Nona Baker

REFUGEE FROM THE JAPANESE

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REFUGEE FROM THE JAPANESE

Dorothy Thatcher
Robert Cross

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IN THE OPENING chapter Nona Baker gives her own, entertaining account of growing up as the youngest of the nine children of Canon William Baker, Rector of Dunstable. Her brothers were of the generation which suffered so grievously in the first world war. One of her brothers died at Gallipoli in 1915, and another, at the age of 20, in France in 1918. She herself being very musical qualified as an LRAM, taught music and then worked as a secretary before, at the age of 30, she went to Malaya to keep house and the hostess for her eldest brother Vincent ('Vin') Baker, a mining engineer who was (in 1935) the general manager of the Pahang Consolidated Mine at Sungei Lembing in north-east Pahang, the only major lode mine of the Malayan tin industry.

The book is her account of the eventful decade from 1935 to 1945 in which, with one interruption for home leave in 1937, she lived in a remote part of the East Coast of Malaya. Dr Sheppard, Hon Editor of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, chanced in 1941 to be the Assistant Adviser (district administrative officer) at Kemaman in southern Terengganu, just north of the mine at Sungei Lembing. He remembers that: -

> Vin Baker invited me to pay him a visit, and I did so, by a 12-hour walk through the jungle from South Terengganu. Baker, and his sister, Nona, entertained me and sent me to the coast, so that I could return to my base by motor launch. In December 1941 I was asked by Army HQ to go to Sungei Lembing to organise a 'Left Behind' party, which would carry out destructive tactics behind

the Japanese lines. But Baker decided to withdraw into the jungle, with his sister, expecting that the British would soon return and recapture Malaya. I met Baker and his sister again, but they refused to come back to Singapore, and I was obliged to leave them, on the edge of the jungle. I heard no more of the Bakers for many years.

Before coming to Nona Baker's long and active life after the war, it is worth recounting how 14 years after the war, this book came to be written as an account of her experiences during the Japanese occupation of Malaya. At the end of October 1945, while awaiting repatriation to England, Nona wrote two long letters (some 9,000 words) to her mother to tell her story. These letters and the brief contemporary entries in her diary are the foundation of the remarkably detailed, as well as vivid, narrative of this book. She may well have given talks, and she certainly wrote a brief article in 1951, entitled 'Jungle Sanctuary', to which we shall come in due course. As so few people knew of her unusual wartime experiences, her friends urged her to put aside the views which others might take of her three-year association with the 'Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army' (MPAJA), forerunner of the insurgents of the long Malayan 'Emergency' (1948-1960), to communicate to a wider audience a story of a unique and gruelling life in the jungles of Malaya, for which she had been awarded an MBE. In the late 1950's however she was immersed in her duties at the Electrical Association for Women ('EAW').

At this point Nona crossed the path of Dorothy Thatcher, who became joint author of the book. Dorothy Thatcher too had been in Malaya in the years before the war, though, unlike Nona, she had reached Singapore before it fell, and ultimately spent the later war years in Australia. After the war Dorothy Thatcher returned to England to pursue a career as

a journalist and writer, including the editing of the Malayan news section of the monthly magazine of the British Association of Malaya. Hearing the fantastic story of Nona Baker's years with the MPAJA Dorothy Thatcher arranged to make weekly visits to Nona Baker's home in north London. Over a period of six months this cooperation led to the production of the manuscript of Pai Naa ('White Nona' to her Chinese hosts). Originally it was to have been published as 'Bamboo Curtain of Fire.' A well-known firm of London publishers aas interested in publishing the book and it was arranged that Robert Cross, author of a number of other books, should edit the manuscript for publication. It was a very productive tripartite partnership to which each member brought his or her own special talents, but the result is essentially Nona Baker's own story.

The book attracted generally favourable reviews in national and local newspapers and in literary journals. Within two years almost 3,000 copies of the first edition had been sold, one third of them outside England. There was a second edition in 1974 but, at the time when this reprint appears, the book has been out of print for some time.

Apart from a brief postscript the narrative ends with Nona Baker's return to England, where she arrived on 30th December 1945. Now that Vincent Baker was dead she had no occasion, and indeed no opportunity, to resume her prewar residence in Malaya. Instead she joined the staff of the EAW. This was a body established in 1924 by Miss (later Dame) Caroline Haslett, who was still its director (and a considerable figure in public life) when Nona Baker joined the London office of the EAW in 1946. The original purpose of the EAW had been to develop opportunities for women to make careers in electrical engineering. Caroline Haslett herself had worked in a boiler factory during the 1914-18 war and had been the first secretary of the Women En-

gineering Society, formed in 1919. In Nona Baker's time much of the EAW's very useful work was directed to encouraging the use of electricity and electrical apparatus in the home, to lighten the domestic chores of married women.

Nona Baker first worked in the Accounts Department of the EAW, where one of her EAW contemporaries, Joan King, remembers that Nona and her colleagues shared a large office in a building near Victoria Station, with a view of the gardens of Buckingham Palace. Her responsibilities included purchasing EAW supplies and the distribution of educational leaflets - applications 'received from small boys and girls doing school projects received a (particularly) sympathetic response from Nona. 'After her time in Malaya it was a humdrum job but she was 'conscientious and hardworking.' She also joined in the staff recreational activities. *The Electrical Age* records that 'in addition to her musical talents Nona was an amateur actress of no mean ability ... when she portrayed a nasty character on stage her colleagues eyed her with grave suspicion for a few days.'

In 1955 the EAW moved to premises in the West End of London and at about that time Nona Baker was appointed Branch Development Secretary. This was an important post since much of the EAW's work was done through a country-wide network of local branches. Her duties entailed travelling to meet local organisers and attend branch meetings, at which she had scope for her considerable talents as a public speaker. These contacts 'always gave her much pleasure' and 'all who met her on her travels always enjoyed her company.'

To assist and chronicle the activities of its headquarters and branches the EAW published a quarterly journal, *The Electric Age*, which included a substantial supplement on branch activities. Two issues of *The Electrical Age* include articles by Nona Baker herself. The first 'Curry at Home and

in Malaya' was jointly written with a colleague. Of more interest to readers of Pai Naa is the second article, by Nona Baker as sole author, entitled 'Jungle Sanctuary.' In the main it is a very short preliminary sketch for the narrative of this book.

In 1965 Nona Baker was 60 and she retired after twenty years' service with the EAW. But she had by no means ended her useful working life, as is shown by the following passage from the address given by Canon Raymond Lee at the memorial service held at Allerton Parish Church on 4th February 1993.

> Her brother Scott had become Bishop of Zanzibar in 1943 ... at 60 she went with her brother the Bishop to look after him in Dar es Salaam. Again she entered whole-heartedly into the new life, and became a great friend of many people in East Africa. Then in 1968 he retired and they came together to Liverpool. He became Assistant Bishop in our Diocese and was on the staff of St. Katherine's College. They lived in Woolacombe Road. So there began another 20 years of service, friendship, generous hospitality, being known and loved as they travelled together to virtually every parish in our Diocese, Nona professing to be merely the driver of the Bishop's car! Then, when they were getting older a grateful diocese and a good Archdeacon in particular found them a ground-floor flat in this parish - amazing, there was just one, and it had two single bedrooms. So they came to All Hallows, where our people loved to see them and a small group most faithfully cared for them both. The last chapter of all was at Beechside (Retirement Home), where the staff

looked after them so well, and which was Nona's home until she died.

In these last years she struggled gamely with physical disabilities, but was always generous in spirit and in hospitality and 'she never lost her sense of fun', of which there is so much evidence in the story of her life in Malaya.

She died at Beechside on 30th January 1993 at the age of 87, the last survivor of her parents' nine children. She was a remarkable person and her story, told in these pages, is a remarkable episode in Malayan history.

REFUGEE FROM THE JAPANESE, formerly, *Pai Naa - the Story of Nona Baker*, by Dorothy Thatcher and Robert Cross, was first published in 1959 by Constable and Company Limited, under arrangements made for the authors by A.M. Heath & Company, literary agents. Constable no longer have any record of the first edition. It was republished in 1974 by White Lion Publishers.

In preparing this third edition Mrs Rosemary Harger, niece of Nona Baker, has kindly provided material for additional illustrations and also invaluable information on the life of Nona Baker. Mrs Joan King, and other colleagues of Nona Baker in her EAW period have also contributed unique personal recollections. Most grateful thanks are made to these ladies for their help.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Mr Mark Hamilton of A M Heath & Company, to Mr Robert Cross and to Mr R H Arden, executor of Nona Baker, for permission, and also for their general help, in arranging for the republication of the book. It has not been possible to contact White Lion Publishers or Miss Rosemary Thatcher, as the legatee of the late Mrs Dorothy Thatcher, despite searching enquiries.

J. M. GULLICK

CHAPTER ONE

MY FATHER, WHO was rector of Dunstable, had nine children and I was the youngest; having run out of names by then, my parents called me Nona, which was changed to Nin by my brothers and sisters. Coming at the end of a long line, I had to learn to fend for myself and I seemed to spend a large part of my early days wrestling on the nursery floor with the two brothers nearest to me in age; I have vivid memories of wriggling out from under a mass of flaying arms and legs. There was no rigid discipline in the rectory and, within reason, we were allowed to be as noisy and barbaric as we wanted: the exception to this was the stern rule that there must be complete peace in the neighbourhood of my father's study.

I did not see much of my parents in the nursery days as they were both busy with parish work. I can remember standing on a chair by the nursery window, with the firelight dancing on the pale yellow wall, watching for a glimpse of my mother's scarlet cloak as she rounded the street corner on her way back from visiting the sick. My favourite occupation when I was allowed to see her in the evening was nestling up against her and breathing in the scent of violets which always seemed to cling to her. My father spent long hours in his study, ostensibly writing sermons; he was a large, silent figure with a deep voice,

and I found him rather frightening when I was young. Every morning he would summon the family to prayers in the dining-room and, as we knelt down on these solemn occasions, I used to stare with fascination at the camels woven into the seats of the dining-room chairs and count the steps on their humps.

Sometimes, when the tussles on the nursery floor became too hard to bear, the door would open and my eldest brother, Vin, would come in and rescue me from the fray. I was a great favourite of his and he would spend hours playing with me when he was at home. He was seventeen years older than I and, a naturally big man being just over six foot with very broad shoulders, he seemed a giant to me in those days when he would sweep me up and carry me on his shoulder at an enormous height from the ground. I adored him and all my imaginary heroes and knights in shining armour were Vins in disguise. At this time he was studying at the Camborne School of Mines in Cornwall and was very seldom at home because even in the holidays he would be away in Wales or Cornwall studying mining, which had become his absorbing interest. When he left the School of Mines, he went to Australia and, to my sorrow, I did not see him for over ten years, but I never forgot my childhood picture of him as my hero and protector.

The rectory was a long low house with a corridor on the first floor which ran the full length of the building. This long expanse of brown linoleum became a familiar route for me to the schoolroom which was over the stables beyond the house and was reached by a bridge, which my father had built, connecting the two buildings. Each member of the family in turn had been taught by Miss Whitworth, our governess, who was such a good teacher that she had no difficulty in filling the schoolroom to capacity with other children from Dunstable as we grew up and went to boarding schools. A complicated system of hot-water pipes,

which gurgled and rumbled alarmingly from time to time, kept the schoolroom warm in winter; the water was heated by an ancient stove in a small, dark, cave-like room, known as "Reading's cubby-hole", near the stables below, where the old gardener cleaned the knives and shoes. Reading hoarded there an amazing collection of odds and ends which he was convinced would "come in handy" sometime, and he drowsed there over a succulent pipe when the bitter weather drove him to take refuge.

In the holidays the house was full to bursting as the headmaster of the local grammar school and my uncle, a housemaster at Fettes, used to send boys to us, often of various nationalities including Austrian and Chinese, whose parents lived abroad. Among our favourite activities was hiding in a sycamore tree whose branches spread out over the pavement, and waiting for the policeman to pass underneath on his way to point duty, so that we could drop stones on the silver top of his helmet. In the stables the remains of my grandfather's old carriage were kept, and another game of ours was climbing in and out of it and jumping up and down until it was a wonder it did not disintegrate into a thousand pieces. When I was five, my two younger brothers went away to King's College Choir School and I was left alone: it was never quite the same again after that, as even during the holidays they preferred to ignore their baby sister, who could not possibly understand their games: either I spent a great deal of time hammering on the schoolroom door for admittance or, as a great favour, I might be allowed to count out nuts and bolts for their Meccano constructions. Sometimes when they were feeling bored with playing together, they would turn to me to help amuse them. In this way they taught me to ride a bicycle on the lawn at the back of the rectory, and to make sure that my training was complete they would spring surprises on me: on one occasion a garden roller was suddenly

dragged across my path and, swerving to miss it, I rode straight through the plate-glass window of my father's study. Fortunately he was too surprised to be angry.

One of my sisters had died at boarding school and my parents decided that I should be educated entirely at home; as most of my brothers and sisters were away, I began to see much more of my parents and grew closer to them, and when two of my brothers were killed in the first war, I felt something of their anxiety and sorrow. My father would take me for long walks through the parish and beyond, and I soon ceased to be frightened by the silences which prevailed in his company; if I asked him a question, he would often take so long to reply that I had forgotten what I had said in the first place. One of his great interests outside the Church was in the bloodstock world, and it was impossible to mention a racehorse of any note whose pedigree he did not know off by heart.

During the first war, Vin had been tin mining in Malaya: he had gone to work for the Pahang Consolidated Company in 1911, and for years had been unable to return home. From time to time I heard from my parents how well he was doing and what a high reputation he had as a miner and administrator, which only served to put him more securely on a pedestal in my mind. We had heard that he had married an Australian girl, and after the war he brought her home with his three children. We must have been an impossible family to be married into as we had a hoard of silly family jokes and expressions which meant nothing to outsiders. And try as we could to make her welcome, Vin's wife felt out of it and their leave was not a great success. Added to this, it turned out that she was not really happy at Sungei Lembing because the climate had begun to affect her health; by the time Vin's next leave came round, they had decided to live apart and she went back to Australia instead of coming to England with him. It was naturally lonely for

Vin when he returned to Malaya, but as he was entirely wrapped up in the mine he managed quite well until he was appointed general manager of the Sungei Lembing Mine, which was the largest single tin mine in the world. He was then desperately in need of help with his entertaining, sometimes at Royal level, and with his large household. My mother was by then a widow and Vin was reluctant to suggest what to him seemed to be the ideal solution: that I should go out and look after him. I was thrilled with the idea of travelling and of looking after my beloved brother, and after Vin had been back in Malaya a year I broached the subject to my mother, who was then seventy-four.

'Of course you must go. If you'd been married I should have had to manage without you long ago,' she told me, and so it was decided.

CHAPTER TWO

I SUSPECT THAT being a parson's youngest daughter is as good a training for life as you can have: you are used to managing with very little money and new clothes are a luxury, although my two sisters were so much older that I did not receive the usual legacy of their cast-offs. And yet, at a moment's notice, you must be ready to accompany your father to one of the large houses in the neighbourhood and behave like a society girl. Certainly when I went to Malaya to look after Vin, I had little idea what I was in for; I knew that he was an important person in Malaya, but I did not stop to think what that implied for me. All I was concerned with was the plan to look after my hero brother. On the boat going out I was treated royally enough, being put at the captain's table, but it was not until I met Vin at Penang and went on to Singapore with him that I began to realize what being the *Tuan Besar* or Big Master's sister would mean. We were treated with enormous respect in Singapore, where we stayed in a sumptuous hotel—before the war, in the East, a man's position was of immense importance in a rigidly graded society.

The east side of Malaya was still almost bereft of roads and railways and we travelled most of the way to Sungei Lembing by boat, passing through Kuantan, which was the nearest town to the mine. A few miles short of the mining

village the river became too shallow for a steamer and we transferred to the Pahang Consolidated's miniature railway, which carried all the stores, tin and passengers to and from Sungei Lembing. Vin had his own diesel railcar and he drove me at a furious pace through the jungle, round hairpin bends, over flimsy bridges across deep ravines and along a ledge above the muddy river. Knowing from previous experience what a poor driver Vin was, I paid no attention to the surroundings, concentrating entirely on the chances of my safe arrival. As we approached the village, Vin slowed down and I was able to appreciate the beauty of the valley with its tree-covered hillsides tumbling down to the river and its view of distant mountain peaks beyond. The bottom of the valley opened out, and as the river moved away from the railway in a giant loop I saw the village below; my brother pointed out first the neat Malay settlement, from which a strong smell of wood ash and spice penetrated even the diesel car, then the larger Chinese part of the village, which was grouped round a large market, and the clerks' houses dotted round a smooth green. There was no sign of the mine at this point, it being hidden round a bend in the railway.

My brother's house stood on the top of a small hill overlooking the village and Vin stopped the car at the bottom of a large garden covering the slope. As we walked up a steep path, followed by a retinue of Chinese servants who plied Vin with questions about my journey, I was aware of great splashes of scarlet and yellow cannas, bushes covered in trumpet-shaped flowers and palm trees towering above me. The house itself was two-storied and raised on stout stone pillars; a veranda ran round the first floor, on which were a large sitting-room and all the bedrooms. Any doubts I might have had about bodily comforts in the Tropics were soon dispelled: Vin showed me my bedroom, which was the size of four of the rectory rooms put together, and

opening off it was a bathroom lined with glistening tiles and complete with a sunken bath which would have cheered the heart of a film star.

'Vin, darling, this is absolutely palatial!'

'Good, I'm glad you like it. Now I must show you the mine.'

There was to be no time for unpacking or settling in then; Vin whisked me off on a tour of inspection with the enthusiasm of a parent showing off his child, and I was soon to discover that the mine and the eight thousand people under his control meant everything to him.

'That's the mine,' Vin said, pointing at a hill behind the house; 'it's all inside that.'

'I can't see anything.'

'Yes you can. You see that roof through the trees, that's the mill for crushing the ore.'

'Where's the winding gear?'

'That's all inside the hill. The shafts are some way in, so all the winding gear is hidden. You know, except for the Raub Gold Mine we're the only lode mine in Malaya. Most of the others are dredges, although there are some opencast mines. I call the dredges muck-rakers!'

We walked along a path by the railway close to the rows of perpetually shaking tables where the crushed ore was washed, allowing the tin to settle; higher up was the mill where the steel stamps crushed the ore with a deafening din. Then we climbed up to the great dump above the mill, where from inside the hill came a succession of trucks pushed by Chinese workers, or drawn in trains by battery-driven electric locos, bringing the ore which had been raised from the bottom of the mine and discharging their contents into bins above the mill. Vin told me that inside the hill, more than a thousand feet down, pumps worked night and day keeping the mine free of water. The pumps

were driven by electricity generated in the power station, which he promised to show me later.

Vin stopped and talked to everyone we saw, Scots engineers, Cornish miners, Chinese and Malays, and I was impressed by the respect they showed him. I remember the thrill of pride I felt that my brother should be the one responsible for keeping the whole complicated system going, and I am quite sure that at the time I thought without him the whole mine would go to pieces. It was not long before I discovered that it was not only the mine that Vin took so seriously: he worried incessantly about each member of the community. He was a king and father to the people, and they certainly adored him. The fact that he was a reserved, rather frightening figure only increased the respect they felt for him; he was a scrupulously fair man, and justice is a quality which the Chinese respect above all others. His relations with the other European members of the staff were friendly but restrained; presumably the lives of all leaders are lonely and certainly Vin's loneliness was reinforced by his temperament.

From the very beginning Vin was determined that I should not rely on him too much. His remark to me the first evening was typical of him.

'Nin, there's the box of cigarettes on the table. Help youfself when you want them, but for God's sake don't expect me to offer them to you.'

As far as the house was concerned, I could have as many servants as I wanted, and food and drink could be ordered quite regardless of expense; but the running of the house was to be entirely my province and Vin had no wish to be bothered with a lot of domestic problems. The one exception to this rule was in cases of trouble with any electrical appliance; I was on no account to try to put it right, even though it might be only mending a fuse, which I was quite capable of doing. I must ring for Fonseca, who

proved to be a very shy Sinhalese who seldom said more than, 'Good morning, Miss Baker.' In the evenings I was expected to amuse myself: I could go down to the club and the village tin cinema, or sit sewing or playing the piano—knowing how I loved music, Vin had bought me a grand piano in Singapore. In this way my brother was free to work late at the office or to sit reading at home without bothering about amusing me.

I was soon involved in a hectic life of entertainment; Vin would ring up from the office with cheerful unconcern for the preparations needed and say:

'Nin, there'll be twenty-six for lunch tomorrow—the Navy's coming.'

'Good Lord, what'll we feed them on?'

'Oh, you'll manage, my girl,' and I had to see that I did.

Sometimes we would have the Sultan of Pahang—the State in which the mine was—to stay. He used to come with a hefty retinue of about forty, which included his cook and food-taster. The Sultan had several wives, but he was always accompanied on these "jungle" trips by his favourite wife, Che Siti, who was plump and pretty. Although conversation with Malay women was not exactly easy, I never felt shy with Che Siti, because she laughed at everything you said. The Sultan's main object in coming to Sungei Lembing was to see his people, and when he appeared, a vast figure swathed in gorgeous silks, he was greeted with great reverence. He was quite as large as my brother and, like him, sported a considerable stomach, which did not, however, prevent him from donning a pair of white shorts and playing a strenuous game of tennis on our private court. The Governor of the Straits Settlements the Commander-in-Chief and all other people of importance were entertained by us with what we hoped was suitable magnificence, and apart from these official guests

we entertained hordes of visitors who came on business or to see the mine.

Vin was one of the two European unofficial members of the Pahang State Council, which meant frequent visits for meetings to Pekan, where the Sultan lived, and where we were entertained to the most lavish curries, washed down with quantities of fizzy soft drinks. His Highness was a strict Mohammedan and alcohol was never served in his *istana*. We also went several times to Ipoh for meetings of the Chamber of Mines. I was glad that I was a good traveller, as this entailed a day and a half's journey by car, along the twisting road to Jerantut and over the mountain road to the Gap, where we crossed the Main Range, through some of the loveliest scenery in Malaya.

Those two years before we came home on leave were the happiest of my life. I soon fell into an easy routine: immediately after breakfast I would take the dogs for a walk—I had acquired an Alsatian, later succeeded by two bull mastiffs—and walking up the hill in which the mine was I would reach the top and look across an endless expanse of dark green jungle to the sea. Often the valleys would be covered with fluffy clouds like cotton-wool, out of which the occasional hill and mountain tops would be peeping like blunted thumbs. Sometimes I would accompany Vin down the mine or help him survey the new roads which were being built to shorten the journey to Kuantan, or to open up hitherto unexplored parts of the concession. I asked for nothing better than being with him, watching the quiet efficiency with which he went about everything. I am an inveterate tomboy at heart and never happier than when I am accompanying a man doing a job of work. Those long, silent walks with my father had taught me not to chatter too much, so Vin's reserve, when I was out with him, never bothered me at all, and I had only to do something silly,

which I frequently did when I was helping him, to start him off teasing me.

While surveying for the roads if I ever tried to read his theodolite for him he would slap me on the behind and say: 'Nin, you're an enormous help, but just let me look at the reading.' Of course, he would never admit that I was right.

The afternoons were intensely hot, and I lay on my bed, with the shutters firmly closed, and dozed off in a bath of perspiration. When it was cooler, I used to go down to the club to play tennis; and although I was on friendly terms with all of the European wives, I did not join in very much with their tea-drinking sessions. I have never been very good at gossiping with other women, but apart from that I felt that being the general manager's sister I had to be careful what I gossiped about. As time went on, Vin did confide in me about some things, using me as a safety-valve, so that I had to be careful not to let slip anything he had told me and thereby raise his ire. He never tired of saying: 'You blasted women will chatter all day. Why can't you be more like men and talk about things instead of people.' He usually allowed condescendingly that I was a bit different from the average run of women. Sometimes, when a new bungalow had been built for one of the European members of the staff, I would hear at the club who was going to be given it before Vin had made up his mind on that point himself; those were bits of gossip he did enjoy hearing from me.

Gardening had been a favourite pastime of mine in England, but although I did make an effort to take an interest in ours at Sungei Lembing, everything I tried to do met with disaster: either Vin or I would bring up a choice plant from Singapore and I would plant it with great ceremony, only to find it had shrivelled up to nothing in a few days or been washed out of the heavy red soil by

a cloudburst. I soon left the whole business to our Chinese women gardeners.

Although Vin wanted to be quite independent of me in the evenings, I did in fact see a lot of him. As he was also fond of music, I would play to him for hours while he sat reading or pulling a wireless to pieces, which he was invariably unsuccessful at putting together again; he used to get furious with the set and was liable to throw all the bits he could not fit together again out of the window, and then laugh about it afterwards. It was generally quite easy to make Vin laugh: he had a good straightforward sense of humour and was quite able to laugh at himself as long as he was not in a really bad mood. If he was particularly worried or tense about anything, I had to watch my step; if I pulled his leg about something on those occasions he would flare up: 'Nin, I wish you'd grow up and stop giggling at stupid things.'

Vin was always a little strung up; it was the penalty for being so completely wrapped up in the affairs of the mine, and I often wished that he did not take his responsibilities quite so seriously. I always knew when he was worrying unduly about something because one of the clear signs was his habit of lighting endless cigarettes, taking a few puffs at them and then throwing them out of the window—this was a habit which recommended itself very much to our Chinese gardeners, who collected all the half-smoked cigarettes round the house and office and kept themselves in tobacco.

'What are you worrying about, darling?' I would ask him.

'What do you mean?' he would ask testily; he never liked the idea of his baby sister being able to read his mind so easily.

'Well, to start with you've smoked six cigarettes in the last few minutes,' and I was never wrong about that sign. I think in this way he came to talk a lot more about his worries than he had ever done before; I encouraged him

because I could not bear the feeling of tension, and there was always the chance that I might be to blame for his bad mood.

Vin's fatherly treatment of the people in Sungei Lembing was partly the reflection of a plan which he was trying to fulfil. Most of the tin mines in Malaya were at the mercy of a floating labour force of Chinese and Malays and of unscrupulous contractors who brought gangs of men to work on a particular job; Vin's idea was to build up a permanent mining community at Sungei Lembing where, like in the Welsh villages where he had worked as a young man, the profession went on from father to son. He built good houses for the workers and saw that their children had proper schools to go to; there was a large hospital with a well-equipped maternity ward, and the standard of health among the workers improved immensely. And no worker brought his personal problem to Vin without being helped. It was no wonder that they all regarded him as a benefactor, and it was not surprising, either, that looking after eight thousand people proved a strain on him. When under the International Tin Agreement the output of tin was greatly restricted in the late 1930s it meant that our mine could no longer work at anywhere near full capacity, and this greatly increased Vin's worries. He knew that he would either have to dismiss a large number of those workers whom he had successfully settled at Lembing or find other work for them. It was to give jobs to these redundant men that he started building the roads around Sungei Lembing, but inevitably some employees had to be paid off and this upset Vin more than anything else. I remember one day receiving an urgent telephone call from the office, asking me to bring to him all the money I could lay hands on. I found him with four cigarettes alight in his ashtray, interviewing two weeping Chinese women, who were the wives of men he had had to pay off. Although he could not alter his decision, he gave them all the money I had brought with me.

'What could I do? They said their children were crying with hunger and they had no money to buy rice,' he told me later, trying to excuse his soft-heartedness.

There was very seldom any labour trouble at the mine; occasionally the Communists tried to disturb the peace, but their attempts were looked upon more as a joke than anything else. In 1928 the police received word that the Communists were planning to seize control of the mine, and when they raided their headquarters they found a list of all the people involved and promptly put them in prison. Once Vin was told that there was a Communist agitator in the village who was trying to organize a strike. He heard later that a mass meeting was to be held on the village green and he was urged to take action, but Vin did nothing until the crowd had gathered round the Communist; he then drove from the office to the green in a tiny car in which he always went everywhere at its maximum speed and which could only just contain his large form. As soon as they saw the *Tuan Besar*'s car, the crowd melted away until only Vin and the agitator were left. 'If you have anything to say, you'd better say it to me,' Vin told him.

The Communist assured him that he had nothing to say, and left the village without more ado.

I very seldom saw Vin angry with a Chinese or a Malay, but being very intolerant of fools he found Tamils very irritating. He had employed a Tamil gardener at one point, and it took Vin months of repeating the same instructions over and over again to impress on the Indian that cannas should be watered every day or they would die. At last he grasped the fact, and one day when Vin was hurrying up the path to the house in a tremendous tropical downpour he passed the Tamil watering the cannas, standing under an umbrella. That was too much for Vin; he had to stop in the pouring rain and tell the man what a blithering idiot he was and give him the sack.

Vin's life was so tied up with the East that I do not think he would ever have gone back to England for his leaves, if he had not promised Mother that he would; he had none of the compelling desire to return home which most Englishmen feel when they are living abroad. We left for England in April 1937.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN VIN AND I returned to Malaya in November, nothing seemed to be quite the same any more. Outwardly, there was no change in the valley; the mine had been run efficiently in the *Tuan Besar*'s absence by Gordon Fairmaid, Vin's second in command; we still played strenuous games of tennis at the club, and when occasions arose we still entertained on a lavish scale. And yet there was a subtle difference; a little of the enthusiasm had gone out of life and the light-heartedness of what was a very happy community was less in evidence. Conversations in the club were not so much about mine gossip as Germany and Japan; the shadow of war had fallen across Malaya. Many people were saying that war with Germany was inevitable, while to us in the East the danger of conflict with Japan was already a very real one; the Japanese had swept into China and were arrogantly proclaiming their Co-Prosperity Plan for South-East Asia which we knew was intended, in time, to include Malaya, Siam, the East Indies and Australia.

To Vin these anxious days of approaching crisis proved an additional strain, but there was one compensatory factor, the mine could now work at fuller capacity owing to Britain's rearmament programme. Vin had been in Malaya during the First World War and he remembered only too well the hardships suffered by the people, due to the

blockade by submarines, and he decided to clear a large area of jungle near the village and plant rice, vegetables and fruit, so that at least the Sungei Lembing community would not go short of food. The energy with which he threw himself into this new enterprise was typical of the compelling urge he felt to safeguard his own people; he worked ceaselessly marking out the area to be cleared and supervising the felling of the enormous trees which form the thick green umbrella over the jungle, and I spent as much time as I could with him. He also imported a Large White boar and later two sows from England in an effort to improve the local strain of pig, which is miserably small and suffers from a pronounced curvature of the spine.

He imported into the community as many Hakka-Chinese as he could find; these men, who come from all over China, are natural horticulturists and, in direct contrast to me, anything they plant grows. Vin chose one of the timber contractors called Cheng Kam, to be foreman: this little man was entirely trustworthy and Vin had known him since the days when he had first come to Malaya. He was born in the Dutch East Indies and was superior to the general run of Chinese at the mine, his father coming from the equivalent of our middle class. Cheng Kam was not a man you ever felt like being familiar with; there was a rather prim severe quality about him and I often felt that he disapproved of my habit of giggling at silly situations. He wore his iron-grey hair on the long side and kept it neatly brushed back over his head, and his grey moustache was always severely trimmed; unlike most Chinese, his face was brown rather than yellow. Whatever work he was doing, he remained immaculately dressed; his grey shirts always seemed to have been freshly laundered and he wore the sleeves tightly buttoned at the wrist; he was never known to expose his arms to view. His drill trousers were kept perfectly creased, and he never went out without

wearing a large topee. He was very fond of my brother, and when on one occasion he witnessed a row between Vin and myself he had been most perturbed. As I was a better driver than Vin, I usually drove the car, and on this particular day we stuck in a boggy piece of the new road, and Vin and Cheng Kam had to get out and push. Having successfully negotiated the bad piece, I drove on to higher ground in case the car stuck again, and Vin, who was expecting me to stop sooner, had to follow after me on foot; when he caught up with me, he exploded.

'Why the hell didn't you stop instead of going on for a mile up the road?'

I tried to explain, but Vin's pride had been hurt and he would not listen, so I got out of the car and said: 'Very well, then, I shall walk home,' and I went off back to the house, followed closely by Cheng Kam, whose normally impassive face showed great concern.

'*Missie* had better go back in the car.'

'I have no intention of going back with the *Tuan Besar*.'

'*Tuan Besar* will be very angry.'

'Let the *Tuan Besar* be angry,' and I walked back without another word, leaving poor Cheng Kam feeling very unhappy about it—Vin and I spent an icy evening together afterwards.

My brother put large gangs of men on clearing the plantation, and in no time the ground was cleared and planted. Vegetables and fruit grow quickly in the tropical sun and we were soon harvesting sweet potatoes, beans, lettuces, bananas and so on (while rice was nearly ready to reap in the *sawars*). It was then that the jungle creatures began paying marked attention to our plantation, and Vin ran an electric fence round the whole area which gave a sharp shock to anything that touched it. Deer of all kinds and wild pig soon discovered that the risk of a burning sensation on the nose was not worth a few potatoes, and

the ground around the fence became puddled with small footmarks. Vin himself had cause to treat the fence with respect: one day when the current in the fence was switched off for repairs, he was bending down looking through the theodolite with his sweaty behind resting on the wire. The current was suddenly switched on again at the other end of the plantation and Vin received a powerful shock. Everything went flying, including the theodolite, while Vin jumped up and down in a fury. The Malay survey gang retired precipitately behind the nearest tree stump and, as usual, I giggled. The only animal which failed to respect the fence was a rogue elephant which burst into the plantation time after time, laying waste to large areas. Cheng Kam was most upset: 'All that good seed wasted—so much work for nothing! The *Tuan Besar* must get someone to shoot that elephant.' After several unsuccessful attempts, the elephant was finally shot; his carcass was dismembered and the flesh dug into the ground to manure the newly planted fruit trees.

Another frantic pest was the minute rice-bird, which attacked the rice in flocks; it was so light that it could sit on the ears of grain and eat the kernels out of the husk. The women and children spent hours screaming themselves hoarse in an effort to frighten them off. Cheng Kam said bitterly. 'They never stop. They eat. They evacuate and then they come back to eat again.'

When we made one of our periodic visits to Singapore in 1939 the place was buzzing with rumours and the presence of some Austrian refugees was a reminder that things were boiling up in Europe. During that year, a regular Army officer came to stay with us, and Vin gathered from him, after a good dinner, that in the event of an attack on Malaya the peninsula would not be defended, all troops being withdrawn to the fortress area of Singapore. It was piece of information which evidently set Vin thinking, and one day

when I was standing with him in the plantation he suddenly said:

'Even if the Japs did come, I'm not leaving Sungei Lembing. I've been here for over thirty years and nobody is going to drive me away from here. Supposing they did overrun the mainland, it would only be a matter of weeks before our troops in Singapore drove them out. Do you think you and I could live in the jungle for a bit? When the Japs were blown to pieces we could come out of hiding and I could get the mine going again. What do you think?'

I laughed and said that no doubt I would do anything he told me to do, and thought no more about it.

One day when Vin was, ironically enough, measuring up some of the rooms for air conditioning—we were never slow to add to our comforts—the telephone rang, and it was Fairmaid to say that Hitler had invaded Poland. From that moment all the British in Malaya worked ceaselessly; the rubber plantations and the tin mines steadily increased their output, while the women produced a formidable amount of woollen clothes for servicemen and bomb victims in England. Money poured into the Malayan Agency in London, given not only by the Europeans but by Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasians. The collapse of France changed the Far Eastern picture completely because Japan, as a member of the Axis, was handed Indo-China, and this meant that there was only defenceless Siam between us and the Japanese. Troops poured into the country from England, India and Australia and every town in Malaya was garrisoned, including Kuantan, where an airstrip was laid down. Seeing so many troops about gave us renewed confidence in the strength of our position, and none of us had a high opinion of the Japanese soldier, the general idea being that one British soldier was worth at least four Japs; we had no idea how ill-equipped our men were and what efficient soldiers the Japs had become.

Vin worked night and day to keep the mine going at full capacity; and added to his usual anxieties he now had the strain of keeping the eight thousand people in Sungei Lembing fed and of seeing that an adequate supply of spare parts for the machinery reached us from England. I did my best to stop him overworking, as otherwise he was liable to collapse with a high temperature and a mysterious ulcerous swelling of the leg. He used me more and more as his safety-valve, but although he often asked me my advice he seldom took any notice of what I said! He could be very pig-headed about things, especially if he was tired, when he would go his own sweet way whatever anyone said.

'Trouble with you, Nin, is you never think anything out.'

'I go by instinct,' I would say sagely; 'it's far better than thinking something over and over in your mind and then not being sure.'

We were totally unalike, which was one of the reasons why we got on so well. I would make up my mind immediately about a line of action, right or wrong; Vin would not dream of deciding anything until he had looked at all sides of the question.

The war in Europe was going badly and the Japanese menace loomed ever larger, and yet Vin and I seldom talked about the possibility of invasion. It was partly because Vin shirked facing the full implications of an attack which would mean the loss of all he had worked for, but also he believed very strongly in the invulnerability of Singapore and our ability to repel the Japs. In 1941, another factor also contributed to the feeling of complacency in Malaya: after Germany attacked Russia, it was generally felt in the East that if Japan came into the war she would invade Russia from Manchuria, and this lulled our fears of an attack on Malaya.

From time to time we did hear disturbing reports about the weakness of our forces: soldiers told us how ill-equipped

the army of fifty thousand men in Malaya was, while one of our own engineers, who as a naval reservist had been called up at the beginning of the war, told us in Singapore how weak our naval forces were.

On December 1st a friend and I arrived home from Singapore to find that a general mobilization had been called, and all the Europeans from Sungei Lembing who were in the Volunteer Force, except for a few "key" men, were about to leave. Rumours were rife and I went about with a feeling of dread which lay like lead in the pit of my stomach; I felt that at any moment my whole world was going to disintegrate, and each night as I lay in bed I wondered what the next twenty-four hours would bring.

We heard on the radio that a Japanese fleet was in the Gulf of Siam. Then, on the morning of December 8th, the news came through of Pearl Harbour, of the devastating air attack on Singapore and other airfields, and of the landings at Singora and Khota Bharu. Even then we did not know the magnitude of the disaster or the seriousness of our position. We had no conception of the extent to which American power in the Pacific had been crippled, nor how obsolete was our air force in Malaya, much of which was destroyed on the ground in the initial attacks.

Vin had already reopened the subject of what we should do if the Japanese came.

'What about my idea of hiding in the jungle for a bit?'

'How long do you think we would be there?'

'Perhaps a few weeks, six months at the longest. Singapore won't fall, and with their long lines of communications the Japs won't be able to last. The people here would like it if they knew I was close at hand.'

Vin said it with such assurance that it never occurred to me to doubt his optimism; I was so used to his being completely in command of a situation. I wanted to go wherever he went, and I certainly had no wish to be evacuated to an

unknown fate. When Vin rang me up that afternoon to say that he had received a message advising the evacuation of all women and children, I had already made up my mind to stay behind. Vin was anxious that those women whose husbands were fighting should be moved to safety, and asked me to give them what help I could with their packing. One woman, whose husband was still at the mine, refused to leave him, but after a hectic hour of flinging necessities into bags, all the others and their children left under the care of Brian Tyson, who was acting as second in command during Fairmaid's absence on leave in New Zealand. Tyson escorted them to Kuantan and arranged for cars to take them on to Kuala Lumpur.

We had been greatly heartened by the arrival in Singapore of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* and felt confident that with this reinforcement to our naval forces the Japanese would be driven off. On December 10th came the crushing news that these two great battleships had been sunk by Japanese bombers before they were able to engage the enemy. That was the worst blow so far, and from then on we knew that it was only a question of time before the enemy would be in our midst.

Vin thought out his method of denying the mine to the Japanese and speeded up the plans for our stay in the jungle. He had chosen Cheng Kam to be his confidant as he was the most trustworthy man on the mine, and the foreman had readily agreed to do all he could. To him, as to all the other workers at Sungei Lembing, the idea of the *Tuan Besar* deserting them was unthinkable. He told my brother solemnly that our safety would depend on the utmost secrecy from the beginning, and this would mean smuggling food into the jungle without the house servants knowing about it. Every evening the little Chinese would call, ostensibly to report some happening on the plantation, but while he talked and gesticulated he filled a sack with food

and clothing. He told us that he had found two old men who would look after us in the jungle, and he had already arranged with them for a small hut to be built near a stream. To me there was an unreal quality about these preparations, but meanwhile our world was fast disintegrating.

On December 28th a stay-behind-the-Jap-lines party arrived in Kuantan looking for a suitable place to install their receiving and transmitting set; they suggested that they should set it up in the hills near Sungei Lembing, and when Vin agreed they made an initial try-out of the wireless in our house. They needed help to man this station and Vin, who was too old for such an exacting job, suggested that Brian Tyson and Maurice Cotterill, a rubber planter, should accompany them; he also arranged that Fonseca, the Sinhalese electrician from the mine, should act as their contact with the outside world once they were firmly established in the jungle.

The following day Vin received a telegram from the British Resident in Kuala Lipis ordering him to flood the mine. For a time Vin was speechless; it was only then that he came face to face with the disintegration of his life's work. Apart from that, there was the appalling responsibility he had to bear of throwing all his workers out of a job. With typical self-control and without showing anything of what he was feeling, he called a meeting of the heads of the departments and made plans for the flooding of the mine. As the night shift reached the surface, another day was just beginning; the early-morning mist was clearing from the sky and to all appearances it was one of a thousand other beautiful tropical mornings. Suddenly the pumps stopped for the first time in over fifty years, the roar of the mill died down and Sungei Lembing lay in an uncanny silence as the sun touched the mountain tops. It was a deathly calm, and I did not dare look at Vin's face. I could imagine his mind thinking only of the thousands of gallons of water which

were already filling the subterranean tunnels and would soon flood the entire mine for hundreds of feet. All the bags of tin ready for shipment had already been dumped down the bottom of the mine, and now all the stocks of fuel oil were jettisoned in the river.

Vin had seen to it that a large sum of money was brought up from Kuantan, and he paid all the workers up to date plus a substantial bonus. There were tears in many eyes when he told them that the *tuans* would soon have to leave. He was determined that nothing should be left for the Japanese to seize, so he gave orders that the store should be thrown open for everyone to take what they wanted. Soon a fighting mob of people surrounded the building, and Vin watched sadly all that day as the last vestiges of the order which he was so proud of vanished in the general pandemonium.

Alarming reports about the nearness of the Japs came to our ears; we heard how they were raping and massacring all the Chinese they could lay hands on, while a British planter and his wife had been surprised in their house and hanged from a tree in the garden in front of their servants. The remaining Europeans from the mine set out for Kuantan, to join the last group from there before they left for Singapore, only to find that everyone had already gone without letting Vin know, as they had promised to, and Kuantan was in Japanese hands. The party had to return to Sungei Lembing and then set off through the jungle on foot, hoping to reach Gambang before the Japanese. Tyson and the commanding officer of the stay-behind party destroyed the bridge over the Kuantan river, while I helped to put all our cars, except one which we were to use, out of action.

The time came for us to leave, and we said good-bye to everyone sorrowfully, pretending that we were leaving for a trek over the mountains to Kuala Lipis to join another party. We started off in the direction of the gardens, where

we had arranged to meet Cheng Kam, waving to our friends who were still there. We passed three men carrying a looted refrigerator who said cheerfully, 'Greetings, *Tuan Besar*,' and Vin and I laughed as we wondered what they were going to do with an electric refrigerator without any current.

'And that,' said Vin with a sigh, 'was Sungei Lembing.'

CHAPTER FOUR

OUR HUT HAD been made in a part of the jungle which was about a quarter of an hour's walk from the gardens. Cheng Kam and the two old men, Wong Ng and Lau Siu, were waiting for us at the gardens, and they led the way. The happenings of the last few days had left me in such a daze that my mind refused to take it all in and explore all the depressing possibilities attached to our predicament. Instead of dwelling on the catastrophes which had seen all our friends dispersed, our home lost and the mine flooded, I found myself smiling at the odd appearance of our procession through the jungle. Lau Siu and Wong Ng were both wearing wide blue cotton trousers and loose Chinese coats, and while Lau Siu was tall and thin, Wong Ng was short and enormously stout with roll upon roll of fat round his neck, and when he laughed his small black eyes disappeared into a round moon-like face. Vin and I followed wearing shirts and shorts, while Cheng Kam brought up the rear, immaculately dressed in a grey shirt and trousers and the inevitable topee. In the hurry of our departure, I had seized the tool kit from the car and taken it with me, instead of carrying something which might have been of some use.

On arriving at the hut, we ate our evening meal off our picnic plates, and as we munched the delicious cakes which Mrs. Cheng Kam had made for us it was hard to realize

that our Sungei Lembing world had just collapsed; we might quite easily have been having a picnic in the jungle for the fun of it. The hut was sturdily built of bark and roofed with palm leaves, while inside, raised from the ground, two hard beds had been made of sticks laid crosswise and covered with tough bark. It was not until I lay down to sleep that my mind began to run riot among horrible images of recent events: there were my two bull mastiffs shot dead because we could not take them with us, there was the sudden eerie stillness of the valley when the mine machinery stopped, and then there was the picture of my bed, unslept in, and all my belongings left neatly folded in the chest of drawers. It was all quite unbelievable.

The sounds in the jungle had dropped from a crescendo of noise at dusk to the quiet hum of the insects. Suddenly I heard twigs crackling and the sound of plants being brushed sharply aside, and I was sure that someone was outside the hut; I knew that tigers and other wild animals always stick to the game paths and move stealthily along without disturbing a leaf or frond of a fern. The noises increased and my heart beat furiously; it was really most unnerving being quite so vulnerable, lying in a frail hut in the middle of the jungle. I looked across at Vin, who seemed to be sleeping soundly, and I hesitated to wake him, knowing that he had had days and nights of ceaseless work and anxiety. Wave after wave of mosquitoes dive-bombed my net and reminded me a little too forcibly of the Japanese planes which were strafing our troops day after day. At last I fell asleep and did not wake again until the tremendous din which greets a jungle dawn began with its infinite range of snorts, whistles, barks, roars and trumpetings. Vin hotly denied that he had slept through the strange noises in the night; he assured me that he had several times been on the point of investigating them but had hesitated to do so in case he disturbed "my lovely sleep". We were both certain

that someone had been walking about near the hut, and we took no chances when we went down to the river to wash. Vin kept guard with his revolver while I waded into the stream, wearing a *sarong* and clutching a piece of soap. We adopted the usual jungle law of hygiene, using the flow of the stream nearest the sea for our lavatory, the centre for bathing, clothes and dish washing, and the part nearest the source of the stream for drinking.

While we waited for the three Chinese to come, Vin performed a speedy operation on my hair.

'We must get rid of all this, my girl,' he said, pointing at the perm which I had had recently done in Singapore. 'You'll have lodgers in it before you know where you are.'

'All right, I give you a free hand.' I sat on the ground while Vin made me a very professional Eton crop, which gave the two old men quite a shock when they arrived.

'Ay-yah,' laughed Wong Ng, 'very pretty, very pretty, *Missie* like a schoolboy now.'

It was hard ever to tell Cheng Kam anything he did not know already; and, true to form, he knew all about the nocturnal happenings which had disturbed us. He had seen dozens of the people from the gardens disappearing into the jungle at nightfall, to bury all the loot and tinned food which they had got from the store. Although no one, to the best of his knowledge, had discovered our hide-out, Cheng Kam decided that we must move the next day, and the two old men were sent deeper into the jungle to make another shelter for us.

After a long talk with Vin, Cheng Kam, who looked as dapper as usual in a neat grey, hurried home to the plantation, which he was running as if nothing had happened. Sungei Lembing was full of stories about the cruelty of the Japs towards the Chinese, as the two peoples hated each other, and Cheng Kam was nervous to leave his wives alone for any length of time. The old men returned later in very good

spirits and told us how they had found an admirable hiding-place higher up the stream, where they had built us a shelter on a large rock above a waterfall, which would not be easy for anyone else to find. It was agreed that we should move early the next day.

That night Cheng Kam arrived clutching a gun. He announced that a gang of robbers, who were not uncommon in Malaya, were known to be afoot, and he and Vin must keep guard through the night in case they came. When the old men came the next morning we set off to our new hut in a cautious mood. When Vin pointed to some elephant tracks, and Cheng Kam admitted that he had not liked to frighten us with the news that a rogue elephant was in the vicinity, so he had invented the story about the robbers to set our minds at rest!

I was horrified when I saw the new hut: it was no more than a roof of palm leaves over our heads with a frame braced against a tree and built on a flat rock overhanging the waterfall in a deep gorge. It rained heavily that night and the stream swelled up into a torrent of water which drenched the inside of our hut with spray and made such a deafening roar that we could not hear ourselves speak. I will never forget the gloom of that gorge where the banks of wet rocks seemed to press down on us, while giant trees formed such an impenetrable cover over our heads that not a ray of sunlight could find its way through. Everywhere there was a riot of plant growth, ferns of every size, mosses, lichens and creepers all struggling to catch what light rays they could. Normally I would have been thrilled by all the lush greenness around me, but under these circumstances I was suffocated by it all.

Day after day heavy tropical rain added to our troubles, and soon every stitch of our clothing was soaked and Vin and I started heavy colds, which were accompanied, in Vin's case, by a large boil. We were unable to light a fire even if

we had been able to find any dry sticks, because we were still close enough to the gardens for smoke to give us away. I cannot describe the boredom and despair which settled on me during the first few weeks in the jungle; up until then I had been living a very active free life, and now I was condemned to squatting in a damp, dark hut for days on end, with nothing to occupy my mind but thoughts of the British defeat in Malaya and the possibility of thousands of Europeans being massacred. My most despondent moments were at sunset when the air was filled with a strong smell of damp earth and rotting leaves lying in thick layers on the floor of the jungle, and the light faded from the sky; it was a time when I would ordinarily have been sitting comfortably at home or playing a strenuous game of tennis at the club. There were times when I felt that I could only stand a few more days of it, and then when that span of days was up I would last another stretch of time until I grew accustomed to the deadening pattern.

Vin, on the other hand, was extraordinarily cheerful during these first few weeks: he resigned himself completely to our stay in the jungle, confident as he was that we would soon return to the mine. He would talk for hours about what he planned to do when he got back; how he would set about draining the mine of water and starting the pumps again, how he would salvage the bags of tin which were lying at the bottom of the mine, how he would gradually restore order again and set about building the new wing on to the hospital as he had been planning for the past year.

'And, Nin darling, the first thing we'll do is to go down to Singapore and find two bull mastiff puppies for you.'

'I can't bear to think about dogs at the moment. I don't want ever to have a dog again after having to let Brandy and Brutus be killed.'

Although both of us were getting noticeably weaker, nothing would alter his optimism; most of the food which

the old men brought us was of a starchy nature and for a long time we could not force ourselves to eat enough of it, so that we lost weight rapidly.

After two weeks of acute discomfort, we decided to find another site, at the risk of offending our friends. When we found one higher up and away from the stream, we showed it to Lau Siu and Wong Ng, who shook their heads very doubtfully and clicked their teeth disapprovingly; but we won them round in the end and they built another hut with a split bamboo floor, without walls or a door, on the site we had chosen. I felt much more cheerful here, if only because by climbing a nearby ridge I could get a glimpse of towering mist-clad mountains. It is odd how quickly the jungle could depress you and set you longing for a view of the open sky. To make it worse, this was the time of the north-east monsoon when skies were nearly always cloudy and rain was constant. Of course there was plenty of beauty: pink and yellow orchids clung to the trunks of massive trees, bright kingfishers would flash past you in a streak of colour, and enormous butterflies would hover in places where the canopy overhead was a little less dense. Even the birds that appeared to be black when at rest on a branch showed the most lovely bloom of iridescent blue on their undersides as they flew away and their wings caught the light: one of the most attractive-looking was the Drongo, or racquet-tailed bird, which had long, thin tail feathers opening out into a "racquet" at the tip; in flight the connecting feathers were invisible so that it looked as though the bird was being followed by two enormous bees.

But there was nothing gay and bright about the jungle; apart from the orchids, I very seldom saw any flowers on the ground, because it was too dark for them; the climbing plants, in a desperate need to flower in the sunshine so that their seeds could ripen, forced their way up through the dense foliage and flowered out of sight; occasionally I would

come across a shower of pink petals floating down to the ground from above. The jungle floor was much more the scene of decay; for hundreds of years the leaves had been dropping from the trees and rotting in thick, black steamy layers, and when branches were torn off or whole trees uprooted they would lie in spongy dark lengths decaying, covered with orange fungus and silver lichen. It was only at night when the moon was shining that the jungle became light and silvery, because the moon rays were able to penetrate the foliage in a way the sun never could; masses of leaves around us became a never-ending pattern of lovely shapes. I came to like the night-time best, but Vin found the moonlight sad and depressing.

The old men came regularly with food and stayed talking for hours. Wong Ng spoke Malay and Cantonese, which Vin could also speak, and he would squat on his haunches and chatter away to my brother for hours on end. Both the Chinese were deeply concerned about the Allies' reverses; they would belch loudly over their tea, suck the liquid noisily through their teeth and shake their heads with dismay. But neither of them had any doubt that the British would win in the end because, they said, had they not brought peace and prosperity to Malaya?

'The British are strong and kind and clever too,' sighed Wong Ng. 'Did they not bring bicycles into the country? And that BBC! Letting the *Tuan Raja* speak to his people when they were over eight thousand miles away.'

Every visit they brought news of more Japanese victories, which only increased my feeling of depression. I was quite convinced by then that the British were going to be driven out of Asia and that it might be years before they returned; and as far as Vin and I were concerned, either we would have to give ourselves up to the Japanese and be killed for our part in flooding the mine, or we would be condemned to years of solitude in the jungle; in the latter case we would be

dependent on the three Chinese for food, and no one could tell how long they would be able to bring it to us. At present Sungei Lembing was free from Japanese, but once they occupied it they were bound to discover that we were hiding near by. Cheng Kam might be tortured and, fond as he was of us, how could we be sure that he would not break down and give us away. Sometimes Vin and I would discuss our reliance on the Chinese.

'Why was Cheng Kam prepared to risk everything to help us in the first place?' I asked Vin.

'The little man's fond of us, we know that, but he hasn't been a trader all his life for nothing: he knows we'll be back at the mine one day and his helping us now will do him good later on. It's as good a motive as any.'

'That's all right so long as he thinks we're going to return one day, but supposing he gives up hope of that?'

'There's one thing about a Chinese you ought to know by now: once they have given their word to help you, nothing'll make them change. They may have their brains put in upside down, but I'd trust a Chinese a damned sight more than I would many of my own countrymen.'

There was no jingoism about Vin; in fact he was curiously detached about the British, and I think that his national pride was a lot less upset by the British defeats in Malaya than mine was.

'Anyway, Nin, don't let's hear any more of this defeatist talk. We're not going to be in the jungle for a long time. We'll put up one hell of a fight to keep Singapore and then we'll build up our offensive against the Nips from there as soon as the Americans have got going.'

Vin refused to consider the possibility of complete defeat; his whole attitude of mind depended on his keeping alive the belief that we would return to the mine in the near future. Sometimes I would lie awake at nights and dread the time when Vin's hopes would be destroyed. I knew that

hope could be a worse drug than opium smoking when one was a prisoner; it was far better to face and to wallow in despair and self-pity from the outset, as I had done, and come to terms with it.

In mid-January Cheng Kam arrived to stay with us for a few days. Although the Japanese had not yet occupied Sungei Lembing, the village was a far from tranquil place now that the British had left; one of the contractors, who like Cheng Kam himself had supplied labour for the mine, had failed to pay his workers their proper dues and the men had rioted and thrown a vat of sulphuric acid over him. Cheng Kam had not been involved in any way nor had the trouble spread to the gardens, but he decided that a spell out of sight until tempers had cooled would do no harm. He brought us cakes, eggs and meat, and we fed exceptionally well during those few days. Vin was very pleased to have his company, and the two men talked for hours on end about the old days when, going back to 1911, he and Vin had done a lot of surveying together in the jungle; they talked endlessly about the future too, deciding exactly which man would do what job when the mine was opened again. Cheng Kam spoke Malay so rapidly that I could hardly follow a word he said, and I was driven to sitting outside the hut, wrapped in a *sarong*, and singing snatches from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and playing an imaginary piano. The car we had driven out in was the only one we had not destroyed before we left, and once, when I was able to slip a word in, I asked Cheng Kam if he had destroyed it yet. Looking slightly aggrieved, he assured me that he intended to do so; it was quite clear that he was driving about in the car himself and had no intention of parting with it until the petrol ran out.

The two old men came every other day with vegetables from the plantation. After a few days they reported that Sungei Lembing had returned to normal, but when I saw

their expressive faces I knew that something was seriously wrong. A stab of fear went through me, as I was certain that it could only mean that our days of freedom were numbered. We questioned them closely, but the old men would not be hurried, and it was only after the usual pantomime of shaking of heads, clucking of tongues and wringing of hands that they would tell us that the *Kempei-tai*, or Japanese secret police, had sent a civilian messenger for Cheng Kam summoning him to Kuantan, where the police had their headquarters. Frightened out of her wits, Mrs. Cheng Kam had told the man that her master had gone across the mountains on business; strict instructions were left for Cheng Kam to report to the *Kempei-tai* as soon as he returned.

The old men begged him to remain hidden in the jungle, but Cheng Kam would not hear of it, and we sadly agreed with him that to remain concealed would only confirm the Japanese suspicions. The little man straightened his clothes, which he had kept miraculously clean in the jungle, and prepared to leave us.

'I will see the rats, *Tuan Besar*. I'm not afraid.'

We watched the prim little figure, as he followed Lau Siu and Wong Ng, with a feeling of love and anxiety; and through my mind flashed the line "Greater love has no man than he who lays down his life for his friends".

'I hope to God the swine don't know about us and don't start torturing him. Maybe they only want to get details out of him about the food supply in Lembing. If they once suspect we're in hiding, we'll have to give ourselves up. I'm not having anyone tortured to save our skins.'

The days dragged miserably by, and more than ever we cursed the fact that in our haste to leave the house we had not brought a single book with us. The only reading matter we had to occupy our minds with was the local newspapers in which our food was often wrapped; Vin could read *Jawi*

(Malay script) and the journals gave him an opportunity to teach me this, but as far as gleaning any news from them was concerned, we were unlucky, as they were hopelessly out of date and inaccurate. It was too dangerous to ask Cheng Kam to go up to our deserted house and bring us a few books. To keep our minds occupied we made a checker board from a piece of paper on which we drew a board and used pebbles from the bed of the stream as draughts. At last Lau Siu and Wong Ng arrived with beaming faces and there was no mistaking their good news. Cheng Kam had returned to Sungei Lembing little the worse for his inquisition; he had been tied up in a kneeling position for hours on end and questioned as to our whereabouts, but he had stuck tenaciously to the story of our having gone out through the jungle to Kuala Lipis with the last party of Europeans. The Japs had as yet no means of disproving his story and, since the plantation manager was a village leader and an important agent in the production of food, they set him free. Shortly after this, Cheng Kam met Fonseca, the electrician, who listened regularly to the Singapore broadcasts in Sungei Lembing and was able to send us some up-to-date news which was far from reassuring. He said that Tyson and Cotterill had left, on instructions from Singapore, for Segamat in North Johore to join up with the British troops there. Fonseca was afraid that they would not be able to make the hazardous trip through the jungle in time, as the Japanese were sweeping down the peninsula and were already in Johore.

Vin was very perturbed by this: it was the first reliable news we had heard, as he knew Fonseca was to be trusted.

'If they don't make a stand soon, the Japs will get to the reservoirs which supply the island. I thought Johore would be strongly held—they must have a fortified area outside the island to protect their water supplies.'

He would not admit the possibility that Singapore would

fall, though as there was no news of any halt to the Japanese advance I had begun to despair.

In the evening a few days later we heard an aeroplane, which sounded as if it were just over the gardens, and from the noise it was making as it dived and banked it was obviously doing a victory roll. Vin looked up with his eyes alight and said:

'Listen, Nin, it's doing a victory roll. It must be good news—it must be a Spitfire.'

'Unless it's a Japanese plane doing a victory roll for the fall of Singapore.' I only felt a sense of foreboding.

All the joy went out of Vin's face and he looked at me angrily. 'You mustn't say that. Of course they won't let Singapore be taken.' Then he hesitated and went on: 'At any rate, not so soon. They'll fight to the last man.'

The next day we had a letter from Fonseca in which he said that he feared Singapore had fallen as there had been fighting at the causeway linking the island to the mainland, following which the Singapore station had gone off the air.

The old men, however, told us that after Fonseca had given Cheng Kam the letter, Singapore had been heard broadcasting again, and so Vin refused to give up hope. I dreaded the moment whenever this would be taken away from him.

In the middle of the night, and I remember it was February 17th, Cheng Kam and the old men came to see us, bringing the usual supplies. This was the first time we had seen Cheng Kam since his interrogation, but we could hardly rejoice as he brought the news that Singapore had fallen on the 15th. Vin was absolutely stunned by the news; he walked a little way into the jungle and stood leaning against a tree in an attitude of utter despair. My heart bled for him but I knew that nothing I could say would comfort him, and, worse still, I was sure that his suffering had only just begun. For Vin, his entire world had been

destroyed at a blow; hitherto he had lived on hope, now he had no hope.

All night Vin and Cheng Kam talked about the crushing defeat in despairing tones.

'I don't understand it; we were always told that Singapore was so strong and yet they gave up with hardly a fight. They say sixty thousand men laid down their arms—sixty thousand men with rifles! How could they surrender, how could they give up so soon? If only the Chinese had had those rifles in China, think of what they would have done with them,' Cheng Kam kept repeating over and over again.

I listened hour after hour to this shaming conversation, which made me hot under the collar, but we could say nothing, knowing little of the circumstances of our defeat. How could we tell him of the heroic resistance put up by the British and Australian troops, when we had heard nothing about it?

'Their water supply had been captured, they had no room to fight.' Vin tried to find some explanation, but Cheng Kam would not stop: 'I always thought the British were such good fighters.'

We could find nothing constructive to say to a man who was so genuinely dismayed as he was, but I shall never forget the feeling of utter shame which came over me as I listened to him denouncing the British defeat; more than anything else in the months and years that followed, my determination to show the Chinese that the British were as tough as they were made out to be, kept me going.

At length my brother spoke about us: in view of the hopeless situation, he and I would have to go to Kuantan and give ourselves up. Cheng Kam's usually solemn face became very animated.

'*Tuan Besar*,' he shouted, 'you cannot do that; it would be utter craziness. Those animals would not intern you;

they would drag you to the execution ground at Telok Sisek: already many people have died there, first a hand, then a foot, an arm, a leg and finally the head. Few are lucky enough to be killed outright.'

He paused to wipe the sweat off his forehead, and then went on in a rush of words which I could hardly follow:

'The wife of the man who owned the cold storage shop went alone by moonlight to Telok Sisek to collect up the pieces of her husband and bury them. You must know the ways of the Japanese, *Tuan Besar.*'

The little man stood up and pointed at Vin to gain dramatic effect:

'Do you forget that you destroyed the mine and threw a fortune in crude oil into the river? The Japanese are not likely to forgive you for that when they are happy to kill people who have committed no crimes at all. And, *Missie,*' he turned his beady eyes on me, 'she would die too, but not until she had been debased in front of a gaping crowd.'

Cheng Kam turned away, shaking his head, while Lau Siu and Wong Ng moaned in horror, rocking to and fro on their heels. His words had had their desired effect. Vin and I sat silent, feeling sick with fear for ourselves, for each other and for the men who were risking everything to help us. I put my arms round Vin, who had gone ashen pale, to try and comfort him.

My brother broke the silence at last:

'The Japanese would not kill me because I flooded the mine. That was scorched-earth policy and all is fair in war.'

'Fair!' Cheng Kam wheeled round on us and beat his hands together. 'Fair! Those lice do not know the word. Besides, they would order you to put the mine in order again and you would refuse.'

Vin lit a cigarette with trembling fingers.

'What will happen to you, my friends, if we stay?

Sooner or later the *Kempei-tai* will find out what is going on and you'll be for Telok Sisek too.'

'Who will tell, *Tuan Besar*? No one knows, except us three, that you and *Missie* are here. Already those dogs of Tamils are working for the Japanese in Kuantan, and if one had known our secret they would have spoken by now.'

'But food isn't scarce yet. When a *kati* (1 lb. 5 oz.) of rice costs more than a gold watch, then we'll see who knows what.'

'Perhaps yes, and yet perhaps the Japanese will never come to Sungei Lembing. The mine is dead, so what will bring them there?'

Cheng Kam's first taste of the secret police seemed to have made him braver than ever, and the two old men were as determined as he to continue helping us, in spite of the terrible risk they were running. Vin had spent thirty-five years of his life with the Chinese and he had grown in many ways closer to the Oriental than he was to his own race, and even in that moment of despair I think that he derived some measure of comfort from the devotion and loyalty of those three men; it seemed to be a justification for the years he had spent with a people whom he loved.

In two things Cheng Kam proved himself a wishful thinker: our whereabouts were known to several of the villagers, although at present our secret was jealously guarded; and secondly, on March 3rd, the Japanese occupied Sungei Lembing. A military headquarters was set up in our house, and the commandant, after denouncing the British in no uncertain terms, took to the life of an English lord with great relish, or so we were told. He engaged Chinese boys who knew British ways of living and had the dining-room table laid with a splendid collection of our silver and cut glass. All the stocks of wines and spirits in Sungei Lembing had been destroyed before we left, but he brought supplies looted from elsewhere, and Wong Ng discovered

for our benefit that he had a passion for tomato sauce, York ham and good cigars. His junior officers lived in the houses belonging to the other Europeans. In the wake of the soldiers came the military administrators to take over the business concerns; other units followed which specialized in forming monopolies, creating a black market and taxing the people up to the hilt. Workers were paid in worthless "banana" dollars manufactured by the Japanese, inflation spiralled and the people began to go short of food. Vice was encouraged, opium, rice and coconut wine being all readily obtainable because the conquerors hoped to win the people over to their side by fair means or foul. The Malays were treated fairly well at first, as the Japanese mistakenly thought they could win their support. Any Chinese who would not kowtow to the conquerors were treated with unparalleled brutality, as the Japanese hated their race for the brave resistance they had made in China.

Once Sungei Lembing was occupied, we only saw Lau Siu and Wong Ng at longer intervals, while Cheng Kam did not come at all for a long time as there was now a constant danger that one or other of them might be followed. When the old men did come, they arrived in the pitch dark or very early in the morning, and knocked on a nearby tree three times with a *parang*. They brought us nothing but bad news; they tried not to tell us of the atrocities being committed in the village, but there were plenty of stories about the evacuation of Java and Sumatra and of hard fighting in Burma and North Africa.

We had been in the third hut about eight weeks when Cheng Kam paid us a surprise visit, bringing some coffee which was most welcome. The Japanese had put him in charge of part of Sungei Lembing and he was looking noticeably older and more strained. He had come to tell us that we must move again, as an acquaintance of his had had a dream in which he had seen Vin and me—Cheng Kam

was a great believer in dreams and fortune-tellers. This man described so exactly the place where we were that Cheng Kam and the old men were afraid he knew our hiding-place and would come to look for us, with possibilities too frightful to contemplate. When I stupidly suggested that he was uprooting the *Tuan Besar* on rather a frail excuse, he became really angry and turned on me.

'*Missie*, Sungei Lembing is now a treacherous place. It is not as you knew it. There is little work for the people, and what food there is in the market is very dear. Some are even suspicious of their shadows and would sell their souls for a dollar.'

Vin asked him if he was still questioned by the *Kempei-tai*.

'*Tuan Besar*, they think I know something but they still cannot prove it. This way and that they talk: "You and *Missie* are perhaps dead," they say, "or fled the country in a small boat." Yet in their hearts the rats believe you are still in the jungle.'

Vin and I moved to our fourth hut with heavy hearts.

CHAPTER FIVE

'TWO DAYS IN the first hut, two weeks in the second, two months in the third, I wonder how long in this one? Probably for the rest of our lives, so we'd better make the best of it,' Vin said with a forced laugh. Since the fall of Singapore my brother had become like a man robbed of a drug to which he had become addicted, and yet I was glad that he no longer lived on hope. As if to confirm our desperate plight hundreds of Japanese bombers thundered over our heads shortly after we moved to the new hut. They were evidently on their way to Burma and were flying only a few feet above the treetops.

'There can't be much opposition to the bastards if they fly as low as that,' Vin remarked.

Feeling certain that the new hut would be our home for a long while, we worked hard to make it as secure and comfortable as possible, and for a time this new interest roused Vin from his apathy and he became more like himself as he directed the old men to build the kind of house we wanted; being an engineer he knew all about stresses and strains and he made sure that the construction was sound. The site we chose was on the steep bank of a little stream, which promised an adequate and uncontaminated water supply as we were not far from its source.

Vin insisted that the house should be raised well up so

that there would be plenty of room for an elephant to walk underneath without disturbing us unduly. The old men thought we were mad when Vin said that we only wanted a roof and a floor, because the Chinese always shut themselves in with walls and only the smallest possible windows. In the Malayan climate there is no need to conserve heat, and a high-pitched roof coming down to within a foot or two of the floor and overhanging it at the sides gives as much protection from sun and rain as is necessary and allows a free current of air for coolness.

Wong Ng and Lau Siu cleared a site, leaving every tree that was not actually in the way to provide cover and make the hut as unnoticeable as possible. With their axes they then cut the main support posts, the beam, and smaller poles for the joists which would carry the floor. Vin and I went down to the stream with our *parangs* and cut bamboos for the floor; we carried these up to the site and split them so that they could be laid flat.

We chose a vast tree, with a huge trunk soaring far out of sight above us, to be the main anchor of the house, and to form a back wall covering about half the gap left by the pitch of the roof; two smaller trees served as supports at the other end.

We had only four nails, so, while Wong Ng and Lau Siu were shaping the timber, Vin and I tried to split rattans for lashing the roof and supports. We were soon put to shame by the old men; with only clumsy *parangs* they could split a rattan twelve to fifteen feet long into four, each strip being only half an inch in diameter; they would then peel away the pithy inside until they had a strong pliant "rope" with absolutely smooth edges. We were quite unable to match their skill although, to humour us, they would sometimes use in unimportant places the notched and mangled fragments that we offered.

Before Wong Ng and Lau Siu left us on the first day, the

framework of the hut was completed and sufficient of the floor was laid for us to sleep on; fortunately the night was fine, as we had no roof over our heads. Early next morning the Chinese returned and we all went off to look for palms (*dahun palas*) to cut for the thatch. This palm grows in clumps and each stem has a compound circular leaf, two feet or more in length; the centre frond is hooked over the lath and pushed through to the outside where the others are hanging, and, provided the leaves are laid close together and each layer has a good overlap on to the one below, they make a completely watertight and secure roof: as the leaves dry and shrivel, they can be pushed closer together and new ones added. We found that the two or three inches of stem left on each leaf made a convenient peg to hang things on inside the house.

Having discovered a good crop of palms Wong Ng and Lau Siu went back to get the framework of the roof ready, leaving Vin and me to cut the leaves and tie them into bundles, ready for the old men to fetch when they were ready for them.

That afternoon we surveyed our new home with pride. The front, with a rough ladder for doorsteps, was four to five feet from the ground and the back, with supporting posts and strong lashing to the large tree for security, was twelve to fourteen feet above the steeply sloping bank. Inside, the floor of split bamboo covered an area of about twelve feet by ten, and over our heads the tightly thatched roof was sufficiently high to allow Vin to stand up to his full six feet at the centre; on one side it came down almost to the floor and on the other it stopped about three feet above it and showed me what I thought the most thrilling thing of all. This was the view, stretching down over our own little valley to a glimpse of hills on the far side of the Kuantan river, two miles or more away. After weeks of looking at an interminable pattern of leaves, of being pressed upon and

suffocated by dense, dripping undergrowth, possession of this window on to the outside world was like being released from a dark cell. Vin had spent so much of his life underground that he did not feel, as I did, the longing for an open sky over his head.

I sat down with my legs dangling over the side of the house, rested my elbows on the wooden rail which the old men had put up and said: 'Oh Vin, this is lovely!'

My joy was short-lived: Wong Ng and Lau Siu gathered their tools together and prepared to leave, saying casually, 'We shall see you in two weeks.' I gazed at them in horror, and Vin said: 'Two weeks? That's a long time.'

'Yes, but it's difficult for us. People see us going into the jungle and it's hard to think of a reason for so many visits. We carry the bags of food out of Cheng Kam's house in the dark and hide them under bushes and leaves in the jungle, and then we go out just as it's getting light, saying we're going for wood, or rattans, which we always take back with us, but they are getting suspicious.'

By this time I had found my tongue. 'You can't do that!' I cried. 'How can we live for two weeks without seeing anybody? We shan't know what's happening to you and Cheng Kam. Supposing we're ill—what's to happen to us?'

They looked at me sadly and Vin said: 'Hush, Nin! They know whether it's safe or not.' But I would not be comforted; I forgot the risks they were running and thought only of myself. One week had seemed like a year, two weeks would be insupportable.

At last Wong Ng said, 'Perhaps we can come every ten days. We will try, and then we can see,' and with that I had to be content. I felt very ashamed of my outburst later. Our life in the jungle had started in earnest.

For a little while we were busy putting our house in order: we cut and timbered steps down to the stream and Vin built shelves in one corner of the house where we stored the

Photograph taken in 1959 at a party given by Constables to celebrate the publication of the book. From left to right: Richard Sadler of Constables, Nona Baker, Russell Braddon, Dorothy Thatcher and Robert Cross.
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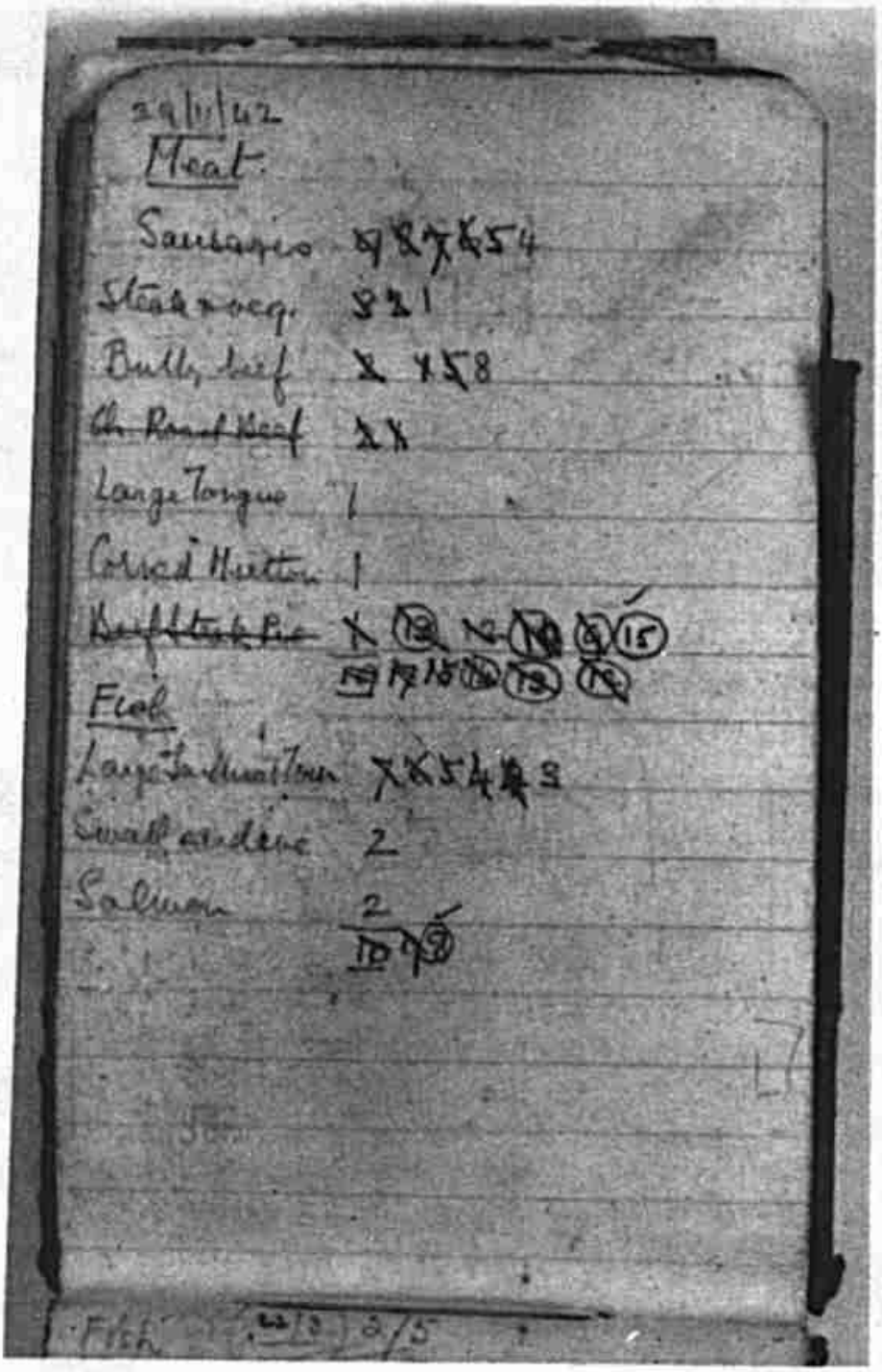
Vincent Baker (in happier times) with Cheng Kam who did so much for them in their first year (1942-3) when Nona and Vincent were alone in the jungle.
Ceng Kam is on the extreme right.



'We were very strong-minded about our stock of tinned food' (p. 49) and Nona kept a careful record of what remained.

paraffin for the primus stove, the bean or coco-nut oil for cooking and my kitchen utensils. Vin also made me spoons out of bamboo, and saucepans and frying pans, with rattan handles, out of tins. We were very strong-minded about our stock of tinned food, which we kept in a kitbag slung from the roof; we never knew when our valiant friends might be prevented from bringing us food and we therefore determined to keep the tins for an emergency, only dipping into them on special days like Christmas Day or birthdays or to celebrate the completion of our new house.

When we had done all that we could for our comfort, time began to hang heavily on our hands again, and our worst enemy was boredom. Each day spread out before us as an interminable space of time to be endured. We were often hungry, although as the months passed we became more sensible about our food and forced ourselves to eat masses of sweet potatoes simply to keep our strength up and to try not to lose any more weight. When we woke up in the morning we boiled up a large jorum of coffee, which grows in Malaya and could be obtained without difficulty by the old men; in the middle of the day we had a snack, either of little potato cakes which Mrs. Cheng Kam sent us or, if these were short, we made chips of sweet potatoes and fried them in oil. At night we made a stew of vegetables and carefully rationed pieces of the meat, or salt fish, which the men brought us. Sometimes they found us meat which had been dried in the sun, like biltong; this was very tough so that Vin, who had to rely on false teeth, was driven to cutting it up into shreds with a pair of nail scissors. He had already broken the plate once since we had been in the jungle and when Cheng Kam had taken it to the village to be mended the Chinese dentist had recognized that it was of European origin, so that Vin did not dare to risk breaking it again. After that, he kept his teeth in a tin box and only used them on special occasions.

We were almost entirely dependent on the supplies the old men brought us, as contrary to what is often thought, the jungle yields very little natural food. Vin knew that many jungle plants were poisonous and we did not dare to eat any except bamboo shoots; these are delicious, but as they are covered in fine hairs they have to be soaked for hours and then cooked several times to get rid of them. We could not clear an area to plant crops near our hut, because any change in the dense green pattern of the treetops would have been plainly visible from the air, and Japanese planes were often overhead. Moreover, the ground all round us sloped so steeply that without a major terracing feat it would have been impossible to prevent the plants being washed out by the heavy rains. It was also out of the question for Vin to use his Winchester to kill game in case the shot was heard and our hiding-place betrayed to the hundreds of villagers who had moved out of Sungei Lembing and cleared patches of jungle to grow vegetables; for the same reason my brother still refused to let me light a fire.

Although our new house was very inaccessible, owing to the various ridges which separated us from Cheng Kam's plantation, we were not more than two miles from it; if we had been any farther away the old men's task of supplying us would have been impossible. Their journey, which was not far as the crow flies, took them a long time because they were scrupulously careful not to cut any of the undergrowth or to leave a track that could be followed; heavily laden as they were, they had to travel slowly and carefully picking the easiest going by devious routes. Each time they visited us they had to be away for a whole morning, and a more prolonged absence would undoubtedly have aroused suspicion.

Having so little to do we counted the days to Wong Ng's and Lau Siu's visits, although they never came without bringing depressing news. I had insisted that we must keep

count of the date and, in addition to Vin's little notebook in which he recorded each day's weather and any event that occurred, Wong Ng had found us a calendar, on which we put a ring round the date of their next visit and crossed off each day as it went. The end of each week and, even more, the end of each month was a milestone to be looked forward to with pleasure; we found that the second half of the month went more quickly than the first, and a month with thirty-one days seemed at least a week longer than one with thirty.

Wong Ng and Lau Siu kept their promise to come every ten days and only once did they miscount and leave us for a day, a prey to the wildest misgivings as we imagined all the awful things that might have happened to them and to Cheng Kam.

Cheng Kam came less and less frequently and only appeared at night when he would sit and talk for an hour or more. He had never been an optimist but now he was particularly gloomy, one of his favourite remarks being, 'They're all starving in the Singapore prisons' and 'All the white women are being driven naked through the streets.' On one of these rare visits he announced that Churchill had resigned and Attlee taken over the Premiership, and we wondered what crisis had caused this upheaval. It was typical of the garbled versions of news which reached us, being a distortion of the fact that Churchill had gone off to meet Roosevelt in the Atlantic, leaving Attlee in charge.

Cheng Kam was never tired of warning us to remain hidden, giving us hair-raising reports of treachery by Indians and Malays, whom he suspected of hunting for us. Although we could not dismiss his warnings we both thought that he named, out of jealousy, several Malays who had worked closely with Vin in the surveying of the plantation; this was a natural enough reaction for a Chinese with so much national pride. He also told us that the Japanese were employing aborigines as trackers in the

jungle; this disturbed Vin, because he had used them himself as guides when he was prospecting soon after he came to Sungei Lembing and he had a great respect for their jungle craft.

'You know, Nin,' he said, 'they move so silently that one of them could get close to us and watch us without our knowing he was there. I don't like to think they are working for the Japanese, but they would do anything for anyone who would give them salt or a nice large empty tin.'

There are several primitive tribes in Malaya, and the small, almost black, curly-headed *Negritos* are the descendants of the aborigines of the peninsula, whose forebears are thought to be of the same root as the natives of Papua, New Guinea and Australia.

Cheng Kam's warnings, added to the black cloud of despair which hung over Vin, made him very unwilling to leave the hut and explore, while I fretted over our cloistered existence and longed for some real hard exercise. Every morning we did what physical jerks we could on our far from rigid floor, but this was a poor substitute for the tennis and walking that I had been accustomed to all my life.

Some relaxation of our close confinement was allowed us, however, when a month or two after we had moved to our fourth hut we became aware of the continuous plopping sound of fruit falling to the ground. It was difficult to decide from which direction it came, but when a strong odour of mangoes pervaded the air we set off like hounds to follow the scent, and found some distance away a colony of wild mango trees surrounded by a carpet of ripe and over-ripe fruit. We picked up as many as we could carry and returned in triumph to our home, eating as we went. The result was disastrous! The wild mango, though juicy and of excellent flavour, is very fibrous, and we both suffered from severe attacks of diarrhoea. We were determined not to forgo this addition to our meagre diet, so I scraped the

pulp away from the fibres and stewed it. This was satisfactory, and as we found other colonies of trees which fruited later, mangoes became one of our staple foods for some time. The old men had discovered a tin of custard powder and brought it to us in high glee, thinking they had really found something that white people would enjoy. We had not the heart to tell them that it was not much good without milk, and put it sadly in the back of the shelf which Vin had fixed up. With the arrival of the mango season I looked at the tin again and decided to experiment, and I found that a custard "mousse" made with water and flavoured with limes made a most palatable accompaniment to our stewed fruit.

The large tree to which our house was attached also bore a fruit which Lau Siu told us was called a *chempedak* and was very good to eat; however it grew at a great height and the tree was too vast to be climbed. Fortunately Vin found a solution to this problem: while we occupied the ground-floor flat, a family of grey monkeys, the *kera*, well known to visitors to the Singapore Botanical Gardens, lived on the floor above us. They were not really good neighbours, and from the screams that disturbed the peace of our jungle fastness we judged that the father of the family often beat his wife in a drunken frenzy. When we were wondering how to get hold of the fruit, which did not seem to drop until it was rotten, Vin said: 'I know what to do. If you do anything at a monkey long enough he'll do it back at you.' So, when the family was at home we went outside, and picking up sticks and stones we hurled them at the monkeys, accompanied by much abusive language. It worked! For a time the monkeys gibbered and snarled in fury at us; then, to our joy, one of them seized a fruit that was hanging close to him and flung it at us. It narrowly missed hitting me on the head, which was fortunate as it was about the size of a croquet ball and with its very hard shell would certainly

have knocked me out. It rolled down the steep slope on which our hut was built, with me in hot pursuit. When I had recovered it we set to work to crack the shell and discovered inside the most delicious, fragrant, peach-coloured pulp. Monkey-baiting became our favourite sport as long as any fruit remained on the tree. My marksmanship was poor, but Vin scored several bull's-eyes, which infuriated the monkeys but filled him with pride.

These activities helped to pass the time, but there were long hours when we would play draughts on our improvised board, study our *Jawi* newspaper, or just sit, with our feet dangling over the edge of the house, looking at the view and trying not to watch the time, when ten minutes seemed like an hour.

There were unforgettable moments for both of us during those months. One morning we awoke to find two mountain peacocks strutting outside our hut displaying their beauty in front of us as though we were a couple of desirable hens; once when we were accompanying Wong Ng and Lau Siu on part of their homeward journey, we caught a glimpse of a superb argus pheasant flitting through the ferns. On another occasion two herons postured and preened themselves in the evening sunlight on the banks of the stream; and it was seldom that I went for a wash in the early morning without seeing brilliant blue kingfishers with bright orange breasts flash past me. One afternoon when Vin and I were sitting in our usual position, surveying the scene outside, a family of *wak-waks* (gibbon apes), two adults and three small ones, came through the jungle on the other side of the stream. They stopped as they reached a point where there was too large a jump for the little ones to negotiate. After a moment's consideration, the father leapt across and standing on the other side he turned and held out his hands. Mother picked up the smallest ape and threw it over to him and he caught it by the hands just as a trapeze

artist catches his partner and placed it safely on the branch beside him. This operation was repeated with the other two children and then, with a courtly gesture, Father held out his hand to Mother, who jumped over to him; he lifted up an overhanging branch to let her pass, and the whole family proceeded on its journey.

I think that skunks alarmed Vin more than anything else, and if one came near the hut I was given strict instructions:

'Sit still and don't dare to move. If you annoy the thing, we'll have to move from here, lock, stock and barrel!'

Vin did not consider it wise for me to go down to the stream to wash up at dusk after our evening meal, so I would put our plates and cutlery into the billy-can and hang it outside the hut until morning. One evening as I was hanging it up I heard stealthy footsteps on the leaves and looking up I saw the hind legs of a tiger disappearing on tiptoe through the undergrowth. I was so surprised that I wasn't even frightened—only struck speechless. At last I let out a squeaky 'Oh!' Vin looked up sharply and said: 'What's the matter?'

'Well, it *was* a tiger, but he must have seen us first and was in such a hurry to get away that he's gone. I only saw his back legs.'

'Really, Nin, you are mean. I would have liked to see him too.'

I don't think he ever believed that I had not had a chance to call him in time.

There was relatively little game in the jungle around Sungei Lembing because thousands of animals had been drowned in the great flood in 1926 when the Kuantan and Pahang had inundated vast areas of the State, devastating towns and villages and wiping out some of the rarer species of wild animals. Yet the trees were alive with small animals and the grey squirrels (*tupai*) were a source of great amusement to us because of their antics.

We cursed ourselves for bringing no books with us; at Sungei Lembing we had possessed gorgeous books on the birds and trees of Malaya which we had never had time to study, and yet here we were, with all the time in the world and an unrivalled opportunity for observation which, because of my thoughtlessness, we were unable to use. Cheng Kam had made a midnight sortie to our house and had brought us two books, which we read over and over again: one was a light, amusing story of life in a small American town and the other was a deadly dull treatise on education in the Soviet Union. Both palled after repeated reading, but it was not safe for Cheng Kam to make a second expedition.

Vin was worse off than I was; I at least had the cooking to do, water to fetch and clothes to wash, but he belonged to a generation when men were not expected to do household chores and, in addition, he had lived for thirty years with Chinese servants to attend to his every want, so that it never occurred to him to do anything that did not require a man's strength. I loved waiting on him so much that I did not realize that I was really being selfish in not suggesting that he should do more. Being seventeen years older than I was, he had always treated me as his baby sister, and I still felt that I must fetch and carry for him. Thus I was able to forget the future and busy myself with my daily routine, while Vin, too much the victim of his temperament to live from day to day, worried endlessly; added to that he was fifty-four by then and had much less resistance than a younger person.

One day he burst out: 'What have I done to you, Nin? I never meant our life to come to this!' I could not let him think that I regretted our decision, and replied:

'But, my darling, you never made me do anything I did not want to. I chose to come with you and if I had said a word you would have given up the idea, so I'm just as much

to blame as you.' That seemed to satisfy him and we never referred to the matter again.

Nothing could ever stop me sleeping and no sooner had I spread our blankets, put up the mosquito net and laid my head on my knapsack than I was sound asleep until morning. Vin, on the other hand, would lie awake, worrying, among other things, about any unusual sounds he might hear during the night. He was always anxious too about Cheng Kam, and not without cause, as it was not only Vin and I that Cheng Kam was helping. From time to time Wong Ng would tell us about his heroic efforts to help the many victims of Japanese cruelty: he had become a Scarlet Pimpernel figure in the district and when anyone was in danger he arranged for them to vanish into the jungle to join the Chinese Communists who were using guerilla tactics against the Japanese. We heard a lot about these men who had been putting up a resistance to the invaders ever since Malaya was occupied by the enemy. Vin knew that all the Communist agitators who had been kept in prison in Singapore before the war were released by order of Whitehall when Russia came into the war on our side.

'This,' as Vin pointed out when he heard the news at the time, 'gives the Reds an ideal opportunity to organize cells of Communism throughout Malaya.'

Vin, who in the old days had had no reason to love the Communists, had no prejudice against them now; in fact he admired them for being the one group which was still putting up a resistance against the enemy. He used to question the old men closely about their activities.

'All the time they attack the Japanese and cut off heads and arms and legs and those of any traitors, too,' Wong Ng told us. 'A traitor must die slowly; that is why there are few traitors now. Many Communists are good men, they live deep in the jungle where Japanese fear to go; they take in people and feed them.' Vin asked if all the guerillas were

Communists, but Wong Ng shook his head and said that he thought most of them were followers for convenience and few were real Communists.

'It seems the war's doing the Reds a good turn,' Vin said to me after the old men had gone. 'They'll get such a foothold in the country we'll have one hell of a job getting shot of them after the war.'

'At least they're putting up a fight against the Japs.'

'I agree and I admire the beggars, but of course it suits them to do so; they're all under orders from Father Stalin. And probably the stories of their feats are exaggerated to justify what Cheng Kam said about the Chinese being such wonderful fighters.'

'Vin, what's going to happen to us? You know our money can't last for ever—in fact I reckon we shan't have any left in four months' time. We can't ask the Chinese to risk their lives and give them nothing in return, and anyway they won't be able to afford to buy us any food.' It was the first time we had talked about the future for several months.

'Either we'll have to shoot ourselves or join the Communists.'

'I know which I'd rather do!'

'I've no love for the Reds, but I'm certainly with you there.'

When Cheng Kam paid us his next visit Vin asked him why he did not arrange for us to join the Communists, but the little man shook his head disapprovingly:

'Those Communists are putting up a fight, yes, but, *Tuan Besar*, you don't know what's in their hearts.'

'What happens when our money runs out, Cheng Kam?'

'We will see, *Tuan Besar*, we will see,' the little man replied firmly and we said no more. Both Vin and I had become rather in awe of Cheng Kam by then, and it was not only because we owed our lives to him and were entirely dependent on him; during the last year he seemed to have

grown immensely in moral stature. Apart from taking on far greater responsibilities than he had ever borne before, he was proving himself to be an exceptionally heroic man.

On his next visit Cheng Kam confessed that his star was very dark, as the fortune-teller had revealed that he was shortly going to die, and fortune-tellers, as far as he was concerned, were never wrong.

'If I live until my birthday,' he told us, 'I'll kill a pig and you shall have a leg and all the liver and kidneys.' This was, of course, a tremendous offer.

As time passed and he still lived, he promised to kill a goose on his birthday. At long last his birthday came round and to our intense relief Cheng Kam was still alive—he arrived on the day bearing two pancakes. Vin and I had a good laugh about this, and in honour of the occasion we opened a precious tin of steak and kidney.

Another of Vin's worries was concerned with what we should do if our enemies found us. We planned to give as good an account of ourselves as we could until the ammunition ran out and then to use our last bullets on ourselves.

'But,' said Vin, 'could you shoot yourself? I don't think I could bring myself to kill you.' There followed a rather gruesome lesson on where to put the revolver to make quite sure that one's brains were blown out.

One chore that he insisted on sharing and supervising was the regular oiling and cleaning of the gun and revolver, which were always kept loaded; he wore the revolver during the day and slept with it under his pillow, while the gun was always at his side. Vin was a very good shot although he had never enjoyed shooting for the pot; he knew that I was incapable of hitting a house at a hundred yards, and tried to teach me as much about handling our weapons as was possible without actually firing a shot.

Apart from our fears of discovery circumstances soon compelled us to remain cooped up in the hut. I knocked

over the primus and upset a pan of boiling oil over my leg, burning it severely, so that walking was out of the question for weeks. All I could do was to apply compresses of cold tea, and when at length the burn had almost healed a large carbuncle came, close to the scar, which kept me inactive for several days more.

Soon after my leg healed, Vin, whose health had been steadily deteriorating since he had lost hope of returning to Lembing, went down with a bad bout of malaria, and the fever returned at intervals for some months. His shivering shook the hut from floor to roof until I wondered if the structure would hold together. I had to lie beside him trying to keep him warm while he raved in delirium about his boyhood, his wife and children, about the mine and the Communists. 'Don't let Stalin have the quinine,' he would shout. 'I need the stuff, it's my quinine. Stalin can't have it.'

The trouble was that we had no quinine, our medicine chest consisting only of a few M and B tablets. Fortunately the old men paid us one of their visits during this attack, and they hurried back to Cheng Kam to tell him how ill the *Tuan Besar* was. Cheng Kam, with his amazing resourcefulness, appeared two nights later with a small supply of quinine. He was much thinner but looking quite as dapper as he always had; added to the strain of dealing with the occupying army, his second wife was very ill.

'That is not altogether a bad thing,' he told us solemnly, 'because now I can look for medicine for the *Tuan Besar* as well and pretend it is all for my wife.'

Whenever we could get quinine, Vin's health would improve, but mentally he remained very low. I did my best to keep his spirits up, but while a few months ago he would have talked about archaeology or quoted from German literature, which he had always been fond of, now it was difficult to arouse his interest in anything. His long silences never bothered me, but I hated to see him sitting

with his head in his hands so depressed that he could not speak; cooped up in the hut with nothing to listen to but the steady fall of rain outside, I was often in no better spirits myself. We must have presented a gloomy little picture to the old men, whose smiling faces were always a tonic to us. Cheng Kam was very distressed to see the change in Vin and he redoubled his efforts to find extra food for us, although at the time, as we discovered months later, his second wife was dying of malnutrition.

One job which occupied us at this time was ridding ourselves of jungle rats; they had quickly discovered our store of sweet potatoes and played havoc with them, and, not content with that, they bit large holes in our mosquito net during the night. The rats completely dispelled our illusion that wild animals are frightened of artificial light. At the beginning of their invasion we still had a torch with a battery which worked, and when we heard them scampering round the house at night we switched on the torch and caught the marauders in its beam. Far from being dismayed, they ran towards the torch, raised themselves up on their hind legs and sniffed it with the utmost friendliness. This convinced us that the lantern which we had always kept burning at nights outside the hut as a safeguard served no useful purpose and was a waste of the paraffin which Wong Ng and Lau Siu had to carry with such care. The old men brought us an old trap and we proceeded to kill the whole family off one by one, ending up with the mother, who was in an advanced state of pregnancy when we caught her. I hate touching any dead animals, especially rats, and Vin always emptied the traps, but unfortunately by the time the pregnant female was trapped Vin was just emerging from a bad attack of fever, and I was forced to release it myself; after several hours gathering courage to face the task, I took the trap outside the hut, holding it at arm's length, and then made frantic efforts to release the corpse

with my eyes tight shut. I must have looked very ridiculous as Vin gave a shout of laughter from the hut, in spite of his weakness.

I was always glad of anything which tickled his old sense of the absurd. One night before we had finally got rid of the rats, we were sitting on the floor of the hut facing each other when we heard a tapping noise which sounded like Morse code. Ever since the Japanese had occupied Sungei Lembing we were always expecting trouble, and Vin immediately grasped his revolver and went outside the hut to investigate, but could find no sign of anyone. It was some time before we discovered that a rat had been rattling the tin in which Vin's false teeth were kept. This set me off into giggles and cheered Vin up tremendously: 'How lovely to hear you giggling like that, Nin! I haven't heard you laugh for ages.'

Another evening we were sitting on the floor when we heard a loud explosion from the kitbag. 'Oh, my God, there's our Christmas dinner gone west,' groaned Vin. And sure enough the large tin of steak-and-kidney pudding which we had been keeping especially for Christmas had burst.

'Come on, let's eat it, Vin; we can't waste it. If we die from poisoning, at least we shall have had a decent meal.'

It was a measure of the change that had come over Vin that he gave way without a murmur to doing what in the old days he would have regarded as one of my utterly irresponsible, impulsive suggestions. 'You're a terror! Go on, heat the blasted thing up,' was his only comment. Throughout the night when one or other of us was awake we called out: 'You all right?' We must have asked that question at least twenty times during the hours of darkness, and we were very relieved to wake up finally to hear the usual din of trumpeting and bellowing which heralded the dawn.

By the time Vin was getting over his malaria, the north-east monsoon had started again and it rained so frequently that everything was damp and the clothes that I had washed remained wringing wet. At last, one evening, Vin agreed that I might light a fire underneath the hut to try to dry everything. The wood was saturated and all I succeeded in doing was to create a tremendous smoke; suddenly I heard a furious voice beside me saying: 'Nin, in God's name what are you up to? I'm nigh choked in the hut.'

I was so surprised to see Vin on his feet again that I meekly stood aside and let him battle with the fire. He was no more successful than I, and we eventually decided that the damp was preferable to the smoke. As we climbed back into the hut, Vin said: 'Do you realize I'm better? I'm going to start doing things again.'

It did indeed appear that he had taken on a new lease of life, and to my joy he became much more cheerful and energetic. It was just as though his illness had helped him to come to terms at last with a life without hope, and from that moment he began to take more interest in things about him: and in doing more he began to escape from some of the worries that had been tormenting him. First, we set about repairing the roof, which was leaking badly; we wandered round the jungle looking for new supplies of *dahun palas*, because we had already used up all those near the hut.

Vin then decided that we could have a fire in the evenings, the time when no one was likely to be about; we were therefore able to cook enough then to last us until the next night, only using the primus to make coffee in the morning, or tea for Wong Ng and Lau Siu. This meant that the old men had to bring us much less paraffin.

We fitted a tin bottom into the spirit stove, belonging to the kettle in the picnic basket, so that it would hold tiny billets of wood, and made holes in its sides so that it became

an excellent brazier; the spanners out of the car tools made bars on which we could stand our saucepans. We stood the brazier on two biscuit tins, one inside the other and lagged with clay, which made a fine oven.

Vin was happy finding and chopping up the wood into small pieces, which he stored in a pile under the house, so that it would dry out; for fire-lighters we collected *damar*, a resinous gum from the bark of trees. Sword grasses were plaited into a curtain which we could put up over our view of the valley, guarding against the remote chance that someone would be out at night and see the glow of our fire.

Now, from dusk until about midnight, we were busy cooking, first our evening meal and then baking loaves in the oven for our lunch on the following day. The old men had brought me a bag of millet flour from which I made rolls leavened with fermented potatoes; the millet flour would not bind alone, but I found that a small amount of tapioca flour mixed with it made all the difference. I had to be careful not to overdo the tapioca, however, as too much of it produced a gluelike substance which it was impossible to break, bend or pull apart—an insult to the toothless and one which drew forth many acid comments from Vin.

Last thing at night we could boil a kettle on the embers of the fire and make a kind of cocoa from millet flour sweetened with coconut sugar; finding a piece of sugar in the bottom of our cup became known as a "little bit of luck". Those evenings were strangely happy ones: as we sat by the glowing fire the fragrant smell of burning wood would remind us of the Malay village at Sungei Lembing, and we would sit reminiscing about the pretty dark-eyed children we had seen so often playing in the dust or hurrying to school with their books neatly fastened together with a leather strap. Sometimes we would talk of those weddings

we had both attended where the bride and bridegroom, heavily scented with musk and dressed in all their finery, would sit silently on a dais indoors while outside the guests made merry round the gaudily lit trees, indulging in giggling comments about the time shortly to be spent in the marriage bed.

We were both heavy smokers and as long as we had rice paper we rolled our own cigarettes, using the local "shag" tobacco; if papers were not in stock, we smoked the tobacco in pipes—fortunately Vin had brought two into the jungle with him and he gave me the smaller one. The tobacco smelt like burning celluloid collars and tasted rather worse, but it rounded off a poor meal very satisfactorily, and as we both smoked the same tobacco neither could complain about the smell the other was making.

Even though Vin seemed more contented, I noticed that now he lived on memories. While in the early days he had talked of nothing but what he would do on our return to the mine, now he hardly ever spoke of the future and I could not help realizing how much he had changed in the ten months we had been in the jungle. There was no sign of the generous stomach and the robust self-assertive look he used to have, and though he proudly remarked that his figure was back to its youthful leanness he had become gaunt and emaciated. In one way I was so much luckier than he was because, in spite of everything, my original reason for coming to Malaya had not been interfered with: I had come to look after Vin and now he needed me more than ever. He, on the other hand, felt that he had lost everything.

One day we climbed the hill behind the hut and found ourselves on a ridge which to our excitement gave us a glimpse of one of the hills at Sungei Lembing. We looked with quickened heart-beats at this small bit of our lost home and imagined the familiar view of the river winding

along the valley like a silver snake, and the village clustered beside it. We were speechless for a moment as we stared; it seemed so near and yet was divided from us by so many worlds.

'Oh, Vin,' I said at last with tears streaming down my face, 'there's our Promised Land.'

'Don't say that! Don't say the Promised Land. Moses never got there.'

And it was then that I knew to what extent he had given up all hope of returning.

On Christmas Day, 1942, my watch stopped; it was the only one we had as Vin's was being repaired in Singapore when the invasion started. As mine had been getting more and more erratic for some time, we had been preparing for the final stop by learning where the sun would be at any given time. This enabled us later to keep a fair idea of the time of day, and this was made easier for us by the fact that in the Tropics the days are all the same length and there is only twenty minutes variation in the time of sunrise and sunset throughout the year.

The year 1942 turned into 1943 without any ugly incidents from outside disturbing our peace of mind, but although our fears of being discovered were receding a little, we felt our reliance on the three Chinese most keenly. Any ulterior motive they might have had in helping us had long ago lost its point, and although we paid the three men in Straits dollars both for their help and for anything they bought us, the money was an infinitesimal part of what we owed them. We paid Cheng Kam three hundred Straits dollars a month—a dollar being worth two shillings and fourpence—and Lau Siu and Wong Ng one hundred and fifty between them. It was a measure of the faith the people of Malaya had in the turn of the British that these Straits dollars issued by the Government kept a value throughout the war which was far in excess of the "banana" dollars

issued by the Japanese. We had taken about nine hundred pounds' worth of dollars into the jungle of which we had already used three-quarters, and we knew that sooner or later our supply of money would be exhausted.

However, our Robinson Crusoe existence continued undisturbed until the end of February, when the crisis arose which we had all been expecting sooner or later.

CHAPTER SIX

ON THE LAST day of February 1943, Lau Siu and Wong Ng came to see us late at night, and for the first time in over a year they brought no food with them. Their faces betrayed the distress they were feeling and, after the customary clicking of teeth and sighing heavily, they told us the bad news. One of the gardeners on the plantation had been gambling heavily and had lost all his savings; having failed to borrow any money from his friends, he had gone to Cheng Kam and told him that he knew that the *Tuan Besar* and *Missie* were somewhere in the jungle and that they were being helped by Lau Siu, Wong Ng and himself. He threatened to report the matter to the Japanese at once if Cheng Kam did not pay him a large sum in Straits dollars. Cheng Kam had treated him very brusquely, but he was none the less worried by the man's threats and he had sent a message to ask us if we were prepared to pay the sum to keep the man quiet. Vin and I knew perfectly well that if we paid the man the sum he was asking, it would take all the remaining dollars we had and there would be nothing left to pay for our food in the future.

'If that pig talks, we'll be killed, *Tuan Besar*,' wailed Lau Siu and Wong Ng in unison. 'It doesn't matter about us, because we are old, but you and *Missie* will die of starvation here.'

Vin did not hesitate for a moment, as whatever happened he was not going to risk the lives of our faithful friends any further. 'Tell Cheng Kam we'll join the *orang-bukit*.' This name, meaning the hill people, was the general term for the Chinese Communist guerillas.

The old men were obviously most relieved by our decision, although they would have abided by whatever we had wanted. It is hard to imagine more loyal friends than those two brave men.

While Lau Siu and Wong Ng returned to the plantation to tell Cheng Kam of our decision, Vin and I packed our belongings ready for an early start in the morning. In one way I was glad that we were moving: we had been twelve months in the fourth hut and any change would be a welcome one whatever lay in store for us, and I hoped that being in the company of other men, many of whom would probably be old miners who loved him, would cheer Vin up and restore his old zest for life. At the same time we were both sad at the thought of leaving the hut which had been our home for a year; there is always a reluctance to pull up one's roots on the night before one is about to leave a place. In the morning we stood on the hill above our hut and looked across the valley, watching for the last time the sun's rays touch the thick mat of treetops on the other side.

'I've grown quite fond of our prison here, even though we've been half starved and I've been ill and miserable most of the time. Tomorrow we shall lose what little freedom we had.'

'It will be sad not to be able to wander off into the jungle when we want.'

'There'll be no wandering anywhere once Father Joe takes charge of our bodies and souls.'

'It won't be too bad, darling. Most of the people we'll be with will be good friends from the mine, don't you think?

From what Wong Ng told me there's only a handful of real Communists running the camps; the rest are there hiding from the Japs.'

'I don't know.' Vin looked so old and frail that I put my arm through his and said:

'Anyway, whatever happens, we've got each other.' And as I said it I thought how close I had grown to Vin since we had been in the jungle. We had always been devoted, of course, but somehow his age and temperament and his heavy responsibilities had kept us a little apart; and added to that I had always since childhood put him on a pedestal so that half the time I had probably loved an image which wasn't the real Vin at all. I have already mentioned how he had insisted from the very first moment of my arrival in Malaya that I must lead my own life and be independent of him. I can remember him saying almost before we had reached the house the day we arrived from Singapore:

'What you do in the evenings is your own affair, but don't expect me to amuse you. You must lead your own life here.' It was typical of his brusque manner which hid a very kind heart, but it meant that it was hard to get to know him and I don't think that anyone did really know him in those days.

In recent months that picture had entirely changed: now our circumstances were identical and Vin had no heavy responsibilities which made unending demands on him; and, more than that, he had lost a role, the one of paternal monarch of Sungei Lembing, which had kept him in a strained, frantic rhythm of living. And now through sickness and the loss of all he believed in, Vin had come to rely on me, and the bonds between us grew increasingly stronger. It was the moment in my life when I had the clearest vision of what I was living for; I wanted to look after Vin more than anything else in the world.

Lau Siu and Wong Ng arrived early, accompanied by a

loyal friend, to help with our luggage, which was surprisingly large; we had by now an enormous collection of cooking utensils and, ironically enough considering all the pangs of hunger we had suffered, we still had a large bag full of tinned food.

In the past year and a half Vin and I had not often wandered far from our huts; cut off from the sun and with a complete absence of landmarks, it was very easy for us to lose our way, as we had to be careful not to make any paths which led back to the huts we had lived in. Added to that, there was always the danger that we might meet someone on a walk who would betray us. So we both found our two-hour trek to the Communist camp invigorating; we had to pass very close to the plantation during our journey and the two old men went as close to tiptoeing as it was possible as we crossed the stream not far from the gardens; they mopped their brows and sighed with relief when we reached the dense jungle again. It made us sad to think that although we were passing close to Cheng Kam's house, we could not say good-bye and thank him for all he had done for us. We both felt that we would probably never see him again.

As I brushed past green-fingered parasites that left damp lines down my face, I found myself looking forward to meeting the *orang-bukit*; there would be many of our friends taking refuge with them and we would also be able to work and earn our keep. Neither of us dreamt that the Communists were counting on raising large sums of money in Sungei Lembing simply by telling the people that the *Tuan Besar* and *Missie* had joined them in the jungle.

We were able to move at a reasonable pace for jungle travel, as there was a clear path to follow, but I was careful to avoid touching the arms of bushes which dropped over the path; I knew from bitter experience that a gorgeous lush wild banana leaf was the likely platform for dozens of

leeches waiting to spring on the unwary, while a harmless-looking branch of green twigs hid a row of thorns which tore at your flesh and clothing like bared fangs. Quite suddenly we came upon a sentry clad only in brief shorts, who pushed his gun roughly into Wong Ng's stomach until we called the password. We found ourselves in a small clearing with two or three huts which the Communists used as an outer-ring camp for men out on patrol from headquarters. We were pleasantly surprised to receive a warm welcome from the forty or so Chinese working in the clearing who rushed to greet us; many of the men had been miners at Sungei Lembing and were delighted to see Vin again, one of whom, called Reg Lawther, spoke good English, being the son of an Australian miner and a Chinese woman, and we heard our first coherent account from him of what had happened since the fall of Singapore. It was just as well for our peace of mind while we were in our jungle hide-outs that we had not realized the immensity of the defeat inflicted on us by the Japanese; we heard with horror how the Japs now ruled from China to the Indian frontier and right down to the Australian approaches.

The camp leader was called Lao Liu—all leading members of the Malayan Communist Party prefixed their names with Lao, which means "old and to be respected"—and as he came forward to greet us Vin looked hard at him, certain that he recognized his face. The Chinese evidently knew my brother, too, and later confessed that he was the Communist agitator whom Vin had caught years ago on the village green at Sungei Lembing; and when my brother teased him about his lack of success in recruiting new members Lao Liu enjoyed the joke as much as we did. He could afford to laugh now with volunteers rolling into the camp daily. He was optimistic about the war, agreeing that it might take a long time but in the end the Russians were bound to eliminate the Germans, while the Japanese would be

massacred to a man by a united Communist uprising in the Far East.

'The Soviet Union is the strongest force in all the world and Father Stalin is the greatest leader,' Lao Liu added solemnly. We soon got used to the Communist leaders making ponderous statements about Russia, but at first it was a little hard not to giggle, as the Chinese are normally such smiling, light-hearted people. Lao Liu never made any mention of the British contribution to future successes, and the only news we heard about Britain was of defeats on every side, so that Vin and I had to listen to the eulogies on Russia in silence; Vin was often very depressed by them, while I felt angry pride for my country boiling up inside me.

After a great deal of talking and a meal of fish and tapioca, the time came for the old men to say good-bye and return to the plantation; it was a very painful moment for us. We'd grown extremely fond of them and, after all, we owed them our lives a hundred times over; Vin tried to press on them what money we had left, but they absolutely refused to take it.

'*Tuan Besar* and *Missie* will need the money,' they said in chorus, 'and have we not been paid for the work we've done which we would gladly have done for love,' they added.

'We will meet again,' they called back many times, turning to gaze wistfully at us as we watched them cross the clearing and take the trail into the dark jungle again.

'A happy and peaceful sojourn, *Tuan Besar* and *Missie*; we will meet again,' their voices died away, and I burst into tears, while Vin turned away so that I should not see his face. Before they left the camp, we had heard them imploring Lao Liu to take the greatest care of us, in return for which our faithful friends promised to serve the Communists as "outside contacts".

Our friends had gone, and with them it seemed that the last link with our old life at Sungei Lembing had vanished. We had lost the last vestiges of our authority and Vin and I were simply camp followers at the mercy of the leaders; it was not long after we joined the guerillas that Vin asked them to stop calling him by a title which now had only ironic significance, and we were given the names "Pai Kher" and "Pai Naa", which as far as they had any meaning were the Indomitable One and White Nona. Gone too was our privacy: Vin and I were allotted places on a long platform which seemed more crowded than a London Underground station during the rush hour. Although everyone had made us welcome, Vin looked so utterly depressed and worn that night that I lay awake, listening to the twenty or thirty different snores around me, worrying about him; although he had made a great effort to be more cheerful during the last few months, I knew quite well that black despair was only waiting until he was weaker to get the better of him.

In the morning we were woken up by a bugle and took part in communal bathing. As I was the only woman in the camp, no special arrangements were made for me, and I grew quite accustomed to attending to all my needs in full view of the others; but as no one took the slightest notice of me, I had little reason to feel embarrassed. Furthermore, after sixteen months in the jungle I had lost all my curves and looked very much like a boy with my short hair. Later, when we were in the main Communist camp, it became a game for newcomers to the camp to guess from my back view whether I was a boy or girl—they invariably guessed wrong. In view of the communal life I had to lead, I was also very fortunate in that the menstrual cycle ceased to work during my years in the jungle.

After breakfast we learnt from Lao Liu that we were to be moved to his headquarters at Sungei Nyik, about four

hours' march away, as it was considered that we would be safer there; he had no wish to stay long at the outpost, which was not very far from the plantation where the Japanese were in the habit of paying surprise visits. I dreaded the march for Vin's sake who was in a very weak state, but we had no choice but to obey when the escort of soldiers arrived to take us back with them. Our journey lay across the crest of the hills surrounding the Sungei Lembing valley, which entailed either stiff climbing or hazardous descents, and I was glad that Vin and I did not have to carry any of our luggage; we walked in the middle of the line of soldiers, who set a hard pace and made little allowance for the two emaciated Europeans. They stopped at one point which I imagined was to give us a rest, but looking down I saw that we had a perfect view of the mine and village from there. The big house on the hill stood out quite clearly in the brilliant sunshine and the Rising Sun fluttered from our flagpole on the roof. I felt like scrambling down the hillside and tearing the flag off the pole with my own hands, but all I could do was curse at the Japs and weep. Vin walked on without a word; he could not bear to look at the silent valley and the dead mine. One of the soldiers touched my arm and said: 'Don't cry, *Missie*, it is no use now, you will only make your inside sick. One day we will get that house back for the *Tuan Besar*.' They were kind words, which his more orthodox leaders would hardly have approved.

Towards the end of the journey, we had to cross a wide stream which had no bridge except a tree trunk carpeted in moss and lichen. The State of Pahang is full of rivers and tributaries, and the Public Works had only been able to build bridges where heavy traffic made them essential; elsewhere travellers had to rely on flimsy bamboo "seesaws" or tree trunks, which Vin had always been an expert at crossing. He would run across them without turning a hair at some of the perilous drops below, and would always

tease me for my very cautious treatment of them, often returning to give me a helping hand.

On this occasion Vin turned to me and said pathetically: 'I can't go over that, Nin; it's no use, I simply can't.' My heart sank, because the trunk was far too slippery to try to help someone across, and short of carrying him, which was obviously impossible, I could not see what I could do; part of our guard had already crossed it at the double.

'Vin, darling, you must try, you're holding up the troops. You mustn't let them see that you can't do it. It doesn't matter if you fall in, the escort will fish you out.' I said this praying that such an ignominious thing would not happen. If I fell in, it would not matter because I was only a woman, but for a *Tuan Besar* to do so would be too humiliating. Vin nodded his head and went across on his hands and knees; this was an agonizing sight for me, as it brought home, more than any other signs I had seen before, how much fever and the loss of his position at the mine and all it meant to him had destroyed his self-confidence. He had lost faith in himself. And as I slipped and slid in the jungle mud and inhaled the sour smell of rotting leaves lying feet deep on the jungle floor, I was more than ever determined to keep Vin alive and restore him to his old vigour. Whatever happened I was not to give the Communists a chance to belittle and despise my brother who had done so much for the people in the valley. Keeping my eyes fixed on this object helped me to ignore the past and the future; and whenever I felt depression descending on me I used to try humming a favourite piece of music and found its influence very soothing.

We arrived at Lao Liu's main camp covered from head to foot in mud; it is one of the least pleasant features of the jungle that owing to the dense foliage and the constant heavy rains the ground seldom dries up. We met the first women in this camp we had seen since we left Sungei

Lembing; one of them, Ah Lan, was instructed by the commandant to give us special dishes to restore our strength and messengers were sent to nearby villages to beg for eggs and poultry, so that our camp ration of tapioca and vegetables was soon supplemented by delicious pieces of duck and chicken. And certainly our health did start improving with the help of this good food.

Later we were measured for new shirts, which were made by the two camp tailors, who spent hours working at treadle machines, which were among the first things to be set up in any new camp. Our strong khaki drill shorts were standing up well to the strain of jungle life, but our shirts showed distinct signs of wear. I was eventually supplied with a bright green silk blouse to wear at Sunday evening concerts and special harangues given by the commandant. We were both given khaki drill caps, adorned with three stars indicating the major races in the peninsula, Malays, Chinese and Indians from which the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army were to be drawn, although in fact for over a year we never saw a guerilla who was not Chinese. To protect our feet, we were issued with shoes made from smoked rubber sheets, which were so hot and heavy that they were reserved for treks; for using in the camps we had *terompaks* (wood sandals) which often split so that we spent much of the time walking about barefoot, a dangerous habit as hookworm is caught through the soles of the feet.

Lao Liu sent out regular parties of men to hunt game, as meat for the pot was almost as important as Japanese heads, and infinitely more difficult to come by. Wild boar was the only animal which was quite plentiful, but they were not easy to track down when there was always a danger that the hunters might run into an enemy patrol. To ease the food problem, the Communist leaders had ordered large clearings to be made, often of two hundred acres, for vegetable-growing and the rearing of pigs, and by 1944

the guerillas had seven large plantations of this kind dotted about the jungle, but, in spite of this, feeding the ever-increasing number of refugees and soldiers became an acute problem. There was not an animal or reptile that did not find its way into the pot. Lizards have a delicate flavour and their unhatched eggs are delicious; young crocodiles are not unpleasant, and when chopped into small bits they could pass for snails; python tastes like chicken providing it is skinned alive and eaten fresh. Apart from boar the favourite game animals were deer of all kinds, and on one occasion the hunters killed a tapir, a rare creature, which like its distant cousin, the horse, was quite good to eat. Elephants are very tasty and proved a great standby while we were in the jungle; owing to their vast size they had to be dismembered where they were shot and messengers were sent to all the neighbouring camps and plantations, carrying great joints on their shoulders which drenched them with blood, so that nothing should be wasted. The flesh is coarse but every bit of it is edible and sweet; the skin is quite eatable if cut in small cubes and boiled in oil for three days, but the chunky part of the trunk and the tops of the feet are considered to be the choicest cuts. Tiger meat tastes very much like beef, while a wild buffalo which only rarely crossed the path of our hunters is so good, tasting like the best Scots beef, that a general holiday was called. The offal of any beast is always eaten first, because the hot, sultry weather turns everything rotten in a short time.

The Chinese method of cooking made most food palatable, but one could not afford to be squeamish; we ate a great many monkeys, and I for one had to try to forget that they looked like babies as they were dropped into the pots of boiling water; monkeys' brains were thought to bestow wisdom if eaten while warm with life, and members of the Commissaire not surprisingly reserved the right to crack open the skulls and swallow the contents with the aid of

chopsticks; this they did with revolting gusto and relish. This was one of the rare occasions that the leaders, in the early days of our stay in the jungle with them, asked for anything more than the rank and file were given; when, however, a bear was shot, the Commander did insist that he be served with its genitals, as it is believed by the Chinese that such organs confer immortality on the consumer.

One day a patrol came in and shortly afterwards we were given a delicious extra meal of stew made from some animal they brought with them. While we were digesting this unexpected treat Vin said: 'I hear they've got a dog to eat; the Chinese think dog flesh is a great delicacy—could you eat it?'

With sad memories of Brandy and Brutus I replied: 'Oh no! not possibly; when are they going to cook it?'

'I think for tomorrow's breakfast.'

'Then I shan't eat it.'

'I don't think I could either.'

Sure enough at breakfast there were some square chunks of rather dry-looking meat which Vin and I pushed distastefully aside, while we ate up our sweet potatoes, feeling slightly sick.

Seeing that we had left the delectable morsels, Ah Lan, who took a motherly interest in us, said: 'Aren't you hungry?' We replied that white people didn't like eating dog. Whereupon she burst out laughing and said: 'But you ate dog last night! This is shark's flesh dried in the sun; it's good for you.' After that we gave up worrying what we ate.

Life at Lao Liu's camp was not rigidly disciplined, but certain activities had to be performed: the hammer and sickle was run up the flagpole each morning at dawn, and we all had to salute it and chant to it, after bathing and drill, but before we sat down to breakfast. Vin and I were told that we need not do drill with the others, but as this was our

only means of exercise we joined in with the others when we felt strong enough. I personally found the running and jumping about very refreshing in the cool of the early morning after a night spent on a wooden platform shared with twenty Chinese!

Lao Liu was an ardent Communist, and when he was not out on patrol he lectured us on Marxism and on the wonderful place Malaya would be when he and his comrades took over the administration. Russia was a workers' paradise, and in England, he assured us, child labour was still used and ten-year-olds were forced to go down the pits. Although those who had not been indoctrinated would listen to Vin and me when we told them that conditions were not really as Lao Liu described, it was quite useless trying to tell a Communist that; however preposterous, the Communist propaganda was swallowed whole by the comrades. It was the Law, the Truth and Holy Gospel to them. Vin and I would sometimes try to convince Lao Liu, who was an intelligent man, that he was wrong about conditions in England.

'All women have a vote when they are twenty-one,' I told him once.

'You have a vote, yes, because you are rich, but the poor haven't.' It was impossible to convince him.

At the end of these regular harangues, we were told that our jungle hospitality was provided so that we could all fight the enemy; for the present we were no more than members of the People's Anti-Jap Army, but the time would come, at the end of the war with the Japanese, when all the camp followers would be expected to take Communism as their creed.

Since the Communists began to set up their camps after the invasion of Malaya, they had tried to adopt Mandarin in the face of dozens of Chinese dialects as the common one, cutting out all the others like Hokkien, Hainanese, Cantonese

and so on. There were very few Malay-speaking Chinese in the camps so Vin and I decided that we must try to master enough Mandarin to make ourselves understood, and this gave us something to occupy our minds with, but it was difficult, as few of the Chinese spoke it well themselves. Our studies were soon interrupted by the arrival of six men from the Communist headquarters near Sungei Riau, a dense jungle area near Batu Sawah; the most important figures in this party were Lao Chuang, the Political Commissar, and Lao Lee, Commander of the Armed Forces. Lao Chuang was a Hokkien Chinese and although he was very short-sighted and peered at one through thick pebble lenses, it was soon evident that he missed nothing: we came to know him as the "spider", as all threads led back to him. Although he seemed to be well disposed towards Vin and me when we were presented to him, I found his silence unnerving. Lao Lee was a Hainanese and completely different in temperament to his comrade; during the evenings they spent in the camp, Lao Lee never stopped talking, boasting about the great deeds he and his men had done, most of which had to be divided by three or four, while Lao Chuang sat silent. I soon found Lao Lee a most attractive person because he was always laughing; the slightest thing set him off giggling, and although he was a fanatical Communist I had only to catch his eye during a solemn lecture by another leader and he would start smiling and winking. In his attitude to the party I suspect that he was quite typical of the soldiers in the Communist movement, who were happy to leave the indoctrination of the rank and file to the political leaders, while they were given a free hand in the fighting. We were soon to realize how valuable this man's friendship was to us and how dangerous life could be once his influence was removed. It was easy to forget while we were close to a man like Lao Lee, who was friendly to us, that we were in the power of the

Communists, who could be utterly ruthless when they wanted; and even as far as Lao Lee was concerned Vin did not let me forget Cheng Kam's words of warning: 'With a Communist you never know what is in their hearts.'

The purpose of this grand visit was to arrange for our removal to headquarters, as the two leaders feared that news of our presence would leak out and the Japanese would attack Sungei Nyik in the hope of capturing Vin. The enemy made frequent raids on the guerillas, but generally they used only Indian troops, who fought very half-heartedly and were easily driven off. One reason for this was thought to be that the Japanese themselves hated and feared the Malayan jungle, but it is more likely that they had so few troops holding Malaya at the time, they could not afford to send many of them to raid the camps. There was, however, always the fear that the enemy might bring up some of their crack troops, against whom the Communists would have scant hope of success. The headquarters at Sungei Riau had never been discovered by the Japanese and the two leaders considered that we would be quite safe there. Furthermore, Lao Lee told us that we could be useful to them, a fact which pleased us both enormously after months of inactivity; I knew how vital it was for Vin to regain his old self-confidence by doing something worthy of his abilities.

Safety measures for our journey to headquarters were checked and counter-checked as the Chinese put up a pretence of great efficiency; in fact, the soldiers made such a noise in the camp that Vin and I were both grateful that we were a good way from the nearest Japanese garrison. As we left the camp, our departure was marked by the shouting of a Chinese farewell song which rang through the jungle. There were twenty of us, including Reg

Lawther, Ah Lan and her two children; the escort were armed to the teeth, and their armament included tommy-guns and one Bren. Lao Lee himself proudly carried Vin's Winchester repeater and revolver, which were new toys to him. The first day took us over thickly wooded hills, and we brushed past huge fern fronds laden with water and tried to avoid the savage clutch of a palm appropriately known as *nanti-dahulu* (Stay-a-While), which hangs over one's path with a long feathery arm, at the end of which is a hook-like thorn; this buries itself into your nose or ear and can only be escaped from by going back on your tracks. We followed rough dried-up river beds, and then after five hours of climbing up and down hills we reached a small-holding at Sungei Niloi, owned by a Chinese who helped guerillas in any way he could. His home was so inaccessible that he had never seen a sign of the Japanese and was able to be quite self-supporting with his pigs, chickens, rice and vegetable garden, selling off the surplus to the Communists. I ought to mention here that in all my time with the Communists I never knew them not pay for the food and lodging which they received from the poor.

We were all made very welcome, and an enormous meal was set before us which lay very uneasily in my shrunken stomach. The smallholder could give us very little news of what was happening in the outside world, but he listened avidly to Lao Lee's tall stories of what his soldiers had done to the Japanese. It was quite true that the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army had already killed a large number of Japanese soldiers; and all over the country leaflets were circulated and posters fixed which read that the Japanese prayed for the happiness of their new subjects but would not tolerate any resistance: Communists in the jungle would be liquidated to the last man, and this included anyone who helped them. At least one Communist stronghold had been

wiped out in this way and already thousands of innocent people suspected of helping the guerillas had been herded into concentration camps or shot.

I had a restless night in the hut which was not only due to indigestion but to a feeling of claustrophobia—after fifteen months living in a hut without walls I could not stand being cooped up in the best cupboard bed which was allotted to Vin and me as a great honour; only the fear of being discourteous and of being stung by fever-carrying mosquitoes prevented me from moving into the garden. The march following our rest was even more strenuous, being made more trying by a thunderstorm which had turned the paths into rivers of red mud. From time to time I looked anxiously at Vin, who fortunately kept going in spite of feeling utterly exhausted.

Lao Lee confirmed my good impression of him by going out of his way to be considerate to Vin on the trek, calling a halt whenever he could.

We were cold and miserable from rain and wading through a river when we reached our next lodging, the home of some woodcutters who had supplied the mine with fuel in the old days; although the branch line of the Sungei Lembing railway came out to their settlement, they had not yet been visited by the Japanese so that they were able to greet us without fear of surprise. Vin and I were given a very warm welcome and nothing was too good for the *Tuan Besar* and *Missie*; we were fed and fêted after being dried in front of a sweet-smelling wood fire. Vin was touched by their pleasure at seeing him, but I noticed how much less sure he was of himself even with these simple people: he seemed almost shy with them. Although the workers were outwardly gay and saying that it would not be long before the British returned, we knew that they were very frightened about the future, and it was not long

after our call there that the Japanese arrived and took control of their settlement.

We continued our journey to Riau through the night as it was essential for us to cross the River Kuantan at Pasir Kemudi before dawn, using a temporary bridge built by the Japanese to replace the one which Tyson had blown up. This was my first experience of walking in deep forest in pitch darkness and I found it most unnerving. The leaders of our party knew the way blindfolded and carried small flickering torches, lit by pieces of rubber tucked in a palm leaf, to help those following behind. Those of us who were at the end of the crocodile were plunged in complete darkness and we had to guide ourselves by holding the shoulders of the person in front. As I gripped Vin I could feel how tense he was with strain and fatigue. When the jungle gave way to symmetrical rows of rubber trees, word was passed down that the Japanese often had strong patrols in this area, and we crept forward, pausing at each step, listening intently. It brought back memories of a game of "bears" we used to play as children at Dunstable in the passages and cupboards. And I had the same prickly feeling as I had had then, expecting a bear in the shape of a Japanese soldier to leap out of the darkness at me. As our eyes grew accustomed to the intense blackness, we could just make out the inky blue of the sky which would normally have filled me with joy after months living under an umbrella of trees, but instead made me feel naked and defenceless.

Our luck held and we met no enemy patrols so that by sunrise we were safely in the jungle on the other side of the river. We went on up to our knees in slime until Vin collapsed on to a fallen tree and said he could go no farther; the others were determined to go on and I had to bully Vin to his feet and force him to follow the escort. We were covered in mud from head to foot when we reached headquarters and I was in no mood to appreciate the antics

of the reception committee that kept us standing on the parade ground while they ran through their repertoire of songs of welcome; from some hidden reserve Vin had found the strength to follow the troops into the camp at the jogtrot which they always adopted at the end of a journey.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SUNGEI RIAU headquarters was a very ambitious place compared with the two earlier camps we had been in. The parade ground in the middle was nearly one hundred yards long and Vin and I were able to look up with relief at the blue sky which we had not seen properly for a year and a half; not much sun penetrated the clearing, however, as the Communists had made it as narrow as possible, allowing the branches of the huge trees to hang over the huts, so that the camp should be inconspicuous from the air.

The office block stood at one end of the parade ground, and was well equipped with a typewriter, a duplicating machine and stocks of stencils, ink and paper, all of which had been conveniently yielded up by the empty rubber estates and offices of the mine. In this hut the general administration of all the Pahang camps was carried out: continuous raids on the Japanese were planned and streams of leaflets, printed in Chinese characters which are fortunately the same for all the dialects, were rolled off for distribution in Kuantan and elsewhere, proclaiming the successes of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army. Messengers, dressed in freshly laundered and pressed clothes so that they should pass unnoticed in the villages, took bundles of these leaflets away by night for distribution,

returning eventually with much needed food supplies. These men contacted the large invisible army of those who sympathised with the guerillas, called the *Min Yuen*, who collected food, arranged for victims of Japanese cruelty to escape into the jungle and gave exact information to the guerillas about enemy troop movements and impending attacks: it was almost impossible for the Japanese to plan any action without the *Min Yuen* hearing of it.

In spite of this network of spies working for them, the Communists took no chances; all approaches to the camp were constantly guarded by sentries who controlled a series of devastating anti-personnel bombs. These were placed near the guard posts and each had a Heath Robinson gantry over them, and at the first sign of an intruder the sentry would tweak a rattan connected to the gantry and release a stone which fell on the bomb and exploded it. Many people, both friend and foe, were blown to bits in this manner, much to the amusement of most of the camp except for those detailed to collect the pieces. After all, argued the leaders, anyone with a right of entry should know where the booby traps are. Vin and I made very certain that we did know their exact whereabouts, but even so I nearly joined the intruders in the next world from sheer forgetfulness. I was crossing a line of logs laid over a swampy piece of ground near a sentry, when I lost my balance and was about to clutch at a convenient rattan just above my head, when the soldier gave a yell and I let myself fall into the black smelly mud instead.

The dormitory huts lined one side of the parade ground, providing accommodation for two hundred garrison troops, domestic staff and all the others who had sought sanctuary in the camp; many of the soldiers were constantly out on raids during this time. Opposite the sleeping quarters stood an enormous communal hut which was used for lectures, entertainments and as a canteen. It was furnished with

My Membership Card of the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese People's Army, Old Comrade's Association

Vin and Brandy

Myself and Major Chapman of Force 136 at Kuantan, September 1945

rough tables and benches. Vin and I still had our battered picnic basket with us and we used our own spoons for feeding, but everyone else carried his feeding bowl and chopsticks wherever he went. The camp kitchen with its huge clay fireplaces and cast-iron cooking pots opened off the communal hall and backed on to the river. This allowed the refuse to be disposed of quickly and easily, so that the place could be kept reasonably clean and free from disease. The smell of cooking attracted every shape and size of animal and insect: cockroaches as long as my little finger invaded the kitchen and sleeping huts in determined bands, while rats made merry at night among the stores and sometimes one would feel them running over one's bed in the night; hairy legged spiders stared at us from dark corners, while yellow striped hornets and enormous bluebottles buzzed unceasingly around our heads; bats flew into our huts at dusk and hung upside down from the rafters, crunching the bones of small birds. Mosquitoes were active at all hours of the day and night, while swarms of large winged ants besieged our lamps at night-time. Apart from these pests which were no more than severe irritations, we had to keep a sharp look-out for snakes, scorpions and centipedes.

There were four cooks and several assistants in the kitchen, while five women supervised by Ah Lan were detailed to prepare food for the sick, nurse the bedridden and mend the soldiers' clothing. The Chinese were always so neat and clean that I wondered how they made their clothes look as if they had been ironed when I knew no iron existed in the camp.

'Why, Pai Naa, it's easy; after you've washed your clothes you fold them very carefully and put them in your knapsack. Then when you use the knapsack as a pillow the heat and weight of your head act instead of an iron.'

I tried this with Vin's and my clothes and found it true

so that I soon felt less ashamed of the Baker turnout. I worried because Vin, who had always been so scrupulously particular about his appearance, was becoming rather careless about it: I kept bullying him about this as I could not bear the thought of the Chinese despising the British for lack of cleanliness. All traces of Vin's old independence seemed to be vanishing in those days and he began to rely on me for everything. Often he would say nothing for hours on end and I knew that his terrible bouts of depression had returned with renewed vigour, but I could never get him to talk about them. Any hopes I had entertained about the activities of the camp cheering him up had begun to fade because the Communist leaders seemed deliberately to prevent Vin from occupying himself usefully around the camp. Friendly though Lao Lee and Lao Chuang showed themselves to be, they were first and foremost Communists and they had no intention of running the risk of Vin re-establishing his influence over their followers in the camp, most of whom were no more Communists than we were. Kindly but firmly, they kept Vin idle and this depressed him so much that he began to slip back into the state of mind he had been in after the fall of Singapore. The only use they made of Vin's abilities was getting him to make maps of the area showing all the paths and tracks that he knew, and Lao Lee was delighted with his neat creations, although he was quite unable to read a map himself. This kept Vin happily employed for a time, but inevitably that job came to an end.

Sometimes in the evenings Vin would feel like talking but he never discussed the future now, only the past: he would reminisce about his childhood.

'Was it true,' I asked him once, laughingly, 'that you made Katharine eat a cardboard box?'

And for a moment Vin's old sense of fun returned.

'Yes, I'm afraid I did. I bullied her unmercifully, but she

was such a tiny little thing and would always do what I told her, and she dissolved into tears so easily. She was a sitting target for my brutality—but I can't remember now why I made her eat the cardboard box!'

He told me a lot about his young days. He had always been a lonely person; the next boy in the family was four years younger than he was and though my second sister Marjorie was a tomboy and would try anything if dared to do it, he missed the companionship which meant so much to my two youngest brothers who were closer in age. Vin was devoted to my mother and to her sister, with whom he spent much time owing to the successive arrivals of younger Bakers, but he often spoke of his regret that he and his father had never really understood each other. Vin envied the close friendship that had grown up in later years between Daddy and me. 'You and he were so happy together, I wish I had known him better.'

Vin was the only member of the family who proved too much for Miss Whitworth to manage. That usually mild woman told my mother, 'Either Vincent goes to school or I shall have to leave.' Vin went to school! First he went to Salisbury and then to Haileybury. Although he had enjoyed Haileybury it was his schooldays in Salisbury that he talked about most.

'On the way back from the playing fields there was a little shop, kept by an old woman, which used to sell lardy cakes. Oh Lord! they were good and we used to stop and fill ourselves up after games. If ever we get home we'll go and see if it's still there.'

His days in Camborne were the happiest of his youth, when in his spare time he and his friends clambered all over the North Cliffs, explored old smugglers' caves and passages, and amassed a really wonderful collection of sea-birds' eggs.

'I remember once,' he said, 'climbing up a cliff that was supposed to be unscaleable and when I looked over the

top, there was a party of the belles of Camborne undressing ready to bathe. They thought they were safe from that side and they kicked up an awful row about it.'

As this was about 1907 one can imagine that the girls were more upset than their modern counterparts would have been.

At Camborne he also played a good deal of rugger and he would tell hair-raising stories of the beat-ups that used to follow matches between the School of Mines and other Cornish teams. Vin always liked telling a good story, so perhaps some of his tales were slightly embroidered!

He would often talk about his two sons and daughter of whom he was very fond, and occasionally of his wife.

'I never considered her enough, Nin,' he would say sadly. 'She always said I loved the mine better than her. It was a much harder life for her in those days and there were few comforts.'

Soon after we arrived at headquarters, visitors came over from the Mentakab group of guerillas, and they were intrigued to meet Vin whom they had heard about from their white leader, known as "Chippie"—it was not until after the war that I learnt that "Chippie" was Lieutenant-Colonel Spencer Chapman whose own experiences are written up in his book, *The Jungle is Neutral*. As there had been no communication between the Riau and Mentakab camps before, we were curious to know how their leader knew anything about Vin being in the jungle.

'Chippie,' said the visitors, 'had recently crossed the border into Johore to find two white men who were with some Chinese bandits there.'

'Tyson and Cotterill?' we asked eagerly.

'Yes,' they replied, 'and one of them died of fever, it was the man Tyson.'

This news came as a devastating blow to Vin: he never stopped blaming himself after that for letting Tyson stay

behind with the wireless party instead of remaining himself. However much I expostulated with him, reminding him that he would have been far too old for the strenuous work involved, Vin would not listen: he could only think that Tyson's wife and newly born baby, who were on holiday in Australia at the time of the invasion, would never see him again. Apart from that, Vin had always thought of Tyson as a future manager of the mine, and his death was another blow to Vin's hopes for the future of Sungei Lembing.

There were certain activities which Vin was expected to take part in. As at Lao Liu's camp, we all surrounded the flag pole at dawn and saluted the hammer and sickle with a clenched fist held against the temple; later on when the number of non-Communists increased enormously, the flag was changed to one with the three stars on it, which was a pretty piece of condescension and in no way changed the flavour of the lectures which were delivered daily to the rank and file. Lao Chuang told us, in the measured tones of a headmaster addressing his school, that Father Stalin took a deep personal interest in every one of us. We heard the same hair-raising stories about conditions in England which made Dickens' descriptions fade into insignificance, but in spite of these horrifying conditions which existed in imperialist countries, Stalin had ordained that the Communists should co-operate with them until the Germans were beaten. As witness to our backwardness and weakness as a nation, the Leaders would point to our pitiable defence of Malaya, a country which we had been bound by treaty to protect: our failure to defend Malaya made an admirable propaganda weapon in favour of the Communists who were keeping up the struggle.

Vin tried to discuss things with Lao Chuang from time to time.

'Would you allow freedom of speech under a Communist regime in Malaya?' he asked him once.

'There will be freedom of Press, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom from the slavery of class and racial discrimination,' Lao Chuang launched off into the usual set of slogans.

'But will you really allow freedom of the Press? Supposing someone wrote an article condemning the regime, would you allow that to be printed?'

'Certainly not,' said Lao Chuang coldly.

'But that's not freedom then.'

'Oh certainly it is, because an article denouncing the regime would be contrary to the wishes of the majority who respect it and it would therefore be contrary to freedom to publish it!'

Vin never got very far with these conversations.

Life in the camp was not entirely given over to indoctrination; the guerillas were a happy-go-lucky people and they enjoyed themselves to the full in their spare time. Ball games in the cool of the evening were very popular and excited spectators urged on their favoured side with shouts and yells, though the standard of play was very poor; wrestling was another popular pastime. Sunday evenings were devoted to musical entertainments and certainly talent for these was in very short supply.

One night they begged us to dance "European style" for them. Round the parade ground which the moon made almost as bright as day, Vin and I danced while I hummed The Merry Widow Waltz. Vin was a beautiful waltzer and I had always loved dancing an old-fashioned waltz with him. That night we excelled ourselves and from the deep shadows where our audience sat came a chorus of 'Ai-yah—look at their feet.' 'Why don't they trip over each other.' When we stopped because I had no more breath to hum with, we walked off to an appreciative buzz.

Lao Lee always struck us as being much less bigoted than Lao Chuang: this was partly due to the fact that he was so much less serious-minded than his comrade, being quite incapable of remaining serious for any length of time.

'I've no head for facts,' he would tell us, and furthermore the only Mandarin he would speak was a few imperfectly worded slogans, and this prevented him from giving lectures.

'I ought to hate you because you are a capitalist,' Lao Lee said to Vin on one occasion, 'but how can this be done? Every worker on the mine thinks of you as some kind of God. You are a good man, Pai Kher, and no one can hate goodness.'

Both Lao Lee and Lao Chuang went out of their way to be friendly to us in their different ways; they seldom went on a journey without coming into our hut and giving us details of what had happened and any piece of news they might have heard: in Lao Lee's case these were always highly embroidered, while Lao Chuang's information was usually brief and to the point. I never saw Lao Lee in anything but high spirits and his smiling face was an endless source of comfort to me. Lao Chuang, however, was not easy to talk to and I never quite got over my fear of him. He was a very ascetic creature and there was a ruthless lack of sympathy for weakness and failure which reminded me of a 17th century Puritan—I always feel, probably rightly, that that type of person disapproves of everything I do.

Wherever possible we were given extra food and although we asked to be fed the same as everyone else, they insisted that we must eat well to regain our strength:

'Pai Kher is weak, also he is very sorrowful,' they would say.

It must be remembered that outside, both in Kuantan

and Sungei Lembing, they were raising large sums of money on the strength of Vin's presence in their camp, and people gave freely to help their *Tuan Besar*. As the number of refugees increased daily, the Leaders, who never sent anyone away, began to get alarmed and they called a conference of Chinese *Towkays*—who are business owners—somewhere in the Jabor Valley, to try and arrange a great deal more financial help. One of these *Towkays* who knew Vin well was brought back to a nearby plantation where we were taken to see him; we spent a whole day talking to him and asking him endless questions about life at Sungei Lembing. Hundreds of the miners, he told us, had moved into the hills and felled jungle to make way for vegetable gardens, others were employed by the Japanese hunting copper from below the surface of the Pahang Consolidated Company's enormous concession. The old *Towkay* laughed about this: vast wealth lay in the flooded tunnels of the mine yet those strutting Japanese who thought they could conquer the whole world, were only able to play about with an outcrop of copper which the Company had never bothered about in the old days. Everyone in Sungei Lembing, he told us, was determined to stick it out until the British returned. This news cheered my brother up although he hardly spoke himself, letting me do all the talking, unlike the days when he and Cheng Kam would talk for hours on end without my saying a word. I asked him how Cheng Kam, Wong Ng and Lau Siu were and heard that they were well enough but 'like everyone else they had shrunk a good deal; no one was fat any more.' At which the *Towkay* looked across at Vin and sighed. We heard about the empty shops in Kuantan, the thriving black market in essential foods, the deserted offices of the Pahang Consolidated Company, the shabby post office which had once been so busy, and the little cinema which now only showed Japanese propaganda films.

The Communists evidently intended to hold the *Towkay* as a hostage against the delivery of funds by the others, but a few days later Lao Lee reported to us that the old man had escaped and found his way back to his home. This disturbed the Communists as they had always been quite confident that their camps were so cleverly hidden in the jungle that no one would be able to find their way either to or from them. And when an unfortunate stranger was discovered wandering near headquarters shortly after the *Towkay's* escape, the Leaders decided to put him to death without more ado in case he found his way back to civilization and told the Japanese about the whereabouts of the camp. Incidents like the summary bayoneting of this man served to remind us that although the Communists were treating us with kindness and consideration, there were strange contrasts in their make-up, and we knew that they were capable of ruthless cruelty if need be: capital punishment after prolonged torture was the penalty for quite small crimes.

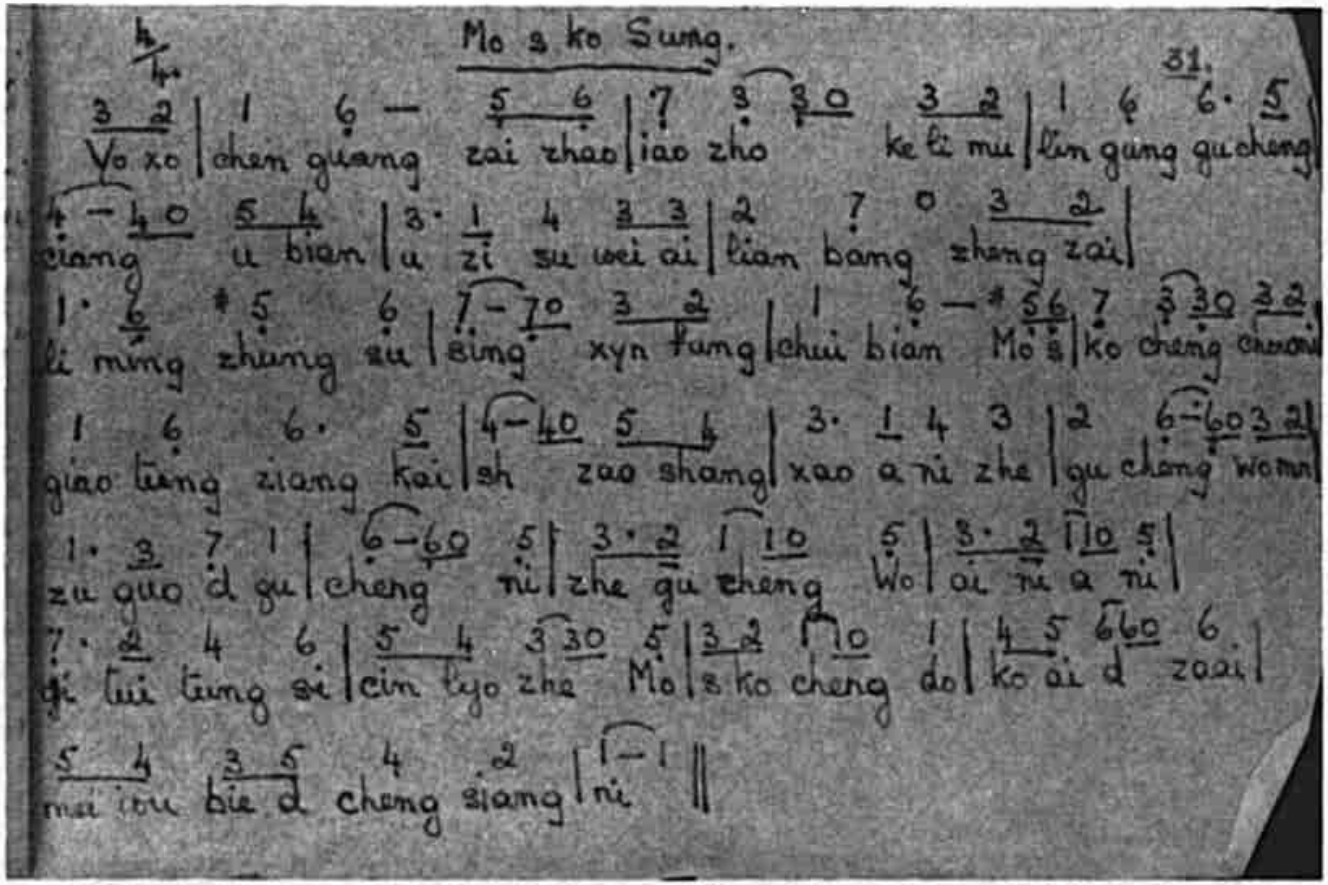
Nevertheless Vin and I seldom felt worried about our own safety in their hands while Lao Lee and Lao Chuang were in charge, as firstly they had given their word to Cheng Kam to look after us and the Chinese seldom break their word; secondly, and as we already knew, Vin's presence in the camp was a powerful means of extracting money from people outside. With the arrival of the Mentakab party however, the picture began to change. Up till then the Leaders at Sungei Riau, being in a wild jungle area, had been out of touch with other groups of guerillas, and their version of Communism had been considerably milder than that practised by those on the West Coast where the Leaders were much closer to Moscow. Communism had always been more highly developed in western Malaya where all the large towns lie and Mentakab was linked to it by road and railway. A small group of the

more fanatical Communists (under the command of Lao Fong) came over from the West and joined our camp. When Vin and I were introduced to the Leader, there was no sign of the smile, which usually lights up the Chinese face, on Lao Fong's: he stared hostilely at us and made it clear from the outset that he hated Europeans. There was a sinister sneering look about his expression which was accentuated by a slight deformity—making one of his shoulders higher than the other; no doubt his misshapen body had contributed a lot towards his bitterness. We learnt later that he had been indoctrinated in China and had come over to Singapore before the war as an active Communist and troublemaker, where he had been quickly imprisoned by the authorities: he had been released when all the political prisoners had been pardoned in 1941.

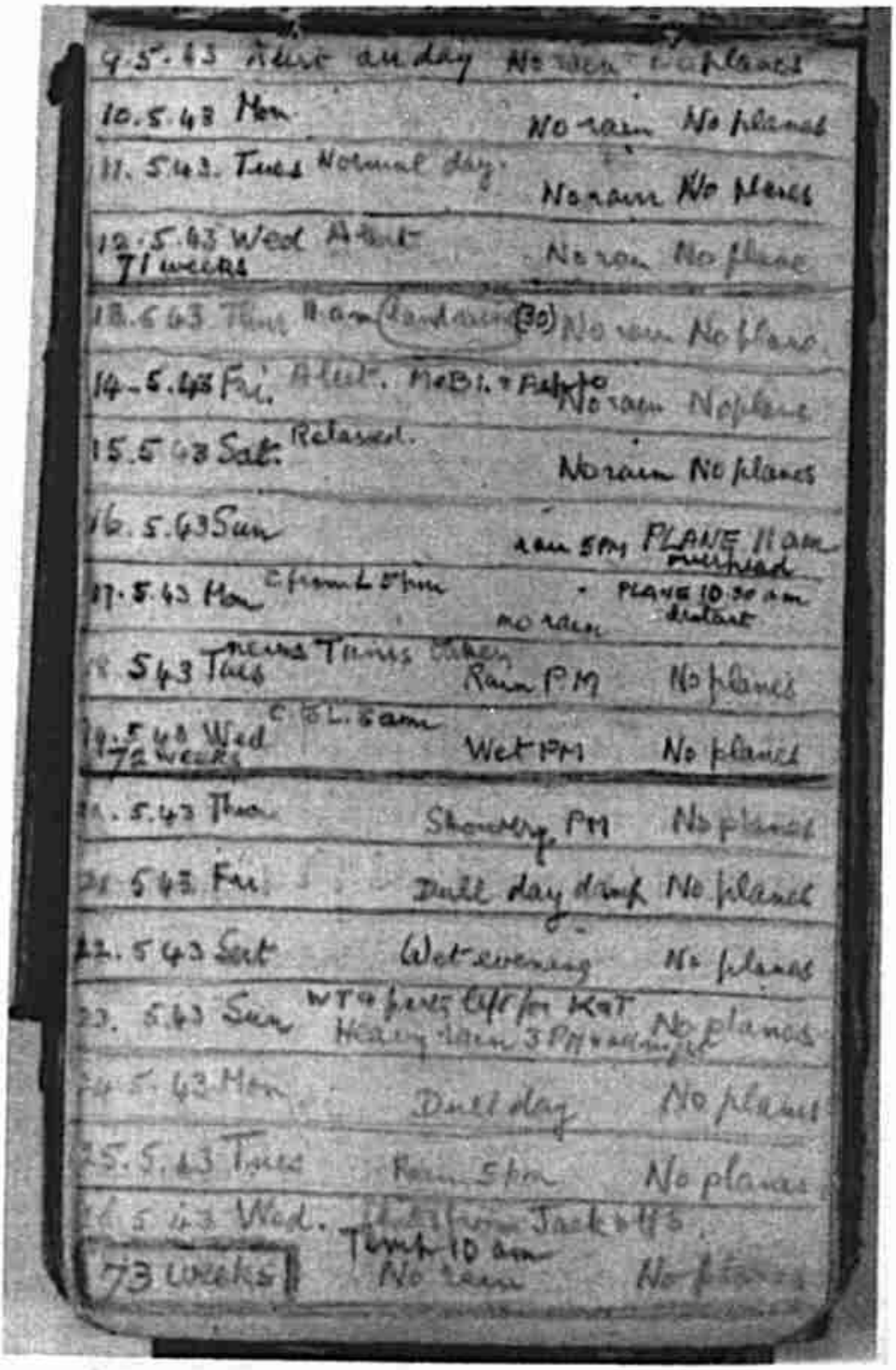
Vin in particular became the butt of his hatred although, while Lao Lee and Lao Chuang were in the camp, we knew that he could not do us much harm; in fact whenever the other leaders were present, he treated us both with exaggerated respect, but as soon as they were out of earshot, he revelled in making offensive remarks at our expense in the hearing of the rank and file.

'Those who don't do a day's work, shouldn't eat,' he would say as he stood behind us in the queue for a meal. And he was always talking pointedly about "parasites" which made Vin livid and he found it increasingly difficult to keep his temper with him; every now and again a row would flare up between them which I dreaded, knowing that Vin must have the worst of it in the end.

'If only they would give me something more to do,' Vin said miserably one night. I stared at him lying next to me on the sleeping platform and thought how pitifully thin he looked; his large stomach had completely vanished while his legs, which had always been well covered, were now little more than bone.



A page from one of the song-books which Nona compiled as 'officially appointed music mistress' to the guerrillas. (p. 99)



A page from the diary (May 1943) kept by Nona. Some days were more tense (12 May 'alert') than others. The weather and the occasional planes overhead were important in their lives. From this brief record the book was later written up.

'You've got your music, you're lucky, you've got something to interest you,' he added almost reproachfully.

I had been appointed music teacher to the camp and I was, it was true, finding the work most absorbing. My new job had started from the day when passing Lao Lee's desk in the office, I had happened to notice a large sheet of paper with a song written on it in tonic sol-fa, which had been pushed to one side, away from the heap of other papers—Lao Lee's desk was always in a state of chaos, quite unlike Lao Chuang's which was a model of tidiness. I picked the sheet up and although I could not read the words in Chinese characters, I could and did sing the tune to myself. Lao Lee happened to come into the office at that moment and hearing me sing threw him into a state of great excitement, his face lighting up like a child's with a new toy.

'Pai Naa, you are singing that right.'

'Of course I'm singing it right—that's what is written here!'

'Do you understand music then?'

'Well yes. I used to teach it once.'

'Then you must teach us. That song is one of the most important in the Great Soviet Republic—the Red Flag.'

Lao Lee stood stiffly at attention because in spite of his very good sense of humour, he never referred to his creed without keeping a serious expression on his face.

'It is our solemn duty to teach the comrades this piece of music. Most of them have never sung before or heard anything more tuneful than the moans of a funeral march, but I despaired because no one here is clever at music, and I can't understand it.' Furthermore, as I soon discovered, Lao Lee was quite incapable of singing anything in tune.

I was officially appointed music mistress and was expected to produce a choir of cathedral standard without the help of so much as a tuning fork. Although my spoken Chinese was slowly improving, my grasp of it was not nearly good

enough to enable me to teach singing in this tricky medium. The language is monosyllabic, the meaning of the word depending on whether the tone of it is high or low. Consequently when the tune went up, it often happened that the meaning of the word required you to pitch your voice low: and one either had to be faithful to the music or the meaning of the word. This entirely baffled me and I evolved a system of my own: I posted the tune in tonic sol-fa on the blackboard and the class, full of round eager faces, sang with me until they had mastered it; after that I learnt the words and wrote them down in a brand of Romanized Mandarin, which Lao Chuang produced from a book. The Chinese characters were written on the board, and the complete score was dovetailed together in the memories of the singers, and soon the Sungei Riau rendering of the Red Flag was the envy of all the other camps. I was far too proud of our performance to worry about it being a Communist song. When we had learnt the Internationale we followed it with many other songs with strongly anti-Japanese words, including one sung to the tune of the Marseillaise, which was a great favourite. My students would have touched the most phlegmatic of teachers with the enthusiasm and gusto which they put into singing all the songs, and it is true that however badly you do it, singing lifts up your heart, so that I felt I was boosting morale.

Vin followed my activities with the greatest interest and wanted to hear every minute happening in the classes; he was pathetically eager to help me in any way he could by writing out my songs and helping me to learn them. Sadly, I felt that my working in the community made him feel more isolated than ever. Tyson's death still weighed heavily on his mind.

'If only I'd stayed behind instead of him. It wouldn't have mattered a damn if I'd died. Look at the life I'm

leading now, no damned good to anyone not even myself. It was Tyson who had a life before him, a good career at the mine, all gone and his newborn baby in Australia whom he never saw.'

'It would have mattered everything to me if you'd died, darling. Anyway after the war you'll be back at the mine and putting everything in order again: you've got that to live for.'

'Don't talk about the end of the war. How do we know we'll win?'

'We've got to win!'

Lao Fong's sneering remarks had hurt Vin in his weak state more than he cared to admit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BY MAY 1943 the shortage of small arms throughout the Pahang camps was so acute that Lao Lee, who had heard that the stay-behind-the-Jap-lines party had buried a large quantity of arms before they left the Sungei Lembing district, decided that they must be found at all costs. After a long consultation with Vin, Lao Lee sent off messengers to Kuantan to make contact with Fonseca, who had acted as outside helper to the party and who might be able to give us an exact plan of where the arms had been hidden. The Sinhalese Eurasian was easily found as he was working for the Japanese, helping to run the little power station at Kuantan, while at the same time operating an illicit wireless set which he had hidden somewhere in the town. When approached, Fonseca had readily agreed to give a plan of the place where he had seen the small party bury their transmitter, petrol and various weapons which were too heavy to take with them on their trek through the jungle. He sent a message to Lao Lee saying that he would rather hand over the information to the *Tuan Besar* whom he had heard was in the Communist camp: this was not only out of loyalty to his old master, whom he loved, but because he was quite aware that Vin was the only one in the camps who knew every inch of the ground around Sungei Lembing and would therefore be able to understand his directions.

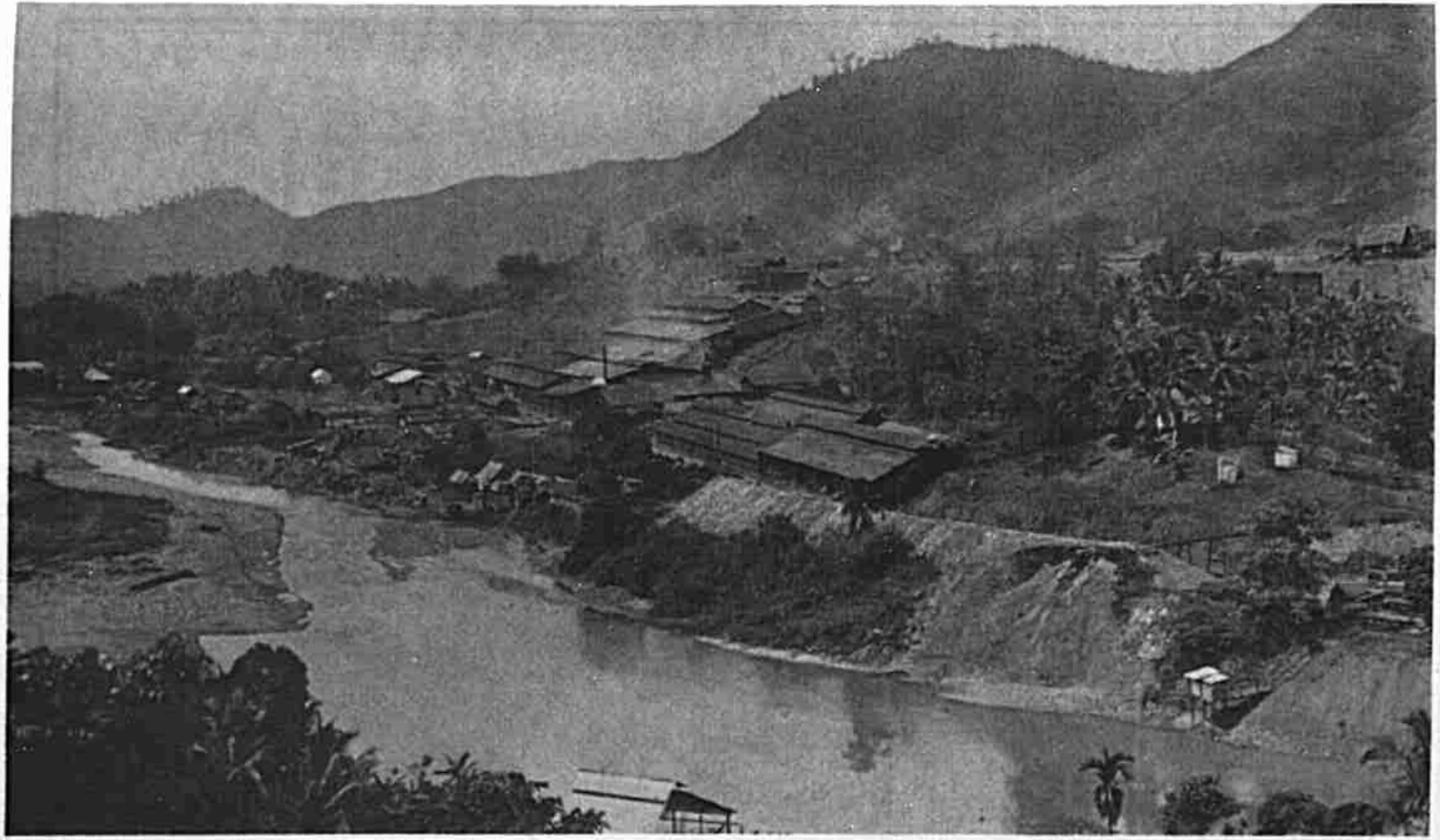
Plans went ahead with great speed and Vin and I were told that a meeting with Fonseca had been arranged in a house near Kuantan, and that our escort, led by Lao Lee himself, would leave the following day at day-break. We were delighted, welcoming anything which would break the tedium of camp life; added to that we would have the opportunity of speaking to an intelligent man who spoke perfect English and was in direct contact with the outside world, by means of his wireless set. In my own heart I hoped too that a change of environment might break the depression which hung over Vin so much now; it was also a relief to escape for a few days from Lao Fong who was getting seriously on our nerves.

Lao Lee planned to take a large body of crack troops with him: these were men who wore red stripes down the sides of their trousers signifying that they had been decorated for bravery. Vin thought that he was taking a very big risk marching the cream of his troops into enemy territory on such a doubtful errand, as he was quite sure that the dump of arms would never be found. Lao Lee, however, was like a dog with two tails at the prospect of finding some modern English weapons and in his delightfully impulsive way, he was prepared to risk anything to find them. However badly organized the rank and file among the guerillas often were, they were individually very brave and loyal to their cause: although very few of the ones I knew were Communists, they were all glad to have any opportunity to attack the Japanese while the war lasted, and most of them looked forward to returning to their homes after it was over.

During our journey Lao Lee kept the pace of our march to a moderate level out of consideration for Vin who, cheered at the prospect of having something positive to do, kept up without much trouble. We spent one night in a suffocatingly smoky hut at Batu Sawah and a second one at

Bukit Goh: this lap was exceedingly exhausting because a great many trees had been felled across our path and one after another we had to climb over enormous trunks covered with slimy mosses and fungus. I was so busy keeping up with the others that I did not worry about the increasing number of leeches which were fixing themselves on to me as I brushed past a succession of bushes and creepers, and I failed to carry out the necessary offensive operations against them which entails holding a lighted cigarette to their posteriors. Instead they gorged themselves to capacity and either fell off or were knocked off as I walked along, so that when I arrived at Bukit Goh my arms and legs were covered in blood. The wife of our host quickly rolled up my shirt sleeves and pulled off my shoes and socks; then, ripping a piece of blue cloth from an old coat, she lit one corner of it in the stove and snuffed it out leaving a charred end with which she rubbed my sores: this left a generous coating of carbon to soak in. The effect was like magic and I had no more trouble from them.

We had a very hilarious evening with the smallholder and his wife, and the guerillas sang and shouted with such gusto that they might have been in their own homes celebrating New Year's Day. We drank a series of toasts in rice spirit to Stalin, to the Communist Party, the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army and eternal damnation to the Japanese. Vin and I caused a great deal of hilarity by trying to eat with chopsticks and then finally being driven to using our hands out of sheer need to eat: in spite of our early clumsiness with chopsticks, we never went back to spoon and fork after that and soon became very proficient. The only people who worried about the possibility of the din being heard by a passing Japanese patrol were Vin, myself and our host. As I fell asleep that night, I was far from happy as although the hut was deep in the jungle, one never knew who might be prowling about. I often found that the



Mine buildings at Sungei Lembing from across the river


S. Kuantan
S. Lembing
S. Kebah
S. Kenau
S. Pinang
Panching
Posic Kemudi
Batu Sawah
S. Riau
Jabor
K. Balok
Bukit Goh
Beserah
Kuantan
S. Belat
Gambang
Scale
0 5 10 Mls
KEDAH
Kota Bharu
Georgetown
PENANG
KELANTAN
TRENGGANU
Kuala Trengganu
PERAK
Ipoh
Kuala Lipis
S. Tembeling
Chukai
Cherating
Jabor
Kuantan
Jerantut
S. Lembing
PAHANG
Gambang
The Gap
S. Pahang
Pekan
SELANGOR
Kuala Lumpur
NEGRI SEMBILAN
Segamat
Mersing
MALACCA
Malacca
JOHORE
Johore Bharu
Singapore
STRAIT OF MALACCA
SUMATRA
Scale of Miles
0 20 40 60 80 100

guerillas were careless about noise and Lao Lee was one of the worst offenders! They did not seem to realize, although they knew well enough, what terrible fate would overtake those who were found helping them; even when we were near Sungei Lembing a few weeks later, they took little more care: when the holiday mood was on them, nothing would stop their merriment.

Lao Lee had arranged to meet Fonseca at a house on the outskirts of Kuantan which was being used by the Communists as a distribution centre for their propaganda leaflets that were then collected by trustworthy Chinese and distributed round the Kuantan area. Once again we found ourselves picking our way in the pitch dark and pouring rain down rows of rubber trees. Fortunately I have a keen sense of hearing and I was able to follow the Chinese in front by ear while I held the end of Vin's stick so that he could follow. The plantation had been deserted since the Japanese occupation and thick rank grass was growing between the rows which soaked us to the skin while Vin, who was head and shoulders above everyone else, kept collecting endless cobwebs which stretched from one tree to another. The Malayan spider, as Vin reminded me later, spins a much tougher web than his English counterpart and meeting them is like hitting a series of dirty washing-up cloths. Fonseca was waiting for us when we arrived at the house, dressed exactly as I remembered him at the mine, in khaki shirt and shorts and a large trilby hat which cast a large shadow over his coffee coloured face and enormous brown eyes: with him was a young Chinese called Sam Swee Tuck who had also worked in the electrical department at the mine and was now employed by the Japanese in Kuantan while secretly distributing leaflets for the Communists.

In spite of his natural reserve and good manners, Fonseca was so moved to see Vin that he wept as he held our hands in his:

'You are far too thin, sir,' he said sadly.

He went on to tell us in his faultless English how he had helped Tyson and his party for the first fortnight after the Japanese had occupied Kuantan, and how they had transmitted a few messages before being called to Singapore.

'I doubt whether Mr. Tyson and Mr. Cotterill ever got through and I don't know what's happened to them,' he said.

As gently as he could Vin told him that we had news that Tyson was dead. Fonseca turned away—he was too proud to let us see him weep twice. He was not at all cheerful about the news in general although he tried to make the best of it: the Japanese appeared to be victorious everywhere, but he heard the News regularly from London, listening to Churchill's speeches to the nation and to Sir Richard Winstedt's regular broadcasts in Malay. He told us that the British were fighting in Africa but he was not certain who was winning the war there. He talked about the sufferings of the prisoners in Singapore and how the people in the city were doing whatever they could to help them; he had heard that the Japanese were building a railway from Siam to Burma and were using thousands of European soldiers who were dying like flies, 'a story which will rock the civilized world when it is known'. He was very reticent about conditions in Sungei Lembing for fear of upsetting Vin, but he did tell us that Cheng Kam was well and continuing his heroic activities saving people from the Japanese.

'Everyone is waiting for the day when the British will come back again. Sungei Lembing is glad to think you are not far away and they look forward to your return, Sir.'

Vin thanked him and smiled, but I noticed the faraway look in his eyes which I had grown accustomed to see now: perhaps he was thinking about Tyson and many others who would not return to Sungei Lembing again, and

wondering whether he would ever see the mine again himself.

'Everything is going to be all right for you, Fonseca, and for all the others who have survived. The good days will return and better ones too.'

As we sat talking I could hardly believe that we were almost in Kuantan where the roads led down to the palm-fringed beaches, where we had enjoyed so many picnics on the silvery sands in the old days. A breeze sprang up from the river and blew through the windows, and I felt suddenly cold.

Our hosts had prepared a good meal for us and in tucking into some chicken, Vin finally broke his false teeth which had served him so faithfully until then. Fonseca told us during the meal that contacts in Singapore had told him that Bett, the chief electrical engineer from Lembing to whom Fonseca was devoted, and Baxter, his assistant, were both being made to work in the St. James Power Station in Singapore, and this thought cheered Vin up:

'Those two will gum up the works for the Nips if they're given half a chance.'

Fonseca handed Vin the map he had drawn and explained where the arms had been buried: he warned us that the whole face of Sungei Lembing hills had been transformed by the labourers who had left the village and felled trees in order to raise crops.

'That will be better for Lembing after the war—there will be more fruit and vegetables for everyone.' It was typical of Vin to think about the future of the people in that way.

When it was time for us to leave, we begged Fonseca to join the Communists in the jungle, but he refused assuring us that he was running no risks.

'Besides,' he said, 'people depend on me for the truth about the war: and I work with others. I can't let them down. And if I came into the jungle I could not bring the

set with me because there would be no electricity there.'

We were very sad to have to say goodbye to him and to think of his returning to the Japanese occupied town: it seemed inevitable that we would never see him again, and he was one of the most loyal and devoted men to the British cause that I met in Malaya.

We reached Bukit Goh again by dawn, but it had been raining so heavily that the Sungei Riau river was in flood and we were forced to stay two days at the smallholding. It was the only occasion we ever saw Lao Lee worried and nervous; he paced up and down the mud floor of the hut while the rain fell in sheets outside. When we were able to start off again, the mud was up to our ears and the trees kept on releasing a steady shower bath on to us. We soon picked up some elephant tracks which were deep potholes in the mud while the trees beside the path were splashed right up their trunks with black slime; it was hard enough picking our way round these holes but when we came to a sharp decline, we found that the elephant had made it on his behind, forming a giant toboggan run with tall sides, and we had no alternative but to follow suit. When we reached the bottom of the hill, we all had a good laugh at one another's thick coating of mud, and we were a sorry sight when we reached headquarters. I think that the change had done Vin good in taking his mind off his troubles, and he had certainly kept up marvellously well: I did not realise the extent to which he had used up all his remaining strength.

Lao Lee was in a great state of excitement about the cache of weapons and we had no sooner returned to the camp than he was itching to set out again to find it. It was obvious that he would want either Vin or me to accompany him as we knew the Sungei Lembing district so well, and it was quite evident that I would have to go as Vin was not fit to undertake another long journey. We both hated the idea of being separated but Lao Lee was so anxious to go and

promised to take the utmost care of me, if Vin would let me accompany him. I spent a wretched night before we were due to leave, worrying about Vin; he relied so completely on me now that I was certain that he would sink into a lethargy of low spirits once he was alone. Added to this, I had the carping fear that Lao Fong would vent his spleen on Vin in Lao Lee's and my absence: his hatred of Vin was quite undisguised by now and they were never together a minute before they started quarrelling. Of course I knew that Lao Chuang was at headquarters and would see that Vin was treated properly by his comrade while he was there, but as he had the whole organization of the subsidiary camps and plantations on his shoulders while Lao Lee was away, it was hard to see how he could keep his eye on everything.

I listened sadly to the crescendo of noise as a faint streak of light appeared in the East hidden from our view by the thick mat of the jungle. As the darkness in the hut turned to a grey light, I looked across at Vin who was lying on his back next to me. I had been constantly with him since the end of 1941 and seeing him every minute of the day I had only been dimly aware of the change in him. But at that moment at the prospect of leaving him, I became more keenly alive to his yellow face, so thin now that his beard had been shaved off by the camp barber, the bloodless lips and the thinness of his arm as it lay beside me. It was hardly credible that this was the same man who two years ago was bursting with health and energy and self-confidence. I was filled with a feeling of sudden panic which settled in my stomach like a load of lead. Would he be alive when I returned from Sungei Lembing? I shook myself angrily, of course he would be alive, he had survived a year and a half in the jungle why not a few more days. I got up and walked down to the river for my morning's wash; the sky was a faint blue by then and the air was full of deliciously sweet smells

after the rain. The river water was a cloudy red colour as it swirled past me, moving on relentlessly towards the sea; I looked up at the line of trees towering over me and down at the dense mat of dead leaves, browns and blacks, decaying and decayed. All jungle life was relentless and unmerciful, watching us struggle and die.

I was glad that morning when the bugle sounded and I was rescued from my thoughts, caught up in the frenzy of Lao Lee's preparations for departure: he greeted me with the infectious gaiety of a preparatory schoolboy on the last day of term. We were to set off in the afternoon and there were seven of us in all including Reg Lawther who had been appointed my bodyguard. Heavily armed, we formed up ready to leave when the time came, and I broke ranks to fling my arms round Vin's neck and hide my tears in his shirt. We marched off to the tune of the usual farewell songs and, as I turned to see Vin's pathetic figure waving to me from the parade ground, such a stab of misery struck into me that it was all I could do not to run back to him and refuse to go with them. But I bit my lip and turned away: it was then, when my courage seemed to leave me altogether, that one thing always came to my rescue in true chauvinistic spirit. I had not listened to story after story about the British laying down their arms in Malaya without a fight, for nothing. I was determined to show the Chinese that the British could stand up to anything they could.

My feeling of misery was soon dissipated by the energy I had to give to keeping up with the others, as Lao Lee wanted to get well past Batu Sawah before we slept. It was an intensely hot day and a steam rose from the bed of rotting leaves and decaying branches that was quite suffocating. We stopped at a smallholding belonging to a man who had once been Tyson's cook until he had won a lottery just before the war. He provided us with an enormous meal; the

belchings after it would have gratified the most fastidious of Chinese hosts, and I had no difficulty in contributing my full share to the chorus. We had no sooner finished than Lao Lee ordered us to our feet as we had to cross the Kuantan river in the dead of night in case we met a Japanese patrol. We slipped and slid through the mud, while our distended stomachs complained bitterly, until I became utterly exhausted, but I was equally determined not to show it, and was thankful when we came out on to our old road. At intervals a voice full of concern would come out of the darkness from Lao Lee:

'Pai Naa, are you all right? Pai Naa, you are not too tired?' He was greatly relieved to hear me say that I was quite all right as he had no intention of stopping our party!

At last we were allowed two hours' sleep in a hut and Reg Lawther and I slept together on a narrow table: I was so tired that I never even stopped to worry about Vin left to the tender mercy of Lao Fong. By dawn we had reached the woodcutters' camp where we had had such a warm welcome some weeks before, but everything had changed by now; there was tremendous activity going on and it was quite evident that the Japanese had started drawing timber from there. As soon as one of the woodcutters saw us approaching, he rushed up and warned us that a Japanese train was due to arrive at any moment: he begged us to move on for half a mile or so where he would bring us some food. Lao Lee turned as usual to me:

'Pai Naa, can you go on for another two hours without food?'

'Of course I can if the others can. Anyway I'm still digesting the meal we had last night.' Lao Lee laughed.

'Pai Naa, I believe you're nearly as tough as my soldiers.'

'You wait until you have to start carrying me.'

We reached Sungei Nyik that afternoon and rested for two or three days in Lao Liu's camp before moving to a

hut overlooking Sungei Lembing. It had taken us only twenty-four hours to cover thirty miles from Sungei Riau, which anyone who knows the Pahang jungle will agree is good going, especially as much of the journey was done at night. Even the inexhaustible Lao Lee had felt the strain at times. To break the monotony of endless hours of climbing and descending narrow paths, I encouraged Reg Lawther and the soldiers to sing, leading them in the tunes which I had taught them in classes; once while going up a particularly steep hill, Lao Lee called back:

'Where do you find the wind to sing, Pai Naa? I haven't even enough to get me over this ridge, never mind sing.' I took this as a great compliment from the irrepressible Lao Lee.

The hut which Lao Lee chose as a base for our search stood just behind a hill overlooking the Lembing valley; we were in fact only about three-quarters of a mile from the village. We all slept in one small room, and I was soon the object of a great interest to the old man who owned it; at first I think that he had written me off as Lao Lee's mistress although it must have seemed a little odd for a European woman to fill that post; but then as he stared harder at me, he began to think that he recognized me until one morning he was certain of it:

'You are the *Tuan Besar's Missie*,' he informed me triumphantly.

We all bathed in a little stream in the garden and Lao Lee ordained that a sentry must be on duty while I was bathing. We could hear a tiger in the neighbourhood at night but I never knew whether the sentry was to guard me from this or to ward off Peeping Toms.

We started our search without delay trying hard to follow Fonseca's map which was not made any easier by the fact that he had drawn it upside down; also as he had already warned me, I found that I hardly recognized the hillsides

where so many old landmarks had vanished with the vast increase in the acreage cleared by the villagers. When all our patiences were almost exhausted, Lao Lee and I went for one last search together. Choosing what we still thought to be the area Fonseca had described, we took a new and apparently little used track which led us to where an old woman and a boy were cutting rattans: when the boy caught sight of us, he spoke to his mother behind his hand and she immediately let out a squeal and took to her heels in terror, pulling the boy along with her. We soon overtook them by their smallholding and Lao Lee cross-examined the boy as to why they had run away because Lao Lee, who was wearing uniform, was well known to everyone in the district and was usually bowed to and offered copious refreshments. Lao Lee roared with laughter when he discovered that the woman had mistaken 'Lao Lee' for 'Lau Hu' which means a tiger—there happened to be one on the prowl just then. We were soon drinking some of the old woman's best tea and eating little cakes; she told us that her husband was out tapping jelutong or wild rubber trees and would be returning shortly.

When the husband appeared, he bowed low in welcome to Lao Lee and, after brushing his own shabby black trousers, and putting on a clean coat, he settled down to a long conversation with Lao Lee: as usual in Chinese circles the object of our search was not mentioned for some time, Lao Lee instead entertained his host with stories of his exploits and soon Japanese heads were rolling in the dust: the old man listened with great interest and a good deal of chuckling and whenever Lao Lee reached a particularly juicy detail, the old man would repeat it at the top of his voice to his deaf wife. We were about to leave when Lao Lee mentioned the hidden dump of arms, and our host replied without hesitation:

'Captain, is that what you seek the same as the *Tuan*

buried when the Japanese came?' We agreed that it probably was. And so it was that after days of tearing ourselves apart fighting through thick jungle, wading through muddy streams and being eaten alive by mosquitoes, we had found the man who had actually seen Tyson bury the supplies. Lao Lee was beside himself with excitement while I was considerably more sceptical. The Chinese led the way and, in a small clearing, we found the pathetic remains of their camp. A small lean-to shack remained against the massive bole of a tree, while the roof had gone and the supports had rotted away at the base; there were traces of a trench cut to lead away the rainwater which was now overgrown with weeds in amongst which we found a pair of worn out gymshoes and a few tins. The woman and the boy started turning up the earth with what seemed to be tremendous enthusiasm as soon as the old man had marked the spot; two empty kerosene tins were exposed at which we all joined in the digging: the hole grew larger and deeper but nothing more came to light except a broken thermos flask and part of a primus stove. Lao Lee's excitement ran high:

'I will pace again and we will start afresh,' but hard as we dug in several spots, we found nothing more. Somebody had been there before, and it was quite probable that our host had been putting on a little act to cover the fact that he himself had dug up and sold the equipment as soon as the Europeans had left the district. We did not know and we could not accuse: the Oriental can be very inscrutable at times, he is also a superb actor. Lao Lee was desperately disappointed and we made our way back to our hut in a subdued frame of mind, where we collected the others and moved to Lao Liu's camp at Sungei Nyik.

After we had been in the camp for a few days, I was told that a deputation from Sungei Lembing was waiting to see me in a hut a little way below the Communist camp. I

found many familiar faces there: some of them mistook me for a man at first but after they had recognized me, I was overwhelmed with questions and greetings:

'So sorry to see *Missie* so thin.'

'How is *Tuan Besar*?' they all asked with touching concern and, when I told them that he was in quite good health, their faces lit up with joy.

'Now, *Missie*, there is something to live for. Very soon the Japanese will be driven out and the *Tuan Besar* will be back with us again. Before, when we worked for him and the other *tuans*, we worked with our hearts as well as our hands. Now we work for the Japanese with our hands only —our hearts are dead.'

None of them complained of losing near relatives under tragic circumstances—and most of them had suffered such bereavements—nor did they complain of hunger, poverty and ill treatment; and I never heard a suggestion that they had been let down by the British. Some of them, with touching generosity, insisted on my taking some of their precious Straits dollars which they had kept buried since the invasion. This money, they said, was to buy food for the *Tuan Besar*.

'He is such a long man and needs much to fill him up and keep him strong.'

The concern and devotion for Vin shown by all the people I met while we were near Sungei Lembing so affected me that I felt for the first time that our decision to remain behind with the people Vin loved so much had not been in vain. It brought home very vividly to me just how much Vin had given his life for these people and the extent of the blow to him of being helplessly cut off from them. I was more than ever determined to nurse Vin through our time in the jungle so that he could take his place as manager again after the war. It gave back to me a belief in the worthwhileness of our keeping ourselves alive,

a faith in our own usefulness which I had largely lost in the past months.

I longed to see Cheng Kam and the two old men but unfortunately we were separated from the plantation by several miles of thick jungle, and I did not dare to send him a message asking him to come and see me in case he was followed.

The days dragged on at Sungei Nyik and Lao Lee showed no signs of leaving for headquarters: I was sick with anxiety for Vin and longed to get back to Sungei Riau. Each evening we would be asked to nearby huts in the jungle where many people were living to be well out of the way of the Japanese, and I consumed vast quantities of sweet coffee and sugared cakes which gave my digestion a great deal of trouble. At last when I was almost at the end of my tether, Lao Lee announced that we would leave that afternoon after a stay of ten days. We camped the first night above Sungei Lembing and we all slipped down to Reg Lawther's mother's house which was opposite the village on the other side of the river. Reg's two lovely sisters had made a mountain of moon cakes, and they produced some precious china tea in our honour; these girls had been kept well hidden from the Japanese who were in the habit of seizing any young virgins for their harems. We were so near the village that we could almost hear the Japanese soldiers snoring, but our party shouted and sang without giving a thought to our nearness to the enemy. After midnight we tried to return to our camp but it had rained again and we were so well fortified with food that we could not master the steep slippery slope behind the Lawther's house, and one after another of us slithered back down the muddy slope to the bottom until we were all in a hopeless state of giggles, with Lao Lee being the worst offender. I was certain by then that the soldiers would hear us but fortunately they slept on.

We set off early the next morning, choosing a different route to the one we had used coming because we had heard that the Japanese now had a constant guard on the bridge we had crossed two weeks earlier. It was a very hilly path and half way up one of the steep inclines I suddenly lost my breath and lay gasping in the mud: everyone crowded round me while Lao Lee asked me what was wrong looking most alarmed. I was speechless. I had not been feeling well for several days but I had put it down to worrying about Vin and to an over-indulgence in sugar cakes. I remember vaguely being helped to my feet and when I got my breath we went slowly on to the house of the man who had helped in the final stages of our treasure hunt, where I was quickly put to bed. This was my first attack of fever which was fortunately not a bad one, but Lao Lee took complete charge of my nursing and no one could have been more devoted in their ministrations than he was; there was no medicine but one of our party was a skilled cook and made me cooling drinks and I was soon about again. I was desperate to start on our journey back to headquarters again and Lao Lee was not sorry to give way after saying that I ought to stay on another day in the house. Our next call was at Cheng Kam's plantation when we went to his house and saw Mrs. Cheng Kam: sadly I heard that her husband was away trying to buy vegetable seeds which were becoming increasingly difficult to get. Mrs. Cheng Kam told me with much clicking of teeth that her husband's health was failing under the strain of occupation, but still he continued with his work of helping the victims of Japanese aggression to escape into the jungle. While I was in her house, word had been sent to Lau Siu and Wong Ng and the two old men came rushing in, their faces beaming: they asked me question after question about the *Tuan Besar*, and I broke down unashamedly in front of them.

The rest of the journey was more exhausting than I can

describe, although I dared not admit how weak I felt to Lao Lee who kept asking me anxiously how I was, because I had to get back to Vin. One of the carriers who had a huge load, fell asleep as he was walking along: his was typical of the grit and courage of the Chinese carriers, and this particular one so wore himself out with hard work that a few months later he got up in the middle of the night in the hut which Vin and I shared with him and others, and coughing out half his insides, quietly died. I somehow managed to keep going, driving myself forward with the thought of seeing Vin, and Lao Lee used me as an example to the unfortunate ones who lagged behind, weighed down with heavy loads:

'Look at Pai Naa, she can keep up, why can't you? What's come over you?' Still smarting from all the Communist derision at the British defeat in the Far East, I was delighted to have a little praise!

When we finally reached Sungei Riau, my face was so swollen that I could hardly see out of my eyes; I do not know whether it was a bite or a poisonous plant that had caused it. Vin's emaciated figure was unmistakable enough standing on the parade ground on the spot where I had seen him last, and I flung myself into his arms, quite regardless of the elaborate songs of welcome which were being formally played for our benefit.

CHAPTER NINE

OVERJOYED AS I was to see Vin, I was alarmed to notice how ill he was looking and I soon discovered that he had had a very bad attack of fever in my absence—a fact which had been reported to Lao Lee who had deliberately kept it secret from me in case I insisted on returning to headquarters to nurse him. I hurried him back to bed and then disappeared to the river to have a good wash. Vin wanted to hear every detail of my adventures and I lay on the sleeping platform beside him: it was touching the way this once reserved man now lapped up the minutest incident. I told him how loyal all the people at Sungei Lembing still were to his name and how moved I had been by their devotion.

'Vin darling, now that I have seen how they still love you, the way they are just living for the day when you are back, I feel that we have really done the right thing by staying behind in the jungle and keeping alive their faith in you.'

Vin turned his face away to the wall.

'It's good to hear they still think of me but what's the good of hoping for the future. We'll never get out of this place alive.'

'You mustn't say that sort of thing, Vin. Of course we're going to get out.' I changed the subject quickly because I had little enough grounds for hope, and I was determined

to keep my mind, and Vin's too if I could, on day to day things and to leave the future to look after itself.

'How have things been here?'

'Well, relations between me and "our friend" have been a bit strained.'

Lao Fong was now known as "our friend".

'He hates my guts, that bloody little man. He is always making insulting remarks about me in Chinese, pretending that he thinks I can't understand, but he takes jolly good care to use words I'm likely to know and he grins all over his ugly mug. It makes my blood boil, but what can I do?'

'Thank God he can't do anything to us while Lao Lee and Lao Chuang are around. I shudder to think what he would do to us if he had us at his mercy.'

'That's just it. Supposing Lao Lee gets himself killed which is more than likely the way he takes risks, then we'll find ourselves in the little bastard's power. I'll wring his yellow neck one of these days.'

'You can count on me to give the final squeeze.'

'Come to think of it, that's not bad enough for him, what about sitting him over a young bamboo shoot for twenty-four hours while it grows?' We both felt better after this little conversation: it was just as well Lao Fong was not listening.

Vin went on to tell me that there had been two alerts from the *Min Yuen*, warning of suspected Japanese attacks and he thought he had heard a bomb dropping shortly after a plane had flown very low over the camp.

'There's something brewing up, I'm sure of it. If half Lao Lee's stories are true, the Nips aren't going to lie down under his sawing off their heads and gouging out their eyes for ever. They've only got to send in some crack troops and we're sunk.'

'Darling, you've got thoroughly depressed while I've been away. Let's talk about something more cheerful.'

'All right, what on earth's up with your face, it's gone an oddish shape?'

'I know, I feel as though my face were an overripe damson.'

Lao Lee came in at this moment and stood smiling at the foot of my bed.

'Pai Kher, I must apologise for letting Pai Naa get the fever while she was in my charge.'

'I hear you nursed her better than any hospital sister could have done.'

'He was wonderful, Vin. Lao Lee should have been a doctor not a soldier.'

'I'd kill all my patients off,' he said with a chuckle, producing a handful of groundnut leaves. 'These are to be boiled and strained and then the liquid used to bathe your face.' Although he had had a great deal to attend to on his return, he had immediately sent people to collect the leaves: that was typical of the man's kindness.

'Now, Pai Kher,' he went on, 'you too must get better and eat plenty of good food or I will have to take over your nursing as well!'

And in spite of Lao Lee's growing preoccupation with his defence of the camps, he saw to it that every possible delicacy was found for us.

Headquarters was soon in a ferment: although there was still no sign of a Japanese attack, a stream of refugees was pouring into all the camps and plantations as the enemy intensified their activities against the men outside who were either keeping us supplied with food or who were suspected of doing so. The Japanese were determined to break our contacts with the outside world and would enter the gardens and smallholdings near the jungle, ordering everyone to assemble at a given spot on the following day, where lorries would be waiting to take them, so it was said, to much better and more fertile land. They were allowed

to take anything they could carry. Some did as the Japanese ordered them but when they had been driven to a secluded spot, they were forced to dismount and to dig their own graves before being machine-gunned. Hundreds of innocent people were killed that way; hundreds took warning and escaped into the jungle. It was a common sight to see long lines of refugees arriving at the camp, carrying huge loads on their shoulders, including hens in baskets while small children with babies on their backs would bring up the rear of such processions. It is greatly to the credit of the Communists that, in spite of the increasing shortage of food, I never heard of them turning any refugees away from their camps. The newcomers were divided up and distributed among the plantations; in the end this influx turned to our advantage, as many of them were Hakkas and skilled gardeners, so that in time we had better and more varied crops; at first, however, their arrival caused a severe cut in our meagre rations.

Meanwhile alarms were becoming more frequent; in the middle of June 1943 we heard of an impending Japanese attack from Batu Sawah—the *Min Yuen* always knew beforehand because the enemy had to arrange for carriers to meet them at certain spots in the jungle. Hundreds of Japanese soldiers came into the jungle at Batu Sawah from the main garrison at Kuantan and on the 21st of June they attacked Number Six Plantation, burning all the workers' huts and destroying the crops on the cleared land, much to Lao Lee's chagrin. Although he must have been very worried, like all of us, at the prospect of a determined attack by trained troops, he never showed it. At nights if he was in camp, there was never a dull moment, either he was teasing someone and making everyone laugh, or he would be telling one of his numerous tall stories: he would often tell us about the many bodies of British soldiers he had found rotting in the jungle and how useful their

weapons had been to him. He told, too, of the large dumps of arms he had found and removed to a very safe place. He could never resist expressing amazement at the way the British had surrendered in spite of possessing so many modern arms: he was not always very tactful.

About ten days after I returned from our trip I went down with another bout of malaria. As there was no medicine available, I just had to lie low during an attack, under a heavy weight of blankets, and sweat it out; my throat would be like a coke oven and Ah Lan used to tell me that I would drink the stream dry if she gave me half a chance. Vin did what he could for me during these attacks but he too was feeling very weak. In the middle of my bout of fever which came just after the destruction of Number Six, Lao Lee evacuated us with all women and children to Number Three Plantation, fearing an attack on Sungei Riau; as Lao Fong had just been put in charge of this plantation, we were most relieved to be called back to headquarters four days later.

On the 1st of July another attack was launched and we were all moved again, this time to Number Two Plantation; as we set off, the enemy seemed to be very close to us as we could hear rifle shots near at hand. While scrambling over a ridge on our way to the plantation, we heard loud voices and, to our horror, we realized that a large force of enemy troops were passing along a path just below us. We could not see them because of the dense undergrowth of thorns, fronds and fleshy leaves, but there was no mistaking the Japanese language which bears no resemblance to either Chinese or Malay. Keeping the children quiet was no easy matter, particularly as all their parents were frozen stiff with fright, but "shushing" pigs and hens, which we had been told to take with us, proved quite impossible. The fowls, which were being carried in baskets suspended from poles slung over the women's shoulders, decided at that

moment they wanted to make a bid for freedom; the pigs took up the chorus and squealed and grunted in sympathy. Fortunately the Japanese soldiers were making such a tremendous noise themselves, shouting at the tops of their voices and slashing at the undergrowth beside the path with their swords, that they successfully drowned all our farmyard noises. I had often heard that the Japanese hated and feared the Malay jungle and now I felt inclined to believe it, having witnessed their shouting and yelling to keep their spirits up: making such a din can hardly have added to the element of surprise in their attack, but then neither side was very efficient in that respect. After the troops had passed, everyone had a good laugh out of sheer relief and, amid a storm of giggles, they all tried to imitate me trying to keep the hens quiet.

On July the 5th all the children at headquarters were moved to the camp at Sungei Nyik as the Japanese seemed to be paying our camp a lot of attention: this was a very sad moment for us as Ah Lan had to leave too with her two children. She had looked after us with such love and care when we were ill, forcing food down our throats and trying to keep us in a hygienic state; and in the months that followed we were to regret bitterly that she was not with us. It became increasingly evident that a major Japanese attack was about to be launched, and the fact that both Vin and I were in a very low state of health did not make us any too optimistic about our survival when the onslaught started. As a ray of light through the darkness, word reached us from Kuantan where Fonseca's wireless set was in full use, that the Allies had landed in Sicily, and there was a rumour too that Italy had capitulated.

'The Italians are the least of our worries,' was the poor reception given to the first good bit of news in two and a half years: we were in no mood to be cheered up while a major attack was in preparation.

At the beginning of August the Japanese attacked again, this time with mortars and bazookas which fortunately made more noise than they did harm as they were never near the target: the ominous part about the attack was the fact that modern weapons had been used against the camps for the first time. A conspicuous lull then ensued during which the stream of refugees mounted to alarming proportions as the civilians now greatly outnumbered the soldiers, and the general food position was becoming acute because the smallholders who had supplied so much of it were gradually dispersed by the enemy. Fortune shone on us in August when two of our crack shots killed an elephant and came into headquarters waving two strips of flesh over their heads. All the hale and hearty went off to the scene of the kill with carrying-poles, axes, saws and hacksaws; we watched a gory procession return two hours later, each person carrying a large hunk of meat, and it was hard to believe that it had all belonged to one animal. We all enjoyed a late night feast from the offal and not one piece of any part of that elephant remained uneaten by the end of three days.

By early September I had quite recovered my strength and had taken up my music teaching again: it was sad to have no children among the class. There was very little for Vin to do expect help in the cookhouse and we spent many an hour together in front of a mound of sweet potatoes, peeling and peeling. As our chances of survival looked more and more bleak, we found ourselves talking only of the past.

'Do you remember the first time you arrived home unexpectedly on leave, after we had moved to Southill. It was early in the morning and Daisy, that new maid we had, thought you were a tramp and put the chain on the door?'

'A poor sort of welcome I had too. I had to look in the window until I recognized the furniture. When you took me up to Scott's room he was hogging it in bed and all he

said when he saw me was "Oh Lord, so you've come" and turned over and went to sleep again.'

'I remember you describing your flight across France in a plane done up with bits of string: that was one of your tall stories I learnt never to question. You and Lao Lee are a pair with your stories!'

'Tell me, Nin, was I pretty impossible to live with in the old days at Lembing?' Vin asked me.

'You could be edgy enough at times but generally you spoilt me by giving me everything I wanted and you never questioned what I was doing. I wish I had one of those tins of chocolates you brought me every Saturday!'

As clouds of mosquitoes hung above us and lizards darted from one side of the hut to the other, we would wile away the time with that kind of chatter. And in a way, simply because we knew that our lives in the camp were about to be disrupted and put an end to, those evenings became precious.

On the 16th of September Lao Liu and Lao Chuang made a special announcement at the early morning parade: word had reached them that in an attempt completely to disrupt our food supplies, the Japanese were planning to attack our plantations, so that starvation would force us to surrender. In these circumstances they had decided to break up headquarters, abandon the site and distribute the troops among the plantations; Vin and I were to be moved to Number Three Plantation where Lao Fong was in sole charge. As Vin remarked, if the Japanese were so anxious to destroy our camps, it looked as though Lao Lee's attacks had been more effective than we thought.

It had always been a rule in the Communist camps that the harder a man worked, the more food he received; but under the benevolent despotism of Lao Lee and Lao Chuang, no one was allowed to suffer because they were not strong enough to do a full day's work—least of all Vin and I who

were often embarrassed by the choice morsels which Lao Lee was at pains to procure and ordered us to accept, even though Vin was often too weak to do any manual work at all. Lao Fong, however, saw to it that this rule was carried out to the letter: it evidently suited his twisted nature to see the sick and weak go short of food. At first things went quite smoothly for us as, by a miracle, we were both in fairly good health and able to do manual work so that Lao Fong could not penalise us for being parasites. There was great activity on Number Three as there was normally only accommodation for one hundred workers and their families on a plantation, but now that headquarters had ceased to exist they each had to absorb many more than their usual numbers; this meant tree felling, preparing support poles and gathering huge quantities of *atap* thatching for new huts. Vin and I worked not only as carpenters but as gardeners and assistant cooks; we also levelled off a fairly large area for a playground. The ground was dug with *changkols* and then levelled with a special gadget, which was a five foot plank with a wooden handle fastened in the middle and rattans tied to each end making a loop: one person pushed on the handle and the other stepped into the loop made by the rattans and pulled. Vin and I must have shifted tons of earth with this implement.

Although we were both doing a full day's work, at this point, Lao Fong made no attempt to hide his hatred for Vin; he refused to give my brother any respect for what he had been, a humane employer who had been greatly loved by his workers: to Lao Fong, Vin was simply an odious British capitalist. Apart from abusing us on all possible occasions, he ordered everyone in the camp to shun us: up until then we had met with nothing but friendliness from the rank and file and so it came as a cruel blow to both of us to be treated as lepers. They all obeyed the order not because their feelings had changed towards us

but because everyone was terrified of Lao Fong. This vicious order caused Vin more silent misery than even Lao Fong could have hoped for. Only I knew how much the devotion of these people, who had known him in the old days, had meant to him when he had nothing to live on but memories. The mine was idle and in enemy hands, while the workers whose welfare had been his great interest, were either starving or being tortured by the Japanese; and all that had been left were the signs of gratitude and the smiling faces of those who had known him before. Now suddenly he was rejected, shunned and cast out. As proof of his decline, Vin had ceased to bother altogether about his personal appearance, and if I did not drive him down to the river, he never bothered to wash either.

It was easier for me to put up with being shunned because I was still giving my music lessons and not even Lao Fong could prevent my pupils speaking to me in class; besides that, I had my brother to live for and Lao Fong's cruelty only spurred me on to fighting back. Being so much younger than Vin I was anyway more resilient than he was. I was far more worried at the time about the coming Japanese attack, but the enemy were playing cat and mouse with us and there was still no sign of the general offensive. At regular intervals Japanese reconnaisance planes flew over the camp, sometimes so low that we could see the faces of the pilots, but they made no attempt to attack us at this juncture as they were obviously pinpointing all the plantations prior to the great onslaught: their constant sorties tried our nerves sorely and we gave vent to our feelings by shouting abusive remarks at the planes.

Without warning Vin collapsed in November with a prolonged bout of malaria, and this gave Lao Fong a new opportunity to persecute him; he denied us access to any medicine or invalid foods. How I longed for dear Ah Lan who would have risked her neck to defy the commander;

as it was, the cook was far too scared to give us any special food and in fact he obeyed orders to the letter and gave us rather less than the others. This was the first time when Vin had fever that he did not toss and turn: all the fight seemed to have gone out of him and he simply lay and stared at the roof of the hut. Most of the time he said nothing but in his more lucid moments he would sometimes talk.

'I cannot think why Lao Lee sent us to Number Three knowing how Lao Fong hates us,' I said to him one evening.

'He probably thought we would be safest here from the Japanese attack, as this plantation is deeper in the jungle than the others: he would not think about the human side, the Chinese are not made that way.'

Having never mentioned the mine for months now, Vin suddenly began worrying that the Japanese might be able to get it going again.

'They won't be able to cope with the water, but there is still tin above water level and if the war goes on much longer they may be able to get part of the power house and the mill going. I didn't leave the bastards any fuel oil, but they may get hold of some, and Fonseca said they were trying to repair some of the engines.'

He became very depressed at times and a macabre incident in the camp hardly helped to cheer him up: one of the older refugees suddenly fell down and lay so still that everyone was convinced he was dead. He showed no signs of life while he was laid out on one of the sleeping platforms and hasty preparations were made for his funeral. Just as this was about to take place Ah King, who acted as camp doctor, came in after visiting another plantation. He looked at the man and suddenly slapped him on the face and poured cold water over him and the corpse revived. Vin, who had a horror of being buried alive, was very unnerved by this happening: 'For God's sake, Nin, make sure I'm really dead before anyone puts me in the ground. You have to be buried

damned quick in this climate, but these blighters are in such a hurry anything might happen.'

'Don't talk about dying,' I said, suddenly frightened. 'I can't think what would happen to me if you died.'

'I know if anything happened to you I should die very quickly.'

I used to prop him up against the corner post of the hut and keep a fire burning night and day beside the sleeping platform where he was lying; we shared the hut with five other men but if they disliked the heat, they certainly never complained. I dreaded the possibility that Vin might start *beri beri* on the scant rations we were being allowed, as I knew that with his spleen swollen from malaria, it could easily be fatal, so I tackled Lao Fong about giving Vin some proper invalid food, but he only grinned and shook his head:

'We are at war, there is nothing we can do for hangers-on.'

I determined therefore to risk all and steal some extra food: fortunately there was no sentry post near the cook-house so I used to wait until everyone was asleep and then crawl on my stomach across the parade ground to the food store, like a snake, and would stuff my pockets with potatoes which we baked in the ashes of our fire. I had no excuse for crossing the square at night as the jungle behind our huts was our latrine. The penalty for stealing food was death, but somehow the thought did not worry me as I was too desperate to get the food. As Vin began to get a little better, his relations with Lao Fong got steadily worse! He quarrelled openly with him and they frequently had rows in front of the others, which was exactly what Lao Fong intended: he wanted everyone to think that Vin was angry because he was not being allowed any more favours. Once during a music lesson, Lao Fong and one of his officers had a tremendous argument and made so much din that I could not hear myself speak; Vin was furious and

rather rashly tackled the officer on the subject of bad manners, and this was reported to Lao Fong who regarded it as rank insubordination, and behaved with increased vindictiveness.

Unfortunately, during Vin's illness I had begun to feel symptoms of fever myself but I was determined to keep it at bay in view of Lao Fong's remarks about those who do not work, do not eat. Often as I was giving music lessons or digging potatoes in the garden, I would feel so giddy that I had to sit down and do nothing for several minutes. As Vin's health improved a little, my fever increased and even Lao Fong noticed that something was wrong with me and told me, with the only bit of humanity he ever showed, that I need not work if I did not feel well enough. On stopping, I sank into a coma which lasted a fortnight: I can remember nothing about those two weeks until at the end I heard Vin calling me:

'Nin, Nin, you must come back,' he had a bowl of black bean soup in his hand and was trying to coax a few spoonfuls down me. I lay back after sipping it half heartedly, and was conscious of a series of raw places on my hips where the buttons on my shorts had rubbed me as I tossed and turned: Vin had been too ill himself to change my clothes. I fell into a deep sleep and from then began to improve.

When I woke again, Vin told me how, during my coma, Lao Lee had made a lightning visit to the plantation for the first time for weeks: someone had evidently gone to the plantation where he was staying and told him that Vin was very ill and that I was dying. He had been shocked and horrified by our appearance and Lao Fong had been dismissed from his position as Leader without more ado. Lao Lee had issued orders that we must be given any special food that could be found. Vin thought he had looked older and more careworn, and his usually immaculate uniform was torn and badly creased. One piece of good news he had

brought was that some British troops had landed by air or submarine in various parts of Malaya, part of the famous Force 136 which had been training in India and Ceylon. The thought of some of our own troops back on Malayan soil cheered us both up, although it was quite possible that the news was as inaccurate as most of Lao Lee's pieces of information.

As soon as I was able to sit up and take notice, I was horrified to see that Vin had started *beri beri*. Although Lao Fong had been sent away from the camp, he had had his revenge. Vin's legs had begun to swell to alarming proportions, while the rest of his body seemed to shrink. Lao Lee sent messengers scouring the other plantations for special food for him but by then the Japanese stranglehold on the camps was nearly complete. There were over one thousand people to feed and food was becoming dangerously low; even so the Communists kept up their practice of never turning away anyone who sought refuge and they shared what food they had with the most destitute. Their humanity at this time made a great impression on us. Meat was very short as our best hunters were also our crack riflemen and they could not be spared from the front line where they were keeping constant watch for signs of the Japanese attack. The days were over when they had the leisure to wander through the jungle for days on end hoping to bag an elephant, a tiger, a pig, or a deer.

The thought of Vin with *beri beri* on the eve of the imminent Japanese attack spurred me on to recovery; but the Japanese still waited, quietly continuing their massacre of the smallholders, and we soon started wishing that they would come and put an end to everyone's worries once and for all. A new party of Communists had joined us from the west and one of this group, called Ah San, had been put in charge of our plantation; he was a kind man and did what he could to ameliorate Vin's condition. He suggested that

we moved from the hut lying in a hollow where we had been, to the one he shared with three other men, as he thought it would be higher and quieter for us. We were only too delighted to escape from our dark hut where we both had horrible memories of fever and near-starvation at the hands of "our friend". Looking back I wonder if the change of hut was a good thing after all, as Vin almost immediately started asthma on top of all his other complaints. He had never suffered from it before and as the new hut stood in a plantation of tapioca it is quite possible that he was allergic to it. Another snag about our new hut soon presented itself: it was much farther from the river and Vin was now quite unable to reach the water to wash even if he had wanted to, as his legs were too enormous to function properly. We were also further from the edge of the jungle which acted as the latrine and, to cap it all, we both started dysentry! The women in the camp boiled up huge tins of water for me and I then washed Vin like a baby and took his clothes away as often as I could muster the strength to wash them. Poor Vin was quite helpless by now and he turned to me like a sick child to his mother.

Although I was feeling much better, I had to be careful to do everything very slowly or else another attack of fever presented itself. Lao Chuang sent for me one day to see him at Number One Plantation and asked, looking searchingly at me through his pebble lenses, whether I would start my music lessons again. My mouth went dry as it always did when confronted by Lao Chuang, and I asked if I might be excused duties a little longer until I felt stronger; Lao Chuang gave a suspicion of a smile and told me to go back and rest and try to regain strength. I tottered back through the jungle to Number Three and then promptly had another attack of fever as the result of my exertions of the day.

February and March passed while more and more

refugees came into the plantations and people suspected of being members of the *Min Yuen* were killed by the hundreds. Suddenly the main attack started; the Japanese came from every side, from Kuantan, Batu Sawah, Panching, Kemaman and Chukai, and they converged on all the plantations which were scattered over a wide area, the Riau valley having been completely evacuated by the guerillas. The enemy only used their best troops for this offensive and in the last six months scouring the jungle for victims, they had learnt a great deal of jungle craft. Instead of employing Malay guides as they had always done before, to show them the well defended paths, and thereby giving the *Min Yuen* warning of their intentions, they pressed skilled woodmen into their service and made them cut new lanes through the jungle to the perimeter camps—this was quite easily achieved by a few skilled men armed with heavy *parangs*. It might seem incredible that the Japanese had not thought of using this method before, instead of following the established paths, but it must be remembered that they had hitherto only used Indian troops trained by Japanese officers, and loss of their lives by mines and anti-personnel bombs, hidden on the paths, was of little consequence. After days of slow and arduous going, the Japanese infantry, torn by thorns and attacked by leeches and mosquitoes, were in amongst us and no one knew from what direction they might come. The remnants of the *Min Yuen* gallantly did their best to warn us of enemy troop movements, but it was almost impossible for them to know where they would strike next.

The only measure that the Communist Command could take was to arm every able-bodied man with rifles and shot guns, ancient and modern, and let them fight it out whenever an attack was launched. All the noncombatants in the plantations were supplied with iron rations, which were little more than a handful of sweet potatoes and some tapioca, and told to vanish into the jungle at the first sign of

trouble; the sufferings of these people were terrible as party after party of them fell into Japanese hands and were slaughtered on sight. Before each camp was attacked by infantry, planes pounded them with high explosives and incendiaries which in themselves were not able to do much damage as targets were elusive with everyone hiding in the jungle and only a few huts visible from the air; such fires as were started were soon extinguished as the jungle itself is far too wet and full of rotting vegetation to burn easily. The planes then returned and machine gunned the people while they were trying to put the fires out. After that softening-up process, the infantry came in: Number Three Plantation was the last of the six established ones to be attacked and in every case the destruction was complete. The guerillas were outnumbered twenty to one and hopelessly outclassed in weapons; those, who were not killed in the battle, had no alternative but to flee while the enemy set alight to everything that would burn and dug up what would not. Flames leapt higher and higher in the plantations until the huts in each hundred and fifty acre clearing were blazing infernos, but as before, when the fire reached the wall of jungle, the flames sizzled, hissed and licked round the damp black boles of the trees until they went out.

News reached us through the *Min Yuen* before our plantation was attacked and Ah San came to our hut and said with polite understatement that as neither of us was well, he thought it better if we moved into the jungle before the shooting started: we agreed with alacrity. A small shelter was built for us and Vin managed to walk very slowly a short way through the jungle to it. At first he was more cheerful than I had seen him for a long time as we sat together in the new shelter, alone for the first time for more than a year.

'Nin, we'll be all right now we're alone at last. We managed jolly well before, you and I, didn't we?' I hadn't

the heart to remind him how different our circumstances were now; at any moment the Japanese might find and slaughter us, while our food supply was highly precarious.

We had not stayed more than two days in our new hide-out when a stream of more than two hundred non-combatants straggled past our hut in single file, and we found ourselves on a well worn trail. Realising that we were no longer safely hidden, the Commander sent help to move us farther into the jungle, and we were left under a large tree, while the men searched for a suitable place to build another shelter. As Vin and I sat on a cushion of mahogany coloured leaf mould, we could hear gunfire on all sides while a steady torrent of rain penetrated the roof of tree-tops above us and drenched us to the skin. At regular intervals a wild animal crashed through the jungle and passed near us and in those few hours we saw more tapirs, deer and wild boar than we had seen in the whole of our time in the jungle: all the firing had upset every wild animal in the vicinity and set it charging panic-stricken away from the fighting. During the months that we had lived alone under Cheng Kam's care we had done nothing to disturb the peace around us, and we had observed that the jungle creatures lived by a rigid time-table. It was almost possible to set one's watch by the animals' activities; they ate at certain times, they rested at others, and always at midday a brooding silence would fall for an hour or more.

On this day there was no peace, and animals and birds were continually on the move, striving to escape from the terror that surrounded them. Fortunately, one of the wild boar passed very close to a band of our soldiers and in no time at all a messenger came running through the jungle to us, carrying a large piece of roast pork; he was grinning from ear to ear because for him, as for us, it was the first proper meal for weeks, and food had become the most

important thing in our lives. Vin and I gobbled up the freshly killed meat without giving a thought to its effects on our dysentery-torn insides, and the results were quite disastrous. As first one of us and then the other had to leave the shelter of our tree and disappear into the undergrowth, we began to get the giggles.

'Are you off again?' was the taunt, and for that night, in the face of almost certain death, we were curiously happy and contented, lying alone under our tree. As long as we were together, we felt we could stand anything that might happen.

The following morning four men arrived at our tree and moved us nearer to where the plantation workers had spread themselves out in small groups, so that we would not lose touch with them: it was then that we heard that the Japanese had scored a total victory. For the best part of a week our resting-place was changed almost hourly in an endeavour to evade enemy search parties that were operating on every side. The soldier who brought us our food had nothing but gloomy news to report, except to tell us how a party of Japanese troops had been sheltering in a hut on one of the plantations when one of the guerillas lobbed a few grenades among them.

'Bits of Japanese are draped all over the surrounding trees,' he told us in high glee.

As the Japanese intensified their search for those hiding in the jungle, it soon became impossible for the plantation workers from Number Three to continue taking us with them; apart from Vin's enfeebled state which necessitated his being carried everywhere in a blanket, I had been bitten on my leg which had swollen up and become so painful that I could barely walk on it. The Chinese built us another hut in the thickest part of the jungle they could find, and promised to keep us supplied with food from time to time. Unfortunately the hut was built on the side of a hill and

whenever it rained, which it did constantly during that time, the water flowed through our hut as though it was a river-bed, and we were too weak to dig a drain to carry it away, even if we had had more than a *parang* to do it with. We had no sleeping platform and so were forced to lie on the muddy floor at the mercy of the rainwater: it reminded me all too poignantly of the hut by the waterfall which the old men had built for us months before.

There was ample firewood even though it was saturated with rain, but we were not allowed to light a fire in the day in case the smoke attracted the attention of the enemy. I wanted to build another hut away from the water course, but my leg was getting steadily worse and I was soon only able to propel myself about on my behind; from my knee to my ankle became one long suppurating sore once the swelling had burst, and the stench from it was appalling. To add to our troubles the man who had been bringing us food each day fell ill, and we went days without receiving further supplies. Vin was far too weak to move and as his dysentery was getting steadily worse, he had no option but to lie in his own excreta; I on the other hand was just able to roll outside the hut to relieve myself.

By then I had resigned myself to death, in fact I looked on it as a welcome release from our miseries, except that it made me sad to think that my mother would never know how we died. The contentment we had felt that night we spent under a tree had soon ebbed away, and Vin and I lay in silence on the floor of the hut. One morning I felt a tickling sensation on my leg and when I looked I found to my horror that the wound was a mass of writhing twisting maggots, and I let out a cry of revulsion: it was as though part of me was already dead and putrefying. Vin turned his head to see what was the matter, but I hid the revolting sight of the maggots from him, more out of shame than anything else. The maggots were not however such a bad

thing as I had thought because after consuming vast quantities of pus, they all vanished in the course of a day or two taking with them several layers of skin stretching from my knee to ankle. There were two deep holes in the raw expanse of flesh and when I poured water into the higher one to clean the wound, it immediately gushed out of the lower one. The disappearance of the maggots made me feel better because I felt that it was a sign that my body was doing its best to repair its own tissue. Our water supply had run out by then, and I decided to make what seemed an endless journey on my behind to the spot where the Chinese had dug a waterhole for us. They had told us that they had marked the trees leading to it but unfortunately all the marks were invisible from my sitting position, and I took ages to find it; it was the only occasion I can remember feeling nervous of the jungle which seemed, as I dragged myself along on my bottom, to be watching me with a thousand eyes and to be waiting to pounce on me in some shape or form. The waterhole was just a tiny muddy pool surrounded by bamboos, and it lay still in the hot afternoon air until I broke its peace by dipping our tin into it. I nearly fell in in the process, and then had to face the return journey, which took even longer as I guarded against spilling a drop of my precious burden.

Vin was nearly out of his mind with anxiety when I returned; in his semi-delirious state he had imagined a score of awful fates overtaking me. We decided that my safe return called for a celebration so we found and smoked the last of our tobacco: the smoking soothed us miraculously, and we tried hard to laugh at our predicament.

For two days we lay still in our bed of mud and from time to time Vin would sit up and gasp painfully for breath as an attack of asthma came and went, after which I would bend over him and wipe his brow free of sweat. My eyes focused on the shiny black trunk of the tree outside the hut

and my mind refused to do anything but indulge in waves of nausea at the effects of our dysentery. One night Vin asked me to help him to turn over as the side he had been lying on for days had become quite raw. I did my best to push him over but I was so weak by then and my leg was so painful that I could not raise the purchase to move him and I fell back exhausted. Vin relied on me for everything now and in his low state my inability to help seemed to be deliberate.

'Darling, what's wrong? Why won't you help me? You've done so much for me up to now. Why are you turning against me now at the end?'

I broke down and cried hysterically.

'Vin darling, of course I would do anything for you but I can't move you, I haven't the strength.' We were half out of our minds with lack of food and exhaustion, and we fell asleep at last, both feeling very unhappy.

Early next morning Vin woke me:

'Nin, will you light me a fire, I'm perished with cold,' he was shivering all over from malaria.

'I'll do my best but we've only got two matches left and I'm afraid they're too wet to light.' Everything we had was saturated from the water running through the hut.

I took one of the two matches out of our bag and rubbed it against my cheek, a method which we had found dried matches very effectively, but the head was so soft and wet when I tried to strike it, it only tore a strip off the side of the matchbox and lost most of its head. I was then left with only one match and I did not dare risk using that.

'Vin, we'll have to wait until later in the day to give the match time to dry out.' It had rained heavily in the night but a hot sun was already punching a few rays through the foliage.

Vin looked at me with feverish sunken eyes which sent pains like hot needles through my heart:

'Nin, I'm heartbroken you won't light me a fire. It's the only thing I want and you won't do it for me.'

'Darling, I can't yet, if we waste our last match, then we will have nothing.' I lay down beside him and tried to warm his shivering body which was wrapped in a sodden blanket; as his shivering stopped, his legs started twitching and he kicked me several times on my bad leg so that I let out a cry:

'Vin, don't, you are hurting me,' but he did not answer and his legs continued to twitch violently. I then realized that he was unconscious, which he had never been before even in his worst attacks of fever. Bending over him, I could only see the whites of his eyes showing. Terrified, I put my blanket over him and rubbed his hands, calling to him all the time, but the horrible stillness of death had settled on him except for fitful gusts of breathing which escaped from his half open mouth.

I determined to stake all on my last match which I had put in its box inside my shirt hoping that the warmth of my body would dry it. I first built a tiny fire of the driest twigs I could find, and placed a small piece of rubber ready which was to act as a firelighter. I then faced the crucial moment, would the match light? I rubbed both the match and the box gently against my cheek, and struck the match as cautiously as I could; it lit and I soon had the piece of rubber burning long enough to light the damp sticks.

'Look, darling,' I cried, turning to Vin, 'I've got a lovely fire burning,' but he was far beyond the sound of my voice.

Trying desperately to keep back the dry sobs which would tear at my throat, I put some water on to heat and then tried to pour some of it down Vin's throat to warm him, but the liquid simply dribbled down from the corners of his mouth. I threw myself down close to him and held him in my skinny arms trying to warm him. It was not long before one of the Chinese arrived with some food

and, before he saw Vin's still figure, he told me excitedly about how the Japanese had been chasing them for days on end but had now withdrawn from the entire region; he waved a piece of pork in the air telling me that the soldiers had killed another wild pig that morning. He caught sight of Vin and watched his slow, fitful breathing; he shook his head and walked back the way he came. As I pressed tightly against Vin, he suddenly gave a deep sigh and stopped breathing. I sat bolt upright and let out a piercing yell which echoed round and round the jungle wall and set up a raucous chatter from the monkeys. I dragged myself away from his body and lay on the other side of the hut; it is a measure of my stunned weakened state of mind that I was able to sit by the dead body of the person I loved best in the world, and eat slowly and deliberately the piece of pork which the Chinese had brought that morning.

I watched apathetically the arrival of four Chinese led by Ah King who was in charge of all the sick from our plantation, and with a stab of horror I saw that they were carrying *changkols*, the Malayan hooked spade.

'What news, Pai Naa?'

'He's dead,' I did not move or look at Ah King, who pulled the blanket back from Vin's face and then beckoned the others to start digging a hole. With dumb misery I saw the wet black soil, threaded with sinuous roots, pile up beside the hole and, almost admiringly, I watched the rhythmical movement of their bodies as they swung their *changkols*. It was only when the digging ceased and they turned towards Vin's body that I became hysterical: as they unwrapped the blanket and started to move him, hardly knowing what I was doing I seized hold of one of his hands and held on grimly, screaming that they must not take him away from me. One of the Chinese took hold of me roughly and forced me away from the corpse, making me sit down in the far corner of the hut, but I dragged myself

after them and stared at Vin as they laid him in the hole which was already damp with water seeping in from the saturated ground. It is odd what trivial things stay in one's mind on these terrible occasions; I remember noticing how the ulcer on his leg which had so often given him trouble in the old days at Sungei Lembing, had completely healed up. I looked for a brief tantalisingly painful second at his face and saw that it had miraculously lost its shrunken lined look and was at peace. The earth fell on him and, for a moment, I felt glad that he was being buried in the land which he loved best.

After the Chinese had finished treading down the black oozy soil on the grave, Ah King turned to me and said:

'Pai Naa, you stay here until tomorrow, then we will fetch you: we will leave you plenty of food and water.'

The thought of remaining another minute alone in that ghastly hut alongside Vin's grave was so appalling that I stormed and raved at them, demanding that they took me away.

'But, Pai Naa,' Ah King said, genuinely puzzled by my frantic outburst, 'you've been here for over a week, why should another day, only one more day, be so bad?' It was typically Chinese that they could see nothing odd in my staying there alone.

Seeing my state of mind, they finally agreed to take me with them as long as I could walk: so grasping a stick given me by Ah King, I tried, for the first time, to put my weight on the bad leg, but after one step I collapsed, while the pus fairly poured out of the two holes in my leg. Taking one of the blankets which Vin had been wrapped in, they laid me on it and carried me to where they were all hiding. I closed my eyes tightly as we left the hut, wishing to blot out all memories of the miserable place.

CHAPTER TEN

AFTER THEIR DEVASTATING attack, the Japanese had withdrawn from the entire area, having destroyed all the plantations except for Number Seven which, being the newest and most hidden, had not been discovered by them. I learnt from my companions that both Lao Lee and Lao Chuang had survived the onslaught and had gone north to the nearest point on the Trengganu border where they hoped to find a large aboriginal settlement. They intended to enlist the help of these tribesmen in clearing a jungle site for a new headquarters. Messengers were already scouring the jungle, rallying the scattered remnants of the guerillas. These people's spirit to resist was quite unbeaten: Lao Lee, their Captain, was alive so they had fresh hope.

Ah King and his followers were anxious to join their leaders and so in view of my dangerously weak state they decided to leave me in the charge of a Chinese called Ah Bun. A small shelter was built for me, complete with a four-foot sleeping platform made of small sticks which were excruciatingly uncomfortable for my bony frame and too short to allow me to lie flat, but I was at least able to lie out of the sea of mud. Ah Bun erected another shelter for himself which was near at hand but modestly concealed from view by a screen of ferns and long leaved bushes.

For days on end I lay under the palm leaf roof and stared

at the patterns of the sunlight on the leaves outside the hut. At first I felt nothing except a wish to die and escape from the misery that surrounded me; I still had acute dysentery and much of my time, when I was not lying on my back, was spent dragging myself a little way from the hut to relieve the calls of nature. My leg was gradually healing but it was still red and raw from the knee downwards and a steady stream of stinking pus kept escaping from the two holes. At least I was now able to wash and wear clean clothes, as Ah Bun brought me a large tin of water and took away my filthy rags to wash them. No woman could have been kinder to me than this simple, smiling Chinese. He scoured far and wide for food, scratching in the soil of the devastated plantation nearby for any chance sweet potatoes he could find; he was also quite a successful fisherman, bringing me small fish which he roasted over a fire; sometimes he found a young turtle which was rich in minerals—I must have been sadly lacking in them—and which made a most delicious stew. Ah Bun also gave me any rice he had—an act of great unselfishness by a Chinese.

Gradually my apathy wore off and Vin's death became real to me, and I cried and cried until there were no tears left to weep with; then I began to torture myself with fears and regrets. Remembering Vin's dread of being buried alive, a growing doubt took root in my mind that he had not been dead after all when they buried him; after all they had thought the Chinese was dead who had stopped breathing at Number Three, but who had been brought back to life by Ah King slapping his face. This fear preyed on my mind to such an extent that I several times dragged myself out of the hut to start making my way back to where Vin was buried until I came to my senses and realized how light-headed I was being. I finally began to reassure myself on this score, telling myself that he had obviously been dead because Ah King had certainly had no doubts, but other

self-tortures took its place. Why hadn't I tried a bit harder to move Vin over on to his other side as he had asked me the night before he died? It was easy to ignore afterwards how weak I was and to think that if I had used a little more willpower I might have been able to turn him over. Why hadn't I risked the second match when he asked for a fire? It was cruel of me not to have done more for him just before he died: if only I had known that he was on the point of death, but being with him constantly I had been unable to see that he was worse than he had been for some time. As I lay there, I thought of his loving kindness to me and branded myself as a callous brute, as I remembered how patient he had been for so long. When I recovered from this wave of self-recriminations, I began to think of the extent to which Vin had dedicated his life to the mine and the community there and how pathetic it was that all his dreams and plans should end so sadly. One thing did not disturb me and that was Vin's burial in unconsecrated ground: he had never been a great believer in orthodox religions and he used to say:

'When I'm dead, that's that, and it doesn't matter a damn what happens to my body.' I knew that he would be glad to be buried in the earth of the jungle.

One day two messengers arrived from Lao Lee, saying how sorry he had been to hear of my brother's death and that he would come and see me as soon as he could; he sent word that Lao Fong had been executed as a traitor, obviously hoping that this news would cheer me up, but with Vin dead it was too late. The messengers told me a long garbled story about how incriminating papers had been found in Lao Fong's hut which suggested that he had been in touch with the enemy; but I never believed that story, because I knew that he was far too fanatical a Communist to be a traitor to the cause; it was much more likely that he had

started throwing his weight about with Lao Lee and had gone too far.

In spite of my despair, I began to feel stronger; the better food which Ah Bun faithfully brought me was having its effect, although my dysentery gave me no peace. My frame of mind also started to improve as I realized that if I died there would be nobody to tell my mother about Vin's death: I had to get back to her one day. I thought, too, of the few precious possessions I still had; bits of jewellery which Vin had given me, and I could not bear the thought of them being taken and sold to strangers for a few *katis* of food. I grew quite truculent as I began to feel better; the Japanese had been responsible for Vin's death, but I was not going to let them murder me as well. And then my old feeling of pride came to my rescue in the face of the courage and endurance of the Chinese; I was not going to let the Communists think that we could not stand as much as they could. I cried less and sometimes saw the funny side to my antics as I dragged myself along the well-worn path to my private latrine.

After a time word came from the Leaders that I was to be moved to Number Seven Plantation where the rest of the sick had been collected. Two men carried me for an hour or two in a blanket to the plantation and I was so unaccustomed by then to movement of any kind that I was twice seasick on the way. An enormous tree lay across our path at one juncture and its branches formed a labyrinth through which we had to pass; it was impossible to carry me so I was dragged through by one of the Chinese while the other pushed me from behind like a cleaning rod through a gun, in the course of which a long strip was torn off my back. My two carriers were living skeletons, naked except for thin blue cotton trousers rolled up to the knee, and old frayed rush hats; every now and again they would

put me down and sigh heavily—fortunately for them dysentery had reduced me to a very meagre weight.

On arriving at Number Seven, I was put in a hut near the edge of the jungle with three other women who were in charge of the sick: I was not placed in the large hut which served as a hospital because it was thought that if an attack took place, I would only have to limp a few yards before I reached some dense cover to hide in. I had begun to hobble about with a stick and, as I felt more robust, I became more and more revolted by my condition. Dysentery kept me constantly on the move and being severely hampered by my bad leg, I often failed to reach the jungle floor in time; added to the degrading fact of fouling my clothes, a rain of evil-smelling pus still poured from the wound on my leg. One morning I noticed that my hands and legs were swelling ominously and I immediately recognized the dreaded *beri beri* from which so many people were dying in the camp; a day or two later I found that I could not button my trousers up as my stomach was beginning to be affected also. Cheng Kam's words before his wife had died in 1942 came back to me: "once it gets to the stomach, you're done for". But by then I did not want to die and I revolted against the idea, practising the Coué treatment—"Everyday and in everyway I'm getting better and better", and did my best to imagine that I was!

One day Lao Lee arrived in the camp, and his smiling face did more to raise my morale than anything else could have done; although he looked thinner and older, his spirit was quite unbroken. He shook his head sadly over Vin's death and when he had made suitable remarks of sympathy he told me that Pai Kher's death was being kept a secret from the outside world as news of it would have an adverse effect on many people's morale in Sungei Lembing; also what he left unsaid was the fact that without Vin's presence in the jungle to dangle before the eye of the rich *towkays*,

the East Pahang branch of the Communist Party would find their supply of funds drying up. To do Lao Lee justice, I believe that he was genuinely sad at Vin's death, apart from these other considerations.

'Pai Naa,' he said staring at my swollen limbs, 'we must get rid of this *beri beri*. When I was a boy in China, people were given peanuts to cure this sickness and we'll try them on you.' Then looking as solemn as he was ever capable of doing, he went on:

'Now you must eat nothing but peanuts and you must drink the water they're cooked in, every drop of it, and no salt must be added to them.'

I was willing enough to try anything which might cure me but my resolve was soon put to a severe test when I found that peanuts, once they are cooked, turn into a grey sludge and taste like putty. I soldiered on for a week with my diet until I could bear it no longer and when the women brought my bowlful on the eighth day, I flung it out of the hut down the slope; the women were horrified and hurried off to report my bad conduct to Lao Lee, who, when he saw me, laughed until his sides ached and tears poured down his cheeks:

'Pai Naa, the *beri beri* has gone, perhaps it went several days ago and you need not have kept on with the peanuts.' We both dissolved into giggles and I felt immensely better. Lao Lee always did me good as I could never stay serious for long in his company.

Both Lao Lee and Lao Chuang were working frantically during those days to build the new headquarters which was being placed near Number Seven Plantation: the Leaders were filled with zeal for rebuilding their camps again. Until headquarters was finished, I remained at Number Seven and for several weeks I did not stir far from the hut because my leg was still so painful; lying in bed was no joy either because after the *beri beri* vanished, I burst out in a group of

enormous boils all over my back, groin and stomach so that it was soon impossible to find any position in which I could lie with comfort. I had a lot of visitors who would come and squat in the hut and stare at me, repeating my name from time to time, out of politeness: they were paying official calls on the sick. One day a gang of boys came to see me, many of whom I had taught to sing, and they all sat round my bed in a large circle, staring at me; I was very embarrassed but the more I tried to think of something to say the less I could find to talk about. After a suitable period had elapsed, they each said 'Pai Naa' in turn and then tore off into the sunlight after their leader, a boy of twelve. The children in the camps were very independent, doing a variety of chores like a body of scouts led by an appointed leader.

From the doorway of my hut, I could see down the slope of the plantation to the river and, as I sat lethargically on my bed, I would watch with amusement a constant procession of people going down to the latrine at the riverside; there was of course no paper in the jungle so that everyone had recourse to leaves and one soon learnt wisdom as to which leaves to avoid as many had a row of formidable spikes down their midribs or were covered with fine and irritating hairs. Looking down on the long file of Chinese, I could see them fingering the leaves on the bushes and small trees as they went along and already the undergrowth near the pathway was completely stripped of foliage. If one was wise, one discovered a tree with suitable leaves some distance away and marked it for one's own use, hoping that no one else would find it. Ah King made regular poultices from certain types of leaves for my leg and the pus gradually dried up so that I was soon able to walk about more freely. I was then moved to the large hut nearer the river, where thirty or forty sick people were living: some had great swollen bellies from *beri beri*, while others had large jungle

sores which spread over their bodies, and all were suffering from malnutrition. Many of them had lost all interest in life and just lay staring at the roof, never speaking or complaining.

I was asked one day if I could walk to the new headquarters which was almost finished, and I hobbled there with great difficulty through the jungle, taking two hours to do a twenty minute journey. I was put in a hut with the other women in the camp, where we all lay on long wooden beds. I woke up in the middle of the first night to find myself hemmed in on all sides by Chinese women who were lying beside me, on top of me and across me; when I protested, feeling both claustrophobic and apprehensive for my leg, the women were very surprised:

'But Pai Naa, surely you are used to sleeping with several other people in a bed. We have never slept with less than six or seven others in the same bed.' I explained as tactfully as I could that I was not quite so used to sleeping underneath a number of other women as they were, and my peculiarity in this respect was put down to my bad leg, so that I was allowed to sleep the next night at the end of the platform where I was out of harm's way. Though scrupulously honest about big things, my companions were a little tiresome over small items: for instance I had been given a pagoda-like straw hat to use as an umbrella when it rained, but I was never able to wear it because someone else always seemed to have borrowed it when I wanted it.

Soon after I moved to headquarters, Sam Swee Tuck, who had worked in the electrical department at Sungei Lembing and whom I had seen with Fonseca in the house outside Kuantan, arrived from the town. The Japanese had become suspicious that he and Fonseca were working a wireless set, and the two men had decided to escape into the jungle before the secret police arrested them. Fonseca had not turned up at their rendezvous so that Sam Swee

Tuck had been forced to make his way to the Communist camp alone; for some days he hoped that Fonseca would arrive, until news reached us that he had been arrested at the power house in Kuantan and tortured to make him reveal where his wireless set was hidden, but the brave man had died refusing to divulge his secret. We were very sad to hear this news as we were both fond of this shy, retiring little man who had proved himself so loyal to the British cause.

There was feverish activity at headquarters which daily grew more like the one at Sungei Riau; an enormous site was cleared of trees and undergrowth for a parade ground, and the aborigines were used for tree felling at which they are experts, being able to drop a tree between two huts set closely together, without any difficulty. I made up my mind that I must not allow myself to think about the past or the future as I had only to dwell for a moment on Vin's death and a wave of misery would sweep over me from which it was hard to escape. For this reason I found myself a job at the earliest opportunity and kept myself as occupied as possible, which had the added advantage that I was able to claim an extra meal in the middle of the day instead of having to go from breakfast until late afternoon without anything. I also wanted to join fully in the life of the community in a way I had not been able to do while Vin was alive. As far as I knew then I might be condemned to live with them for the rest of my life and I felt that I might just as well make the best of it; by completely adapting myself to their ways; apart from that, I did feel a debt of gratitude towards those who had saved my life. I found that I was quite able to pull up weeds and small bushes on the parade ground while sitting down, moving myself about on my bottom. For variety's sake alone, as I hated doing them, I used to sit in front of a mountain of sweet potatoes and peel

them: this was a necessary chore because we ate about one and a half hundredweight at each meal.

It was while I was peeling these potatoes one day that I looked up and saw the serious-minded Lao Chuang staring intently at me through his pebble lenses. I never got over my nervousness of this cold, silent man and certainly my peeling deteriorated under his stare. After a while he spoke to me in his quiet voice:

'Pai Naa, I am sure we can find something better than this for you to do.' He went on to tell me that he had decided to start an English language newspaper for the benefit of all those Malays and Indians, and even Chinese, in the province who could not read the Communist leaflets in Chinese characters, and he asked me to help edit it with Sam Swee Tuck, under the direction of Ah San. Ah San was a rabid Communist and left to him the paper would have contained news of nothing but Russian victories, but I was fortunate in finding a new source of untainted information. At this time Lao Lee, who was desperately short of arms, had heard that British soldiers, part of the famous Force 136, were being dropped by parachute in various parts of Malaya and he made great efforts to find them: unfortunately none of the soldiers was dropped in the wild Eastern part where we were, as it was beyond the range of the planes, but he did learn of an American who had been dropped a hundred miles off course, complete with a receiving set, a long way from our camp; Lao Lee sent patrols off to contact him, and it was from him that I received the latest news, although the messages he sent me often took days and sometimes weeks to reach me. I was so keen to keep Britain's end up in competition with the editor, who proclaimed that Russia was winning the war single-handed, that I made a habit of poohpoohing any bad news relayed to us from the American: I dismissed the V.1 and V.2 as enemy propaganda and I quickly explained away

the Ardennes counter-offensive as the last kick of a dying animal. Another means of gleaning material for our paper which entirely met with Ah San's approval, was to read the Japanese issued newspapers and print the exact opposite to everything they claimed, and generally we were right.

All the office equipment which had been at Sungei Riau and subsequently kept on one of the plantations, had been hidden during the Japanese attack, and was now brought out of hiding. The duplicator was fully engaged by the constant flood of Chinese leaflets that were sent out, and I was given the use of a typewriter which Reg Lowther had brought out with him. Ribbons were very scarce and so the technical difficulties in producing "The Democracy Series" were enormous. Sometimes we had ribbons and no carbons and each one of the fifty copies would have to be typed separately; other times we had no ribbons but plenty of carbons so that the leaflet had to be typed blind, five copies at a time, and we hoped that there would not be too many mistakes when we came to inspect it. There were times too when we had nothing but paper and I was reduced to writing each leaflet by hand.

The first edition was sent on its rounds in January 1945 and almost immediately Sam Swee Tuck went down with malaria so that Ah San and I were left to manage on our own. Lao Lee took an enthusiastic interest in the paper and although he could not read a word of it, he insisted on scrutinizing the contents most carefully and praising me for my turn of phrase. I was deeply honoured when I received instructions from the Leaders to step up production from fifty to seventy copies. I had now returned to my singing classes and never a dawn broke when I did not lead the singing of the Red Flag in front of the three-starred flag. On one occasion, soon after I had started editing the paper, the man who usually called me to the music class did not

summon me for several days, and when I eventually inquired why it was, he replied:

'Oh but Pai Naa, you looked so busy. I didn't think it would be convenient for you.'

Such respect was quite unknown between the Chinese in the camp and this incident was the only trace that I came across in the Communist camps, of the old feeling among the Asiatics for the superiority of the white races.

We had our concerts every Sunday in a large wooden hall, with a mighty palm-thatch roof more than thirty feet high at its centre, which was one of the first buildings to be put up at the new headquarters; a stage stood at one end with enormous pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse Tung hanging on the wall at the back. Some of the songs we used at the concerts had been written by Vin, including one which described the guerillas' successes against the Japanese and set to the tune of "Old Macdonald had a Farm": "Moo-moo here and a moo-moo there" became *satu kaki sini, satu kaki sana*, which meant one leg (Japanese) here and one leg there, and referred to the successful destruction by grenades of a Japanese staff car: this song never failed to bring the house down. I myself was always expected to climb on to the stage and sing a few solos. Roars of applause greeted my arrival on the stage and my respectful salutation of the Communist hierarchy hanging on the wall; but it was never the custom for the audience to applaud much after anyone's performance, so that one never knew if one's own renderings had been a success or not until the following Sunday when one's name might have been studiously left out of the list of artistes posted on the board. I shall never know why I was always asked to sing in English, as no one could understand it, but they loved "Drink to me only", "Annie Laurie", "Old Man River" and, of course, the favourite, "Old Macdonald had a Farm". Sometimes I took the opportunity of showing

them how I thought the songs I taught them should be sung, but this was too much like lessons and was not really popular. At these concerts, Lao Lee was always glad to do a clown's act: he would start off singing without a hint of the right tune until he would catch my eye and then would dissolve into laughter; soon the whole audience would be rolling about the hall with mirth. Lao Lee was never afraid to lose face by indulging in a bit of fun, while Lao Chuang on the other hand studiously avoided making any public exhibition of himself. Plays were also acted in which the Japanese were invariably worsted by the brave Chinese.

On occasions such as Lenin's birthday we had to produce a special Party article, and I once wrote a long one on the early life of Lenin without having any idea of the real facts: Ah San told me the main points and was delighted with the result. The Press Department was a cheerful place and we were always busy; we often worked all through the night in order to get out some special news. There were eventually six of us working there and laughter and chatter were continuous. One of the assistants flattered me one day:

'If a prize were given for hard work, Pai Naa would get it every time. She's always working.

'Perhaps so,' I replied to everyone's amusement, 'but then you see I can't speak enough Chinese to talk all the time.' The Chinese are inveterate talkers, especially that particular young man.

I came to have a great affection for Ah San despite the fact that his mecca was Moscow and he revered every word that Stalin uttered. Although he was really a very sick man suffering continually with severe bouts of fever, he never gave way to them and he would sit working away in the office with a high temperature and a bright yellow face. He was always trying to improve the amenities of the camp, arranging games and wrestling matches whenever he could, to break the monotony of the evenings. The whole camp

was expected to do certain seasonal chores like taking maize off the cob after harvest and, on these occasions, Ah San made sure that he worked with the rest of us. I remember once as we all sat round a vast golden pile of grain, I ran my hand through it letting a stream of grain fall through my fingers and I turned to Ah San and said:

'Isn't it beautiful?' He was the only Communist I could have said that to.

'Yes, they drop like the beads of sweat from the brow of the farmer who grew them.'

He was much better read than the other Leaders, and as he spoke reasonably good English, he was the only Chinese I could hold a conversation with. He told me how when he was a schoolboy in the Straits Settlements, his mother would give him money for his fares to school and how by walking instead, he had been able to save the money and buy books. He had fallen under the spell of Marx and Engels at quite an early age.

During the months that followed I saw to it that I never had a slack moment in which to sit and think: if I had nothing else to do, I would carry on with Vin's job and copy and enlarge maps, in a very amateur fashion, from an ancient Philips atlas. By not allowing myself to dwell on Vin's death or to speculate about the future, I avoided a great deal of unhappiness, but even so I suffered acutely from loneliness during those first few months after Vin's death: I had grown so close to him since we entered the jungle that losing him was like losing part of myself. Try as I might, I could not feel entirely one with the Chinese and it was about this time that a particularly horrible thing happened which only accentuated my feeling of separateness and isolation.

Since the building up of the new camps and plantations, the Leaders had brought in some pigs in an effort to feed the people; four old men were looking after them on one

of the plantations and one evening they were seen eating pork in the jungle by a small boy who, true to his Communist training, reported this crime against the community. The old men who were already suffering from acute indigestion were marched into headquarters at the point of the bayonet and brought before the Leaders. Most of the camp, including myself, were in bed by the time they arrived but a secret trial was immediately conducted in the concert hall: from my place at the end of the sleeping platform, I could see the great dark shape of the hut looming up into the sky while a faint light flickered from the stage. From what seemed to me to be hours, I listened to Lao Chuang's voice droning on while at intervals there would be the crack of the guards' rattans as they beat the old men who let out the most blood-curdling yells. At last when the wretched victims were on the point of losing consciousness, the trial stopped but the cries of the old men seemed to ring through my head for the rest of the night.

The following morning as I went down to wash in the river, I passed the four men who had been left tied to trees during the night, sagging inside their bonds. After breakfast everyone in the camp was summoned to form a great circle on the parade ground round the spot where the men were brought; one particularly sadistic Chinese, who had come over with Ah San from the Western group of guerillas, placed all the children including toddlers on the inside of the ring, so that they should miss none of the details of the tortures which were to follow. For hours on end the air was rent with screams of agony as red hot coals were placed against the feet and backs of the victims, and bamboo slivers were thrust up their fingernails; whenever one of the old men fainted, a bucket of cold water was hastily thrown over him to revive him. At long last, the Leaders ordered a party of soldiers to drag the men to the execution ground and dispatch them finally with bayonets.

I sat firmly at my typewriter during this grim ordeal, trying to concentrate on the latest issue of the paper but in fact fighting back a feeling of nausea and horror. The penalty for stealing food was known to be death and I could just see that the old men had to be killed, in view of the grave shortage of food, but the tortures not unnaturally struck me as being revoltingly cruel and unnecessary. And when a man was sent to bring me to join the gathering, I refused to go.

'But Pai Naa, Ah San has sent me to call you.'

'I don't care, you can tell him I'm not coming. I don't approve of the torturing that's going on. We don't,' I added rather sanctimoniously, 'do that sort of thing in England.'

The fact that the Chinese were able to look on such horrors with obvious enjoyment made me hate every one of them for some time after that: even Lao Liu (who had once told Vin and me, with tears streaming down his face, how a Chinese girl had been brutally raped by a Japanese soldier before his eyes) and who happened to be on a visit from his camp near Lembing, watched the torturing with evident relish. A day or two after the death of the old men, Ah San, who was quite aware of my disapproval, referred to the matter:

'Pai Naa, I think you did not like the way we treated those four criminals,' he suggested, looking slightly sheepish.

'No, I did not. I can quite see they had to die because that is the penalty for stealing food, but why did you have to torture them in that horrible way?'

'Because, Pai Naa, those men had committed a crime against the community which means they are traitors who might give us away to the enemy. We had to torture them to find out if anyone else was a traitor too.' So intense is the Communist philosophy that a simple crime committed by an individual, is interpreted as a major act of treachery

against the community: all I could do was to thank God for the benefits of a democracy.

The death of the offenders was not the end of the incident because it quickly transpired that one of the soldiers, a boy of about fifteen, who had been told to bayonet one of the victims, had refused to do so. This expression of finer feelings was looked upon with grave disapproval by the Leaders who called an immediate meeting of the whole camp in the concert hall. Lao Chuang, standing in front of the portraits of his masters, delivered a long speech, in icy tones, condemning the weakness and cowardice of the young soldier, and ended by ordering him to stand on the dais and confess his wrongdoing publicly. When this was done, Lao Chuang announced that the crime would be overlooked on this occasion but another show of degeneracy would be severely punished.

It is hardly surprising that this incident not only upset my peace of mind but made me feel more lonely than ever.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AT THE COMMUNIST headquarters at Sungei Riau, life had never been very disciplined, partly because, with the constant raids on the enemy and the danger of their major onslaught on the guerilla camps, there had been too little stability for a settled pattern of living: also, as I have mentioned earlier, our group was out of touch with the more doctrinaire Communists to the west. But in the new headquarters, where the influence of Leaders from other groups was much stronger and where life itself became more secure, a host of rules and regulations sprang up. In the early days, everyone including the Leaders lined up for and ate their food together in an atmosphere of ease, now the rank and file were strictly regimented. At the first whistle we formed up in a straight line and were counted off in groups of eight, each of which then doubled to the serving bench, bowl in hand, and, collecting their food, went and stood at a particular table until the second whistle blew, allowing people to eat. We were given ten minutes to devour the meal, after which another blast was the signal to leave the table and take our bowls down to the river to wash them up. The Leaders, on the other hand, came in when they wanted to and sat for long stretches at their table, laughing and talking amongst themselves: they also enjoyed very much better food than we did; such differences

between the privileges of the rank and file and those of the Leaders became increasingly marked as time went on. While before, Lao Lee and Lao Chuang had shared the same hut with several others including Vin and myself, they now slept in a special part of the office hut which was partitioned off and kept as the private preserve of the Leaders. This meant that I saw very much less of them and hardly ever had a chance to speak even to Lao Lee under the new conditions.

There was a strict segregation of the sexes and all love affairs were frowned upon by the Leaders who bracketed making love with opium smoking as being hopelessly decadent. A great deal of time was spent educating the children and adults; while in the early days all the instructors' attention had had to be focused on teaching the people, most of whom were illiterate, how to read and write, they were now able to concentrate on instilling Communist propaganda into their minds: it was a marvellous opportunity for the indoctrination of both young and old, which the Leaders were not slow to take advantage. About once a month we had a public holiday which was either a Russian holiday like Lenin's birthday or a Chinese one like the Double Seventh, the Seventh Day of the Seventh Month: and on these solemn occasions we were all given a great feast which was followed by endless tedious harangues in the concert hall. The Leaders repeated over and over again the slogans which were so familiar to us all, while we sat on very narrow benches which soon started cutting into the backs of our legs. The Chinese were particularly good at sitting for long periods at a time in a comatose state during which they took in very little of what was shouted at them. I, however, was much less patient during these ordeals and would become increasingly restless, slipping away as often as I decently could supposedly to answer the calls of nature; once alone in the jungle I would

try and redress the balance by singing the National Anthem at the top of my voice.

In September 1944, when the new headquarters was assuming an atmosphere of permanence and orderliness, we had celebrated a very special occasion. Up to that time we had not been officially incorporated into the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, but towards the end of August it was announced that our position had been recognized and that from henceforth we should be known as the 7th Regiment. September 7th was named as the feast day to mark this great honour and hunters were sent off to kill game for the pot, while carriers started a shuttle service to and from the outside world bringing in large quantities of pork, vegetables and rice, for on such a day our usual diet of sweet potatoes was not considered splendid enough. We feasted on rich food, cooked in oil, for two days and at the end of that time there were many, myself included, who wished they had not indulged so freely. Our stomachs were so accustomed to near starvation that they rebelled strongly against the sudden demands that were made upon them, and for a time we took no interest in any food at all.

At the beginning of June word reached us from the American, after considerable delay, that the German war was over: we worked, in a state of great excitement, throughout the night to produce a special announcement. Lao Lee had recently acquired a large store of stencils and another Roneo from a deserted rubber estate, so I was allowed to stencil my version. We had no correcting fluid so the stencils were run off complete with typing errors, but who cared about that. Our plain clothed messengers set off early next day for Kuantan; soon the whole district knew the glad tidings, long before the Japanese made their proclamation to the effect that, although they had lost an important ally, it would make no difference to the Pacific war, which had already been won, and no force on earth

could alter the course of their Co-Prosperity Plan. I was so overjoyed by the news that not even the fact that most of the credit in our newspaper had been given to the Russians worried me very much: I would soon find an opportunity in a later issue to redress the balance.

Lao Lee still led the soldiers off on raids against the Japanese, but it must be confessed that for the past year or two he had never been very successful: in the early days of the occupation, the Japanese had been ill-prepared for guerilla attacks which usually caught them by surprise, and Lao Lee's tremendous courage had paid off handsomely; but very soon the enemy had organized effective resistance against chance attacks, and Lao Lee who was no strategist and was unable even to read a map, was often outwitted by them. If anything went wrong to foil his original plan of action, he was completely at a loss. The Japanese also kept up their attacks on the camps although they never again launched an all-out offensive against the Communists, and in the later stages they went back to using mostly Indian and Malay troops. It was this fact which prompted Ah San to decide that I should go out and paint slogans in Malay on the trees around the camps when an attack started, appealing to the Indians and Malays to desert from the Japanese side and enlist with the guerillas. This proved an abortive plan as the paint refused to adhere to the newly barked trunks of the trees.

In a further effort to convince the Malays that the Japanese were losing the war, Ah San started an issue of our paper in *Jawi* script so that all the Malays, who could not understand our English number, would be able to read of the Allied victories. Two Malays, who were the first I had seen since coming into the jungle, were brought into the camp to help me, and I did my best to transcribe the news, making use of the little *Jawi* I had learnt from Vin. I shall never forget the moment when I finished the first issue after days

of hard work, because I had hardly laid it down with a heavy sigh, when we all heard a tremendous roaring noise in the jungle; it sounded as though express trains were approaching the camp from every direction and trees groaned and splintered while millions of leaves swept over the parade ground. I knew that a typhoon was approaching and felt utterly helpless, remembering as I did the scene of devastation near Jerantut when one had struck a piece of jungle and uprooted every tree in a swath a mile wide. I flattened myself on the parade ground and watched, out of the corner of my eye, the trees round the camp bending right over until their tops touched the ground; roofs were lifted off the huts and clothing, blankets and office equipment were swept away, many of them being blown to the tops of trees; some turtles awaiting cooking for the Leaders' supper and tied by the leg to a post, struggled free and escaped into the jungle in terror. After it was all over we set to work to retrieve our belongings, and the turtles whose tracks were followed. One of the Malays came up and announced with a broad grin, 'That paper, Pai Naa, the wind has taken it': I could have hit him.

Our propaganda was not without effect and one group of Malay police at Cherating agreed to desert to the guerillas on a given night. The plan was that Lao Lee was to take a company of our troops and to mount an attack on the police station. As soon as the attack was launched the Malays promised to desert with their arms. As usual Lao Lee's plan miscarried and owing to a flooded river he was delayed. Nothing daunted and true to their promise the Malays set fire to the police station and decamped, complete with rifles; they met Lao Lee's party some distance away. Lao Lee was delighted; he took all the credit, and I must admit that he treated the Malays very shabbily. Instead of incorporating them into his forces he took their rifles away and gave them to the Chinese troops, sending the Malays to

work on one of the plantations. They very much resented what they considered to be their degradation, and when I saw some of them at the plantation they complained bitterly about their treatment, and considered that they had been robbed, instead of rewarded, for their gallantry. They were the more miserable because most of them had contracted malaria since their arrival. I had every sympathy with them and hoped that Lao Lee was not really responsible for this mean action but had been overruled by his political commissar, Lao Chuang.

During the first six months of 1945, I had settled down to a routine of such hard work that my mind had no time to wander and indulge in sorrows or fears. An event soon occurred, however, which upset my peace of mind even more than the deaths of the four old men had, a few months earlier. Shortly before we heard that the war in Europe had ended, an Indian, who had been a dresser in a hospital on a rubber estate, was discovered near our camp, ostensibly looking for herbs. He was brought before the Leaders, who asked him if he would give his promise to remain in the camp and help to look after the sick and wounded. Although a dresser holds no medical qualifications, he is usually very knowledgeable and, in the absence of a doctor, there is very little he cannot do himself. We were sorely in need of medical aid at that time as Lao Lee had recently made a disastrously unsuccessful expedition which had resulted in the death of several of our best soldiers, and the severe wounding of many others. Ah King and his women assistants were doing their best, but some of the more seriously wounded men were in urgent need of more skill than they possessed: the Indian dresser seemed like an answer to prayer. However he refused, point-blank, to give his word not to escape or to do anything to help; under no circumstances would he work for the Communists. Lao Chuang, Ah San and Lao Lee stormed at him, telling

him that, if he refused, all he could look forward to would be a bayonet in his stomach. Neither threats nor blandishments would make him change his mind. Finally, Ah San came to me and asked for my help:

'I don't think I've made myself understood, Pai Naa, my English is not good. You talk to him and persuade him to work for us, otherwise he will have to be killed. We can't keep him unless we are sure he will help us and we can't let him go; he may be a spy.' They were naturally reluctant to kill anyone who could be so useful to them.

I went over to the hut where the Indian was being kept a prisoner. I explained that many of the people in the camp were not Communists, including myself, and that no pressure was brought to bear to make one join the Party: while the war lasted, we were all fighting the common enemy. If he stayed in the camp, I pointed out, he had an opportunity of using his skill to help the sick, and would be serving humanity by using his special gifts. He listened to me with great respect, but he shook his head when I had finished: 'I cannot work for the Communists,' he said simply.

For several days I tried to reason with him, using every argument I could think of, and I finally implored him, for my sake, to stay and help us so that his life would be spared. At last I went sadly to Ah San and told him that I could not make him change his mind.

The execution was fixed for the following afternoon at the burial ground on the other side of the river, and, while I hid myself in the women's bathing place, the young soldier who had refused to use his bayonet against one of the old men, was ordered to kill the Indian in front of the whole camp. This time the boy did not fail his masters.

This incident had a profound effect on me: it was not only that I blamed myself for failing to save the life that had been put into my hands, it was also the fact that the Indian's

moral courage and steadfastness to his principles disturbed me. Until then I had never wondered what people outside would think of me for taking such an active part in the life and work of the camp. I had gone into the jungle with Vin because we did not want to run away, and circumstances beyond our control had brought us to the Communists. At first I had been obsessed by the wish to keep Vin alive, and this had then been replaced by the idea that I must at all costs survive, to see England again and to tell my family what had happened to Vin. Moreover there was my desire to prove to the Chinese that the British could endure as much as they could, and this had led me to seek to identify myself more and more closely with all that was going on, until I had become an accepted member of the community. It had soothed my injured pride to hear exclamations of admiration for my skill as a typist, as a teacher of singing and a drawer of maps, even though my ability in these directions was only great in comparison with the complete inability of my companions and was entirely due to the advantages in education that I had enjoyed. Now I became introspective and everything looked different: I imagined that, in spite of his respectful manner, I had seen contempt in the Indian's eyes, as he saw me as a tool of the Communists he hated.

I argued with myself that, after all, the Communists had been fighting the Japanese since the occupation of Malaya and, while Russia was on our side, they were our Allies, so that there could be nothing wrong in fighting alongside them. The propaganda work I was doing was anti-Japanese and what I wrote was better and far less pro-Communist than anything the Chinese would do; the singing was a means of cheering the spirits and keeping up the morale of those I was with, and the maps I drew were to help ignorant people to learn. Eventually, perhaps because I wanted so desperately to do so, I convinced myself that it was my

duty to live, and to live I must work. Since Vin's death it had become a greater necessity than ever to keep myself occupied: the impossibility of forecasting the length of time that we must stay in the jungle forced me to shut my mind to hopes and plans for the future—that way madness lay—and it was only by concentrating on each job as it came along and doing it as well as I could, that I could keep myself sane and moderately contented. Gradually I stifled my conscience and settled back into my usual routine; nevertheless, the man's courage made me uncomfortable for I knew that I was not as brave and unflinching as he was.

The execution of the Indian also served as a grim reminder of what happened to anyone who did not obey the wishes of the Leaders. I think it was then that I first began to wonder what my fate might be after the war. As soon as they had heard of Hitler's defeat, the Leaders were confident that the Japanese war would soon be over because "now Russia will be free to inflict a crushing defeat on the enemy." Either they never knew that Russia remained strictly aloof from the Asian war or they preferred not to admit it, and we were frequently told that she had declared war on Japan. Their conversation turned on their plans after the war; my knowledge of Mandarin was very imperfect but I was able to piece together a picture of what they intended to do. It was evident that if they were not given a large share in the government of Malaya, they intended to remain in the jungle and keep up their struggle against the authorities. These talks were usually held in private, but they never bothered about my being within earshot, possibly because they underrated my knowledge of Mandarin, poor as it was. I was often in the office where the Leaders were holding their conferences behind the partition where they all slept: and I remember once Lao Chuang telling one of the others to go and see who was in the office during their discussion.

'It's only Pai Naa,' I heard him say, and they then went on

with their discussion which happened to be about burying food and arms in certain places in case of trouble with the British after the war.

I could not help realizing that, although they may have thought I did not understand anything of what they were saying, they were quite aware that I knew a great deal too much about their organization and methods. I was not the only one worrying about my fate after the war because Sam Swee Tuck would sometimes tell me his worries in that respect. He was often away at this time and I had assumed full responsibility for bringing out each edition of "The Democracy Series," but he would help me whenever he could and we often had long talks together. On one occasion he said:

'What am I to do? However shall I get out of this after the war? I daren't face my people, they hate the Communists.' I brought out all the arguments I had used to quieten my own conscience, but he went on, almost angrily, 'It's all right for you, Pai Naa. You can go back to England, but Malaya is my home and I shall be caught like a fish in a net.'

'Perhaps they won't let me go. I know where the camps are and I've a pretty good idea of what they are planning.'

Sam Swee Tuck looked at me, then walked away leaving me a prey to doubts once more.

As if to confirm my fears Ah San brought up the subject one day. Sitting down beside me he said:

'Pai Naa, you could be very useful to us. Would you like to work for us after the war is over?'

While my heart thumped and I felt the colour rush into my face I said, as quietly as I could:

'I am English, Ah San. I love my country and all my loyalty belongs to it. I want to go back there when we've beaten the Japanese.'

He smiled and shrugging his shoulders, appeared to accept

what I said. It was a few nights after this conversation that I was summoned from my bed to appear before the Leaders, and, being very shaky after an attack of fever, I arrived before them feeling somewhat frightened and going over in my mind the possible misdemeanours which I might have committed. Instead of being condemned to the burial-ground, I was told that I was looking under-nourished and was bidden to join them in eating some choice morsels from an elephant which had just been killed.

On another occasion I was typing furiously in the office when Lao Chuang came and stood beside me, whereupon my fingers became thumbs and the page was littered with typing errors. I stopped and looked up, to find him regarding me with the nearest approach to a twinkle in his eye that I had ever seen: 'Pai Naa, have you any chopsticks?'

'Yes,' I was somewhat puzzled, 'I have a pair of wooden ones.'

'But you haven't any ivory ones, would you like some? Our comrade the carpenter has made some from the tusks of one of the elephants we have eaten. There is a pair for you, if you want them.'

I was quite overcome by this signal honour, for ivory chopsticks were much sought after, and were generally a perquisite of the Leaders. I stammered inadequate thanks in my halting Chinese and said that I should be delighted with such a gift, which was duly presented to me a few days later. But however friendly they were to me I could never forget Cheng Kam's words about not knowing what was in their hearts: they could love you as a friend but once you betrayed the principles of the Party, they would cease to regard you as a human being.

During 1945 I came under direct fire for the first and only time, and had my narrowest escape from death. Our office was at the opposite end of the parade ground to the cook-house and as matches were practically non-existent we had

to walk over to the kitchen fire whenever we wanted to light a cigarette. It became a test of endurance to see who could last the longest without going for a light, as whoever went to the cookhouse was expected to give a light to everyone else on their return, so that the bulk of the first cigarette was used up in supplying it. One evening when we were working late I gave way first and went for a light; as I was strolling back enjoying my smoke and the coolness of the dark parade ground, I felt something whizz past the end of my nose and heard the crack of a rifle. Pandemonium broke loose and there was much rushing hither and thither so that I was able to finish my cigarette undisturbed, having recovered from my fright. At an inquiry which was immediately held in the Great Hall, it turned out that a new recruit had just taken over guard duty and, being unfamiliar with his rifle, had pressed the trigger by a mistake.

It was shortly before the end of the war that a messenger arrived in the camp with news of Cheng Kam's death. He had been instrumental in saving so many persecuted villagers from the Japanese that the enemy had inevitably grown to suspect him, and he had had to escape himself into the jungle. He was a sick man by the time he reached one of the Communist camps and he had hardly arrived there before someone unthinkingly told him of Vin's death—no one had heard of it outside. At first the old man had refused to believe it, and then, when one or two others confirmed it, he retired to the hut where he was sleeping and died without another word. Apart from being a great personal loss to him, Vin's death meant the end to Cheng Kam of all he had been working for: while my brother was alive, he knew that he could count on being amply recompensed for all he had done, but with Vin dead he could see nothing but change and decay ahead.

It was a bitter blow to me to hear that another of our faithful friends had died.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AS NEWS OF a steady stream of Allied victories reached us, I found that all my good resolutions about not thinking of the future faded away; once I let myself consider the possibilities of being delivered from the jungle, my mind behaved like a barrage balloon in a high wind and tugged fiercely at its moorings—none too strong at the best of times—longing to soar away into the land of dreams. This was soon the end of any contentment which I had managed to build up over the months, and a host of things which I had grown to accept became exceedingly irksome, almost overnight. The barrier of damp dark trunks standing stiffly round the camp reminded me more than ever of bars in a prison window and I longed for a view of green fields and a stark line of ploughed earth against the sky; I rebelled inwardly against having to swallow every meal in ten minutes and my old hatred of the sweet potato revived after months of trying to persuade myself that I really liked it.

As my hopes grew stronger, so fears about what the Communists intended to do to me, increased with them. When the Japanese withdrew their troops from the more isolated areas in order to draft men to other parts of the Pacific theatre of operations, the guerillas had less opportunity to attack them and so concentrated more on planning for after the war. It was quite obvious that they had no

intention of breaking up their camps after the defeat of the Japs, and I could see less and less reason why they should release me, in view of my knowledge of their organization: if anyone from outside should ask where I was, they could easily be told that both Vin and I had died and no one could disprove it. I began to wish that I had not started to dream about the future.

At the end of August some messengers arrived in the camp in the early hours of the morning and soon there were tremendous preparations afoot. Sam Swee Tuck rushed in to see me:

'I've been ordered to go with Lao Lee as an English interpreter. I think something important has happened: Lao Lee is very excited.'

I immediately wondered whether there had been an invasion of Malaya, and, perhaps, a landing at Kuantan, but, as the latest news we had was of fighting far out in the Pacific, I decided that this was improbable.

After breakfast Lao Chuang, Lao Lee and Ah San left with most of the soldiers. There was much speculation but nothing was said, and it was not until a day or two later that we were told the Japanese had capitulated. A wave of great excitement swept through the camp and we waited hourly for instructions to follow our Leaders to Kuantan. I was so excited that I could hardly think, but there was nothing to do but to carry on with my usual routine, under the control of a little man with an enormous head, known to Vin and me as the Dwarf. Extra food was sent in for us and we lived well but there was a growing expectancy and impatience in the air, so that the Dwarf found it hard to maintain discipline, and grew more self-important and dignified every day.

At last more messengers arrived at the beginning of September bringing a letter with all the names of those who were to join the Leaders at Kuantan; with great solemnity,

the Dwarf read the letter out at regular intervals through the day. My heart sank when my name was not called out.

'Are you sure my name's not on the list?' I asked the little man a dozen times, but he assured me with an air of hurt dignity that he was quite certain that it was not, and said that probably Lao Lee did not think I was strong enough for the long journey. That infuriated me. I sat gloomily all evening mending a shirt belonging to one of those who were due to leave for Kuantan, until the Dwarf came into my hut at about ten o'clock.

'Ah, Pai Naa,' he said casually as if what he had to say was quite unimportant, 'I find there were one or two more names on the back of the letter that I hadn't noticed. You are to go down to Kuantan with the others.' I could have gladly embraced the little man, and then kicked him for making me so miserable when I might have been rejoicing all day!

We set off early the next morning and walked steadily for ten hours. Although my leg had quite healed by then, it did not take kindly to a walk of that length, but I did not dare slow down our march towards what I took to be freedom. We had to cross several tree bridges one of which was particularly thin, slippery and pliant. I was negotiating it quite successfully when one of the Chinese shouted out, 'Be careful, Pai Naa.' That was of course quite fatal and I immediately slipped and fell twelve feet into the stream. I was unhurt but covered in mud, and the sight of my angry figure dripping water aroused gales of mirth!

After two days of steady marching we took up quarters in a bungalow on a rubber estate near Kuantan, where masses of leaflets were being printed announcing the final triumph of the Communists and the beginning of a new and glorious era in Malaya. We soon heard vivid accounts of the trials and executions held by the Communists of

hundreds of people suspected of having collaborated with the enemy or of being hostile to the Reds—the few remaining Japanese soldiers had, for the time being, safely barricaded themselves in their headquarters in Kuantan. One evening we went down to the town to the cinema where we met Lao Lee; the film was exceedingly old and spluttered and jumped throughout the performance, but I thoroughly enjoyed it in spite of being bitten by every conceivable bug. As we all left the cinema we passed a large oil storage tank, and someone asked if there was any fuel in it.

'If there is, it all belongs to us. We own Malaya now,' Lao Lee boasted and it did not seem worth while to argue about it.

In the cinema I had caught sight of some Malays in an unfamiliar green uniform and had wondered who they were: when, on returning to our bungalow, I heard that there were some Europeans in Kuantan, I thought of the British officers we knew to have been parachuted into Malaya. I was so excited at this news that I decided to risk possible reproof and ask Ah San, who had returned with us, if I could go to Kuantan again and see the Europeans.

'Oh, I forgot,' he said quite calmly, 'I've got a letter for you,' and he produced it airily from the depths of his shirt pocket; it was a note from Colonel Spencer Chapman inviting me to stay with his group in Kuantan until arrangements could be made for my transfer to England. I could hardly believe my ears when Ah San agreed to my going the following morning, on condition I returned for one more night to attend a farewell feast: after all my fears, it was going to be as easy as that.

As I got out of the car at the British headquarters, I saw the Union Jack flying from the flagpole and was quite overcome with emotion after two and a half years saluting the Communist flag. Colonel Spencer Chapman was out

but I was greeted very warmly by an Australian—Major Chapman—and various other Commando officers. A room had been carefully prepared for me equipped with every feminine luxury which Major Chapman had been able to find in the Kuantan shops. I was extremely touched by this kindness especially as these men who had all been given the very toughest Commando training, had only just emerged from their hideout in the jungle to take over main strategic points. I was soon to discover that the presence of this brave group, known as Force 136, in Malaya was largely responsible for preventing general anarchy breaking out before the main army arrived in the country.

During the day Major Chapman sent off a radio message asking that my mother should be informed of my safety, but, unfortunately, the Force 136 base in India was being moved just at that time, and with all that was going on it is not surprising that the message did not get through, so that Mother first heard of my survival through the newspapers.

After one more night at the guerilla camp, I moved to Kuantan where crowds of people who had lived at Lembing came to see me; none of them had heard of Vin's death, which the Communists had successfully kept secret, and they were absolutely stunned by the news. They had all been counting on Vin restoring their world which had been so rudely shattered by the Japanese: they begged me for help and I could only say that I was sure the company would look after them. It was pathetic seeing the expression of utter dismay on their faces as they went away. Among the visitors were Wong Ng and Lau Siu who were touchingly pleased to see me, and I promised that I would do whatever I could for them.

Very soon Major Chapman drove me up to Sungei Lembing along the new road made by the Japanese, and I walked up to the machine shop where all the machinery

stood still and covered in rust. The whole place was heavy with memories for me and I could barely fight back the tears as Vin's memory pressed in on me: to make matters worse, a Malay came in, as I stood there, and, putting his head on my shoulder, burst into tears—a most unusual act for a Malay.

'I have just been up to the house, *Missie*: I remembered where *Tuan Besar* used to sit in one chair and *Missie* in another, and I thought that the *Tuan Besar* would never sit there again; then I saw you standing there and I cried for sorrow.'

It was heart-rending to see these people's sorrow when they knew of Vin's death, and yet their devotion made his sacrifice seem worthwhile in the end. If he had to die, I was glad that he died in the jungle near Lembing.

On our way back to Kuantan, we passed a group of my erstwhile comrades, unloading a lorry of rice and taking it into the jungle along the path by which I had come out ten days before. They waved to me, but looked decidedly sheepish.

'I wonder what they are up to?' said Chapman.

The following day Lao Chuang sent a message to me asking me to go and see him. Major Chapman did not want me to go and said that if Lao Chuang wanted to see me he ought to come himself; but I did not want to stand on my dignity and decided that I would go and discover what was behind the request.

I found Lao Chuang sitting in front of a neat desk in the building which had become his office. He peered coldly at me through his thick lenses and I felt distinctly nervous of him.

'Pai Naa, you saw some of our people yesterday, didn't you?'

'Yes, I saw them unloading rice near Bukit Goh,' my mouth was noticeably drier than usual.

He stared fixedly at me: 'You know a lot about us. You won't give any information that could harm us to Colonel Chapman, will you?'

'Colonel Chapman hasn't asked me anything.'

'You won't tell him, will you?'

'He hasn't asked me anything,' I repeated.

Lao Chuang shrugged his shoulders and indicated as frostily as he could that our interview was at an end. I have never been more glad to escape than then. I told Major Chapman what had been said, and none of the officers asked me for information about the guerillas: either they decided that I knew nothing which was likely to be of any use to them or they did not want to put me in the awkward position of giving away the people who had saved my life.

During the days that followed I was treated with the greatest kindness by everyone. The Sultan invited me to his palace and insisted that I had a bath and siesta in the Royal suite, an unheard of honour. Vin and I had heard from Cheng Kam how the Sultan, as soon as he learned of our presence in the jungle, had sent secret orders to all village headmen in East Pahang to do what they could for us. Diana Gibson, the recently arrived war correspondent of the *Daily Mail*, generously gave me all the clothes she could spare to replace my shorts and shirts, while Colonel Spencer Chapman returned from Kuala Lumpur with an armful of clothes, including several pairs of voluminous bloomers: he had asked the Mother Superior of the Convent there to make some clothes for me and, on being asked my size, had said that I was the same size as she was. As a result I was able to make two garments out of one.

At the end of September all the Japanese soldiers from the Kuantan area paraded before the officers of Force 136, who stood on a dais on the *padang*, and threw their firearms and weapons on to a vast heap. I was given a seat beside the

officers and was able to stare at the first Japanese soldiers I had seen!

When the time came for me to leave for Kuala Lumpur, Lao Lee and several others came to say goodbye to me; and as I got into the waiting car, they saluted me and sang the Farewell Song which I had led them in so often when parties were leaving headquarters. Dear Lao Lee, he had always been so kind to Vin and me and I owed him my life many times over. I don't think I could have borne the tedium of camp life without his smiling face being near at hand. I believe he was fond of me, in his own way, and this farewell was the finest tribute he could think of paying me. Almost sadly I waved goodbye, for they had truly been my friends, and I set my face towards England.

POSTSCRIPT

THIS STORY HAS waited a long time to be written: there are several reasons for this, the most vital being my inability to write it myself. When I first came home I was too happy at being with my family again and so busy finding out what had happened to them, and to the world at large, during my four years' hibernation that I had not time to think of it. Then I had to find a job. By the time I had joined the staff of the Electrical Association for Women and had settled down to office routine in London, instead of in the jungle, the emergency had started in Malaya and I was so horrified to think that the same people who had saved my life were killing my friends, that I did not want to have it written. It is only now, when a request to be allowed to write it has coincided with a more peaceful atmosphere, that I have felt the time has come to do what Vin said he wanted me to, and to publish the story of our life in the Malayan jungle.

I know little of what has happened to my erstwhile companions; few of them could read or write English and communication was difficult, even before the emergency started.

I do know that the Pahang Consolidated Company rewarded Wong Ng, Lau Siu and Cheng Kam's wife for their care of us during the first fourteen months of the

Japanese occupation. I also know that the mine was unwatered and started up again in a remarkably short time, in spite of terrorist activity around Sungei Lembing, where several of the European miners were killed and a great deal of trouble caused.

In June 1946 a representative of the 7th Regiment took part in the Victory Parade and while he was in England he and another Chinese made their way to my home in Bedfordshire to see me. I was away but they saw my mother and a few days later I met them and other representatives of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army in London, where we all lunched together and recalled with much hilarity some of our meals in the jungle.

Lao Lee's death at the hands of the Security Forces was reported some years ago and, when I heard of it, I forgot that he was almost certainly responsible for my friends' deaths and I grieved for him as the saviour of my own life and a gay companion. I had heard from him once, before he returned to the jungle, when he told me that he was almost destitute because he was unable to get work. This was not surprising as he was a well-known Communist, but I did hear from other, non-Communist, members of the 7th Regiment that, owing to their war-time contact with the Reds, people were unwilling to employ them.

There can be no excuse for the atrocities committed by the terrorists, especially as the campaign was largely organized by Chinese from China and had no truly nationalist background, but it must be remembered that many of the rank and file were just growing up when they went into the jungle, or grew up there, during the war, because their families had fled from the Japanese.

These ignorant youths were fed on Communist propaganda for four years and the inherent Chinese admiration for any form of learning, made them easily susceptible to this insidious evangelism from men who were better

educated than they were. They could remember little or nothing of life before the war and, if they could not find work outside the jungle, it was not unnatural that they should return to the Communists who had cared for them for so long. It is not difficult, either, to imagine the threats used by the Communists to force the unwilling ones to help them, or the shocking reprisals on those who refused to do so.

I realize that to those who fought against the Terrorists, or who lost relatives at their hands, my picture of the group in East Pahang may appear unduly favourable, but, with the exception of Lao Fong, these savage and uncouth men never showed us anything but kindness and, whatever they hoped to get out of us in the end, there were many times when we were a considerable liability; neither did they ever refuse assistance to anyone who sought escape from Japanese oppression.

The military achievements of the 7th Regiment were not great, at least while I was with them. In East Pahang, where there are no railways and very few roads there were few targets for conventional guerilla tactics, which were not very strongly guarded by the Japanese. Although, before the Japanese had established themselves there had been several successful raids, activities after Vin and I joined the guerillas were almost entirely confined to ambushes of Japanese staff cars, when grenade attacks often resulted in the gratifying disintegration of the passengers.

Our chief value to the Allied cause was probably psychological, because our existence kept hope alive in the minds of the general population by giving them an assurance that the Japanese were not having everything their own way. Also the Japanese were uneasy about us, as is evident from their efforts to eradicate us and their constant offers of magnanimous surrender terms, which were greeted with howls of derision and a resurgence of our will to resist.

7 SEP 1994

My brother and I did not join the guerillas until March 1943, and the first news we had of Colonel Spencer Chapman was the rapturous account of his exploits from the Mentakab group in April of that year, so that I do not think our letter to him can have been dated Christmas 1942, as he says in his wonderful book, *The Jungle is Neutral*. I think, too, he must have been misinformed about my brother who was only fifty-six when he died and was not diabetic.

At the time Vin's death seemed to me a tragic and wasteful end to his hopes and plans, but I know that he would have suffered much unhappiness in the subsequent troubles in Malaya and I can now be glad that he was saved great agony of mind.

I shall always be grateful beyond words for the sympathetic treatment that I received from the members of Force 136 in Kuantan and later from the British Military Administration in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, which helped so much in my own rehabilitation before I left for England. They could not help my physical discomfort in getting used to wearing shoes again, which became my greatest trial, but their kindness made an enormous contribution towards such mental balance as I have achieved. The patience and devotion of those working in R.A.P.W.I. and the various voluntary services in Singapore, Burma and India who looked after me on my journey home, are beyond praise and I should like to record my gratitude to them all.

I was surprised and delighted when I was honoured in 1946 by the award of the M.B.E., but I cannot think that I deserved it, after four years of busily saving my own skin: I feel that by right it belongs to Cheng Kam's memory and to Wong Ng and Lau Siu for the hideous dangers which they faced for our sake.

5th May, 1959.