'When did you have your last needle?' she asked.

'Haven't had any needles,' he said as softly. 'I wanted one badly when I came, but no one ever gave me one.' He had not had a needle in all his life, not in all his twenty-three years.

She was amazed. She knew patients lied about needles. 'If we had given you one then, you would have died,' she said, 'but now it is all right.'

She paused, searching about in her pocket. 'You sure you haven't had one in the last couple of hours?'

He felt a trifle angry, because he loathed lying. 'Just leave me,' he said roughly, being close to tears. 'I don't tell lies.'

It was her turn to be angry. 'They never gave you a needle?' she said with astonishment. She took out a small bottle and rubbed his arm with something. Then he felt the needle bite in. Astonishingly she bent down and caressed his face with a kiss. Later, when he thought about it, he knew it to be a gentle gift: nothing else.

'You'll sleep well now,' she said, and he felt the tears stinging

him. She went away like a solitary and beautiful angel. If he was never to forget the anaesthetic and the retreating pain, no less was he to forget the morphine injection. The pain receded, the throb ceased, the mind, tired with pain, became cool. The drowsiness was from heaven; he knew that. Pain cancelled had a whole vast message in it somewhere, but he was no longer thinking. He was sleeping.

It was the next morning the Japanese came. From dawn until midmorning the fighting had been explosive. The yammering of the machine-guns had been close, and the cries and the explosions. He knew those cries. He had heard them on the foreshores of the Straits, looking towards Johore, and he had heard them at Bukit Timah. Now they were close, and the Tommy in the next bed was afraid. He kept looking at Denny as though he, Denny, could protect him. He had given up his pretence of having a wound. Sometimes he helped the sister, but now he was back in the bed, cowering. Denny decided he was only a kid, a raw recruit without training, and a conscript at that. He pitied him gently. All the ward pitied him.

There was a period of silence between the dying away of the machine-guns, the cessation of the mortars, and the entrance into the ward. The small Jap soldiers seemed alert and polite. They kept their eyes open for any attack, but none was forthcoming.

An officer came to Denny. 'What nationality?' he asked simply.

Denny said, 'Australian,' and the man nodded delightedly.

'Australia is very good,' he said, still nodding. 'They helped us in our earthquake in 1924.'

Denny had been too young in 1924 to think about those things. Now he was partially grateful.

The Japanese officer peered at the platform splint. He sheathed his bayonet. A large samurai sword was swinging from his belt. His look was almost tender. He shook his head. 'No good fighting Australians,' he said. His English was perfect.

Denny asked him for some water. Day by day he had dreamed of fluid, and of food. They had only one Army biscuit each a day, and one cup of fluid—nearly always cocoa. No one could get to the swimming pool.

The officer sent an escort to the swimming pool with some of the orderlies. Meanwhile he gave his water bottle to Denny. Denny shared it with others. He didn't offer it to the Tommy in the next bed. He talked to the officer.

Then the officer was gone. The soldiers were gone. Only a guard or two remained to keep watch. What the patients did not know was that the Koreans had burst into the Queen Alexandria Hospital, not far from them, and had killed everyone. They had been heavily drugged—those Koreans. They had slain the wounded, walking them to slit trenches and then bayoneting or machine-gunning them.

All the staff had been killed, even a patient on the operating table. One orderly had fallen under an officer who was bayoneted. The officer told the orderly to keep quiet. His blood flowed over the hidden man. The orderly was saved by his blood. Later he escaped with the gruesome story. The soldiers who had come into Denny's hospital and ward were the Imperial Japanese Guards. They were Emperor Hirohito's personal troops.

Denny was wondering about being in a ward. He seemed so protected. Everything was going his way. Without protection he was helpless. He liked the Irish surgeon. He loved the Irish sister. Sometimes she would come with her needle in the night, trying to make up for the long hours when he had been unaided in his pain. Perhaps things would change. Maybe the Allied troops would come to the Island and the nightmare would be over.

Then the order came. They were to go to Singapore City. They were to be transferred to another hospital. He thought, with some weariness, and some pain, 'It will be another ward.' Later he wondered why he had had that thought. At this moment he was remembering the painful ride in the truck, his leg dangling on the backboard and jumping with each jolt of the rough roads. He was remembering the crying Indians. Sometimes they shrieked, imprecating Ram, but at other times they just sobbed pitifully.

He hoped the transference to the next ward would be more peaceful.

WAR WARD TWO: FULLARTON BUILDING.

They were taken by Army ambulance to the Fullarton Building, which was next to the GPO in Singapore City. He remembered seeing the building during a period of leave in 1941. With the General Post Office, it fronted a large playing area. He was a bit vague as to whether it was cricket they played there or not. Perhaps it was polo. He wasn't sure.

They hadn't been able to see much in the travelling, which brought back the pain. They had taken his leg off the platform splint and it was strapped to the stretcher. Denny could look sideways a little, but mainly he saw the sky with its white clouds and washed blue. He could hear the cries of the city, and the noise of traffic. Japanese soldiers were moving everywhere. Some of them stared at him, but he didn't mind. He knew their code about non-surrender, about committing *harakiri* rather than the dishonour of surrender, especially unconditional surrender.

The Fullarton Building had been a hospital during the last days, along with other buildings, but with the surrender its numbers grew. He was carried into a long ward and placed on the floor. There were cries everywhere about him, the cries that whimpered or complained or grumbled or protested, or which rose to a crescendo because of the intolerable pain. There was also the unmistakable smell of surgical cases, a sort of putrefaction where wounds had deteriorated, or were badly corrupted. It was the sickly sweet smell of decay.

The medical staff were busy. Stretchers were unloaded onto the floor. Most were without mattresses. His leg lay hard against the concrete floor. He felt the tears in his eyes, but he said nothing. Occasionally he would beg water, and a harassed orderly would give it, almost impatiently. He knew that for the rest of his life he would never forget the terrible and burning thirst he had known at Gilman Barracks Hospital.

Here, there was no Irish nurse to single him out, nor the Irish surgeon to stop by him and enquire. There seemed to be no end to the wounded, and he knew there were other floors, other doctors, nurses and orderlies attending to the old wounded and the new wounded. He lay in the confusion, sensing the irritations of the overworked staff. Once or twice he slept, faint from the pain.

Late in the day they were fed. They had to beat off the flies from their food. Some whimpered with emotion as they ate. They had been starved, and the food they were eating was good. It was out of cans, but it was tasty. Denny watched some wolfing it and calling for more. He marvelled that so many men could be attended to when there was scarcely an aisle anywhere for the passage of the orderlies. They stepped over bodies, doing their best in the enforced haste.

Denny was left all day, except for food and water. Someone had placed a sheet over his leg, but it was on the floor without any kind of splint. Towards evening a doctor moved amongst them again. He lifted the sheet, looked at the leg and then stared, aghast.

The roar he gave brought an orderly running. 'What's up, sir?' he asked.

The surgeon pointed with anger at the leg. 'You'd better hurry,' he said, 'or we'll lose that leg.'

He was lifted on to a stretcher, gently, and they hurried him to an annexe at the end of the long ward. There were others in there, serious cases by the look of them. They were trussed like turkeys, and it wasn't long before he was one with them. A sister was giving him a needle, and another was fussing about his bed. He could see that the doctor was angry. He was even more angry when he found out the nationality of his new patient.

They kept him comfortable during the night, and through the next day. They cleaned out the maggots in his wound, and put in fresh vaseline gauze. Denny wondered at the yards of it spiralling down into his thigh. He wondered, too, at the good food, until someone told him that the General Post Office next door was crammed with Christmas parcels and lashings of food. The contrast with the last ward was so vivid that the tears kept pricking his eyes.

It was the next day that the senior surgeon had an argument with the Japanese officers who wanted the building. They wanted it quickly. The surgeon knew he could not oppose this. He pleaded for the dangerously ill patients to be left until they were out of danger.

The Japanese senior officer shook his head. 'We need the building,' he said, 'and it is urgent.'

The surgeon was an Englishman, hardly able to conceal his contempt for an Asian. Like the rest, he thought it would be only a matter of days before the Island would be retaken. He was concerned for his patients. The Japanese officer was adamant, and refused.

'They'll die,' the surgeon said. 'If they're shifted they'll die.'

The other officer shrugged his shoulders. 'Too bad,' he murmured, 'but this is a war.'

The English surgeon was incredulous. 'You mean you are going to have them shifted?' he shouted in anger. When the officer nodded, he rushed at him, slapping the Japanese before he could be hauled off. A commotion arose, and there was shouting. Miraculously, the other Japanese officers did not kill the doctor. But there was an ominous silence, and the senior officer turned on his heel.

'Tomorrow,' the Nipponese officer said grimly, wagging his stick high in the air.

THE men in the wards knew little of the matter. It was a year later when Denny heard the full story. In Changi Prison Hospital he caught a glimpse one day of the wardmaster who had looked after him in the Fullarton Building ward. The man did not recognise him, for by this time he had lost a lot of weight. He listened with interest to the story.

'Do you remember those nine fellows in that annexe?' the wardmaster asked him. Denny nodded, for he had special reason to remember them, being one of them himself.

The wardmaster retold the story of the senior surgeon and the Japanese officer. 'We had to get those fellows out, because they were the worst hit of all our patients,' he said, 'but then we knew they would never make it. We knew they would die on the way to Changi, so we filled them up with morphia. Lethal doses, you know.'

Listening to the English wardmaster, Denny remembered the sisters coming with needles every hour, so that they, the patients, had felt no pain—just a continuous ease of body. He also remembered the peaches and cream, the sultanas and the rich fruitcake they kept plying the nine patients. What he himself had never forgotten was the deep pity in the eyes of the English

medical sisters. He had never seen or sensed such compassion—not anywhere at any time in his life. Now he knew they—these sisters—had been pitying them because they were dying, being put out of their misery by lethal doses of morphine. At that time he had not known the word ‘euthanasia’.

‘What happened to the nine men?’ he asked the wardmaster.

The sergeant shook his head with sorrow. ‘Seven of them were English and two were Aussies. I don’t know what happened to the Aussies but I guess they died too. The seven Englishmen were dead before they reached Changi.’

‘I was one of the Aussies,’ Denny told the wardmaster.

He saw the look of shock in the eyes of the medical man. At first he was stunned and then he said in a fierce whisper, ‘For God’s sake never tell anyone! There would be a furore.’

In many, many years he had never told anyone, but just marvelled that the two Australians had survived.

When they had put him in the ambulance with the other Australian, he had felt marvellously comfortable. When he woke, he was in another ward, in a surgical bed, and his new splint hoisted into the air. He had arrived at the prisoner of war camp called Changi.

WAR WARD THREE: CHANGI POW CAMP.

Over forty years later Denny could not remember all the details. He wasn’t quite sure of the order of events, or even of the wards he was in. He knew the prisoner-patients were placed in a well-built barracks—Selarang Barracks—and later taken to Roberts Barracks, where the conditions were different but tolerable. Later they came back to Selarang. What he remembered, after being brought by the ambulance, was the despair and apathy that he saw in the eyes of many around him.

Medical and surgical cases were all in the one ward. Most of the cases were suffering from bacillary dysentery, and he could hear their cries of pain. Later he came to know the same pain. Some of them looked panic-stricken, and with their cries were the cries of the badly wounded. When the cries became screams, then the orderlies would administer morphine, though only on the orders of medical officers.

The food they brought for the patients to eat was thick, gluey rice. As yet, the newly conscripted cooks—shanghaied to do a job they had not previously known—scarcely knew how to cook it, but later they learned. From a child he had loathed rice, although he could eat just about anything else. A thin vegetable stew scarcely gave it any taste. He envied the dysentery cases who were given canned tomato soup. He was shocked to see some of them refusing it, complaining about their pains. He would have given anything to sip the delectable soup.

Denny saw those who had lost heart die around him, and they died because they saw no hope. Given other circumstances and encouragement, they would have borne with their lot, and perhaps not have died. The shock of failure in war, the weariness of battle fatigue, and so many other factors combined to destroy the will to live. Later he was to learn that it is not only in prison camps where such things happen, but for the moment they were a surprise to him.

IN the wards, at night-time, they slept only when given something for the pain. Often they heard the stuttering of machine-guns out on the shores, knowing the Japanese were disposing of the Chinese whom they hated, and—even more—feared. The sound was unforgettable. In their mind’s eye, the prisoners in Changi could see them taken out to the foreshores and massacred, arms jerking upwards, bodies falling into the low surf.

The surgical cases were moved to another ward, being taken by ambulance, and here they were crowded in, with almost no space between beds. The ambulances were then requisitioned by the Japanese. From that point onwards they used devised trailers, old lorries which were stripped down to their tables, and these were pulled by the prisoners.

The beds were close to one another in those early days; scarcely room for the doctors to have access to the patients. Sometimes the beds had to be pushed together to give the surgeons access for emergency operations in the ward. All day and night there were the groans of the badly wounded patients. Some had lost two and three limbs. Others had been wounded in the head, needing metal plates or bone grafts to cover their wounds.

Some had gaping exposures of their stomachs. Many amputations had already taken place. Others lay with multiple fractures to limbs.

The surgical smell pervaded everything. New chums to ward-visiting went outside as quickly and quietly as possible and retched. Some visitors could not recognise their former mates, so reduced were they in body and spirit. They brought what they had, meagre little offerings of food and perhaps the first infiltrations of black market purchases. Already men were breaking through the wire at night, bartering with 'the boongs'—that homogeneous Chinese-Indian-Malay mixture of population. It was dangerous, but it was the first step in survival for some.

Denny watched his own body grow thin. At times he seemed like a spectator to his own self. His wounded leg began wasting because it was partially paralysed. From time to time small operations were carried out, draining away an abscess or trying to mend the nerve. The foot of his bed was raised high, and his splinted leg even higher. His injured leg was fastened within a Thomas splint, and the splint had its end fitted into a shoe which held everything in place—all of it lying on the slings which supported the wasting limb.

Once he saw small ants going in and out of the shoe, and he asked about that phenomenon. When they gently removed the shoe, they saw the tunnels the ants had made in the anaesthetised flesh. The surgeon was furious at the thoughtless neglect. A dead heel also came away with the removal of the shoe. Even so, his leg was retained.

Not all days were grim. Far from being grim, many of them had fun. The news kept coming through from the hidden wireless, but whilst it was not good, some of it had the troops laughing. Once the Japanese claimed they had bombed the middle pylon of the Sydney Harbour Bridge!

Some of the most wonderful times were the Concert Nights. Even the Japanese attended, but they were mystified by the beautiful ladies on the stage, and had to be convinced that they were not ladies. There was plenty of humour there, but only the healthy patients could attend.

Friendships grew between patients and medical orderlies.

Perhaps 'camaraderie' is the word to describe it. Doctors were more detached, but had their measure of fun. Denny remembered the day when a patient was under anaesthetic to have a stiffened arm manipulated, and the surgeon was pressing the unconscious man's shoulders to the floor, saying, 'Do you give in? Do you give in?' whilst the patients laughed helplessly. There was plenty of humour around the ward.

This was the ward in which he learned more than in any other. Denny learned lots about himself, of course. But he was more intent on finding out what human beings are. He was able to read as never before. Sometimes he consumed three books a day from the hospital library. Even though his head was lower than his feet, he learned to write at great length. Some friends saw to it that he had plenty of writing material.

Then there was the thinking. Denny's mind had grasped the fact that if he read for so many hours a day, thought for so many hours a day, and wrote for so many hours a day, then he would learn a special self-control and discipline—something he may never have been able to accomplish had he been free of his prison camp. His great plan for using his life had its beginning there.

Denny watched human beings—how they reacted to life and circumstances under which they had to live. He saw the dread of fear of wounds and illness in some, and the calm and quietude of others. He saw those who used their wounds and sicknesses to induce support from others, whilst there were those who rejected any kind of help. They had decided to battle it out on their own, stoically.

He learned how low-spirited and despairing some became under adverse pressures, and how others seemed to flourish most when matters were difficult for them. He also learned from those who visited the patients. Some could scarcely tolerate the sight of men who were wounded, especially when some of them were dying. Perhaps it was fear of death, or even anger at God for not changing their situation. Whatever was the cause, anger showed in their eyes, and after a time they would leave. Some stayed and were irritable. Others showed the most amazing capacity for compassion and help. He watched them as they cared for their mates, willing them into life and healing.

Denny was shocked beyond measure when they brought him the news one day that some of their number were filching special supplies of food and medicines from the hospital store. The food was kept for those who became exceptionally ill. The medicines were as valuable as gold. The depravity which the human spirit can know and exercise etched itself upon him. He felt a great wave of depression envelop him.

His own state of living was carried on in illnesses and fevers. He had known no illnesses in his twenty-three years of life. Now he had a succession of them—malaria, dengue fever, the painful visitations of dysentery—until his body was so thin that his backbone showed through where his stomach seemed to have collapsed. His whole body was a living skeleton, and his limbs so skinny that he could put his thumb and longest finger around his thigh. His eyes receded, his facial bones had the skin tightened on them. His closest friend came to see him after a long absence and ran from the ward—from the sight, the smell and the horror of the living death.

One day they took him to the operating theatre for surgery. The doctors were short of surgical gowns and had discovered—somewhere—a cache of new butcher's coats. He grinned as his favourite surgeon hove in sight. 'How appropriate!' he had commented, but the surgeon had not smiled. Later he discovered that the previous patient, who was simply having a circumcision, had died under the anaesthetic. Nor did he know until much later that his own heart had stopped during his operation.

WHEN the pain-killing drugs ceased, he learned not only about others but had painful revelations of himself. Denny had always pictured himself as a person of integrity, but he felt the waves of yearning beat up against him, the waves the drug addict knows only too well. There was something terrifying about the withdrawal from pain relief. It was confronting to know his strong dependence upon morphine and lesser pain-killers. He found himself ready to cheat and to lie—to do anything in order to force them to give him morphine. Later he realised the source of his addiction—the treatment they had given him at the Fullarton Building ward.

When that barrier was overcome, another presented itself—the unloosing of his knee joint, the stretching of his ligaments, the dread of the thigh breaking again, and the fearful prospect of learning to walk again. He had been many months in his bed with its upwards slope, and felt he would slide off the end when it was set down level with the floor.

Years later, when Denny looked back, he could not believe a grown man could be as fearful as—or even more fearful than—a child taking its first steps in life. The pain of bending the knee, of his leg dangled over the side of the bed—these would have been laughable had they not, in fact, been pitiable. At night he would worry over the next day's exercises, and after them, over the pain they brought. The surgeon used severity, chiding, discipline and encouragement, even to promising a special copy of one of Dickens's novels if he would get the leg to bend to a right angle.

When Denny could walk, it became an adventure, though not without danger. Long ago the amputees had learned to flash around the ward on their crutches. The nerve pain, which was never to cease in his leg throughout all the years ahead, often made him wish his own leg had been amputated so that he could have been without pain. Later, of course, he was grateful it had not been taken off.

One day, as he was passing the officers' ward, he heard a stern voice: 'Stop that limping! Get rid of that walking stick! Walk naturally!'

The orders were barked out with military precision, and it was a brigadier who, whilst being an artillery officer, was also a surgeon. He told the story of a man who had been his friend in the First World War, and who had never let go his walking stick.

'Made it his moral and psychological support,' the brigadier growled. 'Let the world know he had been wounded,' the surgeon said critically. 'Don't get into that syndrome, son,' he told Denny in a kindly voice. 'It'll sap your manhood.'

It was difficult walking with a dropped foot whose toes were still and would not move; even so, he never forgot the kindly but gruff old First World War artillery officer.

One night Denny had to return to his ward. He had been visiting a friend in another place, and suddenly the lights went out.

He had to descend flights of steps which were inordinately steep and had no hand-rails. There was no moon, and all stars were hidden by cloud.

He looked down into the murky depths of the night, and suddenly felt afraid. One movement of his thin and shaky legs might mean he would topple. His vivid imagination saw him falling and tumbling incessantly, and the shattered body still and useless below. There was no one about. Not a sound broke the uncanny silence. He remembered a phrase from somewhere, 'The dark night of the soul.' He shivered, knowing he would never forget the fear of that night. *The dark night of the soul!*

A warm, gruff voice said, 'Like a hand, mate?'

They made their way down the steps together.

HE still lived in the ward. He guessed he would, until they returned him to his own country. He was always treated as a patient; they kept him from the working parties. They made him to be a librarian to the officers, and he liked that. It let him get amongst books. It also gave him a better atmosphere in which to write. He learned to bind books. He also learned to write them. He amassed hundreds of poems—his own.

Now he was not really a patient—not, anyway, when the malaria was distant, and the dengue did not dun him. Once he had a swollen diphtheritic ulcer on one hand, and because he was not strong really, this kept him within the confines of the ward.

He had his times of thinking, still trying to work out man's moral dilemma, still trying to work out the ethics of law and love. Others of his mind gathered together and talked, but without coming to any conclusion. Even so, they were thinking in terms of how to live when they returned home.

THEN it happened! The men from the working parties which had been on the Burma–Thailand railway project returned to Changi. But not all of them, for at least one third had remained north, dead in their graves from typhoid fever, tropical ulcers, dysentery, beriberi and other weakening diseases. They had been cruelly treated, beaten, starved, and weakened to the place of no return. Some had lost their memory of once having been men

of a proud race. They had sunk into their own filth and expired.

Many of those who had returned no longer looked like human beings. They looked like little monkeys—thin arms and legs, wrinkled faces, eyes receded, hair little more than a weak, thin fluff. Some had the scabrous elephant-looking hide of malnutrition. Others were bloated with beriberi, faces puffed and shining, but were they to be drained of that oedematous fluid, they would have been skinny and deathlike.

Denny came closest ever to knowing what human zombies really are. The spirits of many of them had retreated from reality. He had a great desire to give them a recall to life, but he felt helpless. Now they were in the ward and he, in a sense, was on the outside. They were patients, and in a curious way he was a doctor—a doctor of the soul. The things he had thought of over the past couple of years now began to bear fruit. He sat and talked with them through the smell of sulphur ointment, the only treatment for scabies.

Slowly they began to mend. Timidly they made their way back to where their mates were, but the hesitancy remained. Denny wondered whether it would ever go away, whether these would ever stand upright again. All of them bore inner scars. He guessed some would die of the mauling they had had from 'man's inhumanity to man.'

WAR WARD FOUR: KRANJI.

When the prisoners finally had to go within the confines of the Changi Gaol—as distinct from the Changi Prison Camp—the sick prisoners were removed to a camp at Kranji. Denny, of course, did not even dream that one day he would come back to this place, or rather to the War Memorial Cemetery which would then be close by the old Kranji Hospital site.

In that hospital camp they lived beneath the leafy rubber trees, in huts built of bamboo and *attap* palm. For over a year they were to attend to the men who had come back from up north. They were to receive patients from Changi prison who suffered heavily from claustrophobia—fear of confined space—and send back the patients who suffered from agoraphobia—fear of open space.

Denny watched so many die. Some of them had been his

friends. He also shared what faith he had with them, and that seemed to make a difference. He grew to know when men were about to die. A couple of times it seemed he might be dying himself; sometimes he felt so weak. But it was the weak he wanted to help, and he knew that meant an almost impossible infusion of moral courage.

They watched the silver ships sail high in the sky. They heard the drone of the great flying fortresses, and dreaded the sound of sirens, the scream of falling bombs, but marvellously the bombs missed their camp. They could even hear the shrill sound of the bombs as they passed over them; but pass over they did, and that was the relief.

One day he had to bury a friend, and the cortège wound its way up the hill to the open space of the cemetery. Up there Denny could breathe in a manner different from the way he did in the covered campus of the hospital, hidden in the rubber trees, full of unchanging shade. He looked across the Island and marvelled. It seemed so large, so impossible to bomb, even by those flying fortresses. That day he experienced a freedom that soaked into him and kept him in the months ahead—kept him free behind the barbed wire, and the duckbeat of the Nipponese guards.

Sometimes life and release seemed so remote, so far away, that they dared not dream. At other times it was all dreams. Alternately the news was good and bad: bad, because as Pacific island after Pacific island fell there were yet so many more to fall; good, because the tide had turned. More silver fortresses droned overhead. More bombs fell. Victory was in the air, but there was trepidation in many a prisoner's heart at the thought of the immutable Nipponese. Would the prisoners of war be wiped out in a cold bloodbath?

Denny thought it might be good to climb a tree, but he looked woefully at his gammy leg, and thought it an impossible feat. He grinned—an adrenalin charge might get him to the first branch anyway! In any case, he had been landed temporarily on his back again with his first acute attack of renal colic. A rare phial of MSA sent him off into freedom from pain and a mild hallucinatory condition. He saw himself climbing into leaf venation. He knew how a leaf felt! It was all fantastic and a bit debilitating.

THEN, wonderfully, Kranji was finished. The war was over. Planes invaded the airspace over the camp, and aircrews filmed the ragged skeletons that turned up their faces and cheered. A few died in the wards, and others were ill with the sudden increase of rations. Well-dressed commandos came into the hospital camp, and suddenly everything had changed.

The day before he was to board the elegant Dutch luxury cruiser-cum-hospital ship, he had his second attack of renal colic. The new nurses—fair, brunette, and feminine—dosed him heavily with morphia, against the pain. When they took him on board he was hurried to his luxury cabin. They called it 'The *Oranje* Ward'.

WAR WARD FIVE: *ORANJE* WARD.

It was all a dream, of course. Nobody could believe it was true. Nor, to Denny, had a ward ever been so sheer white, its walls and furniture all of brilliant enamel. No germ could have hidden out for a chance moment!

The other beauty was the ward sister. He had never seen a woman so beautiful, and his appreciation of her seemed returned. He wondered how anyone could even notice so skinny and worn a creature as himself. His mind was filled with a thousand thoughts about men and women, and life and the future. He felt his spirit to be radiant but even so, he wondered how she could devote such time to him. He mooned over that in the luxury cabin, shared only by one other, another soldier half crazed with the joy of everything and not a bit jealous of Denny, since there were other sisters aboard.

The luxury cruiser made its way towards Darwin at the amazing rate of twenty-four knots per hour. At this northern entrance to the southern island-continent they received a tumultuous welcome, were finely fêted and treated to exceptional entertainment. What these repatriated men wanted more than anything was bread and butter to eat, and milk to drink. The bakery worked twenty-four hours a day, and the artificial cow knew no end to its production.

Darwin gave way to Brisbane, and then Brisbane to Sydney, and at Sydney—being the first prisoners of war of the Japanese

from the Pacific arena—they received a welcome such as Australian troops had never known, and perhaps would never know again. Denny could scarcely believe his ears and his eyes—so warm, personal, loving and appreciative were those who welcomed them back. Tears flowed, ticker tape littered, ambulances paused whilst relatives, friends and admirers hugged and hugged, kissed and kissed, congratulated and adulated, until the whole world was crazy with joy.

Denny received it all into himself with tremendous joy, detailing every bit of data, checking it with his critical mind, filing it away for a day of pleasurable recall. His own family interrupted this activity, and he was thrown into a maelstrom of emotion, of tears, of delight and sweetness such as he had not known. He could not believe how beautiful his sisters could have grown, or how strong his brothers. The former adored and the latter stood with noble but restrained appreciation.

By that time the ambulances had arrived at the Repatriation Hospital, Concord. This, he hoped, would be his last War Ward. If he hoped it would be his last *ward*, then he was to be disappointed, but certainly it was his last War Ward.

WAR WARD SIX: CONCORD.

WThey did not wish to detain him—not now. He could scarcely believe the rapidity with which they put him through. Questions were asked, notes were taken, signatures were given, and in a moment—not of hours, but of minutes—he was freed, even if only temporarily, from this, his last War Ward. He was on his way to the near country, to home and to the family reunion and, withal, to unbelievable liberty.

When his short leave expired he was back at the ward. The weeks were spent in tests, examinations, recalling for the doctors the diseases he had had, and when—if possible—and what happened, and how was he now? The questions came thick and fast. The files grew thick and fat, as data was recorded.

At the same time the medical teams were both baffled and fascinated by these newly returned ex-POWs. They seemed to have little or no psychiatric problems, at least in comparison to those who had been prisoners of war in Europe.

DENNY spent some of his days thinking back on the four and a half years of war. Within weeks he had earned some fame as a writer of war stories, and stories to do with his POW days. As yet he kept silent on what he had learned, the problems of the struggle to live under difficult conditions, the competition between men and men, and the never-ending effort to survive. He wondered how he could utilise what he had learned, how he could put it to work, especially for others. Sometimes dark thoughts would come, and he would have to battle with them. Often they seemed to touch his body so that he could not eat.

He appreciated the renewed life with his family, seeing them as he did from a new perspective, but he knew there were limits to family intimacy. There were some things he could not speak about.

He began to wonder about this last ward. When would he be free from it? When would he be ready to emerge from his years of living in wards, and seeing life from that perspective? Talks with ward sisters and male orderlies never seemed to come to the point which he needed to share, of what he was to do in a world which he had scarcely known as a youth, and to which now he must go as a reasonably mature adult. These were the things he often thought about, stretched on his bed.

ONE of his friends, Sam, came to visit him. He was an ex-POW himself, and from the same camp. He had never been in wards, and there were things he did not know, but he had worked in the Convalescent Depot, in clerical work. Denny had been a bit of a mystery to him, but he had always carried a certain amount of respect for him.

He was one of the few to whom Denny could open his mind and share his ideas. Sometimes they differed from each other, and even quarrelled strongly. Afterwards they would laugh, but Sam always held strongly to his ideas. This day they weren't differing. They were reminiscing over their POW days, and sharing the humour they remembered. Occasionally the ward sister joined them and laughed over their vagrant bits of humour. In between calls she would stand watching them, and smiling. It seemed to Sam that she was calculating, working them out, and making up

her mind about them, though for what Sam did not know.

After a call the ward sister returned to them, looking down at Denny. She was affectionate towards him in a professional way. Personally, she liked him, although he was a bit young for her. She often eyed him thoughtfully, though without his knowledge.

'A friend for you,' she said briefly.

Denny gathered from her voice that she wasn't overenthused about the visitor, perhaps because it was not the official visiting time.

She seemed to read his mind. 'She's a nursing sister herself,' she said, but the edge was still there in the voice.

He looked up with interest. When he had arrived home, there was a batch of almost one hundred letters awaiting him. He had gone through them slowly, thoughtfully, and answered them meticulously. Some of the writers seemed to have suspended their thinking back at the point where he had known them, about six years before. Others were just warm and welcoming, and others diffident to what had happened to him, fearing it, perhaps because it was unknown.

Sam said, 'You know who that is, don't you?'

He remembered as he looked up that he had known this woman when she was a girl. He remembered her quite clearly, but the change in her over some five years was so complete that he had difficulty in adjusting to the mature woman who greeted him.

He noticed that Sam was looking at her keenly, interest growing in his eyes. That made Denny look a second time.

She was blue-eyed and dark-haired. Her skin was red—almost browned by the summer sun. She wore a dirndl skirt of flowered seersucker. Also she wore open sandals.

Her hair was done up in a bun. He wasn't sure whether she was beautiful or not, but something started in him at the look of her. She seemed very free, with a touch of pertness. She was obviously glad to see him, as she was also glad to see Sam.

Denny had watched women over the past months, trying to puzzle them out. For the most part they seemed shallow or empty. It was not that he was a good judge. He tried to talk to

some of them, but they thought he was a bit highbrow. They weren't interested in his ideas. He hadn't minded that. He had just hoped they would have ideas of their own.

He had recalled the early years of the war when femininity seemed to go a bit wild. So had masculinity, for that matter. There seemed to be a style of freedom that many people affected. Maybe there was a mixture of cynicism and despair, elements rising from a kind of fatalism that happens in wartimes. It was as though no one was quite sure of what might happen. So life was suspended from its norms. It hung without purpose, and people filled in their moments as they felt inclined.

He looked at her as she shook hands with Sam. Then she came across and kissed him as though it were the natural thing to do. He saw pity in her candid eyes, but it was not pity which would anger a person. It was companionable compassion. Maybe she was comparing his old state of full health with the sickness that still haunted him.

'Good to see you, Connie,' he said lightly. Sam looked as though she were a meal and he were starving.

Denny and Connie chatted, and after a time Sam wandered off to meet other friends. The two talked about old friends, but their heart was not in the others. He began to think that he had at last met an unmarried woman who had more ideas in her head than quick sex. Night by night he had seen the couples tucked up on the hospital lawns, and he knew they were sharing a mutual passion. He wasn't sure that all of it was genuine love. He used to shrug at it with a bit of despair. Maybe he was odd. Women sensed that and, apart from the older women, never made up to him, eligible as he was now that the war was over.

He walked to the gate with Connie. It seemed natural for her to put her arm through his. He wasn't sure of what it all meant, but it was pleasurable enough. She gave him a light kiss when they parted at the bus stop. She put a slip of paper in his hands which had her address and phone number. He scarcely noticed it as he tucked it into his dressing-gown pocket. What would he want with an address and telephone number?

When he returned to the ward, the sister gave him a strange look. Maybe she knew what had happened to him even more than

he did. He would talk to her at the time of the late cup of tea in the duty room.

Sam was there, too, not looking happy.

'Where's Connie?' he asked.

Denny grinned. 'Gone home,' he said. 'Why?'

'Nothing,' Sam said irritably. Then he added, staring hard and impatiently at Denny, 'You always get what you want, eh?' It was more of an accusation than a question.

Suddenly Denny knew his ward days were ended. He was thinking aloud as it came to him. 'Get what I want, eh?' he asked back. He grinned. 'You could be right,' he said.

Sam saw him go into that withdrawal every POW had learned to effect. He had done it so many times himself. He knew Denny was in the midst of a soliloquy. It only confirmed what he had concluded—that Denny was already captured by the brash young woman in the dirndl skirt.

Sam rarely related to women—especially young women. He was near to scared that one of them might entrap him, but Connie had opened him wide. She was too straightforward to be subtle, too truthful to use cunning. For the first time he had come to like a woman in a few moments. Like Denny, he remembered her from past days. She had always been honest, and nothing had changed in her. It was just that she had matured and was extremely feminine. The strange thing about her femininity was that it didn't embarrass him.

'What are you going to do about Connie?' he asked bluntly, and he saw Denny return from his state of withdrawal. He saw the strong, determined look in his friend's eyes, and knew his own case was hopeless. Connie had talked with him, but not in the way she had talked to Denny.

Denny answered his question from afar off, his voice a bit dreamy. 'I don't know what I'm going to do about Connie. Maybe I'm not going to do anything. I just don't know.'

He stared strongly at Sam. 'You going to do anything, Sam?' he asked.

Sam looked as though he were about to argue. 'Just don't you waste her,' he said, in a half angry voice.

Denny couldn't remember having wasted anyone. let alone a

person like Connie. Suddenly he knew that Sam appreciated her deeply. Maybe Sam wanted to follow up his own feelings about her. Denny thought, 'Maybe I want to follow up my feelings, too.' The thought intrigued him.

It was then Denny that became aware that his ward life was finished.

Sam had left him silently, but with a friendly smile. Sam had accepted his defeat, but then there really hadn't been a battle. What Sam didn't know was that Denny had finished with wards forever.

Denny lay back on his bed, and when the sister passed him, she looked down quickly. He didn't see her, nor notice the spasm of anger that passed across her face. She realised that any hope for a relationship was gone. She had not thought much of the dirndl skirt, the sunburnt legs, the blue eyes, dark hair and the bun. 'Nothing attractive about her,' she had sniffed, but then she didn't have Denny's eyes—'his inner eyes', you might say.

For his part, Denny continued to lie there and think. His mind ranged back to the first morning of pain when he had lain in enemy territory and when Todd and the boys had come to take him out and place him on top of the wounded Indians, as the truck headed along the bumpy road to Gilman Barracks—not that he, Denny, knew where they were going. He could see the tears in the eyes of his section mates as they laid his wounded leg on the tailgate of the Army truck, and as they saluted him. He understood the salute and returned it, weakly. The pain was occupying his mind.

He was remembering, too, the Irish doctor, and the sweet Irish nurse, and the whole matter of pain and Stoicism, and the sudden, quiet freedom from pain. He remembered a thousand things—bombers overhead, bombs falling, the terrible shaking of the hospital by the artillery shells, the fear on faces of both staff and patients, the Tommy in the next bed feigning a state of being wounded, and the terrible thirst that almost drove him crazy.

Then there was the Fullarton Building Ward, his lying on the concrete floor, his bandages filled with maggots, and no one noticing. There were the sisters and their deep pity, and their regular needles with lethal doses of morphine. There was the

Roberts Barracks Ward and the incessant crying of the pained men, and the orderlies trying to relieve them by words and needles.

There were the shocks that had come with the revelations of man's weak humanity, and his elements of moral degradation. There was the puzzled query of what anyone would do—himself not excluded—to keep living.

The ward at Kranji came back to him, crammed with memories both good and bad, both rich and painful. He lay there, thinking, thinking, thinking, and the sister was almost savage as she glowered down at him.

He knew nothing of her. He was in another world. It was a world of wards, and then, as though he were in mental vertigo, they began to swirl around him, at first slowly and then, like the centrifugal separator machine in his father's dairy, faster and faster, with a long, silent note like a soundless moan gathering momentum and whirling to a muted humming, until the wards, all of them, were thrown together and mulched, and made one dissonant harmony, one experience in which thousands of thoughts, ideas and experiences flew into conscripted collusion, and danced and sang and whirled and flew, until the unity of them reconciled all his disparate thinking and his endless questing, and thus accelerated his faith in the eternal order of things.

'I am done with the wards,' he said, and it was clear, cool and distinct relief to him.

'I am neither their victim nor their product,' he said, and he was referring to the wards—one, two, three, four, five, six of them—the first to the sixth.

'If ever there will be another ward,' he told himself, 'it will be a Peace Ward.'

The term 'Peace Ward' echoed in his brain like a refrain that he could not bid 'Cease!', nor did he care to command it so to do.

As he lay there, he kept thinking of Connie, and the way she had come into the ward with swinging dirndl skirt of seersucker, and her frank blue eyes, and her understanding that was deeper than that of most other women.

In fact, he felt the switch of paper in his fingers which had unconsciously come to him within his dressing-gown pocket. He

thought about it for a time, then gathered a couple of bronze pennies and went towards the phone box.

MAN ABED!

HE must have been a tot. Maybe six years: no more. The memorial near the station, on the edge of the green park, had always fascinated him. Perhaps 'intrigued' would be a better word. There it was, with its tall obelisk made out of granite—green granite, shiny and solid . . . and very, very silent.

At the base there were steps, wide steps where they laid the wreaths each year. He had seen them do it once already. A solemn time it was, to be sure. He knew it must be solemn, because the clergy were there in their white and black robes, which always lifted a bit in the breeze. There also were men in uniform, some with many medals. The most solemn part was the bugling. The bugler produced the quivering notes which evoked a deep sweet sorrow in him—the kid of six. He could hear it quaver across the park, and the tall poplars seemed to shiver in their leaves.

When they had gone was the saddest moment of all for the boy. For another year the place would be bare and lonely. Only he and some of his curious friends would visit it. They never touched the dried wreaths of leaves and flowers, but they peered down the four gratings.

'Can't see anything,' they would say repeatedly, one to another. 'Can't hear anything either.' Sometimes, when they were not with him, he would creep up to the gratings and listen. Maybe one of the soldiers down there might still be alive. He knew this was nonsense, but he wanted to cry out to them and say, 'Hey! What happened? Tell me what happened.'

In later years he was ashamed of his naïveté. He never told another person that he had thought the dead soldiers had been buried under the memorial. If he had known they weren't buried

there, he would have been puzzled. Why have a memorial if no one was there? It would have made the whole thing seem empty to him. Now, looking back, he realised how indelibly the matter of soldiers had been imprinted upon him. It all had to do with that obelisk, that green granite memorial.

THE nursing sister looked down at him. It seemed his head had sunk into his chest. Both were the one. Something stirred in her. He looked so immobile, and there was something about the set of his head and shoulders which made her admire him. Then she resumed her simple non-nonsense line of thinking.

'Mister Bremen,' she said, 'it's time for your medicine.' Her voice was a bit sharp. When he didn't stir, she came across to the side of the bed. 'Medicine,' she said curtly.

It was then he looked up, and she saw something of the imp in his eyes. 'Put it down here,' he said, pointing to the bedside locker.

She deftly measured out the pills, pouring them into a small plastic container. 'With water,' she said. They both knew the tablets had to be taken with water.

She noticed how fine was the face, wrinkled as it was like old leather, and as darkly tanned. 'See you do,' she said abruptly, and left him. Something about him always stirred her. It also left her uneasy.

He watched her go, looking upward at her through his long eyebrows. He had never put scissors to his eyebrows. He had always thought that a bit effeminate; yet he shaved his face daily.

The man opposite him was staring down at him, face crinkled with curiosity. Their beds faced each other.

'Very strange,' said the patient, 'that we should be like kids to these sisters. We're old enough to be their fathers.'

He nodded faintly. He was not one for conversation. He got up from the bed, put on his dressing gown and slippers, and shuffled off to the bathroom. The other man looked after him. 'Must be from the First World War,' he muttered.

Ossie Bremen heard his mutter and grinned. He knew he had only been in one world war, but it didn't much matter. Wasn't worth talking about. He knew his disease had made him look like

an old man long before his time. In no way did he mind that. He swallowed the pills in the bathroom, stooping to drink the water, his palm opened under the tap.

Back in bed, he let his eyes drop. Didn't want to talk to the other fellow. He guessed the man was about his own age.

HE had always thought moonlight to be very beautiful. Out on his property, that is, out on 'Billaway', he had always loved to ride in the moonlight. Sometimes Marie went with him—at least until the children came. Only occasionally would she go with him after the babies were born. Even so, she too had loved the moonlight. It was when he got into bed that he couldn't handle moonlight. He would pull down the blind to get its light off his face. Now, lying in the bed, eyes closed, he realised why that had been. It had been old Anzac Smith's stories about Flanders and the moonlight. He had never forgotten those stories.

'On moonlight nights,' Smithy had said, 'some of the returned soldiers go lunatic. They go mad.'

The kids at the country primary school had asked 'Why?' and Smithy had told them. Smithy wrote for the *Bulletin*, the Sydney journal, the same one that Henry Lawson and Hugh Macrae had written for. The Lindsays, too, contributed their part to it. Smithy was a fascinating storyteller. Doubtless he embellished a bit. In fact he must have exaggerated quite a bit.

The kids had watched his staring eyes. 'On moonlight nights they would go loony,' he would tell them, 'because full moon is the time for that.' At this point he would shake his head in sorrow. 'The returned men would see their mates, all getting up out of their graves and walking about a bit; or they would see them dead, eyes staring, legs and arms maybe sticking up in the air, but no noise, no noise at all.' At this point Smithy would shake his head as though no noise was remarkable. Then he would tell them of the barrages and the Vickers machine-guns, and all the noises that could happen and the Verey lights that would burst brilliantly, especially on non-moonlit nights.

It was the moonlight that scared young Ossie Bremen. He was scared of what he might see, so he kept his eyes tightly closed.

Even later, in the war, he liked moonlight, but not when it came to sleeping in it. He would put his slouch hat over his face, or pull up a blanket, if he had one.

It was curious now to remember how he had skirted the memorial obelisk on moonlight nights. He was sure the dead soldiers would emerge from it, even in spite of the grating. He kept remembering the staring eyes on the muddy fields of Flanders. He also remembered the red poppies. They contrasted so much with the pale corpses scattered about in different positions.

HE was no longer in a dream. He heard someone striding down the ward. He knew in a moment that the man was angry. He kept shouting. Ossie opened his eyes a trifle, but not wide enough for the man opposite to catch him into a conversation.

'Call this a hospital!' the man was shouting. 'My foot it is a hospital! Thirty years ago I was here and I vowed I'd never come back. Well, I have, eh? So that's that. I'm back again.' He stared grimly around the ward. 'This time no sister's going to get on my knocker.' He laughed coarsely. 'Oh, no!' he said in a definite voice. 'This time it's going to be treatment, and me getting well quick and back to Lois and the family.'

No one cared to debate with him. The sisters, the young nurses and the aides all seemed busy with other things. Everyone knew that everyone had heard, but no one was saying anything.

That seemed to enrage the newly admitted patient. He rushed over to the windows that once had opened out onto the verandah. In those days—just after the war—the verandahs had been stacked with beds and patients. Now they served as a sort of walkway.

'Just as I thought!' he shouted. 'Nothing has changed. I stuck that paper there to stop the windows rattling. It's still there.'

Those in the wards listened now. They thought that was rather curious, paper being there for thirty years or so, stopping the windows rattling. After that the man shut up, and went off to change into pyjamas. The man who seemed so old went back to his meditation. He was watching the kid of six evading the old country park and its soldiers' memorial.

After a time he slept. When they wakened him for the evening

meal—so early in the evening—he opened his eyes but kept them on the food. The man opposite him was really curious, bursting to ask questions.

After the tea he closed his eyes. He was curious to see what would shoot up in his memory, and fairly soon it was Uncle Jack and Uncle Frank. They were there with their secret looks in their eyes. He knew they had a secret which he could not understand. They had been in Flanders and that sort of place, and, like Smithy, they had come home. His own Mum thought very highly of them, although she was always mystified how they could be her own brothers and she not know them. It was on the annual Anzac Day and an occasional Armistice Day that they all got together, and then they were very alive. Nothing strange about them on those days. However, if ever the family got together for Christmas, they would eat and drink for awhile and then opt out, walking all around Grandpa's special croquet lawn, and talking special language—Army jargon.

The lives of the two uncles had done something for him. Set a pattern, no doubt. Later he could see that was why he himself had joined the Army—when war broke out, of course. They had never been in the Regular Army and didn't seem to have much time for it. They had more time for other things, like heavy drinking, and not marrying but getting around with what they called 'the sheilas'. By that time, Ossie's Dad, who had not gone to the war for certain good reasons, had taken them, the children, down into the city. The whole family was now in the city to have good education. The uncles seemed a bit foreign to the rest of the family, yet without doubt they were greatly admired. Only old Grandma was worried about them. It must have had something to do with what she was always calling 'morals'. Certainly their drinking worried her. After a time Grandpa came up with some money for them to go on the land. Uncle Frank married. He seemed to like sheep-farming, and later he went in for raising fat-stock cattle. Uncle Jack, however, was a restless itinerant.

The medals had stirred Ossie. Even at the age of six he had wanted to know all about them, and they had joked with him. Maybe they liked to see his serious face lighten, because they joked a lot and made up stories about the action which happened

first at Gallipoli and then in France. Sometimes they stopped joking and their eyes looked quite sad. It was that sadness which stirred him. It left a lasting impression on him.

The sister was back again. 'We want your weight, Mister Bremen,' she said. 'We need to check it out.'

He made his way to the duty room and stood on the scales. One of the sisters made a joke about his weight. 'You could box flyweight,' she said. He thought about that, and decided not to tell her that once he had boxed heavyweight—in the Army that was. He could handle the gloves a bit in those days. That was before the disease came; long before the disease came. He looked at the small nurse and thought that she lacked a sense of human dignity.

When he lay down, he had a negative bout of thinking. Marie had told him not to go down to the repatriation hospital. She was a genial person, but on this occasion she sniffed. 'They call it the Veterans' Hospital now,' she said. She shook her head. 'Nearly lost you once, there. Now you want to go back again. Suicide is what I call it.' Her eye was gentle on Ossie. 'You can afford to go into the best hospital in the land,' she said. 'You can pay for the best treatment too.'

It was just that he had two things in mind. One was that he would go back into an Army atmosphere, and the other—well, he kept that one from Marie. He didn't tell that to anyone. That was his own personal business. It was that which made him proof against the hospital staff. For the most part they were uneasy with him. He was proof against the things which made some of the older patients angry. He could pick out the battleaxe sisters easily. In wartime they had been great. Now, in many ways, they were shells. They could only be themselves in wartime. Maybe they had had a break when the Vietnam fellows had come back, especially when they came with their wounds.

Marie had refused to come with him. She could have gone to the best hotels, or stayed with relatives, or even taken time off in a comfortable motel. No way! Marie was not going to that hospital; not in any way. He knew she was no snob, but she was angry about him going back into that old hole. He grinned. He had his own reasonings and his own likings. At the same time he had no illusions.

AFTER leaving school, he had become a jackaroo. By the time war broke out, he was beyond jackarooing. He was part of the 'Billaway' staff. Old Corrigan would have no one working for him who wasn't an expert. They had to know stock; they had to understand feeding; they had to be hard, too—tough with the stock, and tough with men. Corrigan knew he was training them whilst he was paying them. One day they could launch out on their own, but by that time they would understand good horseflesh, and horse breeding. They would know good purebred cattle, how to look after it, and how to show it. The same went for sheep, especially for merinos and crossbreds for lambs and good wool. You just had to be tough to be with Corrigan, but it wasn't that which made Ossie join up. It was something to do with an obelisk near a park, the quavering notes of 'The Last Post', the Anzac Day marches, and medals dangling from his uncles' khaki tunics. Maybe you could call it a cult, but if it was, then, so what? He had scarcely looked back at 'Billaway'. It seemed suddenly that life had come to life. He was going to find himself in the mystique of war.

Not even the crude days of rookie training shook him out of that. He had joined the foot-sloggers, and sat with them for hour after hour in the Training Depot doing nothing! This was supposed to be part of the training, learning patience. He learned things other than patience. He learned the use of weapons: the .303 rifle and bayonet, machine-guns of old and new vintage—Brens, Tommy-guns and others—mortars and hand grenades, and a bit of Morse, helio, and Semaphore. He liked the bivouacs. The only thing he found difficult was authority—NCOs and officers. Even there he coped. It wasn't all that much time until he was off to the Middle East. They suggested he might like to be a corporal, but he knocked that back with a grin. He was biding his time. He wanted experience. He wanted to be competent. One day he would lead; until then he was content to be led. At least, they thought they were leading him.

A NEW sister had come on. She was young, but gentle. Also she had a certain view of nursing that was different from that of the older sisters. She came on for the night shift. She sat

beside him, knowing he did not like to look up. She asked whether he was comfortable for the night. He knew she was asking whether he wanted sleeping tablets.

'If I have any pain I will ask,' he said. 'Otherwise it doesn't worry me if I don't sleep.'

'You know what your trouble is?' she asked him—very gently, he thought. She was much more gentle than Marie, and Marie could be very, very gentle. Those memories, in fact all memories of Marie, were good, but now he was not remembering Marie. He was interested in the sister.

'Sure, I know what is wrong,' he said, 'and I know it could be curtains any moment.'

He was amazed at the softness of her eyes. He thought, 'She is a rare, gentle person.' He knew Marie was gentle underneath, but on the surface she was brittle enough. She knew too about the sickness, but rarely referred to it. They were not—either of them—Stoics, but for that matter they were not sentimental. Going out to get 'Billaway' had not made them soft. You had to have some hide to try to get a place like that.

The sister sat with him for a moment, and he realised she was a person of great sympathy. He liked that, but was alert in himself. He could not afford to let self-pity awake. He had had more than he needed of that at the time when he had been wounded. It wasn't in the Middle East that time. He had been out of Tobruk before the wounding had come. It had come to him in New Guinea. He often wondered whether being wounded was worth it, worth the decoration that followed, even if it was the highest a soldier could obtain. They told him later that the stomach and intestinal wound had laid him open to the sickness which had eventually come to him. Even now it seemed strange to him.

Going back to Queensland and taking the young bride with him had not affected him. The years of struggle and work on the soldier settlement had never unmasked the weakness. They had been hard years but had ended in his marvellous purchase of 'Billaway'. It had been many years later when Dunkin his local GP had sent him down south, and they had passed him on to the repatriation hospital. He remembered the grave face of the specialist and his dismal prognosis. 'You haven't got long,

Bremen,' he had said. 'You're only hanging on because you want to, anyway.'

That had been true. It had been true when he had gone back into action six months after being hospitalised.

The gentle nurse had held his hand for a moment or two and then she had gone, after giving him her soft smile.

The patient opposite was determined to communicate. 'Still got yer eye in for a good-looker, mate,' he was saying.

Ossie refused to react, or even respond. He closed his eyes. The other man was angered. He began talking rapidly to the man on the left of him. Ossie could hear his protest. Protests had long ago ceased to figure with him, and he soon drifted off.

The man opposite did not see the face smooth out, almost losing its wrinkles. The veteran was dreaming, although not asleep. He was seeing the days past in the glory of a vision. He kept asking himself, 'Why did I join up? Why did we all join up?' That was funny, really, because he could remember in the desert, and later when it seemed the Japs had them hemmed in off the Java coast, the men who groaned, 'Why did we join up?' On the Kokoda Trail they had asked the question. They asked it when they went for hours in rain, dragging one foot out of the mud and putting the other in; fighting the mosquitoes day and night, moving along in the dark, and never sure when the Japs would silently move out of the jungle. In it all, he was never uncertain. That was where he ought to be.

It was not that he had not seen the horrors of war. He remembered the first time in action, in the desert. That was when his best friend got it. Clem had had his face blown off. Strangely enough, Ossie had not reacted with anger. It was true that he wept a bit for Clem, but somehow he knew that was how it had to be. Curious, that—knowing that things that happen are as they will be; nothing will change that. Somewhere behind it all was a plan. It was curious, yet it was also sane.

IN the mornings the old sister—the battleaxe—came on duty. She was getting past her prime. He had thought the race she belonged to would soon have died out, but was mildly shocked to find one morning a younger sister who outdid the battleaxe.

He concluded she was plain bitter, and had mixed her bitterness with cynicism and power-hunger; a frightening combination. He could hear her moving around the ward. She was cruel to the little probationers. She confused even the trained sisters. And she was goaded to fury by Ossie's quietness.

She rarely addressed Ossie in the days of her shifts, but she talked to the other sisters, the nurses, and even to Ossie if she was unable to take his silence.

'Just an old lag,' she would say, 'like most of them here. Get what they can. Try to increase their entitlement. Look at him! Says he's sick, but he looks pretty good to me.'

One of the sisters entered a protest on one occasion. 'Have you read his file, Sister?' she asked. 'Seems to me that he's quite ill.'

'It's those GPs,' the ward sister snorted. 'They work together with these old lags.'

When she had gone on this occasion, the patient opposite sought conversation. He swore about the sister. 'Old bitch!' he grumbled. 'Puts us all in that class. I wonder why we come here?'

Ossie did not respond. His mind was off on the old question. He wasn't wondering why he was there. He was wondering why these things did not affect him. Maybe he was just callous. Marie often told him he was, but then later she would take it back. 'You just know how to handle life,' she would tell him. 'I've never seen anyone like you.'

SHE had loved 'Billaway' and the success they had achieved in getting it. Strangely enough, he had not thought of it as success. In the Army days he had not thought of it as a success when recommended for a commission; not even when they had made him a Major. It never seemed to touch him. The local RSL Club had turned it on when he had come back to 'Billaway' to take up a job until he was able to ballot for a settlement block. Later, when he had bred the State Champion Hereford Bull, he was not greatly moved. He had, however, enjoyed it all.

By the same token, he had enjoyed his time in the repat hospital those many years ago, on his return from New Guinea. That

was when he met Marie, and he supposed that was why he liked the hospital so much. So many of the men had married nurses who had cared for them. Those nurses had set their caps at the fellows, but not Marie. She moved among them quietly. Because he had never flirted she was intrigued, and he caught her in the midst of her puzzlement. He could think of those days with almost more pleasure than any other time in his life.

He could also think of the pleasure she had given when they had come to their new settlement block. For two years they had lived in an old hayshed. He had set it up like a home, but it was pretty crude. The bank manager had been pleased and they had built their home.

He was really tired now and glad to be lying back. He opened his eyes slowly. The man opposite was listening to his radio. The man in the next bed was watching TV with earphones. There seemed to be a general and unusual silence in the ward. He felt his weakness and scarcely knew what to do about it.

THE ward had begun to call her 'The Bitch.' In a way, he felt for her, sensing her insecurity. It made him feel grateful for the security he had always known. His mind drifted, and he knew his rationality was going. The sickness was apparently moving up to his brain. Time was foreshortening itself. This did not really worry him. He wondered why Marie had not come down, but then he was glad. She would remember him as she had seen him at the last. They had both known this might be terminal. She had been sharp about his going into the hospital. She would have visited him daily in one of the big hospitals north. Was it because she couldn't afford to break the old memories, their meeting at this very hospital? Was it her nurse's judgement of the post-war atmosphere of the place? He did not know.

The visitors began to arrive. They seemed to flow along the walkways, turn into the wards, and set up a stream between the beds. Then they would be seated beside the patients, or remain standing, talking. Others would sit a bit on the beds, keeping an eye out for a grim sister. Some would weep over the men, especially where illness was severe. Others would be looking at the

TV screens, relieved to have a distraction from visiting. There was a general rumble of noise. He closed his eyes again. The noise did not trouble him. He just wanted to think, meditate, dream. Reality was beginning to flow into unreality; the past was catching up to the present.

He heard the voice. 'It must be the gentle sister,' he thought. Even so, he would keep his eyes closed. Then something stirred at the back of his mind. He peered through his lids. It was like old times, the times he had known in Marie's nursing days. A thought struck him and he opened his eyes widely. Good God! It was Marie!

He sat up. For a moment neither spoke. Then he said quietly, 'Thought you would never come.'

'So did I,' she said gently.

It was then that the sister came striding down the ward, her white starched uniform rustling with every step. She did not just bustle; she bore down upon them like a battleship. Her first look at Marie sobered her. She picked this visitor out as a person of quality—so much so that she gave a little bow. But the quiet man she would not allow to escape.

'Have you had those tablets?' she demanded fiercely. He looked at her, saying nothing.

'Well, have you?' she asked, her voice rising. Marie was watching her. Then her eyes went to Ossie's. She saw a glimmer of humour in them.

'They haven't brought the tablets yet,' he said quietly. There was a faint grin when he added, 'The other sister is in the next bay. The gentle one, I mean.'

Marie thought, 'She drinks. She is bloated. Something is wrong.'

The sister said angrily, 'He's a lag, this man. I don't know why you visit him. He's like the rest of the old ones. He's in here for what he can get. Why, he doesn't even need the medicine.'

He saw the anger leap to Marie's eyes. He looked at her, and it died. She could easily have said, 'He's my husband. He's a VC. He's a successful farmer. He has a station worth a million dollars,' but she said nothing.

He was thinking, 'She's a jewel, that Marie. She understands the woman.' He knew she would not vindicate him. She would just remain Marie, as calm about things as was he. It had not always been like that for Marie, and not even for himself. Slowly they had both come to it, each at his and her time. Now they knew that in the ultimate nothing was irrational. It only seemed so at its time of happening.

For some moments everything was blotted out, and then a fleeting film passed before his eyes. No one had to tell him that war was wrong, that it was frightening, horrific and evil. It was so wasteful. Nothing could rationalise it. Even in those early days, standing by the obelisk and peering down the grates, he had known it was wrong. How come, then, that there had been something magnificent in the midst of it? How had there been greatness as men seemed to pass from the blandness of civvy street into a realm where character was suddenly tested and a man was seen clearly for what he was? Why was it that some emerged with greatness, and others were unmasked in their failure? Yet even in failure, some came to see the dimensions in which a man can live. Until now it had puzzled him. He and Marie had never thought of 'Billaway' and their possessions as anything noteworthy. They had been deeply moved as they watched their children battle out the matter of life, prior to marriage, then in marriage, and in the training of their own children. They had watched the pain the young ones had suffered whilst they made up their minds about life and morality, and even spirituality. He had seen—with some amazement—the things Grandpa and Grandma had stood for now filtering through to these children, maybe even via Marie and him.

The film passed quickly, and he felt very tired. He knew what this was all about. He heard the sister ranting at him, and he was proud of Marie for her gentleness.

'Why don't you get out of that bed?' the sister was saying. 'You are not as ill as you make out.' When he said nothing she turned and saw the other sister coming with the small plastic container in which there were the tablets. The battleship of a sister was saying, 'At least take your tablets.'

He was smiling at Marie. She took his hand and bent down

over him. He felt her lips brushing his cheek, and then on his own. His sigh was almost unheard. He could hear the older sister urging him to get up and take his tablets.

He shook his head faintly. 'No, I shan't,' he said, and there was no rebellion in his voice. 'There is no point,' he added. There was the smile that passed from him to Marie, and Marie to him. Then he closed his eyes. All he knew was that he was contented. This, he thought, is a good place. This is how I always wanted it.

Marie knew he was gone even before the sister. It was not only because she was a nurse. It was something a wife like Marie would know with a man like Ossie. She bent down and kissed him again. She smiled at the two sisters. 'No point in trying to revive him,' she said. The two sisters stared at her. 'Yes,' she said gently, 'he's dead.'

She turned and walked down the aisle between the rows of beds. She remembered there were always thirty-two beds. Those watching the TV or talking to the patients, or just hoping to get away before the bell rang, scarcely noticed her as she walked away.

The two sisters watched her, for they were still caught in their astonishment. She seemed so regal as she walked. Something was breaking through to the gentle sister, a dimension she had not known before. It puzzled and excited her.

As for her co-worker—the older sister—she could feel the unaccustomed tears pricking her behind the eyelids.

A MAN OVER MAJORS

HIS daughter Anne brought him to Denny, and at first sight Denny was a bit disappointed. He liked the quietness and simplicity of this man who was a contemporary, but he questioned the power of the person. Denny often judged a person by the power he had—or lacked. It was his idea that a man's character was known by the power of his personality. This mild man seemed to have little of that. Denny, whose history of discerning men was a long one, bided his time before making a final decision about the person.

Inwardly he was grinning as he thought about judging a person's strength of character. He remembered, as a boy, how he would sit in buses and trams and trains and look at people, trying to fathom them out. He used to play a ridiculous game: if someone was sitting opposite to him he would stare them in the eyes, and a battle for personal victory would ensue. Looking back, he was a little appalled at the hundreds who were unable to meet his gaze; but more appalled, now, at his staring them out. He remembered his foolish little victories won when they dropped their gaze. Later he realised he had just been rude, invading people with his crude staring. He himself favoured a certain privacy of being. In his mind he made a little act of repentance.

THE man's name was Austin—Austin Carruthers—and Denny was sure he had not consciously met the man, although he had been in his Army unit during the Second World War. He had been at Bathurst in the training camp, but amongst eight hundred men that meant little. Then in Malaya Austin had been posted to Kuala Lumpur whilst he was at Port Dickson. Denny had later gone to Mersing whilst Austin's section was at Johore Bahru. That probably meant they had never met.

Austin's married daughter, Anne, he knew as a vibrant neighbour living a bush block away from him. Sometimes he had chatted with her about her father. She worried about her widowed parent, thinking he was caught up in his memories of prisoner of war camps, and the tragedies he had witnessed on the Burma–Thailand railway. She liked to talk to him—Denny—because he was free about the past, and free enough from it, also.

Anne gave them both a gay flourish of her head, and said she would be back later to pick up Dad.

Denny told her there was no need for that. 'I'll run your Dad back to you,' he said, 'when we've finished talking.'

As usual he was thinking whilst he was talking. Forty-three years after the war he was meeting more ex-POWs in a few months than he had met in a block of many years. He wondered why that was so, and came to the laconic conclusion that it must be because they were all retiring from active work; they were wanting to go back to the old years. Enough time had separated them from those rough and painful time, and many of the old bruises had healed. Common suffering had made every man a friend of the other. In a world of privatised individuals, this was a rather remarkable thing.

'Come into my den,' he said to Austin, and he led the way, waving off the daughter as she slipped away in her vehicle.

In the den Austin looked about him. There was a replica war-painting of Denny up a ladder against a telephone pole, with bombs bursting in the background, and an old Army ute posted near the pole. 'Getting line communication through from Endau to Mersing,' he said. 'We had to link up a company of infantry with Brigade Headquarters.' He smiled. 'The Japs were seeking us out with Zeros, and they would drop a bomb wherever they saw even a single person.' He grinned hugely. 'On that occasion we got through, but my fellows were in the jungle. I sent them there.'

After that they talked about the old days, especially the ones at Kuala Lumpur and Johore Bahru, at Mersing and Endau, and then about the 'strategic withdrawal' all the way down the Peninsula. They exchanged small but fascinating insights on persons and situations. Doubtless these things had been long in their minds gestating, and suddenly they were full-blown ideas. Until

now they had not thought to share them with others, but—almost without speaking—they confirmed one another's thoughts. With this exchange, Denny's ideas about Austin were undergoing a sudden sea-change. The man, for all his quietness, was unusually dynamic.

They went on to talk about the last days on Singapore Island, about the bombed and burning oilwells that poured their oily blanket of dark soot over every one. Men's eyes had seemed strange as they looked out of darkened faces. They talked about the lines of helpless refugees, one walking north whilst the other stream walked south, and no one knew where relief could be found. They had seen the terror in the eyes of the Chinese, and a sort of sullen gladness in the stares of the Indians. For the most part, civilians had seemed stunned or in helpless despair.

It was inevitable that they would talk about days in the different prison camps. To Denny, his six years in the Army were no more significant than any other block of six years in his life, and there had been almost twelve blocks of them. Still, the years in prison camp had certainly been greatly formative—perhaps more than any other set of six years. Yes, he valued them, but refused to let them dominate his life. There was too much going on to hark back often to those times. He refused, steadily, to let a block of his history dominate the whole of his life.

Austin was a bit that way. His history went back to the years of the economic depression. When he talked, it seemed that he was eager to let Denny know everything. Maybe he thought that when Denny knew all, then he would be able to evaluate him—Austin. Denny knew how important humans beings think it is to be evaluated and to be ticked off as 'all present and correct' by other human beings, especially those they respect. He smiled faintly at the old Army saying 'All present and correct', but he had the strong thought that this was a rare occasion—this conversation. He sensed that Austin rarely talked as he was now doing.

Denny thought, 'He really is a private person. That is what Anne always says.' For this reason he listened carefully—as though it were a privilege.

Also in his mind was the perpetual quest, the eternal research on humanity. Persons did not simply intrigue him: he was

fascinated by them. They came in all shapes and sizes—these men and women—but none of them was ever boring. He was amazed at the variety of their lives, even the lives of the seemingly stereotyped ones. Talk to them for a while and something would happen. They would brush aside years of dull conformity, and out of their pasts would come the talk of dreams and ambitions, yearnings and hopes, and they would tell him stories of hurts, disillusionments, and the retreat into anonymity or social conventions—an anodyne for terrible pain.

Denny thought that this was why children fascinated him. They were all moving towards some destiny—were it to be good or bad. He marvelled at the way in which simple incidents shaped or misshaped their lives.

As he listened to Austin, he knew he had better listen attentively. He put aside his own secret thought-streams, and concentrated on the man. To look at, he was like most others in their seventies—a bit pale, frail and mild. He had retained most of his hair, but thinly. His pale blue eyes were not hooded, but they were secretive, as though, behind them, the man concealed ideas that were not for everyone.

He was sharing them with Denny. 'We just about starved during those Depression years,' he said. 'We were not in hock to the banks—Dad was too careful for that—but we lived a lot on rabbits, on bread and dripping, and of course there was a bit of hogget. We barely made out. They were hard years, but I guess they made us.'

He smiled gently at Denny. 'Since the war we've made out well enough. I retired from the land some years ago because of my arms. The Japs were responsible for them. They made us carry heavy timbers for making bridges.' His eyes clouded with the memory.

'It was unbelievable,' he said, and Denny heard the terrible anger in his voice. 'This day it was more unbelievable than ever. There was this huge pylon, and they made us pick it up and carry it, and we knew it was impossible before we began.' His voice dropped to a whisper, and Denny suddenly knew the man had rehearsed this ancient happening, time and again—on the tractor at nights when he was seeding the wheat, or in the ute as they were

rounding up the sheep or droving them. There must have been many nights, especially hot nights, when he had lain awake thinking about it all.

The mild blue eyes were close to blazing. Denny from his own experience knew the power of anger and its irrational brooding because of unrequited justice. He knew nothing would ever still the storm in this man. Turbulence lay under the seeming quietude of former prisoner.

Austin was saying, from far away, in a voice of shocked pain, 'They just couldn't support it, and it came down on me, on my arms. They didn't break but they were crushed and bruised.' He paused.

'For a long time they were crushed and bruised,' he said, and he went silent.

Denny sat, quietly observing him but also remaining silent. Time seemed suspended as each entered into the other's thinking. Denny was thinking of the senseless cruelty of it all, but mostly of what it seemed to have done to this man's spirit. How wrong he—Denny—had been in thinking that Austin was just a tired old man, eking out the last years of his life in visiting his family on the one hand, and privatising himself for long periods on the other.

He thought to himself, 'This man is a remarkable person.' He added him to the gallery of the strong people he had known. It was not that he had been impressed by the anger, for anyone—indeed everyone—can get angry. It was the power of the man not to be beaten by the crushing of the pylon, by the cruelty of the oppressor. He had kept his dignity, even if it sometimes needed anger to preserve it.

IT was about that time in their conversation that the change came. Denny remembered his surprise at the alteration in tone. He sensed that all the other had been a preliminary to what he was now going to hear. It was as though Austin had left his own suffering behind and was looking out on the scene of human beings—especially the story of his officer friends.

'In the days before the action—before the Japs came—I was just a truck driver,' Austin was saying. 'I was at Headquarters

and I would drive the officers on leave. Of course, this was all before the balloon went up.' His eyes gleamed, 'They were a pretty bright lot, those men with commissions. They liked the bright life and the gay life, and they used every minute they had.'

He seemed to bear no resentment. 'They made me a driver because I didn't drink or smoke or womanise. It was good for them. They could leave me and know I would be there at the time they wanted me back. I never failed them.' He grinned, 'My time was my own, and I would look around a bit, or read, or have a sleep. I enjoyed it. Maybe they took me too much for granted. There could have been a little of that, but I didn't mind a lot.'

As he talked, Denny wondered a bit about what he was saying. He had come from an old family in western New South Wales, and—given in some economic struggling during the Depression—they were nevertheless a family with dignity. The boys had all become successful pastoralists, and the girls had married into good families. There must have been more than a trifle of indignity in Austin's having to transport the officers on their leave-sprees. Denny listened carefully, but could not catch any criticism of the men he had ferried on those escapades.

He made it clear that all leave was not escapade. He had had a high regard for men amongst the officers who had act responsibly and who were persons of calibre. Denny suspected that although Austin was no prude, he had had little time for those who had been unfaithful to their wives.

'I guess I didn't mind what they did. That was their business. Every man can make up his own mind. But, somehow, you began to get an idea of what they were, and how they would act when the fighting came.' He grinned. 'It became quite a hobby,' he said. 'During action with the Japanese it turned out much as I thought it would. You just get to know people, don't you?' It was a rhetorical question, for he went on without waiting for an answer. 'Yet even I was shocked at some of them. I had given them higher ratings than they deserved.'

They both sat silent. Denny was thinking of how close he himself had gone to getting his commission, and how he had missed out by a hair's breadth because they brought reinforcement officers in as the action had begun. Otherwise he

would have been an officer. He wondered what it might have meant, but because he had always considered speculation to be pointless and stupid he had left off thinking about it. Now he remembered that just as officers had their own friendship and camaraderie, so did the other ranks. That was the way it had always been.

'It's a funny thing,' Denny said suddenly, taking the conversation for a moment from the other man, 'but I remember meeting one of our officers many years after the war—at least thirty years, I think. You won't believe it, but he called me 'son' even though I was in my late fifties and he was only in his early sixties. I wondered why he called me 'son', and then I realised it was his way of still keeping the officer-private connection. I could hardly believe it when I understood that.'

Denny grinned at the memory. 'I said to him, "Why do you call me 'son'? No man in his fifties is 'son' to anyone but his father. Maybe you think you are still an officer, eh, and I am a private?" At first he looked quite angry, and then he was embarrassed. He growled a bit and huffed away, and after a while he apologised. He said, "I can never get it out of my mind that I am still an officer and you a private."'

Denny chuckled. 'I said to him, "You just have to be an officer, don't you? It was the big thing in your life—that lift into authority. What you were before and after being an officer is what you really are. Maybe being an officer helped, but maybe it didn't. I think you feel superior because you were an officer, but no man is superior to any other—or inferior, for that matter. Anyway, stop calling people 'son'. Certainly never call me 'son' again.''

Austin stared at him. 'That was what I getting to,' he said, 'about some officers and their airs, and then their actions.' Denny's little contribution seemed to have galvanised him, giving him impetus. He leaned towards Denny, a bit excited. 'Had officers under me,' he said, 'in fact quite a few.' He waited, expecting Denny's surprise, and when Denny said nothing he said, 'I had majors under me.'

The imp in Denny made him speak: 'The minor was in charge of majors.'

Austin's eyes narrowed with faint suspicion, as though Denny was having him on, or pulling his leg, but not a muscle on Denny's face even quivered. He went on. 'When things got really bad on the Railway, the one who could do things kind of took over. That's what happened with me. I kind of naturally took over. I guess some of the officers recognised the facts, and Japs seemed to accept the leadership. It just happened, and it went on.'

This was the Austin that Denny had not suspected would be special when Anne had introduced him to her father. He had been deceived by the almost expressionless eyes, the seemingly mild manner. There was a tiny thrill in him that kept building up. He was seeing Austin on his farm, very competent as a farmer, as an engineer; and this was the man the Army had made a truck driver for officers on leave. It was not merely an indignity—for men accept almost any designation in war—it was woeful lack of discernment that smothered a man's gifts and ignored his native ability.

Denny had the strange feeling—the very strange feeling—that for over forty years Austin had been looking for a contemporary—one who had been in the Army and knew all about it—in order to share his story. For Denny this realisation was quite an experience. In life he had come up against snobs, and long ago had worked out the social and circumstantial factors that put persons in privileged positions, but since a man's innate worth is that which determines who and what he is, he had not worried too much. His wry, dry sense of humour had helped him over this and other stiles, but Austin's story was bringing him to life.

Austin seemed to sense that. He was certainly saying what he had never said to another man. 'All the officers under me, and for that matter all the men, accepted my leadership. It just happened that I knew what to do, and how to handle situations with the Japs and with the Aussies and others in our party.'

He paused and looked deliberately at Denny. 'Funny, wasn't it? Some of those officers were the ones I drove on leave. Now they were under me.'

'Did they try to give you some kind of rank?' Denny asked.

Austin shook his head. 'The idea never arose,' he said. 'I

simply seemed to take over. I tell you, Denny, there were majors under me.'

Denny thought there was nothing of triumph in Austin's voice and nothing of pride. Nor was there anything in it of patronising the men who had been under him. Denny thought it was a bit of miracle.

THE two men didn't say a lot after that—not, anyway, about his being over majors and they, the officers, accepting it gladly. They didn't need to say anything. The two of them then got to talking about a number of things—present retirement, present action in life, living conditions, members of families.

After a time Denny seated Austin in his Toyota Corolla and ferried him back to Anne. Austin, now animated, was talking about writing an account of what had happened in his life—especially the bit about the war and prison days. Anne seemed a mite mystified, though delighted, at the unusual animation in her father. She smiled her gratitude to Denny.

Denny, who had given some of his own books to Austin, said, 'You'll recognise some of the stories in those books. Maybe I can help you to write your own.' He was thinking about 'A Minor Over Majors'. That would be a good title.

Austin nodded. 'That would be great,' he said. His face was serious. 'Some things you cannot write,' he said wisely.

Denny nodded at that, backed the car out of the drive, and gave a backward wave of his hand.

'That's right,' he said to himself, 'there are some things you cannot write.'

He had the distinct feeling that the Austin who had waved to him was a liberated man, for his eyes had been filled with animation and energy. Maybe this was the occasion he had sought for over forty years, and it had come to pass.

Denny swung the car around the block, heading for his own place, for his den and for his word processor. 'Whilst there are some things we should never write,' he intoned to himself, righteously, 'yet there are some things *you had better write.*' He chuckled hugely at that.

When he swung into his drive he was still chuckling, and when

he sat in front of his word processor the guffaws were rising in him, and then expressing themselves. He wiped away tears from his eyes with the back of his hands.

'Yes,' he said to himself, 'there are some things which ought to be written.' He was absolutely sure *that* they ought to be written, but then on second thoughts he was not quite sure *how* they could be written, just *how* one could convey all that he had just seen and heard.

SINGAPORE VISIT

I WANT to tell you quickly about the visit I had that time to Singapore. I say 'quickly' because my mind is getting confused these days, what with old age, and approaching death, and something of turmoil about the past. I have the thought that if I write quickly I will strike the right chord. Immediately all memory will come together—of itself! There will be a flash of light, and instantly it will piece itself together and make sense. That is how I feel at this moment. Later I may want to go limping back to bed, what with the pain in the leg and the arthritis, and all that.

It has come to me to do it quickly, because my old friends from Singapore—Changi and such—are dying fairly rapidly and widely these days. Our ex-POW magazine keeps giving the lengthening obituary lists. Strange, isn't it, that humans think it is terribly important to get every little detail down on paper, so that nothing is lost! *Down on paper and as soon as possible? Nothing must be lost?* Ah, yes, all must be transmitted. The generation that is going out finds it suddenly important, and the generation being left behind doesn't want the oldies to miss anything. 'Transmit!' is what they both say.

So I will give it to you in bits—dribs and drabs, so to speak. I may be able to piece it all together, or at the last it may come together itself, or some knowing friend may yet edit it and make it tidy.

THE first thing I remember about that trip twenty years ago was staying with rich Chinese friends, the parents of a former student. How kind they were, and how gracious! How marvellously hospitable! They attended to everything I wanted to do. It was restful, staying with them in their large mansion.

Nothing was a trouble to them, nothing was spared in order to make my stay joyful.

They looked upon me as a teacher, indeed a great teacher. They had seen the fruits of this teaching in the life of their son. At that very moment, he was in Japan with his new young wife. She also had been my student: hence their warm approval of me and their quiet respect.

So they took me to Change Alley. You who have been to Singapore recently will say that Change Alley has disappeared. Then so much the worse for us all. Almost all the world has met at some time or another in Change Alley. It goes there not only to buy goods cheaply, but to be in the fun and noise, the music and movement of it all. Not in a hundred years did I think I would meet old Cotter-Harvey in Change Alley. He had been years older than I in the prison camp, and I had thought he must be dead, those twenty years ago.

Fancy meeting Cotter in that alley! What do you know! It was true. He looked quite shaky about the eyes, but very firm as a human being. He had always been that. He had encouraged me those many years ago, both in Changi and Kranji. (Kranji is where they now have the War Memorial Cemetery with all the tall white crosses.) In Kranji he had read my writings with great respect. When I think about it, I believe he gave me faith in my art of words. And here I was seeing him, aged and shaky, but firm as a human being, using a walking-stick and making his way through Change Alley. He had some other men with him, every bit as frail as himself, and he was telling them about 'the days in '41 when we of the AIF used to go to the Alley.'

My, what a bunch of suave schemers and con men they were, in that Alley! Yet they had glorious goods—imports from all over the world. They tried to give them away. They offered me a camera for ten dollars. I had just bought socks—fine khaki socks to go with my Bombay bloomers—but the khaki colour ran in the first monsoon storm. I only paid cents for them. But a camera or ten dollars! They must have been kidding! I was so young and raw that I blushed to bargain with the smiling Indian, and so a man offered me the camera for a dollar! Of course I never bought it. Who would buy a camera for a dollar! Even so,

I used to think later that it might have worked out.

Once you had been in Change Alley you seemed to change for life. I don't know, even now, why that should have been so, but the change remained. For ever after you looked for a bargain—like a camera for a dollar!

In the long nights in the prison camp I used to dream about Change Alley, and the things you could buy and some of the things you could eat. That is, if it did have eats there. I have long ago forgotten. Why, then, did I think about Change Alley eats in the prison camp?

I nearly cried when Cotter and I finished talking. I used to think him the wisest man in the world, and now it seemed I was wiser and stronger than he. Of course I am now speaking of over twenty years ago and about that particular visit to Change Alley. Cotter seemed immortal to me, and I was stunned by his obvious mortality in the Alley. He halted a bit on his walking-stick. Oh, dear Cotter—leading heart specialist—where has all your power gone? I had always thought I would die before Cotter did. Seeing him, I lost confidence in his immortality and mine.

After I left Change Alley I was absent-minded and slipped into a gutter. My right leg swelled enormously at the knee and I wondered about the old osteomyelitis that Bertram Nairn used to care for. He said the thing could revisit me in later years. He and Cotter were close friends. Bert used to make me feel like a boy—almost his son. Cotter used to make me feel that fame was just around the corner. I had a fresh sense and charge of it when we met in the Alley. In post-war years he had read some of my fiction-writing and liked it.

MY Chinese hosts had let me wander the streets on my own. I wanted to go back to the old Fullarton Building where I had lain on my back with a fractured leg because everyone was so busy and had not noticed me in the welter of other fracture cases. In the evening a strange English surgeon had noticed me, and had started shouting at everybody for the neglect. That was the war ward where the surgeon and the nurses gave nine of us lethal doses of morphia so that we would die with ease before reaching the prison camp. Another Aussie and I had insisted on

living; we knew nothing about the lethal doses, only about the glorious cessation of pain. I often wonder where Andy is. I know he came from Queensland. Together we survived the intended euthanasia.

Perhaps it was best that I didn't find the old building and the General Post Office next to it from which we were fed out of accumulated Christmas parcels sent to the troops. I can still remember the old Nestlé's cream, the rich Christmas cakes, and the tinned peaches. There were packets of sultanas and raisins also—all from Australia.

I THINK my hosts wanted me to get to the Kranji War Cemetery. They knew the way there. Indeed, all cars seemed to be going that way. I had a thick throat because the cemetery was (is) just above where some of us had lived for the last eighteen months of incarceration. The camp was under rubber trees, in a plantation. We lived in rows of *nippa* palm huts. There were little gardens outside our huts, but under the trees fed only filtered sunlight. At night the moonlight through the foliage left silver sequins on the silent soil.

We used to fill the rose-bowls with urine during the night, and then rush to get it for our little gardens in the morning. There was little else to give the soil nourishment other than our urine. Some stumped out, bloated with beri-beri, and others groaned their way to the latrines with dysentery pains. There is nothing to equal excruciating dysentery pains.

As my Chinese friends rushed me along in their shiny Mercedes Benz, I remembered the agony of renal colic in the old Kranji Camp; stones in the kidneys, terrible pain in the gut, and horrible heaving because the agony was so bad. Whichever way you turned, there was no escaping it. They said it was as the pain a woman knows in childbirth, and, unmarried as I was, I vowed I would never let a woman go through that. It was Cotter who came to the rescue—Cotter with a phial of MSA. The heart specialist told me it was what they gave to mothers in childbirth. 'Twilight sleep' they called it. That last phial of precious drug sent me into the leaves of the trees, and I was living in the venation of those leaves. I knew everything about everything; more

than the philosophers had known. Heightened awareness it was, within a thin, strengthless body. And so it was then that I discovered more hallucinated truth than any other camp member had had in three years. 'The last phial we have,' Cotter had told me, with a friendly hand on my skinny arm. I could scarcely believe the release. It was like lethal morphia in the relief, and even better in the mystery of hallucination.

Talking about morphia: I dreaded the thought of another attack of kidney stones, knowing that there was no more MSA in the camp. Then unbelievably I had another attack on the night before our departure on the beautiful Dutch hospital ship, the *Oranje*. They took me on board, loaded with morphia, and I fell in love with the most beautiful sister-in-charge who had ever been in a hospital. She also fell in love with me, but we could do nothing about it—neither then, nor ever after.

WHEN we arrived at the War Cemetery I was awed. It was a vast, silent place. No one seemed to talk. The rounded hill was set out symmetrically with white crosses. They were cold and silent and very reverent. I always feel awed where death has come to such quietness. You can almost hear the silence of the unbreathing dead below the even green of the turf. You want to speak to them, silently, and so you do—in your heart you do.

I moved up and down the rows where my mates were buried, and was not ashamed of the tears. The men I knew rose vividly in my memory, and I still could not believe they were dead. It is not imagination that makes you say they speak to you in the silence; but then they are so much younger than you, and you wonder at the strength and beauty of them. How you wonder!

Some graves I could not find, but the names of the lost I found on the memorial walls. 'Missing, presumed dead' was the inscription.

I have been back on further visits and the same power is there in the quietness, the stone crosses, the green turf, and in the sweep of the memorial gates and the memorial walls.

On that first occasion I had stared down at where our prison camp had been. Now it was gone. From it I had helped to inter the first bodies, and had always thought of them as lonely up on the

hills. Now, in this vast quiet War Cemetery many friends were together, and the old once-living, suffering camp was gone forever.

THEY took me out that night to one of those fantastic Singapore restaurants: fabulous place—exotic, with the right music, and all the special people—and my mind was a jumble of memories. They talked to me gently, and with humour, and they drew a soft, warm blanket over the past. They told me about the Island, how it had flourished under their strong Prime Minister and his firm government.

Then they told me about Reformatory Road. No one knew where it was, or even where it had been. Yes, they knew it was near Bukit Timah and had stemmed from that place. They said they thought they knew where it had been. They would take me there the following afternoon, and so they did. During the first part of the day we had visited friends of their own and then friends of friends of mine, and so the day passed quickly.

Behind all the action and the visiting I was thinking about Reformatory Road. I was thinking about the lake on which the ducks had quacked, which told us that maybe the enemy were coming. I had thought the fever I had was malaria or maybe dengue; my teeth had chattered and my body was in an ague, but the notion never entered my mind that it might be unconscious fear. In those days I had no conscious fear. I was waiting for the action. I had ditched the Army Norton on which I had ferried the Brigadier for a day or two, and we were there beside the lake or the dam or whatever it was.

So, I thought, as we visited friends and chattered about inconsequential things, we will easily find a lake or a dam, and then we will be on Reformatory Road. That was where a company of armed Sikhs had tried to bayonet me because I told them—in the presence of their Brigadier—that they were cowards. An English Officer had knocked up the bayonet that would have gutted me when a enormous Sikh private objected to my dishonouring remarks, and it was after that that the Sikhs had followed me in numbers. Followed me! I could hear their cries and my cries as we rushed towards the yammering machine-gun pit just below the left edge of Reformatory Road, and suddenly they had all

veered to the right, through rubber country—over a high hill—while I and a few others had rushed ahead to silence the menacing, yammering machine-gun.

How we hated its yammering, though as yet we feared nothing. Our bayonets were like live steel or even silver fire. The nest below suddenly stopped its noise, and I crashed to the ground, my right leg shattered, whilst searing pain stabbed my surprised body and mind.

It had been there, on Reformatory Road, that I had lain in the early morning. When the dawn came through the war-smoke and war-sounds—mortars all the time whistling over me and breaking below—I wondered why I was not killed so many times.

Then the dawn became very quiet, silent as death. Even the distant sounds died away, and death came stealing through the tall, harsh *lalang* grass to claim its own. Dappled sunshine broke through the tall rubber trees and spent golden coins on the black bitumen.

I watched the river of red flow across the road and into the valley below, and I wondered how much of its Nipponese brotherhood was in the silenced machine-gun nest.

WE never found the place. There was no lake, and there was no bend in the road, which, if you looked, you would *know* this was where it had been. There were only houses and mansions which had outstripped the plantations and overridden the kampongs. Two decades had covered the business of war, and made a new world in which not even the memory of it found a place.

They were sad for me that I could not have my sentimental journey. They spoke so gently, so lovingly, and I felt the disappointment ebb away as I enjoyed a new and critical moment.

THAT night as I slept I saw the few men of my section who had come to get me. I saw them coming along the road which had now lost its name, but then was known to us all. There was not much laughter in their faces, and they looked around and above to see if there was a sniper or two, but the snipers had gone. We had the dawn to ourselves, and I wondered

why Todd—that tough tiger—should weep whilst the others cursed, and a few were grateful.

They could do nothing about the blood, for you cannot recall blood that has flowed and drained into the soil, but you can know a world that those who have never fought in war can never know. Call it what you will, it is higher than that which we know at other times, and no matter how hideous death and war may pose themselves in the eyes of many, it is the precious and the valid thing that comes to participators in their Reformatory Roads. Names may die away, but memory is the strongest reality men know.

So they carried me to the truck, gently, as only men know how to be gentle, and they laid me on top of the other wounded, and sent off the truck with gentle words, silent tears, and a good measure of Aussie humour as they waved goodbye.

ITOLD you at the beginning that these snatches of memory coming to me now in the autumn of my life are precious to me. I really cannot put together all the snatches of them except as they come to me, and I suppose it does not matter. What I have to convey, however, is that everything is precious—every action and movement of us all upon the earth. We cannot wait until someone rationalises it all, puts it together as a tale, and gives pleasure of a story. That is not the point at all. It is the whole thing of that beautiful Island, and those prison camps in which we lived and suffered, laughed and died, that matters. It is the Change Alleys, the Fullarton Buildings, and slipping into a gutter so that an old wound comes to life, and it is searching out the place of battle after having seen the sleep of the battlers. That is what matters.

Without it there is none of this joy, none of this knowing all things to be significant. Indeed, there is nothing! If roads and buildings and places and names have been swallowed up in history—what does that matter?

What we do know is that there is no ‘nothing’. There is only ‘something’. The something lives not only in memory, but also in the age to come. There can be no age to come without the ages that were—the ages where we have lived.

THE RAYMOND CONNECTION

RAYMOND came to me last night like a wraith. He hung there in the back of my mind like some kind of vision. His clothes were fairly tattered, and in a way he was like a tatty doll, but he was human all right, and real. Nothing more real than that happens to me.

I suppose I should have expected Raymond to come. These days I have been doing a bit of delving into the past, and memory is a strange thing—anyone will tell you that. So when Raymond appeared, suspended there against the background of my mind, I wasn't surprised. I took it as it happened, and was not dismayed. Dismay would have been the last thing for me, especially in the mood that I was living at that time.

One of the reasons I partly expected all this was that I had been reading James Clavell's *King Rat*, his brilliant account of Changi prisoner of war camp. Having been in that camp for some years, his story rang true and was pretty poignant, to say the least. After that—and as a kind of antidote—I was reading Ernest Gordon's *Miracle on the River Kwai*. I think you need to read both books, rather than one or the other.

So my whole being was in the mood I mentioned, but for the life of me I can't describe that mood. It was something of sadness, and something of joy, with a lot of inner weeping and a modicum of laughing. Where I stood in it all was what mattered to me; it doesn't matter to others. Not a bit.

I began to talk to Raymond, even before he began to talk to me, although his hanging there was itself a pretty vocal thing. You cannot see a man whom you may not have met before, but who is the synthesis of all you saw and knew in your time of imprisonment, and his very presence not talk to you. I talked—there

is no doubt about that—but then I wanted answers, I wanted conversation, and today there is no one around like Raymond, because he is both the past and the present. He may even have something of the future in him.

Some who were there in the past won't talk in the present. Some of them who might have talked are now dead. Many of them who are still alive are too angry: they burn inside from some slow, consuming fire, and the years have just about eaten them up. They've had to build up the outside so that it looks like some authentic exterior. They've had to make it look modern. It's always been modern in its own time, from the 50s to the 90s. You know what I mean. It has changed with every decade, and in every decade. It is as though you learned nothing from that critical experience, and that which you thought you had gained, you have lost. You become like the age you are in, but in memory you can't be that. Memory is a powerful thing. Try to kill or lose memory and you lose yourself. I repeat that so that you will remember it: lose memory and you lose yourself.

Ernest Gordon said something like that. He said that when the Japs had used cruelty and degraded the minds of men, they made them forget the past, and it was then that men forgot themselves. They were simply blanks, or empty holes, or existent nothings. When memory is killed—and who outside us can really kill it?—then you would lose identity. I think you may understand this, but you won't if you have never killed your memory. Some are trying to do so, and it is suicidal, and like most suicide is without great point.

So I wanted Raymond to talk, and talk he did. I cannot remember all he said. I'm not a good reporter. Every report I've ever given has been flavoured with my own thinking; it isn't objective reporting. But then, I say, 'To the devil with objective reporting!' What are we here for but to see life, and then tell about it. That's the job of every artist, every poet, composer and writer. So I listened to Raymond, and as he talked I kept absorbing it, ranging it up against my own mind and life and thought. It kept coming through that way, gathering pace, and something within me was singing in high spirit, whilst something else was sobbing and sobbing. I'll tell you how.

A few years ago I went north in Australia to Darwin. I was on the track going towards Katherine. We stopped at the Adelaide River, where there was a notice saying, 'TO THE WAR CEMETERY.' I went down a narrow road to where there was a grove. It was unusually beautiful, with high coconut palms, other palms and trees, and a lovely stretch of green lawn—quite something in that bit of the Territory. Then we went into the war cemetery. A plump girl in shorts was there, sweeping away fallen tropical flowers, keeping everything neat. She seemed interested in the flowers on the asphalt. Maybe she was also interested in the graves; I don't know.

When I went in, I saw hundreds—maybe a thousand or more—of tombstones. They were in good marble. They had crosses, except for one or two Jewish and Moslem insignia, the Star of David and the Crescent. All these men had died in the war.

I looked at the stones, the translucent marble headstones, and I read the names of the men who had died over forty years ago. Most of them were young. Here was I, over forty years later, hale and hearty and living life, and they were dead. They never grew up. They never had the chance to grow up. Some of them had been married, and their wives had had their feelings and wishes inscribed on the headstone of their husband. Some of the sayings were sweet, some sad, and I had no way of knowing how sincere or insincere were these inscriptions, nor how many of those wives had since remarried.

In those moments, I remembered young men—mere boys—that I had seen killed or who had died in POW camps, and suddenly I began to weep. Because I was with people, I did not weep outside, but inside a whole stream of tears was flowing, and I was crying for the young men and the sincere wives, and their little children. I kept weeping, and yet all the time I knew there was something wistfully wonderful about it.

WHEN Raymond came it was something like that. He was clad, of course, in his unkempt prison garments. I mean, service khaki which has worn down with the years, until it seemed natural; and he, hanging there at the back of my mind, was clearly seen and understood, and he had a touch of quiet joy

at being received, at being one with me. It was as though he had been searching out a like mind.

Not that I had ever met Raymond, at least not that I could remember. I have to say that, but then in another way I had met him, for he was a composite of all I had known in past days, even though he was himself, and probably a person in his own right. I do not know. He was real enough as I stared at him, and as he looked back at me.

I want to refer again to this thing called 'memory'. Our minds are both strange and wonderful. They store every bit of data they receive, both seen and known from outside our person, or felt, imagined, and thought about within our person. Associations are always there, strong as the day the events happened, and the associations begin to cluster around their objects. When we let memories meet, there is a curious communication as we expose mind to mind, person to person.

This is what happened. It wasn't just telepathy, which, after all, is simply a name we give to mental communication. It was more than that. I've always held the view that any two people can have immediate and full communication—if they want it! Some like it for a while, but then get scared and draw back, or cut off when they feel they are being exploited. With Raymond and me there was none of this. It was as though we were looking away from ourselves to others, and to a mass of incidents and accumulated information which we felt could help each other to sort out our thinking, as though conclusions about all these things really mattered. Oh, they mattered all right. Down through the years I've known they mattered. It was simply that I had needed help to sort them out.

You see, you can't talk to just anyone. Some have self-justification as their driving force in life. They want never to have been wrong. Now how can you discuss anything—especially about a common past—if others have always had to read it the self-justifying way? They never could afford to make mistakes. Why? Self-justification did not begin in their POW days. It must have started before that. Maybe prison conditions intensified it, but they never initiated it. When then did it begin? I think it must have come with their mother's milk, even if it were not actually in

the milk. I mean, every man shapes his own destiny.

Raymond was a wonderful man, a quiet man, and a patient man. He was not out to prove anything, and he seemed too tired to waste time and breath on romantic, sentimental or patriotic ways of thinking. Nor was he merely a stark realist. Certainly he was not cynical. Like me, he wanted to get behind things and happenings, and know what they were all about. That was why we could converse so simply. As I said, I am not quite sure whether we actually verbalised our questions and our thinking, but I know it was as though we did; as though we surely did.

And what was that discussion, that meditation, that beautiful, sad and wonderful communication? It was about us. If Raymond had not said anything, then Clavell's and Gordon's writing would have been enough, for both came at the same thing from different vantage points, and maybe Raymond was simply Clavell and Gordon come together in my mind. Maybe not. There was something about Raymond which was more gentle and understanding than even those other two brilliant writers, but I have to confess I don't know.

Let me tell you that for years I have had to talk to myself about many of these things. There really hasn't been anyone else to talk about the things I needed to understand. When I meet someone who was in one or other of the camps, I soon gather that he has worked things out his way, just as I worked them out my way. So we either cut off from each other, or we clash, or one or other will not speak. Some men have painful memories; as I said before, fires of bitterness are burning within them, or fires of anger, or both. They cannot read their years of suffering aright, and I for one have no criticism of them; only pity, and pity that is without patronage. I guess, in my heart, I have been just as dogmatic in my conclusions about those years as they are.

Not that I have not met humble men, and gentle men, men who have forgiven the Japanese, and men who have sought the forgiveness of God. I have, plenty of them. Even so, I have wanted them to say more, to go beyond forgiveness and vocalise love. It has been like standing in that cemetery and weeping for lost years, when in fact no years are lost years when they are spent on this earth, or, beyond it, in eternity.

NOW I come to what Raymond and I discussed, but I have to warn you that you may not understand. This is not because we two are brilliant, or your mind dull. It is because you must have had something similar happen in your life before you can have affinity with us. Suffering is the key: it is the true connection.

Clavell's *King Rat* I saw many years ago as a film. It was an excellent film, but, having seen it, I felt no inclination to then read the book. I am sorry I didn't. In the film the main character, who is 'The King', was portrayed as a self-saving, self-seeking person. He was all of that, but the book, when I read it, showed he was not only that. It also helps us to understand why he was interested only in number one—himself! Even so, he did some fine things, but then you could not be sure that in the ultimate they were not acts of enlightened self-interest so that one day they would bring him dividends.

Ernest Gordon, in his book, goes much further in describing the utter degradation of the prisoners. It is true that he shows that this demeaning of the human spirit was a deliberate measure of the Nipponese guards. Even so, that does not excuse the depravity of the men. All human beings have the taint of depravity. I can remember saying to myself, 'If I don't write this down I will never believe how low human beings can sink. I must write it down for later memory.' And so I did, but then later I burned the writings I brought out of the camp, so that I would not keep reminding myself. I had not counted on memory. It is all stored there in our memory databanks, and will never go away.

Neither Raymond nor I wanted it to go away. That was why we talked. We wanted to understand *why* it all happened. *That* it had happened we well knew, and *how* it happened we also knew. There is no point in going endlessly over this kind of thinking as though incessant thinking will bring some explanation. Raymond and I talked so that we might set to rest our minds and hearts on the matter of *Man*. Raymond and I are men. We are in the category of being human beings. We are all alike.

‘**A**T first,’ said Raymond, ‘I could not believe what I saw. When I saw Amen cheating, men getting angry and bitter, men dying because they were too crushed to live, and men living

because they were too scared to die, then that made me angry and depressed. I felt sick at heart. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to opt out of the human race.'

'When I saw that,' I said, 'I was miserable, but then I had a theology of man. It was stern theology. It told me that all men are, at heart, depraved. I thought I believed that, but depravity in the concrete is vastly different from depravity in the abstract. I kept thinking that men couldn't really be like that, and then that it was only some who were. Somehow they were the ultimately unregenerate: they were the lost ones. Then I saw that wasn't good enough. I saw those whose theology was the same as mine, and they failed too. They were even worse for failing. So I was bereft.'

'I kept trying not to be like that—like them,' said Raymond. 'It was difficult but I stuck it. When I heard about soldiers trying to go away on ships from the Japs, and herding back women and children onto the wharves so that they could find a place on the ships, that horrified me.'

'When I heard some had raided the hospital rations and drugs, and some of them were officers,' I said, 'I felt the good world had ended.'

'I used always to think it was a fair enough world,' said Raymond.

I thought I saw him shiver, and look cold, thin and lonely, but that may have been my own inner impression. Raymond, when he spoke to me, was a richly mature person. Perhaps he was momentarily living his past experience. I remembered how I used to be swamped with loneliness. I kept thinking, in those days, 'There mightn't be one in all the world who is really trustworthy. Not even your closest friend, your parents, or your wife.' I kept thinking what a frightening world it would be—'Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost'; 'Blow you, Jack, I'm all right.' I shuddered at the memory, and I knew what Raymond might have been thinking.

'I was always an idealist,' I said. 'I expected—in spite of my theology—that man would turn up trumps. I had been reared on men like Kipling and Studdart Kennedy. In them, man always rises to the occasion.'

We cleared those things with each other. 'One day,' I said, 'they brought a Dutchman into our camp. They put him into the mental ward of the hospital. I would hear him day and night—especially at night—crying pitifully that he hadn't wanted to betray his mates, but he had. Under cruel *Kempei Tei* torture he had done that. The secret police had wormed the matter out of him. Now—forever—that would be on his mind. He had gone mad.'

'So scrupulous,' Raymond murmured. 'So scrupulous are some of us.'

'Underneath it all,' I said, 'we are all scrupulous. That is where I made my biggest mistake of judgement. I thought that some men were only evil: were evil only. So few there were that showed no evil.'

Raymond, quiet and hanging at the back of my mind—wraith of a body in khaki tatters—nodded. 'My greatest mistake,' he said, 'was that I used to think we differed from person to person. I have found that underneath everything we are all scrupulous. What worries us is that we cannot keep to our standards, our ideals, and our knowledge of the truth.'

'Otherwise the Japs would have had no power.'

'No power,' Raymond agreed gently, 'no power at all.' He penetrated my spirit and we both met. 'Men do not give up unless they feel they have failed. They do not become like ravening animals unless they are disappointed in themselves. It is at this point that evil can destroy them, or make them destroy themselves.'

'The madman in that prison—the one who betrayed his mates—was witnessing to his scrupulosity,' I said. 'In his crazed state he was saying, "I have failed. I have failed myself as a person, but I cannot accept this: I must go mad in my mind to evade the reality. I, a man—the highest creature upon the earth—have failed." Maybe all crazed people come to the matter like that.'

'We all failed,' Raymond said simply, 'but we failed in different ways. Some went straight to self-saving, but then they had always been that way. Others pretended they didn't, but they still did it by stealth. Others suddenly realised they daren't die, and so they clung to life even through cruelty to others.'

I was suddenly remembering the cruelty of 'The King' who fried eggs until the torture of their smell, their desirable

fragrance, almost drove the starved men to despair. I remembered Gordon's graphic picture of the rush to the offal-cans of the Japanese guards, and how the guards relished the sight of white men, scabbling creatures who fought like pariah-dogs for the offal slops. I thought about the Japs too, how they *had* to have the white man degraded, since he had—in his mind and attitude—degraded the coloured peoples of the world. The degradation of one person by another is unforgivable in human eyes. No human being forgets denigration. We can't afford to be inferior. We are all scabbling towards the top, but then we all have some memory of the time when man was all glory! That is when degradation crushes us.

Raymond said, 'I remember watching men wait for their fellows to die so that they could get the food the dying were unable to eat.'

I said, 'I remember the men who came back from the Burma-Thailand Railway to Changi and Kranji. They were just skin and bones. Their skin was pellagrous—like that of an elephant—and their eyes were sunken back into their heads. Teeth had fallen out and hair was just weak, faint fluff, like that of babies. They couldn't look you in the eyes. They were dead while they were living.'

'Whilst they *existed*,' Raymond said. 'They weren't living.'

'How had they died?' I asked. 'I often used to ask myself that question.'

'You can die anywhere, at any time,' Raymond said. 'You don't have to go to a prison camp for that.' I sensed his sadness. Then he said, from his place in my mind, 'Why, in our history, do we do a great cover-up of man's vileness? Why don't we face it, and come to terms with it?'

I looked at him. 'Maybe it is because that isn't all that we are. Man isn't all muck. Somewhere he has glory, too. He's a contradiction. He's a puzzle.'

Raymond nodded. I could feel his silence, and his gentleness. 'I think we were crushed by what we could be, the evil we could think and do,' he said. 'But then men did incredible things, suddenly, unexplainably—things that seemed like pure gold.'

'People who seemed utterly dead came alive again,' I said. 'They came to life out of death.'

We were both silent, but it was not from despair. It was because we knew about living again.

'Not everyone knows about living again,' I said.

Raymond nodded, and his voice was now sad. 'Throughout the world, we—the human race—keep punishing ourselves. That is because we have consciences. It is because we have memories. The past is just as vivid to us today as it was forty and fifty years ago.'

I nodded. 'Then we both know the same thing,' I said.

Raymond nodded almost impatiently, as though of course we both knew the ground rules for this discussion. We weren't merely speculating. We were passing information to each other, the information that we needed, all tintured with the wisdom we had gained.

'It's forgiveness that counts,' Raymond said. He went on, 'We fight forgiveness, saying we don't need it. Forgiveness is not needed by those who don't fail. Men persist in saying they didn't fail. They try to cover it up. If only we would come clean and admit it, we would be free. Our memory would not haunt us. It would only encourage us.'

'Admission of guilt seems to humiliate,' I said, thinking of the many people I had counselled over the years.

'Admission is good if it brings humility,' said Raymond, 'but it never humiliates. Humility is beautiful for a human being.'

For some moments we were silent. Somewhere along the line we had had to be forgiven. Not becoming crushed and not being defeated by stresses, circumstances, hunger and fear had not made us better than others. Not being cruel or bitter or deliberately selfish had not meant we were good. Pharisaic self-righteousness lives always at our elbows, and its stench is greater than the stink of utter degradation.

RAYMOND said to me, 'I guess I'll be going soon.' He hung there, but I knew he wanted us to come to our point. His stare was patient and gentle. 'It's the matter of love,' he said. 'Love doesn't begin with us. It begins with God: let's be clear about that.'

'They thought He didn't love,' I said. 'That was part of the

thinking they had, and that was why their anger grew.'

Raymond nodded. 'Yet they were really angry because *they* didn't love. They excused their non-loving. They blamed it on to other things. That is why they were savage with God.' He sighed. 'If only we could admit it all.'

I sighed too. I saw a whole human race gripped in its anger against God, when they would have to receive His love in order to understand; especially to understand suffering.

'The pressures on our brothers were great. They were unusual and terrible, but that wasn't the only thing. The pressures today are great wherever human beings try to go it alone. That isn't man's true thing. He can't know love until he is forgiven, and then he can't love until he knows forgiveness.'

I thought about the whole world. I thought about the revelations that had come to men in Changi, and at Chungkai on the River Kwai, and some other places. I knew they had happened from time immemorial. I knew that Chungkai was not the first occasion where and when the love-miracle had taken place.

'What is so sad,' said Raymond, 'is that many of those men are as bitter today as they were then, and even more. To talk of forgiving their former captors angers them. They are men out for justice, and they despise love.' He hung there, very still. 'Yet they love those close to them, even if they find it difficult sometimes to express that love.'

'We said that dead men can come alive,' I said. 'I believe that. Yet some of them who saw life have sunk back into death. They live as they once did before the great suffering. It seems it was all for nothing.'

'Grey enough death,' said Raymond, 'bright enough living. They have all they need now. No hunger; no captivity; no lack of food. But they have never resolved the matter.'

'And we have?' I asked him gently. I knew he was going. I could feel the tears flowing again in my heart.

He nodded. 'Yes,' he said, 'we have, really. We know the answer. We know they could all be free. Everyone could be free. We could all love and love all, if we would. Even if they won't remember, they know the difference. Deep down in the conscience they know the difference. It can't all really mean nothing.'

I hung on his words. I thought of mates who did not know they really hated themselves for their failure, and who desperately went on blaming others—and God, of course. They stuck—and still stick—grimly to their anger and their hatred, as though they are justified in it, when in a trice they could be free. We all fail: let us all see that failure. Let none judge another. Let us understand the Cross, the place where God suffered with all, for all.

It was as though Raymond knew my thoughts. 'We battle all the time to believe it,' he said, 'but the battle keeps us free. If we give in to accusation we're done.' He looked at me squarely. 'We just have to go on battling,' he said.

I was thinking about that when his eyes drew away from me and he was gone. Where he went I did not know, nor do I have to know. I am willing to agree that he may have been the figment of my mind, or even my *alter ego* (if there be such things), but that he was real—however you count reality—I do not doubt. I only know that at places like Adelaide River, and the great war-grave cemeteries I have seen at Kranji on Singapore Island, in Irian Jaya, Thailand and the Philippines, the same tears keep flowing, and I keep praying that my heart will remain soft and gentle and unjudgemental. I keep praying that the world may see that the cross it places on the headstone of millions of graves is the one Cross where God Himself suffered, suffered with us all, and suffered for us all.

I hope all of us come to know forgiveness and love.

THE LONELY KAMIKAZE MAN

I AM the lonely one. I am the one who has returned from death. In truth I know not whence I have returned—whether it is from Valhalla, or Hades, from the lonely shades that cover the warrior of every culture and creed. Whoever I have been, and whatever I have been, I have come from where they are—from the silent place where they exist beyond their valiant death into which they plunged for the glory of the victory. They plunged with the high, triumphant cry that ascends with the charge that makes war to be war, and their voluntary—or involuntary—sacrifice to be the crowning joy, the utmost exultancy, the pinnacle of selfless surrender—the utmost for the highest!

I am coming back. I am returning alone. I know not whether I have been spared the death that would have been my glory, or whether I have been conscripted back to life without the glory being consummated. I do not know. I know that I come on wings that are strange to me, and that from me and by me flow the streams and winds of time. They are in my face and in my mind; they are in the body of me, but they rush from me as a great jet stream thrusts and propels all before it—into its future, into its own unknown.

None is with me in this return. It is as though the hidden powers that rule the destinies of all human creatures, the entire race of all peoples, and who determine what will be, have combined in silent agreement to send me to what I am now coming. Their purposeful nod has drawn me out of the unremembered vale of death where the millions gather, whilst their bodies sleep on, without memory, in the graveyards of the dead, in the

cemeteries of oblivion, in the nerveless non-passion of both hallowed and unhallowed soil.

I am coming back. I am coming back into the resurgences of this world—those which constitute the emergence from the numbness of wars and wars, from battles and battles, from genocides and genocides, from the twanging of bows and the deadly flight of arrows, of fleeting spears, of thrusting sword, from the stinging, steely rain of sleety bullets, the cruel chattering of ceaseless weaponry, from the upwards bursting of callous but uncaring cannon, and the rain of incendiary fire that falls from above—the mortars, the bombs, and the flaying force of the whistling missiles that speed into flesh, and brain, and shatter the momentarily fragile beauty of bodies and beings.

I have come with the ceaseless memory of the whole race, the continuum of unending wars—the excitement, the anger, the assurances of justice, the incitement of righteousness, the applause of the gods and lords, and the quivering nobility that turns us into irrepressible kamikaze creatures. I am all who have rushed to their death for the glory and the wonder of it, who have been gripped irreversibly by the cause that is holier even than the quest for the Holy Grail.

They have sent me—those powers—as a reward for my undaunted courage, my unfailing heroism, my selfless death for my fellow humanity. I stand: I return at this moment, for all men and women, for young people and children who have insisted upon the bravery of the human race, faced as it is—time and again—with the unspeakable glory of dying for others. From the beginning of time the ceaseless, restless urge has been there to display the nobility of the human race. Innate in birth, and from it, is the urge to the ascent—*per ardua ad astra*, ‘through trials to glory’. A race of greatness, and a race of splendour are we, and nothing calls out this surge of holy endeavour more than the matter of the wars.

Make no mistake about it—and now as I flow towards the aftermath of high human conquests I, too, make no mistake—wars are awful in their acts, horrific in their ruthlessness, dreadful in their cruelty, and devastating in their shattering of the highest of human relationships. Wives and husbands are torn apart;

children are terrified and bewildered by parental and familial loss, famous dynasties are diminished to obliteration, and sagas of centuries cease in the quivering deaths of the last of their tribes. Blood flows and congeals in the orgies of genocides, the numbed and silent columns—spirits paralysed—shuffle towards their gas chambers and their holocausts of Belsens and Auschwitzes, their stifling black holes of countless Calcuttas, breathless prisons, and their screaming napalmed terminations that follow the first horrific astonishment and the agonised shrieks of the helpless victims.

Even as I am permitted, or forced, or fated, to return—I, who have rushed gloriously into death in every age with the kamikaze spirit possessing every courageous corpuscle of my blood, and pumping my mind with the strange ecstasy that comes from activated adrenalin and selfless sacrifice—I have been sent to see the full fruits of those holy hours of victory. Nor am I only sent from the vales where heroes gather on their St Crispin's days—those who have imitated the action of the tiger; stiffened the sinews, summoned up the blood, disguised fair nature with hard-favoured rage; then lent to the eye a terrible aspect, letting it pry through the portage of the head like the brass cannon, as fearfully as does the galled rock o'erhang and jutty its confounded base, swilled by the wild and wasteful ocean—but I have been sent from the drear mists where cowards quiver at the merciless memories of contemptuous betrayals of their glorious race. There they mumble in their mindless meanderings as their memories and consciences make cowards of them all. I have come from the conflicts that human beings carry in their breasts and take out into their tideless eternities. I have become, on behalf of the brave and the coward, the best and the bitterest. I have come to see and to return, and to report on the matter of mankind.

Why then do I wonder as all history rushes past me, and I am borne on rapid flight, piercing into the universal aftermath of the history of the tribes, the peoples, and the races? Am I to report to those who sent me, bring back news to the silent inhabitants of the shades beyond this brilliant terrestrial planet? I know not. I only know that I am left to my thoughts, my memories, and my feelings. I am—as it were—confronted by my mind and

memory, and the responsibility of my humanity, my godlike autonomy that wed me to the race and bade me express its loftiest declaration, its utmost ideal. I insistently inform you that I am the lonely kamikaze man—the one sent on a flight which will tell me the fruits of all death-victories. I am the dancing Druid, the strong Samurai, the merciless Mogul, the terrible Tartar, the passionate Pathan, the conquering Cossack, the victorious Viking, the bold Britisher, the avenging Anzac. I have travelled over Alps, Andes, and Pyrenees, over the Himalayas, from east to west, and west to east, on steppes and plains. I am the heartless Hun, the crusading Christian, the merciless Moslem, the tireless terrorist, the fighter for justice, and the creator of new worlds where war will have caused war to cease.

WHAT then do I witness as I am thrust into the streams of time by the driving winds of eternity? What is my reward for my times with the Roman Caesars, my pressing on with Philip of Macedon, my years with Alexander the Great, with Sennacherib, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and Tojo, rambling with Rommel, moving with Montgomery, and marching to the tattooing of the drums, the skirling pipes of the Blackwatch, the incitement of the dervishes, the savage cries of the head-hunters and the mastered music of the modern warriors?

Why is it that even as I ask, the sound of the rushing wind dies in the ears, the throb of my own heart is as a muffled drum, and a sudden silence envelops the planet—the tribes and tongues and people for which we warred? Why is it that an ancient and chronic uneasiness pervades me and the humanity I represent? Is it that I do not hear the sounds nor see the sights of our humanity—the insistent merriment of multitudes, the shouts of the singers, the restless leaping of the compulsive seekers after joy as they rock and shriek, and the drugged endeavourers in their passionless somnolence? I have come back to ask what it is all about, what it has always been about, and what it will yet be about, but my questions are lost in the air as though I were some unseen wraith, some invisible fantasy that is but a whisper in the wind.

Have leaders ceased to lead, and people ceased to be led? Has

exploitation of land, and air, and sea, exhausted itself? Has human brilliance died to a dull show, having whimpered down to a whisper? Has technology tired, and is inventiveness voiding itself? Pleasure is there, and entertainment, and sport, and it may be that these are the new or the old forms of warfare—multitudes watching the vivid videos as their actors run and jump, pursue and leap, tussle and wrestle, and mark the score as that which matters most.

None of this do I see as that which is new. As ever 'the sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north; round and round goes the wind, and in its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again'. All things are now as they were, and nothing is ever new under the sun, however differently they may present it. The human creature still 'searches out the end from the beginning', but 'that which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; but who can find it out?'

I would find it out, as though that were the commission they have given me, back where the battalions lie in their cemeteries, where the leaders ask what it is for, and the living remember in their annual rituals, but turn with relief to their endless anodynes, their blessed busynesses.

I TOLD you I was the lonely kamikaze man, the sole warrior, the returning brave, and the revered battler. I can tell you nothing of what I see, for my words are as silence, or they are lost in the very wind that thrust me into the presence of your present. All things continue the same, and the wise cannot interpret. Families war within themselves as they grow into tribes, as tribes enlarge into nations, and nations become powerful and seek to dominate other nations—if not the whole world. Many Nimrods and Napoleons arise, many Attilas and Alexanders glorify their exploits, seeking to write their names on the pages of history, to stamp eternal memoirs into the mind of men and women. Passionate persons for peace carry on their bitter wars in the name—and for the sake—of peace, and new moralists arise to torment the minds of men, and to trouble the consciences of

citizens. Revolutionaries strike down the hierarchies once built out of some pain and some wisdom. The revolutionaries, in their turn, are less wise, but no less cruel. Greater tyranny arises to destroy tyranny.

The world for which I made myself—rather, let myself be made—a kamikaze man, a battle-altar of sacrifice, has not much altered. Many who object to war with puritan fervency are simply at heart terrified that they may be forced to die in it. No protest is ever pure, just as no sacrifice is wholly sanctified. A glory is given to this or to that, in order to rationalise it to the mind and conscience which would otherwise know intolerable torment. Truth is tampered with, progress is politicised. The assurances do not eventuate; the promises evaporate; the hope is dissipated. Circumstances condition consequences. Exigencies allow deviations from prior determinations. The old order changeth, giving place to new, but the new is the old written in fairer terms, though not in fairer actions.

I, as I return, as I review the past and pursue the present, am the forgotten one—the unheard voice in the wind. As I have said, it is on feast days and fast days that they remember me, for this is a solemn duty—to reverence my memory. They give rein to their fancies in the films they create, the books they write, the pictures they paint, and the articles they devise, and they speak of 'greatness in death', and 'the grandeur of sacrifice'. Nevertheless the heart of man—the noblest of all creatures excepting only God—is 'deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt', and no human being can ever know his own heart, much less the heart of another. Nor does he wish to know either. One heart protests holily against war, but the words are drowned out in the rattling of its own phylacteries. Another extols the glory of conquest, but is itself conquered by its innate fleshliness.

What is it, then, that makes me weep when I remember the merciless slayings of persons and peoples, when I recall the cruelty of the human race, and captious moralism of its self-righteous and self-constituted saints; when I see the weariness of many who have made a plaything of life, and then found it to be a death-thing? What of the endless restlessness of the joy-seekers, the peace-pursuers and the life-preservers? What of this puzzling

and terrifying contradiction—this conflict of nobility and depravity, or extraordinary love and uninhibited hatred?

What message shall I take back to the inhabitants of the no-man's-lands? What hope shall I bring to their hearts?

I WOULD like to evoke your pity for my utter loneliness, the dreary disappointment, my disillusionment of dear ideals, but I cannot ask this.

Your strong concern of the moment may spring from sympathy, not from empathy, from pity, not from practical passion, and so you will soon forget me, or simply be sad because at this moment I am sad. My true victory—I must tell you—is over cynicism. Realistic understanding of my beloved race does not have to lead to wry or bitter cynicism. Acceptance of the fact of human deceit and cruelty is not acceptance of those things in themselves. The failure of idealism does not mean the failure of the Deity, nor does it have to mean the failure of Man.

I have not come as a reformer, for many and more than enough are occupied in that vocation. I have not the power to transform, and that is what is needed. There is a sort of glory in being a kamikaze person, but it is not the glory that transforms humanity. It may affect them, with astonishment or pity or fear, but it will not metamorphose the stubborn human spirit. Races may rationalise the cruelties of others and so exonerate themselves, but the guilt will return to bring its eternal unease. Certain determinists may see evidence of an upwards ascent of humanity, and fatalists may see it as otherwise, but it is what God has determined as the destiny of each and of all that matters. Idealists and Utopians plunge us into ever increasing liberalism of ideas, but bring deeper bondage of being. Making God in our image is no advance for God, but being in His image to the fullest is realising our true humanity.

IT is time for me to return, to go beyond the horizontal and from only seeing everything under the sun. I must join the resonating singers, the authentic artists, the passionate poets, the writers of reality and truth as they are caught in the vertical that joins the horizontal yet does not desert its celestial dimension. Man is not

made for man but for that which is destined beyond himself wherein alone he finds himself.

I will have to tell them these things, and I do not know that such telling will cause more stirrings within the shadowy vales than when I had left them. But perhaps truth will at last resonate, and the faith of true sacrifice may find its own, and I may not be the only lonely kamikaze man among the other lonely ones. It may be that, in the ultimate, love will prevail, and they will come into their own in Him:

*One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.*