

SPEARHEAD IN MALAYA

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IN
MALAYA

J. W. G. MORAN

With a Foreword by
FIELD-MARSHAL SIR GERALD TEMPLER
G.C.B., G.C.M.B., K.B.E., D.S.O.



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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO ALL RANKS OF THE
ROYAL FEDERATION OF MALAYA POLICE FORCE, THE
SPECIAL CONSTABULARY AND POLICE VOLUNTEER
RESERVE, IRRESPECTIVE OF RACE, RELIGION OR
CREED, WHO ANSWERED MALAYA'S CALL TO ARMS
AND NEVER FAILED IN THEIR DUTY

AWARDED THE GEORGE MEDAL FOR
CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY IN ACTION

POLICE LIEUTENANT	THOMAS ALBERT CHARLTON
POLICE LIEUTENANT	ROBERT GRAVER
POLICE LIEUTENANT	GEOFFREY OLIVER HARTLEY
POLICE LIEUTENANT	IAN PETER HYDE
POLICE LIEUTENANT	ERIC JAMES WADGE
POLICE LIEUTENANT	WILLIAM JAMES ROBERTS
LANCE-CORPORAL	WAN HASSAN bin WAN AWANG
POLICE RECRUIT	TAN TIEW SIEW
POLICE CONSTABLE	SAMION bin ABDULLAH
SPECIAL CONSTABULARY CORPORAL	OSMAN bin ADAM
SPECIAL CONSTABLE	WAN AMRAN bin WAN MANAF
SPECIAL CONSTABLE	SAMAD bin BABA
SPECIAL CONSTABLE	ABU HASSAN bin MOHAMED ZAIN

"I realise that the Police have been and are the spearhead of our attack as well as the main source of our defence against the bandits in Malaya."

GENERAL SIR R. M. M. LOCKHART, K.C.B., C.I.E., M.C.

*Director of Operations
Federation of Malaya*

FOREWORD

By FIELD-MARSHAL SIR GERALD TEMPLER,

G.C.B., G.C.M.G., K.B.E., D.S.O.

Late Chief of the Imperial General Staff, formerly High Commissioner and Director of Operations, Federation of Malaya.

I HAVE great affection and admiration for the Royal Federation of Malaya Police Force and its component parts. They are the people who have been continuously at the business of fighting militant Communism all through the long ten years of the Emergency in their country. There was no home posting for them, no relief after two or three years as there was for the British Army soldiers who played such a notable part in the long struggle; and even the units of Malaya's own Federation Army had, I believe, an easier time in this respect than did the Police.

The Author's Preface deserves to be read carefully. I wonder how many people realise the extent of the problem which had to be tackled, and I am quite sure that very few indeed have any idea of the part played by the Police.

This is a first-class book. I have enjoyed reading it immensely. It is always a real pleasure to read a story by a junior officer—in this case a Police Lieutenant—who was on such close terms with his men and who writes of them with such sympathy and understanding.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Gerald Templer', with a flourish at the end.

TO
POLICE LIEUTENANT ALEC BERNARD WILMOT
WHO GAVE HIS LIFE FOR FREEDOM

Opinions quoted in this book are entirely those of the author and
not intended to be those of others.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I PRESENT this book as an example of what the Royal Federation of Malaya Police Force and its ancillary units, the Special Constabulary and Police Volunteer Reserve, have done and are still doing in the common fight to rid their country of the Communist scourge. I was inspired to write this book when I realised beyond all shadow of doubt that the magnificent role being played by the police is almost unheard of in many countries abroad, including the United Kingdom. I am literally amazed by this lack of public knowledge, and having had the honour of serving in the Malayan Police during its darkest hours, knowing at first-hand its achievements against terrific odds, I am profoundly disturbed over the whole issue. In various literary works there have been references to the weaknesses of the police organisation in Malaya, but when one pauses to think that at the time of the Liberation from the Japanese Occupation there was no such organisation as a police force in Malaya at all—all police forces having been disbanded and scattered to the four winds in the wake of the Japanese invasion—and that in 1948, when the newly formed police force was just encountering its first teething trouble, the present Emergency broke overnight in all its ferocity, even the most cynical persons must be conscience-bound to give a large slice of credit where it is unquestionably due. And furthermore emphasised when the public at last know that for the first two years of the Emergency the Malayan police, a mere token force of some 14,000 men—badly equipped and not yet properly trained—bore the full brunt of the Communist aggression.

I use the word 'aggression' because that is typical of the situation. The reason for the intervention of armed Communist forces, inspired and indeed supported by Russia and Communist China, was simple. The Malayan Communist

Party had failed to gain control of the various trades and workers' unions. They were rebuffed and ousted by the multi-racial population of Malaya throughout the peninsula. Unable to stomach this political defeat, the Communists resorted to the only remaining means open to them—domination by force of arms. Subsequently the powerful Communist political and guerrilla military machine was set in motion and, with the murders of three European rubber planters in one day at Sungei Siput in the State of Perak in June 1948, the Emergency came into being. Within twenty-four hours the revolt had spread throughout Malaya, and anyone who opposed the aggressor had his or her life forfeit.

I would like to devote a little space to the Communist set-up in Malaya. They have been described as 'bandits', terrorists and many fancy names—giving people the impression that they are just undisciplined hooligans running around in baggy trousers and coloured shirts firing a few obsolete weapons here and there. The plain truth is that the armed guerrillas are nothing of the sort. They are a highly trained and disciplined military force operating under the title of the Malayan Races Liberation Army. Its soldiers—one must call them that—are distributed throughout the Federation of Malaya in regiments, platoons, companies, sections and independent platoons; correctly dressed in an adapted uniform—commanded by officers who receive their orders from the Political Commissars—and in the main extremely well armed with weapons of all the latest patterns. Initially, and in addition to other military factions, there were fifteen Communist regiments operating in Malaya. They numbered themselves consecutively, and each regiment was composed of approximately four hundred men. They operated from their bases or camps deep in the jungle, and performed all the functions of a normal soldier, even to the extent of the flag ceremony at dawn and dusk. I have seen one of those camps in the jungle. It had every detail from barracks—some married quarters, compound and school—down to a field hospital. It was considered just one of those things during the

first years of the Emergency if a police jungle patrol of about twenty men had the misfortune to encounter a Communist guerrilla force of anything up to four hundred. In the latter years of the Emergency the Communist guerrilla tactics have changed. The big regiments and companies have been split into smaller groups because owing to Malaya's jungle terrain the smaller force, meaning less men to control in action, has proved to be the best means of obtaining success in operations and also presenting fewer difficulties of supply, chiefly food.

So much for the uniformed guerrilla force of the Communist movement; now a few words about the Min Yuen. This is the 'plain clothes' section of the organisation. It comprises chiefly special agents, a kind of 'cloak and dagger' force, couriers, sympathisers and those who collect subscriptions—mostly by force—from the population and others who give food and shelter to marauding groups of guerrillas. The Min Yuen without doubt is the largest single section of the Communist Party machine. No one knows their true identity or who they are until some information given betrays them, and it is certain that the unsuspecting person brushes shoulders with Min Yuen agents every hour of the day. Finally, I come to the last branch of the machine—the specialised Killer Squads. By means of their crude printing apparatus situated in sparse, outlying jungle hide-outs the Communist Party regularly compile a list of potential victims, and the list goes under the self-explanatory title of Eliminations List. The only crime of the victims is that either they have in some way opposed the Communist cause, refused to give money, food or shelter, or, in duty bound, they have killed a guerrilla, Party official or Min Yuen agent. The Eliminations List is then dispatched from Party Headquarters by foot courier to all local Communist Party Committees. Then it is left for the Killer Squads to carry out their work of elimination. Very few victims escape the Killer Squads, being hounded and finally executed quickly and methodically if it takes days, weeks, months or even years. The Killer Squads usually work in small groups of three or four men, and they show a prefer-

ence for night operation. They are dressed in black shirts, trousers and rubber-soled shoes—ideal garb for night—and their armament is usually a knife, revolver or hand grenade, sufficient for their deadly purpose. There is no discrimination in the names on the Eliminations List. It can mean a Government official, police officer, soldier, schoolmaster, labourer or even housewife of any nationality.

The drama had begun and the policeman found that he was called upon to play the dual roles of attack and defence. Control of Malaya had been returned to the civil power, and the military forces at hand were hopelessly inadequate to offer any appreciable assistance. I do not suggest for one moment that the police have been guiltless of blunders or that their organisation has been infallible. Errors have been many, but this is not necessarily a reflection on the integrity of the Force as a whole. When the testing time came, the police suffered a number of completely unavoidable reverses. Among the reasons for them were that they were totally untrained for warfare; they did not possess the essential arms and ammunition, nor were they equipped with suitable uniforms for jungle fighting. The first police units, hurriedly drawn together, went into action wearing khaki uniforms, making themselves beautiful targets against the green of the jungle. Therefore it can be justifiably claimed as a defence that errors made in the early stages of the Emergency can be attributed to the fact that the men had been trained, many only partly trained, as peace officers and not as soldiers; it was apparent that the policeman could not immediately adjust himself to the arduous demands of guerrilla warfare. He had to discard his truncheon and other symbols of more peaceful days, and learn to use the carbine, sten gun, bren gun and other lethal weapons, thereby adding to his credit the willingness to adapt himself to an aggressive role.

I do not favour the dry reading provided by quoting statistics, but I feel that I can be excused if I quote some important ones in this Preface. Never before in the history of our Colonial Empire has a Police Force been called upon to play

such a role as has the Malayan Police. As the result of decorations granted for gallantry in action and distinguished service, the Malayan Police hold the proud record of being the most decorated Police Force of our time, numbering among its major decorations thirteen George Medals—all awarded for supreme courage against the enemy—to say nothing of the hundreds of other decorations granted to serving officers of all ranks and nationalities. The police have suffered the greatest Security Forces casualties. Official records placed at my disposal show that, up to the end of 1956, 2,890 police have been killed in action alone, against the Military Forces total of 518. During the same period the Communist casualties totalled 11,718 out of which 8,678 were bagged by the police jungle forces. Again, during the same period, total civilian casualties are 6,120, and of that 3,253 were killed and the remainder wounded by the Communists. Many wild estimates have been given regarding the operational strength of the Communist forces. Optimists have declared for years that it is no more than 5,000. The above official figures of casualties alone squash that estimate once and for all time. Only the outlawed Malayan Communist Party could disclose their actual strength, but knowing pretty well the man-power strength of the regiments and their supporters, and adding to that the Min Yuen, Killer Squads and political committees, I would make a fairly accurate assessment of 70,000. At least that is much nearer the mark than the ridiculous 5,000 we are asked to believe.

In this book you will read the true story of a small group of men. It is a record of my own personal experiences and those of others, with one or two I have attributed to myself solely for the purpose of this book in order to present it as a human story. In certain cases, for obvious reasons, I have decided to protect the true identities of some characters by giving them imaginary names. I have chosen Sungei Lembu as the locality for my story because among many things it was there that I learned that the true values of man are much more than skin deep. From time to time I have read, in press reports, magazine

articles and books, impressions of those to whom Malaya should be grateful and whom she should uphold as her heroes. Heroes may come and heroes may go, but to me the true hero of Malaya—and of this book—is the ordinary down-to-earth 'mata-mata'—the policeman.

J. W. G. MORAN.

July 1958.

THE driver changed gear and slowed down to negotiate the small hump-backed bridge over the river. Once over, he quickly accelerated, still in the same low gear, and executed a miraculous left-hand turn through the open gateway. Then he yanked the wheel sharp right and braked to a sudden halt, bare inches from a high pile of sandbag defences. I climbed wearily out of the Land Rover; it had not been a comfortable ride.

"Mr Moran, I presume." A quiet voice spoke from behind me. I turned round to face the speaker. He was a short, stocky chap dressed in an old khaki shirt and faded blue shorts. A pair of worn leather sandals were casually covering his bare feet. His body was well proportioned, and I thought that the wide shoulders tapering to the slim waist made him look younger than he was. His face was lean and sun-tanned to a deep masculine brown. His hair was thinning, and had no doubt been more plentiful in his younger days. I think the most striking feature about him was his eyes. They were widely spaced over the bridge of his nose and reflected an impression of deep, clear-cut honesty. They were the brightest blue I had ever seen in a man.

"Lovie, I presume?" I echoed, offering my hand. He grasped it in his, firm and friendly.

"Where the heck did you spring from?" I asked, withdrawing my hand.

"I came out of the guardroom as you came over the bridge," he answered. There was no mistaking his Scots accent.

"Well, I'm here at last, so I had best get mobile." I started to unload my kit.

"Leave that. Sobh will see to it," he said. He turned to the constable who had been my escort. He spoke to him in rapid

Malay. The man nodded and laid his carbine on the ground. Lovie turned back to me and grabbed my arm.

"Come on," he said, "I expect you could do with a cup of tea?"

"After that ride, the answer is definitely yes," I chuckled.

I followed him across the compound to a long wooden building at the rear of the guardroom. I noticed that there was very little sign of life or activity about the base. I took in everything with a cursory glance. It rather depressed me. The buildings were old, dilapidated and weather-beaten. They had about them an air of acute despondency, as if they were content to rot away slowly and conveniently forget the better days they must have known. We went up the steps and walked along the broad wooden verandah which ran along the front and back of the building. We reached the end room and I followed Lovie inside.

"Well, here we are. An Englishman's home is his castle. This is yours, pal."

He stood in the middle of the small room and spread his arms. It was light and airy, but its compensations stopped at that. The furnishings were pathetically cheap and simple. A single wardrobe which also served as a larder. A small writing-table pushed under one window; a bedside locker which looked as if it had been salvaged from the Boer War. A bed tucked away in a corner and two stiff-backed chairs.

"Pretty bloody," I said, unbuckling my gun-belt.

"You'll get used to it," Lovie assured me with more confidence than I had. "It doesn't compare with Sungei Siput, I admit. I'll go and get the tea."

He went out through the back door. I tested one chair gingerly before I sat on it. It surprised me when it took the strain. The constable whom I knew as Sobh brought my kit and dumped it unceremoniously on the floor. I gave him a dollar for his trouble, and he gazed at it as if it wasn't enough. In the end he touched the brim of his floppy green hat and went away. I lit a cigarette and inhaled gratefully. I needed some-

thing to steady me. I had been warned that Sungei Lembu was grim, but the warning was considerably understated. Lovie came back and handed me a glass of tea. I sipped at it and felt better. He sat on the edge of the bed and placed his glass on the floor. I offered him a cigarette. He took one and lit it off mine.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, his blue eyes twinkling.

"It doesn't matter much what I think," I ventured. "Judging by the little I have seen, it's bloody awful. Still, as you say, I'll get used to it."

Lovie slapped his knee. "That's the spirit. It shook me at first, but now I think nothing of it."

I shot him a quick disbelieving glance. I took another swig at my tea.

"Who's the O.C.P.D.¹ around here?"

"Norman Rodway. He hangs out in Bukit Mertajam. You passed through it on your way here."

"I noticed that much," I grinned. "It's after we left the main road that I noticed sweet Fanny Adams."

"Whom did you see in Penang?"

"I saw Chief Police Officer Wylie and Deputy Lawrence."

"I suppose they genned you up on Sungei Lembu?"

"Yes, they painted a pretty accurate picture. I think Deputy Lawrence was a little over-optimistic. He really tried to sell me the dump," I answered dryly.

"Did they say anything about me?"

I looked across at Lovie. He was rolling a cigarette between his fingers. I wondered what he was getting at. I chose to tread carefully.

"They told me that you were a very sick man. That you had been asking for a transfer. And finally they were of the opinion that you have done your fair share of jungle-bashing since the Emergency started," I replied briefly, leaving out a lot.

"Nothing else?"

¹ Officer-in-Charge Police District.

"No. Should they have?"

"I suppose not."

He rose and paced up and down the room. Suddenly he had become a changed man. All the laughter and sparkle had melted from his eyes. A haunted expression passed over his face, making the leanness more intense. I began to see the trouble and why he was sick. His outward appearance rather masked the fact till then. I had seen the symptoms many times before. During the war the Americans had put their finger on the trouble. They had called it combat fatigue.

"Your tea's getting cold," I remarked casually.

He didn't say anything but ceased his pacing and returned to the bed. He sipped slowly at the tea, miles away. I might just as well not have been in the room. He was staring straight down at the floor. He replaced the glass and wiped his mouth. He looked across at me queerly, and a smile flickered over his thin lips. He handed me a cigarette, and I accepted it without comment. There was a long pause.

"What's your Christian name?" he asked suddenly, out of the blue.

"Bill will suffice. I acquired it somewhere during the war. What have you been doing since the war?" The going was getting easier.

"I joined the Palestine Police. When the British pulled out and handed over to the Yids, I came to Malaya."

"You must have been one of the original European police sergeants."

"Yes. That's right."

"A great body of men. I hesitate to think what the police would have done without them."

"They treated us dirty, all the same."

"But they made amends," I remarked in a friendly way.

"They made us up to officer status, if that's what you mean. But it took the Police Mission inquiry to do that," Lovie said crossly. "I believe you know some of the chaps around here," he added, brightening up. The haunted look faded from his face.

"Yes. Paddy Regan, Jack Fisher and Alec Wilmot at Kulim. I haven't seen Regan for years. I lost touch with him during the war in North Africa. I believe he was in some of the Italy landings. Almost started a third front on his own. A bit of a lad was Paddy. Full of good-humoured fun. After the war I heard he had gone in for Life Insurance work. That really shook me. Not quite Paddy's kettle of fish, I would say. I could never imagine him as a body-snatcher. Anyhow, I was in for another shock when I learned that he had joined the Malayan Police. The first indication was when I saw his appointment on Force Orders. We corresponded for a while, but it petered out. Paddy dislikes letter-writing."

"He's a case all right," Lovie agreed. "By what you say, I don't think you'll find him changed. We'll look him up tomorrow when I take you to meet Rodway."

"Good. I'm itching to see the blighter again. Our paths haven't crossed out here until now."

"You might find Fisher a bit changed."

"Why?" I asked, surprised.

"He's having trouble at home. His wife's been on the loose. Expecting a baby into the bargain. May have had it by now. Did you know her?"

"No. He was married on his last U.K. leave. Came back full of her. Almost a childhood courtship, I believe. I've seen photos of her. She looks very attractive. I'm sorry to hear the bad news," I said slowly.

"We're getting melancholy. Care to take a walk round outside?"

"No. I prefer to sit and talk, if you do," I answered. I believed it was best for Lovie. It was a good tonic for loneliness.

"So would I," he said quickly. "I rarely see one of my own to natter to. The Malays are all right up to a point, but after a time it gets a bind."

"I agree," I said sympathetically.

"You went home on compassionate leave, didn't you? Regan mentioned something about it."

"Yes. A spot of home troubles."

"I'm sorry. Anything bad?"

"It was nothing much," I said evasively. "Nothing that time can't cure. It's all over and done with now."

"Let it die a natural death, eh?"

"Have another one," he added, reaching out for my glass.

"Thanks, I will," I said briefly.

He went out of the back door again. I heard him shout in Malay. There followed a sound of hurried movement in the other rooms along the building. Bare footsteps sounded on the verandah, followed by the agonising sound of men clearing their throats. I began to unpack some of my kit. It was getting hot inside the room, so I pulled off my khaki shirt. I folded it neatly and put it on the desk. It would be a long time before I wore khaki again. I kicked off my shoes, and exchanged them for a comfortable pair of sandals. Lovie returned with the tea as I laid my jungle green on the back of the chair.

"I'll move my stuff out of the wardrobe. Then you can put yours away." He nodded at my kit.

"There's no hurry," I said affably. "How long before you leave?"

"A few days, I expect. I'll show you a bit of the area before I go. I think you ought to meet the penghulu¹ of Mengkuang. I'll introduce you to him tomorrow. He's been very helpful to me as regards information. He's a bit difficult at times, but it's a question of knowing how to handle him. Then there will be the handing-over procedure."

I sat back in the chair and sipped at my second tea. Lovie perched himself back on the edge of the bed.

"Any idea where you're going?" I asked.

"Not yet. I expect a transfer will come any day now that you've arrived. I put in for the Malayan Scouts some time back."

I couldn't imagine a man in his condition being transferred to the Malayan Scouts. They were the deep penetration jungle

¹ Headman.

force, recruited mostly from the Army, but some European police officers were seconded on loan. It was tough, gruelling work. Worse than Jungle Squad.

"Have the men just got up?" I asked. "I heard the noise."

"Yes. They were out laying ambushes until dawn."

"Any luck?"

"No. It was just a scare."

I swallowed the rest of my tea. I lit another cigarette and passed one to Lovie. He stuck it behind his ear and clasped his hands over his knees.

"What's the strength here?" I asked.

"I was coming to that. I'll give you the complete gen." He leaned back across the bed and transferred his hands behind his head. "The squad numbers eighteen men. There are five Chinese, one Tamil and twelve Malays. Four of the Chinese are Special Constables. The rest are regulars. Your N.C.O. is Ming. He leads number two section. Now Ming, I think, will be your most valuable asset. His home is in Mengkuang, therefore his knowledge of the area is considerable. He's good as an N.C.O., and he holds the men together. Sometimes he is inclined to show leniency towards the other Chinese, but I suppose that can be expected. Generally speaking, he's all right to get along with, but he doesn't talk too much, no doubt due to his Oriental nature. He's reserved, and it takes time to get under his skin; but once you've done that it's plain sailing. I know for a fact that he resents new-comers, and that includes chaps like you and me. He was anti-me for quite a while after I took over from Potter, and my guess is that he'll act the same towards you, so the best thing to do is ignore him. I'm going to give you an outline of Ming's case-history because I think you ought to know. I'll have to go back a bit. Before the war Sungei Lembu was a Customs Post. They had Customs officers on state boundaries in those days when each state had its own Police Force. During the occupation, the Japs took over Sungei Lembu and used it as a police post. They forced a lot of local Chinese boys into this secret police outfit, and Ming was one of them.

He didn't have much say in the matter. If he had refused or resisted, his family would have lost their heads. If you look round the back of the canteen someday, you'll see a large concrete square. That covers a pit which was found by the Liberation Army. It was full of heads that the Japs had lopped off when they felt like it. It was their way of showing the locals who was master. Ming had to witness a lot of those beheadings. Many of the victims were his own friends. After the Liberation he went rubber-tapping, and when the Emergency started he volunteered for the police. He tried his hand as a detective, but that was not up his street. So he volunteered for Jungle Squad, and got posted to Sungei Lembu after a jungle survival course, and he's been here ever since. One of the old originals."

Lovie sat up and pulled the cigarette from behind his ear. He took a long time lighting it. He blew out the match slowly and flicked it out of the window. I reflected on what he had told me.

"That's the squad dealt with briefly," I said. "What about base personnel?"

"Wait a minute," Lovie said loftily, "there's some more about Ming. I expect you wonder why, but you'll see. In this area we have two local bad hats. Communist leaders: Ching Moi Chai and Ah Cham. They are both in the uniformed Communist forces. They don't always stick around here. So far as I can say, they belong to the travelling troops. Special Branch have established that they are mixed up with the Communist 5th Platoon. That's the local enemy force, by the way. They operate anywhere between Kulim and North Perak. Well, when Ching Moi Chai's around you'll know because he gives Sungei Lembu hell. It's his pet aversion. He and his men attacked this base ceaselessly when Potter was here. He slackened off a bit when I first came, but he very soon stepped up the attacks. For some reason he hates Sungei Lembu like poison. He has a brother who lives alone near Pondok Labu, just up the road. I believe this brother often meets Ching Moi Chai and gives him information, but so far I've been unable to prove it. Rodway, Potter and I in turn have roped him in scores of times for grill-

ing; but he just won't give, and there's nothing we can do about it and, believe me, the crafty so-and-so knows it! I'm going a long way round to get at what I was going to tell you about Ming, but I've come to it at last. The point is Ming knows Ching Moi Chai well. They were reared together in Mengkuang as kids. It will doubtless surprise you to learn that."

"Is it wise to have Ming as your N.C.O.?" I asked seriously. "I mean, being so friendly with Ching Moi Chai. Frankly, I would think that is the last thing to have. It's so bloody irregular. I can't, for the life of me understand the police allowing him to serve here."

"I had a feeling you would say something like that, Bill," Lovie said coldly.

"You set a high price against Ming's loyalty. They do say blood is thicker than water. I agree there's no blood tie in this case, but we cannot overlook the fact completely that the pair of them were good friends in the past."

"Don't be unreasonable, Bill. Be a bit human about it. I know Ming and I trust him. I know that he really hates his Secret Police days. Also he loathes and detests Ching Moi Chai for being a Communist."

"Unreasonable! Be a bit human!" I snorted. "That's bloody fine advice, if I may say so. The fact that my N.C.O. is probably mixed up with the Commies sounds blasted stupid to me!"

"He was vetted by Special Branch when he joined the police. There has never been any hint or suspicion that he consorts with the Communists. He has always acquitted himself well. I judge a man by what he does, how he acts, how I see him do his job."

"Anyhow, I don't like it," I said adamantly. "I'll think about making a few changes when I take over." I had no express desire to offend Lovie, but I had to say what was in my mind.

"That's up to you, Bill," he remarked wearily.

"What about the rest?" I asked, to change the subject.

"There are eighteen regular constables operating as base personnel. All Malays. Their job is the usual run. Man the two

bren posts and sentry duty. Their N.C.O. is Corporal Bakar. He used to be on Jungle Squad, but found it too laborious. Between you and me, I think he's a bit of a nancy boy. I leave it to him to keep up the sentries' roster and detail his men for fatigues. I find I have quite enough on my hands with the squad. They don't do fatigues, by the way."

"Whose Number One Section Leader?" I asked.

"No one in particular. Sobh, the P.C. you've met, and Latif, another Malay, act as leading scouts. Sometimes I switch one of them for a P.C. named Daud. If you are thinking of appointing another section leader, I would recommend Latif. Keep an eye on him, though. He's a nasty, bad-tempered little bastard. Loathes most Chinese. Outside of the police, I'm happy to say. But all round he's a good policeman."

"I'll remember what you say," I said. "What about recreation facilities?"

"They have a pack of cards," Lovie said very casually, as if that pack of cards was sufficient.

"Nothing else?"

"No. I allow the squad to go into B.M. on a liberty run two nights a week. Provided we are in base, of course."

"What about the base personnel? Do they have a liberty run?"

"No. They just have their day off when possible. They go in on the ration and mail-waggon."

"In other words, they rarely see a cinema show?"

"No. They don't work hard like the squad."

"Any bad boys in the squad?" I asked. It always helped to know.

"Not that I would call bad. They are all very young. Yapp, one of the Chinese S.C.s, is the youngest. He's only seventeen. He's seen a fair amount of combat, was wounded in action on his seventeenth birthday. He was discharged from hospital only a couple of weeks ago."

"This Tamil you mentioned. What's his place in the squad?"

"Oh, you mean Peter. He's an interpreter actually. Speaks

four or five languages, including fluent English. The Japs nabbed him as an interpreter while the occupation was on. You'll find him useful with Chinese dialects. How's your Malay, by the way?"

"Pretty grim. I was always lazy about it," I admitted frankly.

"Peter will help you over any sticky patches," Lovie muttered.

We were interrupted by a Chinese. He wasn't a startling-looking character. He had a head which appeared much too big for him. His face was large and round and solemn. He asked Lovie what time to serve tea. Lovie thought for a moment before answering. The Chinese glanced at me quickly, then turned away.

"That's Goo Ling. Among other things, he acts as orderly. He's no good with a gun. Couldn't hit a barn door at three yards range," Lovie said after the Chinese had gone.

"That's worth knowing," I grinned. "He speaks pretty good broken English," I added.

"Broken is the word for it," Lovie chuckled. "I'm afraid he's a bit dim."

That was exactly what I thought.

"Anything more you'd like to know?" Lovie asked after a pause.

"What's the set-up in Bukit Mertajam? Apart from Rodway, Fisher and Regan."

"Well, there's Alf Madill, he's the Signals Officer for Province Wellesley. Then Jock Sheldrick, Transport Officer. You've got him to thank for the armoured car out there," he pointed out towards the guardroom, "and finally Hugh Nield. He trains the Specials with Paddy Regan, also does estate supervision. Oh, I almost forgot. There's Ralph Donnelly. A nice kid. Keeps himself to himself, if you know what I mean. Never a bad word to say for anyone. He's in charge of the Specials on estates in the Butterworth area. Mentioning Madill and Sheldrick reminds me of something else. You have three drivers

and three wireless ops. They're on loan only for their respective duties, but they come under you for discipline, of course."

"Who's the O.S.P.C.¹ for Province Wellesley?"

"A.S.P.² Blake at Butterworth. He's a good sort but a bit trying when he starts talking about Bentong. Anyone would think Bentong was the only place which had any trouble from the Commies. Blake was stationed there when the Emergency blew up. He's always blowing his trumpet about the damned place. That's why we nickname him 'Bugler'. Still, as I've said, he's a damned good sort at heart. So are most of the senior officers here. We're lucky in that way. That's about all I can tell you, I think."

"Well, I think you've covered most things extremely well, Jock. Thanks a lot."

I got up and stretched myself. Lovie suggested we walk round base. It did not cover a very large area, and for all its decaying buildings it looked compact. As I walked around I was conscious of the fact that I was the centre of attraction. Most of the men stood and stared at me. Some looked gloomy. Others neither one thing nor the other: that nasty in-between. When Lovie introduced me to Ming, Peter, Latif, Bakar and several others they all acted in a coldly reserved manner and accepted it as a matter of routine. They certainly looked a cheerless bunch.

After tea we went over to the guardroom and checked the spare guns and ammunition in the armoury. It took about two hours, and when we had finished we strolled over to the main gate. The sentry was standing by one of the posts with a sten gun slung over one shoulder. We stood in the middle of the road and watched the river flowing under the bridge. We had been there about ten minutes when a Malay constable sauntered past. He left the road a few yards farther on, and made his way towards a small attap hut I could see among the trees.

¹ Officer Superintending Police Circle.

² Assistant Superintendent of Police.

"Where's he going?" I asked Lovie.

"That's Din. One of the squad. He lives over there with his wife. I gave him permission to do so as long as he's back in base by dawn."

"Is that wise?" I was thinking more of the man's safety than anything else.

"I see no necessity for worry," Lovie replied uninterestedly. "He takes his sten gun with him, anyway," he added with a touch of dismissal. I did not approach the subject again.

We went back to the billet, and Lovie waved me to a large rattan arm-chair on the verandah. He settled himself on top of the steps, half turned towards me. I offered him a cigarette, and he took it absently. We lit up and puffed out clouds of smoke.

"Where does one bath?" I asked. Lovie pointed towards the river.

"In there," he said, "but don't go too far downstream. Some of the men use that as a lavatory. You can tell the spot because the fish are big and fat there."

"Thanks for the tip," I grunted. The men's deposits obviously agreed with the fish. Lovie had suddenly gone silent. There was a pause longer than usual.

"Don't take offence at what I'm going to say now, Bill," he began slowly, turning to face me fully. I decided to give him his head. "But I think it best to clear the air a bit. I know a good deal about your record, and what you are like as regards discipline, etcetera. I always try to find out what sort of a chap is taking over whenever I leave a place. It's nothing personal against anyone. Don't think that, but it can help me to help the other fellow. Give him some tips. So much for that. Let's get back to where I started. I know you're regimental and strict. That's all right in some quarters. I'd be the last person to refute that. But at Sungei Lembu it's different. The men here are good all round, but they won't stomach a rod of iron. Believe me, I know. Some of them are Specials, and as you know they haven't been through the Police Depot. They don't understand

discipline like the regulars. I've a pretty fair idea what you think of Asians. Maybe in some cases you are perfectly justified in your beliefs, but they are not all lazy good-for-nothings, disloyal or any other thing you choose to call them. There are good Asians just as there are good Europeans, and you've got the good Asians here, Bill, if you would endeavour to appreciate it. I'm not giving you a sermon, but do soft-pedal a bit while you're here. You've had older men to deal with in the past, and by the look of the fruit salad on your shirt you've had a distinguished past."

He spoke so sincerely that I found it difficult at first to be annoyed. He watched me closely for quite a while after he had had his say. My brief conciliatory period did not last for long. I began to get annoyed. I think his references to my past did it.

"You haven't offended me," I replied shortly; "at least you are frank in what you say, and I appreciate that. But my views on certain matters are different from yours, as you seem well aware. This is a combat unit, and the need for discipline is apparent. You just can't have undisciplined men in a combat unit, police or military."

"There's another way of looking at it," Lovie said, tantalisingly calm. "If you are out on patrol and run into trouble, you've got to rely on these eighteen men here. If they pack in without resistance, then you know you've had it without me telling you. They'll never stick by you if they hate you. On the other hand, if they learn to like and respect you, they'll stick until the end. I'm sure of that."

"Aren't you being a bit premature? There's no sign yet that they hate me."

"They will if you use the old whip, Bill."

"You think a lot of this squad, don't you?" I ignored his last remark.

"Yes, quite honestly I do. So did Potter. They have never let either of us down. Perhaps that's because we have been tolerant and understanding. No riding roughshod. I'm not blowing my

own trumpet, don't run away with that idea. Finally, keep one thing in the back of your brain-box. Most of the men here are only kids. All volunteers at that. Back home in the U.K., the majority of them would be too young for National Service. I've only known you personally a few hours," Lovie plugged on, "I believe your hard-boiled attitude is a front. I always think fellows like you adopt that attitude because there is something you want to keep hidden. And to do it you are prepared to risk losing everything. Your own self-respect. Your men's loyalty, and many other things I can't quite put my finger on. It's a big price to pay for a grudge."

"Oh, to hell!" I exploded.

I could think of nothing else to say. I saw a shadow of pain flicker across Lovie's face. His mouth twitched nervously. For a moment I thought he was on the brink of tears. I had taken a liking to Lovie the first moment I saw him. There was something appealing about him. It was something I felt instinctively more than I can express in words. Suddenly his mouth stopped twitching, and he turned away to look towards the river.

"I suppose you know your own business best, Bill," he said as if he were talking to the river and not me. "I hate to see chaps make a bodge-up of their lives. Still, you're back again and you'll do what you think best."

"Yes, I'm back," I grated, "and for a bloody good reason, too."

"Such as?" He was still looking at the river.

There was a long pause.

"I'm going to write a book. Or I should say I'm going to try. I doubt if I shall make the grade. I was never any good at writing. I'm going to write about the police. Let the people know that we do more than sit on our arses boozing. Do more than our share of the hard work. That we never have the help we are supposed to be getting. It's high time that someone presented a true picture of Malaya, the forgotten campaign, and defended the police, especially those of our members who have passed on. Briefly, that is what I intend to do."

Lovie turned to face me again.

"Then you will have to write about Bukit Kepong. Quite apart from what you think, you have got to be fair," he said slowly.

"That won't be necessary. I'm only concerned with our chaps. Let the Asians write their own blasted story. Anyway, Bukit Kepong's dead and gone."

"It's only dead because you want it to be. It's tucked away out of sight in some musty old file down in Kuala Lumpur. And so far as you're concerned it can rot there, can't it?"

"It can," I answered curtly.

"I hope to Christ you'll change your mind," Lovie said seriously.

Long after Lovie had gone to bed that night I lay on my camp-bed thinking of what he had said. I could faintly see the outline of his body on the big double bed in the corner. I called out to him softly several times, and when I received no answer I guessed he was asleep. I lit a cigarette and went out on to the verandah. The sentry at the gate was walking up and down the stretch of his beat in the moonlight. I hitched up my trousers and walked along the verandah. I jogged down the steps at the far end and strode across the compound. The moon threw a long thin shadow in front of me. I stuck my hands deep into my trousers pockets, and the cigarette trailed downwards from my lips. I veered to the left half-way across the compound, and went round the rear of the canteen. The contractor was sitting outside on an upturned bucket, sipping something which looked like tea. I did not speak as I passed him, and neither did he. He just looked at me over the rim of the glass. I stopped when I reached the large concrete square. I gazed down at it thoughtfully for a few moments, trying to imagine the gruesome relics which lay underneath. The cigarette burned down as far as my lip, and I spat it out on to the ground. I looked over my shoulder at Berapit in the distance. At the white stone monastery glimmering in the moonlight on its slopes. I turned round and made my way back to the room I had recently left.

I thought of Ming and his future. Whether he would have to go. I hadn't made up my mind by the time I reached the door, and once inside I didn't think of Ming any more that night. Lovie was still huddled up in the big bed. I tip-toed over and pulled the sheet up round his shoulders. Then he began to snore.

I kicked off my sandals and flopped back on my camp-bed. I lay awake a long time looking up at the ceiling. Then I fell asleep.

[2]

WE left Sungei Lembu early the next morning. Lovie had mapped out quite a bit, and it looked like being one unholy rush. We went the Pondok Labu way into Bukit Mertajam.

We visited Rodway first. He looked as if he were expecting us as we breezed into his office. He made me very welcome, and did everything possible to set me at ease. There was no mistaking Rodway's type. Wide shouldered, powerfully built, he was a tower of strength. His jaw was square and firmly carved, no weakness around the mouth. He spoke with the impacting authority of a man who knew what he was about. I soon learned that his one consuming passion was his old briar pipe, gripped firmly between his even white teeth.

Our interview came to an end, and I left with Rodway's invitation to barge in, as he put it, at any old time I wished to choose. There followed a round of introductions to a collection of Asian officers. I found most of them half-hearted in their welcome. It was a majority attitude one found in most parts of Malaya.

There are exceptions to the rule in everything. I found one that day at Bukit Mertajam. In the personage, the very ample personage, of Senior Inspector Zannuddin. He was a round, fat, jovial little Malay, and quite a comic in his own way. He soon had Lovie and me splitting our sides with laughter at his antics. His was a really singular character. I can quite honestly

say I never met another Asian officer to touch him. I saw quite a lot of him during my time at Sungei Lembu, and I always found him the same. Full of pranks, intensely funny, especially when he took the mickey out of some high-ranking officer. The more I saw of Zannuddin the more I liked him. It is a great pity I cannot say the same about his brother officers at Bukit Mertajam.

Enjoyable as the meeting with Zannuddin was, it had to come to an end. I noticed Lovie glance at his watch more times than was necessary, and I guessed it was time to move. Our next port of call was the Mess, where the European officers were quartered. They were there to welcome me in all their glory. Madill, Sheldrick, Nield, Donnelly and, of course, Paddy Regan. He hadn't changed all that much. A little fatter perhaps and less hair on top. But under the surface he was the same old Regan of the war days. Chock full of humour and Irish wit. I did manage to snatch a few minutes alone with him, and we talked over old times. He refreshed my memory on some things best forgotten, but we laughed over them again. Several times Lovie bowled over and joined in the laughter. It was most comical, really, because he hadn't a clue what Regan and I were discussing. All the same, he entered into the spirit of the occasion.

Fisher came in about twenty minutes after I arrived. It may sound ridiculous to admit the fact, but it wasn't until I saw him come up the steps that I realised he had been missing. I watched him as he entered the room. Lovie was right. I did find Fisher changed. It took me a few minutes to get over the shock. He stood in the middle of the room looking around, not taking any special notice of anyone. Sheldrick shoved a glass into his hand, and he downed the lot in one go. I raised my eyebrows in surprise. That was a new one on me. A few months before he would not have touched the stuff. I made an excuse to Regan and Lovie, and went over to where Fisher was standing. A crooked half-smile played about his lips when he saw me. I caught hold of his arm and steered him out on to the verandah.

"Hell's bells, Jack," I said when we were outside, "you gave me a scare. Look at you, man! Where's all the beef and muscle gone?" I added. It wasn't a very encouraging greeting after some months, but I could not resist the temptation to comment.

"Sure I'm okay, Bill. I guess I've got worms. Been working hard lately," he said, as if he wanted me to believe it. He smiled crookedly again. "You know of course that Harry Jones has moved up this way. Bought a small estate."

Harry was a planter I had known in Sungei Siput.

"Yes. He wrote me while I was in U.K. That's how I knew you were up here, too." I took a hint and changed the subject.

"Harry's a nice fellow," Fisher stated awkwardly.

"Yes. How's Lim? Has he got his secretary yet?"

"Getting fatter than ever. And coining more and more money. Good luck to him, though. He's one Chinese I'll always like. Got the old shrewd business head. No secretary, though. He's still trying hard. Lim always wanted to have a secretary, didn't he?"

Madill interrupted before I could say any more. He had a small glass of whisky in each hand. He offered one to me, but I tactfully declined, saying the stuff didn't agree with me. He looked at me gingerly, then raised the glass my way and swallowed the contents. He smacked his lips and offered Fisher the other glass. Fisher repeated his earlier performance. The drink never touched the sides of his mouth.

"You never drank before, Jack. What's on?" I asked when we were alone again.

"Good for the blood out here, so they say. I only use it now and again. On special occasions like this."

I knew he was lying. He placed the glass on the top of the verandah rail. The sun caught it and made it sparkle.

"Is there anything wrong, Jack? Can I help?" I asked softly.

He looked away from me, down at the glass.

"There's nothing wrong, Bill. Ought there to be?"

He faced me squarely. I detected a challenge in his eyes.

"I was only wondering," I mumbled.

Lovie came out and saved the day. Things were getting uncomfortably awkward. He said it was time we left for Mengkuang. I had forgotten about meeting the penghulu. I picked up my beret and followed Lovie to the Land Rover. I noticed that he barely nodded to Fisher. I climbed into the back of the vehicle, and the driver piloted it down the short drive. I glanced back, hoping to see Fisher. He wasn't on the verandah, waving good-bye with the others. They continued to wave until we disappeared from view. I thought about Fisher as the Land Rover roared along the open road. Lovie attempted to draw me into conversation. I am afraid I was poor company for him on that trip.

We left the Land Rover outside a coffee-shop on the outskirts of Mengkuang. The four Chinese playing mahjongg under the canopy glanced at us quickly, then resumed play. Lovie led the way across the road and into the undergrowth. The track he chose to follow was broad and well surfaced. We had only gone a few yards when he started up the conversation which had lagged. I listened to what he had to say as we strode briskly down the track, only occasionally butting in on the conversation or nodding my head. I learned that he was hoping to get some information from the penghulu which might help me in due course. It concerned the rumoured report of Communist courier movement in the area. I don't recollect how many times Lovie impressed upon me the necessity for tactful handling where the penghulu was concerned. I did form an opinion, kept exclusively to myself, that the penghulu must be a temperamental old cuss.

The penghulu was sitting outside his wood and attap house when we arrived. It was not a pretentious building, but there hung around it an unmistakable sense of cleanliness. He, himself, was more or less as I expected him to be. Broadly built, keen-eyed and, I would say, in his late fifties. He clapped his hands and shouted in a guttural accent when he saw us approaching. A young Chinese boy came out of the house carrying two wicker chairs. He placed them directly in front of our

host, then beat a hasty retreat. No doubt he was glad to get away, but for all that he was curious. I caught him peeping round the door at me. The penghulu waved a large hand in the direction of the chairs, and we sat down. A tense silence followed which after a short while became uncomfortable. I was thankful when Lovie broke the tension.

He turned on good sales talk. He explained that I was the new commander, and expressed a wish that the penghulu would continue to help me as he had helped other commanders. Lovie made such a good job of it that I began to feel important. It was the first time I had experienced his command of the Malay language. It was brilliant, flawlessly accurate. It made my scant knowledge seem utterly out of place. The penghulu listened in silence, sometimes nodding his head or grunting. Once or twice he sighed, and I wondered if Lovie was overdoing it. All the time the penghulu's eyes were centred on me. There was no need for me to look directly at him to find out. I could literally feel them boring into me, tearing me to pieces and putting me together again.

After Lovie had finished the opening speech, the penghulu turned on his best patter. One would think that he was reading from a carefully prepared script. He was sorry Lovie was going. The whole village was sorry. He even took great pains to elaborate in no mean way what a thumping good fellow Potter had been. Putting it in a nutshell, he made it perfectly clear that I was neither wanted nor welcome. He did not say it outright, but the inference was there and I would have been very dense not to detect it. Not that my presence had anything to do with him or his villagers. I had been posted to Sungei Lembu, and so far as the penghulu was concerned he could like it or lump it. I think Lovie sensed my embarrassment, because he cut in several times during the oratory and tactfully, but firmly, put the penghulu in his place. I don't think that helped matters, judging by the expression on the penghulu's face. It could have been one of his difficult days.

At last Lovie managed to get a word in edgeways, and he

plumbed on the subject of couriers and the rumours. In a very subtle manner he began pumping for information. The penghulu's response was ice-cold. I watched a distinct change come over him. For once his eyes left me, and he stared vacantly up at the sky. I saw the facial muscles relax, then stiffen. The large, widely spaced eyes narrowed and the thick lips thinned out into a hard line. He spread out his arms sideways from his body in a deprecating gesture. He stated rather coldly that he knew nothing, and that he discounted Lovie's theory as the outcome of gossip irresponsibly spread around by unnamed persons. I thought he was being a rattling good liar, and once I felt like telling him so. He was obviously cagey, and I wondered if it was because of my presence. On the other hand I wondered if he was as genuine as Lovie made out.

"I believe you could help me, inche," Lovie said very evenly, very straight to the point, after a long pause.

The penghulu's whole body stiffened this time. His nostrils quivered, and his face became drawn and tightly stretched over his high cheekbones. I wondered whether he was going to blow a gasket. He never gave me the satisfaction. Slowly he uncoiled and folded his arms across his chest.

"I have always helped you when it is possible, tuan. This time it is not possible," he excused himself.

Lovie either burped or grunted, I am not sure which. He lit a cigarette and passed one to me. I tapped it on my finger-nail before lighting it.

"What would you have done in Sungei Siput, tuan?" The penghulu had addressed me for the first time.

"Done with what?" I asked, wondering how he knew about Sungei Siput. Lovie hadn't mentioned the place.

"With a person who would not give the police information." I had the sound common sense to realise that he was baiting me. I made up my mind not to bite, if I could help it.

"It depends on circumstances, inche," I replied warily; "if I thought the person was wilfully withholding information I would detain him for further questioning at my leisure. If——"

"Your Malay is not very good, tuan," the penghulu cut in.

"No," I snapped, reddening up.

"As you were saying, tuan. Please continue." His manner was not suave. It was mocking.

"If he still protested his innocence—that he knew nothing—I would adopt other methods," I went on.

"What methods, may I ask?"

I chewed at my finger-nails. I spat the fragments on to the ground.

"Circumstances would have to be taken into account. I might even think of shooting the person," I replied slowly with a greater show of calmness than I thought I possessed.

The penghulu's eyebrows shot up. An impolite smile flashed across his mouth. Lovie coughed agitatedly beside me. I ignored him.

"So, tuan. You might even see fit to shoot me." The eyebrows remained raised.

I stopped chewing my finger-nails. I faced the penghulu squarely. The time had come for a showdown. I think Lovie sensed it. He reached out and grasped my arm. I shook his hand away without looking at him.

"I will give you an honest answer, inche. If at any time I had sound reason to think that you were secretly in league with the Communists, wilfully withholding information against the interests of the country, I would shoot you where you stand without the slightest compunction."

If I had surprised him, he did not show it. Perhaps it was what he expected me to say, wanted me to say. I would be the last person to disappoint him.

"You believe in brutal methods? The law of the jungle, tuan?"

"Where circumstances demand it, yes. I do not believe in half measures, inche."

"An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth."

"Definitely."

"It is very interesting, tuan. Your theory is very interesting."

I believe in Sungei Siput you had a reputation for unorthodox methods."

I shot a quick glance at Lovie. He frowned and shook his head. I turned back to the penghulu.

"How did you know, inche?" I asked sharply.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Word travels, tuan. Sometimes faster than the wind," he said.

"I am flattered that my reputation, be it notorious or not, has travelled so far, inche," I replied sarcastically. "If you consider my methods of dealing with the Communists so unorthodox, I do not agree with you. I merely treat them as they treat us."

"And those who are not Communists, tuan?"

"I do not look upon those as being in the same category."

"But you hate all Asians, irrespective of their political views, do you not?"

Somehow he had learned a fair bit about me. It could have explained his attitude towards me. But again I doubted it as I now doubted his pseudo-loyalty.

"I do not feel inclined to answer that question, inche. It has no bearing upon our earlier conversation," I said icily.

"I believe I know the answer, tuan. I have no wish to be disrespectful to you, but it would perhaps be wise to remember that you are no longer in Sungei Siput."

I did not answer him. I got up from the chair and stretched my body. I looked down at Lovie and inclined my head in the direction we had come. I did not look at the penghulu again. I started to walk up the track. A few seconds later Lovie caught up with me.

"Phew! That was a bit close," he said.

"Bloody close," I grunted.

"Don't take it too much to heart, Bill," he urged.

"I'm not," I assured him. "I think he held out on you about the couriers," I added.

"Perhaps," Lovie said non-committally. "You may have better luck next time."

"Like hell," I snorted; "you are a perishing optimist, I must say."

My meeting with the penghulu of Mengkuang had not been exactly cordial.

[3]

A SLIGHT movement penetrated my slumber. I opened my eyes and tried to pierce the darkness. The movement came closer. At first I thought it was Lovie going outside to spend a penny. Then I smelt the body-odour. It was definitely Asian variety. It stopped abruptly, and all I could hear were stilted breathing and Lovie's snores. Then a hand passed over the sheet covering me. I made a wild grab and caught it just above the wrist. It resisted, then became limp in my grasp. The room lightened slowly, and I recognised the dark face outlined above mine. I sat up and released the hand.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Peter quietly.

"The gunners on No. 1 bren post report torchlight flashing in the trees, sir," he replied shakily. It sounded as if his teeth were chattering.

"Where?"

"At the rear, sir."

I got out of bed, and took Lovie's torch off the window-sill. I switched it on and handed it to Peter. He shielded the light with his free hand. I went over to Lovie and shook him roughly. He took some rousing. He grunted like an angry old boar. I told him what Peter had said, when he showed some semblance of wakefulness. Then he jumped alert. He threw back his sheet and leapt out of bed in one easy movement. He cut a queer figure standing there in the feeble torchlight with his baggy underpants hanging round his belly button.

"Get dressed, Bill. We'll go and have a dekkoo."

I put on my shirt, trousers and jungle boots. I buckled my pistol round my waist. Lovie beat me by a couple of seconds.

"Rouse Ming and the squad. Tell them to take up defence positions quietly. No shooting until I say so. That goes for base sentries, too," he said to Peter, very businesslike.

"Yes, sir."

I felt the torch slip back into my hands, and I followed Lovie along the verandah. We took up position behind the canteen. We stood concealed in the shadows, out of the glare from the Aldis lamps. I looked out across the flat landscape beyond into the darkness. I could see the bright dancing flashes of four torches. They weren't fireflies on a spree.

"What do you think?" I asked Lovie.

I felt him tense in the darkness.

"They're in the rubber-tree area," he replied thoughtfully. "It's too damned early for tappers. Anyhow, they use flares. It could be Commies."

"Ching Moi Chai?" I whispered, getting keyed up.

Lovie blew down his nose like a rhinoceros with adenoid trouble. He obviously didn't think so.

"They're coming a bit nearer," I whispered huskily.

"Wait. We'll know in a minute."

He tensed again and gripped my arm. In the background I could hear the squad moving into position. There was no fuss or bother. We waited a good ten minutes. The lights continued to dance among the trees. One of them went round and round like a Catherine wheel. Then suddenly they went out. And stayed out.

"That clinches it," Lovie came closer and whispered in my ear. "It's the old torch routine. Testing our defences to see if we're on our toes. They'll be bold, seeing we haven't fired. Not enough of them to attack us openly. But enough to come as near as possible and lob over a few grenades."

"They'll wait out there for hours. Until the time is ripe," I breathed.

"You're dead right. I doubt if there's more than four of them. Maybe only two with a torch in each hand."

"What's the next move? Wait for them to show up?"

"It'll be too late then. The grenades will be over before we see who lobbed them. I've got a better idea. A trick I learned from the Gurkhas. I'm going out with a couple of men to stalk them. You nip up to No. 1 bren post and keep your eyes peeled. I bet that's where they'll strike, if we miss them."

"Not on your flaming Nelly," I grunted. "I'm coming with you. Just you and I."

"Okay. I'll get Ming to pass the word round there's to be no shooting while we're out there. Unless he's sure they're Comies. Hold on."

He melted away into the darkness. He was back in less than five minutes.

"Any more flashing?" he asked.

"No."

"Good. Ming's getting the word round. Now we must look slippy. Come on, big boy."

We collected stens at the guardroom. They were better than carbines for the job. The sentry opened the gate to let us through. We turned left outside and hugged the barbed wire as far as the corner. Then we dropped into the ditch and crawled under the glare from the Aldis lamp. Lovie turned left again and continued to hug the wire until we came to the second lamp on the rear corner of the perimeter. We were then parallel with No. 1 bren post, which was on the far side of base. To get past the second Aldis was going to be our trickiest manoeuvre. The light shone outwards from the perimeter in the direction which we had to take; not like the first which had shone away from us. I could hear Lovie breathing heavily in front, pondering the best course to take. It appeared to me there was only one. The grass was about three feet high, a lot more than it should have been so near the perimeter. Fortunately Lovie had not had it cleared recently. We would have to crawl through the grass until we had cleared the lamp's

range, and trust to luck about being seen. It was possible if we moved flat to the ground, using our elbows as levers. But there was always the element of risk that something unforeseen would go wrong. We did have one small point in our favour. The main shaft of light from the Aldis was focused above ground level on to the trees, but a certain amount of illumination did touch the grass. Still, it was going to be tricky. Lovie must have shared my thoughts, because for the first time he turned his face towards me. It was no more than a pale blob in the darkness. I could sense more than see the concern stamped all over it. The blob disappeared when he turned away again, and then I heard him moving forward. I let him go about twelve feet before I followed.

It seemed as if we took hours to negotiate the light range when, in effect, it had taken only minutes. I had never done anything like it before, and I never want to again. The night was cool, but I sweated like a polar bear in a heat wave. The back of my neck ached terribly, and I had skinned my chin through pushing it close to and along the ground. On top of that both my elbows were raw and bleeding. Lovie had not fared much better. The only difference was that his chin was intact. I had paused for a breather when he came out of the darkness and laid beside me.

"Okay?" he queried a little breathlessly.

"Yes," I grunted in a displeased way.

"Now, my theory is," Lovie whispered, "they'll hang about the rubber until they feel safe to move. Then they'll follow the river down to No. 1 Bren post. They can get within twenty-five yards of it without being seen. It's a flaw in our defences, but nothing can be done about it because of the bank which juts up from the river at that point. That's why we call the Bren post Potter's Folly. Potter built it with his own hands. Nine times out of ten, the Commies have a go at it because they can get so close. This is only pure assumption, but I feel that if we make a beeline for the river, keeping parallel with base all the time, we'll eventually meet up with them and score through

surprise. That's the way the Gurkhas do it. They always go out to meet the Commies under cover of darkness."

"We're not the flaming Gurkhas, though," I grunted again.

"True. But now we are out here, let's have a bash. I doubt if they suspect we are here."

I hoped he was right.

He wriggled off, slithering through the grass like an eel, and I played follow-my-leader again. That little imp, humour, gnawed at me. What if the Commies, always supposing there were Commies somewhere, had seen or heard us and were quietly stalking us? That would almost certainly induce Lovie and me to do something unpleasant in our trousers! I almost forgot where I was and burst out laughing. I remembered in time. It was a black moonless night out there in the open, and I had difficulty in keeping track of Lovie. There were a few stars scattered over the sky, but they didn't help much. I had no means of telling whether I was going true to course or veering too much to my right. It was a safe bet that I would not wander too far to the left because base perimeter lights acted as a guide. I had belly-crawled a fair distance when I chose to lift my head cautiously to reassure myself. I had my first shock when I looked to my left. I saw only complete blackness. I had my second shock when I glanced frantically behind me. The perimeter lights were very small and much farther away than they were at the time of my previous bearings check. I strained my ears to catch any sound which might betray Lovie's location. It took me some time before I realised that I was very much alone. Somewhere I had lost Lovie.

I popped up my head again. I listened. I heard nothing except my own breathing. It sounded very noisy. I strained my eyes until they protruded like organ stops. The perimeter lights began to sway and dance crazily in the distance. I swallowed hard. I ran my fingers over the sten and received some comfort. I crawled around in circles unable to decide which way to take. The blackness around me was intense, suffocating. I began to curse my luck and Lovie. I received no satisfaction. I started to

crawl again, away from base. I maintained what I thought was an even course. The undergrowth became thicker, more difficult to traverse. The thorns bit into me, making my elbows bleed again. I felt the warm blood trickling down my forearms. The sten became very heavy. Sometimes it rattled as I moved. I cursed it and carried on.

Then I did a very silly thing. I should have known better, but I had become desperate. I levered myself into a kneeling position. My head and chest rose above the grass. Suddenly the blackness lifted a little. I could distinguish a knot of rubber trees, outlined in pale white relief. I knew I was not far from the river or where the Commies had flashed their torches. I sat back on my heels and rubbed my elbows. I had moved just in time. Automatic fire split the darkness to my right. I saw the small spurts of flame and the bullets whined around me. I yelled and plunged into the undergrowth, hugging the damp earth like a long-lost friend. My heart doubled its beats:

"Christ! Get your head down, you big bastard. . . ."

The words came out of the darkness.

That was Lovie.

I crawled in the direction of the voice. I was halted by the loud abrupt bark of a rifle. There was no tell-tale flame spurt. It was equipped with a flash eliminator. I spun round and flopped back to earth. Then another rifle opened up. The bullets droned through the air.

That wasn't Lovie.

The sten opened up again, away from me this time. I heard the click of a magazine being changed and the bolt drawn back. I had Lovie's position taped. I knelt, half crouched. I cradled the sten's wooden butt into my shoulder. My fingers closed round the forward grip. I loosed off a magazine at random, enjoying it. I heard a scramble among the trees and the sound of pounding feet running away. I couldn't see a darned thing to shoot at. I changed magazines quickly. I threw discretion to the winds and stood up. So did Lovie. I saw his shape in the darkness as he crouched to shoot off his second

magazine. The tiny red spurts lit up his face. I fired simultaneously in the same direction. There was no more rifle fire and the footsteps had died away. I pulled out my heavy Browning pistol and let rip. A peashooter would have been more effective. It clicked empty, and I returned it to its holster. Lovie shouted to me and ran towards the trees. He triggered a couple of bursts as he ran. I followed, edging over to my left. In my exuberance I had forgotten about the river. Until my legs threshed empty air. And I saw the water's silvery gleam below me. Then it was too late. I let out a howl as I plunged down.

I hit the water in a perfect pancake landing. I went under and grovelled on the muddy bottom. I broke surface and spat water out of my mouth. My feet sank deeper under me. I went under again and retrieved the sten. It was covered with slime and fungus. I cursed and tossed it on to the bank. I started to climb out of the river. I slipped back twice and started all over again. It was tough going. I was half-way up the bank the third time when I felt strong hands grip me. I looked up into Lovie's face. I lay on the bank panting to get my breath back. I was a combination of water, mud and hurt dignity. I stood up and shook myself like a dog.

"What a daft thing to do!" Lovie said simply.

I cussed him in my best vocabulary. I picked up the sten.

"Where are they?" I gasped.

"I lost 'em in the rubber. If it had been moonlight, I would have got one at least."

"You nearly got me."

"That was your own bloody fault," he grinned. "How'd I know you would stick your ruddy great bonce up like that? I'm surprised at you."

"I surprised myself," I snapped.

"Did you do anything in your trousers?"

"It was touch and go."

Lovie laughed. I didn't join in. I felt murderous.

"Well," he said, "I guess we had better get back to base. We won't see the Commies any more tonight. Don't forget to shout

when we approach the perimeter. The men might be trigger-happy."

"That would be the final episode in a glorious venture," I mumbled.

"Sure would," Lovie grinned.

I thought suddenly of the penghulu of Mengkuang. I wondered if he was tied up with the Commies. The old doubt returned. I was on the point of mentioning it to Lovie when I thought better of it. We started back towards the perimeter lights. I glanced furtively behind me several times. Lovie seemed unconcerned. He started whistling a few bars of 'Annie Laurie'. He was certainly a cool customer.

"I was reminded of something tonight," he said.

"What?" I asked half-heartedly. I wasn't particularly keen to know.

"Time the grass was cut round the perimeter."

I made no comment. I felt only like throttling him.

[4]

LOVIE's posting came through two weeks later; three days after I had officially assumed command at Sungei Lembu. In the interim period we had been on various patrols, and I had become acquainted with a fair proportion of my large area. The morning after the river episode we went out on a two-day patrol with the squad. Lovie visited a lot of his contacts, and I learned the identity of some reliable informers. The idea of the patrol was to get information which might have some bearing on the Communists who tried unsuccessfully to create disorder at base. We had one or two good leads. At least they seemed so at first. But when we followed them up they amounted to very little. We followed the last lead, and finished up in part of the Relau hills. But we were again doomed to disappointment at a time when our hopes were soaring. I did finally mention to

Lovie about the penghulu of Mengkuang and my suspicions that maybe he was tied up in the business, but Lovie appeared reluctant to pursue that trail. I believe he was a little apprehensive of what might happen at a second meeting with the penghulu. So in the end we gave up the uneven struggle and confined our activities to short routine patrols.

Most of our leisure time was spent in Bukit Mertajam. I welcomed the visits because it gave me the opportunity of seeing more of Regan, and also getting to know Donnelly, Madill, Sheldrick, Nield and Rodway better. As can be expected, some breezy arguments ensued. I think that was because the camp was very much divided on certain topics of conversation. Invariably the trend of discussion centred around planters, and I learned quite early that Rodway did not share my views. He never said so in as many words, but some of his answers to my points gave me that impression. Regan surprised me over the same subject. I found that he was against my criticisms, and he was very outspoken about it. He startled me somewhat when he mildly asked me if I was building up a hate campaign. If I had bitten, it could have developed into a nasty situation. I did not want that to happen with Regan, so when danger threatened I quickly switched the subject.

I saw very little of Fisher during the fortnight. He seemed deliberately to avoid me. It annoyed me at first, because we had been such good friends in the past, and I could only think that the reason was his home affairs. I got used to his manner, and finally I decided to let him get on with it. I managed to get over to Kulim twice and see Wilmot. The actual time spent with him was brief because on both occasions he was shortly going on patrol. Both visits were perfect examples of bad timing. Unfortunately there was no alternative. I could only go to Kulim when circumstances permitted, at short notice. I found Wilmot unchanged. The same upright, honest person I had always known him to be. Full of beans and completely wrapped up in his work. He possessed various talents; art was one, and I often thought that he was wasted in the Malayan Police. I have no

talent to boast of, except for painting. A legacy from my mother. Anything I could do, millions of others could do likewise, so really I have nothing to say for myself. Through sheer laziness I did not take advantage of a good education, preferring instead to think up new ways of playing truant whenever the opportunity knocked. I did once seriously consider taking up law, but my ardour soon evaporated. The long period of study and training required was too much for me. So I forgot all about law, and found contentment in making myself objectionable to other people, especially those whom I disliked. Compared with Wilmot's, my almost non-existent talents were very much out of place.

On my second visit Wilmot introduced me to the Operations Officer, 'Becky' Sharp. I judged him accurately as a thoroughly nice fellow, generously warm-hearted. He was very similar to Wilmot in mannerisms. I noticed that after I had talked with him for a short while. I was not going to allow Wilmot to skip off quite so freely this time. I bullied him, and the result was he put off his patrol for two hours. The three of us whiled away the time discussing various subjects. Somewhere during our conversation—the actual point eludes me—we got round to Malaya again. I listened to Sharp being bitterly critical of what he termed bungling British Administration and cut-throat policy. He was quite obviously pro-Asian. I could quite honestly say fanatically so. I listened attentively to what he had to say and, wonder of wonders, I kept a clear head. That surprised no one more than myself.

Lovie rounded off his introduction tour in fine style. The afternoon before his posting came through, he whisked me off to Sungei Bakap, Jungle Squad Headquarters, to meet Lodge and Quayle. I spent a very enjoyable afternoon in their company. They appeared as unlike as chalk and cheese. Lodge, fortyish, serious and commanding. Choosy with his words and prone to think a lot before he committed himself to actual speech. Quayle, a good deal younger, not so serious and not possessing

the cautiousness which Lodge had acquired through experience. I remember one thing for which I envied both of them: the large refrigerator standing imposingly in their living-room and the electricity supply which worked it!

I had just finished shaving when Lovie came into the room, waving the signal in his hand. He was looking better than when I first arrived at Sungei Lembu. The hollowness had gone from his face. I had a sneaking feeling that he was adding a bit of weight, although he flatly denied it when, on occasion, I jokingly referred to his trim waistline. That vital statistic in man was Lovie's pride and joy. He had an absolute horror of becoming corpulent. I don't think he had just cause to worry. Corpulence and all its alien signs of approaching middle age rarely ravaged wiry frames like Lovie's.

"Well, where to?" I asked him after he had plonked himself on the bed and read the signal at least half a dozen times.

"Perak. Report to Contingent Headquarters Ipoh first. After that it's anybody's guess."

"You'll start off near my old territory. You'll hear plenty more about me there," I grinned.

"Nuts! Your escapades will be chicken-feed compared with mine when I get going."

"Glad you think so. When do you leave?"

"I'll have to catch this afternoon's train from B.M."

"So soon?"

"Yep. Ipoh, here I come. Now all the little girls will have to watch out for Jock Lovie. The big fat ones, too."

"You like big, fat girls?"

"Yep. Plenty of meat on them. Something to get hold of. And you?"

"I prefer them slim, dainty. Not skin and bone. Just nice and slim."

"Not me. I like them with raven dark hair and lashings of sex appeal. No blondes for me. They're insipid."

"My weakness used to be blondes," I admitted. "But no more for me. I agree with you entirely. They think they're the cat's

whiskers. Gentlemen prefer blondes, so the saying goes. They thrive on that, the conceited little pussies," I said.

"That's right. Never trust a blonde. Say one word out of place, make one false move and, boy, they dig in their claws and think what they can sue you for."

I wiped my razor and put it away in its case. In one way I was pleased Lovie was going. For his own sake. In another, I knew it was going to be dull without him around.

"Well, you're old enough to know when to stop," I chided.

"A man's never old enough, Bill. He gets the urge and it's all over in five minutes. Then he's got the rest of his life to regret it. Then say all the nice girls love a sailor. I reckon they love a brawny Scot. Especially when his name is Lovie. It fair sends them. Frankly, I think the attraction is to find out if a Scot does wear anything under his kilt. It's fun when they try. By the way, I forgot to tell you. There's a fellow-countryman of mine in charge of the police at that new Resettlement Camp they're building at Val d'Or. It's only a stone's throw from where we were yesterday at Sungei Bakap. His name's Yule. You must meet him one day. He's only a little squirt, but what he lacks in stature he makes up for in guts. A Scot like me. The salt of the earth. Only trouble is we're too modest about it."

"I hadn't particularly noticed that," I chuckled, aiming a mock blow at his head. I sat down on the bed beside him.

"You wait until Scotland gets home rule. It's bound to come. The Republic of Scotland. I can see it now sticking out on the map. Then we'll kick all you bloody foreigners out of it."

"Hold on. I've got Scots blood in me."

"You don't say. Well, what do you know?"

"My family got mixed up with the Clan MacGregor way back. A distant marriage or something. It's difficult to grasp."

"The MacGregors!" Lovie yelled. "The outlaw clan. The bloody bastard Red MacGregors. That's a laugh."

"Red Rob Roy might hear you," I whispered. "You'll make him turn over in his grave."

"The bastard wants to turn over. Put his arse to the sky.

Best thing he could do. Anyhow, Bill, I won't hold it against you. Can't blame you for the sins of your forefathers."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it, boy." Lovie waved his hand through the air. "I believe in the four freedoms," he added.

"What's the fourth?" I had heard of the first three in varying degrees. Their authenticity was debatable.

"Freedom to seduce any woman you fancy. Married or no. Virgin or pro."

"A nice healthy, vigorous pastime," I commented dryly. I did not quite see how it tied up with my ancestry, all the same. It must have been Lovie's own personal version.

"You can't beat it, boy. Free love. No strings attached. Unless you slip. Well, you can roll up your camp-bed now, Bill. This old bed is yours from now on. Treat her kindly. She's served Potter and me faithfully."

He slapped the large double frame fondly. I saw a fleeting spark of regret cross his face. He got up and shrugged it away.

"I'll do that, Jock," I promised. "I guess my weight will tax her. Unless Potter was hefty."

"He was a shrimp, just like me," Lovie answered seriously.

He began to pack his belongings. He made such a fist of it that I joined in to help. When we had finished, I thought Pickfords would be necessary to transport his gear, not a Land Rover. It's surprising how much junk one collects travelling around.

"If you see Deputy Lawrence again, give him my best regards," Lovie said. "I'm not a one for letter-writing. He's ex-Palestine Police. Same as Madill. We always stick together. It's something we learned a long time ago. *Esprit de corps* and all that."

"I'll tell him," I promised.

He shut the last box with a bang.

I went into Bukit Mertajam with Lovie. It was not a very comfortable ride for me, sitting on his gear in the back of the

Land Rover. As a friendly gesture, I had insisted that he sat in the front with the driver. When we reached the station I regretted my sudden bout of consideration. My backside was numb and ached fit to burst. It was some time before normal blood circulation returned. All Lovie could do was stand and laugh at my plight, clasping his hands to his sides, almost doubling up in convulsions. How bloody funny! I did not know whether to laugh or throw a box at him.

After Lovie had gone I wandered around the town. In the main street I came across a shop imposingly entitled The Hup Trading Company. I went inside and bought some cigarettes, razor blades, shaving cream and tinned foods. I was served by a very pleasant Chinese who I learned was the Hup part of the name. He told me that he supplied the Mess with most of its needs. He spoke of Madill and company with reverence. He concluded by suggesting, in his best salesmanlike manner, that I also bring my trade to him. I assured him that I would do so. My action promoted a long and friendly association with Hup and his attractive wife. It would be very unchivalrous of me indeed if I did not permit space to mention Hup's lady assistant who, for reasons best known to herself, giggled most profusely every time she served me. I wish I could remember her name.

I arrived back at Sungei Lembu in time for tea. As I climbed out of the Land Rover, I noticed that the armoured car was missing. I asked the sentry the reason. He seemed reluctant to answer at first, but after considerable prodding he told me that Corporal Bakar and one of the drivers had gone to Kulim in it. I said nothing more to the sentry, but I registered a mental note to see Bakar when he returned.

Goo Ling prepared a good makeshift tea. He hovered around while I ate, eyeing me sceptically. He was probably trying to find out if I was satisfied with his services. When I had finished the meal, I put him at ease. I told him the tea was excellent. A gigantic smile split his moon-shaped face. He cleared away the dishes with a fair show of enthusiasm. I turned over in my

mind what I would pay him for his orderly duties. I had forgotten to ask Lovie what he had paid.

I leaned back in my chair and lit a cigarette—a Player's Number Three. The result of Hup's salesmanship. It tasted good. I probed between my teeth with the tapered end of a matchstick. My eyebrows knitted together as I slipped deep into thought. My brain worked overtime. I wanted to make some changes, and it was best to get right in from scratch. I shouted to Peter through the thin wooden wall dividing our rooms. I heard a scamper the other side, and he appeared in ten seconds flat. I took a last puff at my cigarette and ground out the butt in the ash-tray. I looked down my nose in disapproval of Peter's scruffy appearance. I gave him the lethal once-over. He stood and stared at me like a lamb waiting for slaughter.

"I'll be brief with you," I snapped. "I notice that you have a tendency to be dilatory in your appearance. I know jungle green is not the best uniform to keep smart, but it can be kept shipshape if one tries. That's what I want you to do, and if you don't I shall take disciplinary action. And I mean it. Finally, you will not wear your blue beret with jungle green. You'll wear the regulation green hat the same as other rankers. You can accept what I have said as a warning. It's up to you to buckle to. Now scram and send Ming into me."

He didn't move. He stood still, occasionally shuffling one foot along the floor.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" I asked gruffly.

"Yes, sir. But I wanted to ask permission to go into B.M. tomorrow on the ration lorry," he mumbled uncomfortably.

"Why?"

He hesitated.

"To see my girl-friend," he blurted out.

"How old is she?"

"Fourteen, sir."

I arched my eyebrows.

"Still at school, then?" I asked.

"Yes. She goes to the B.M. Girls' High School. It's next to the hospital."

I remembered having seen the school when visiting the Mess.

"Oh, all right," I said. "You can go as one of the escort. Now let's have Ming."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

He went double quick. He seemed very pleased to go. I heard him shouting along the verandah. A few minutes later Ming appeared. He stood stiffly to attention in front of me. I lit another cigarette casually, taking my time. I wanted to let him stew a bit. I watched him levelly, thinking of his past associations. I had decided not to get him transferred. But I meant to watch him.

"Jungle squad duties in base are to be changed," I began slowly, letting my words sink in. "When they are in base, all jungle squad men will do their share of fatigues with base personnel. I want you to make out a roster each time and submit it for my approval. There is plenty to be done. Weeding the compound, cutting the lallang at the rear of the billets. And keeping the perimeter clear to a radius of twenty yards. Now a word about liberty runs into B.M. In future one jungle squad section and half base personnel will go together in turns, leaving half the entire complement on base standby at all times. You can work it out with Corporal Bakar. There will be no more of the jungle squad going every time and no base personnel ever going. They are entitled to a break just as much as the squad. And I mean to see they get it. Now, about Constable Din. From this day he ceases to sleep in the house across the road. When he is in base he can go over with his wife, but he must be back in base before darkness. I'll hold you responsible for seeing that carried out. Do you understand my orders?"

He nodded his head. As I watched him keenly I could see the barrier which was forming between us. I did not disregard the fact that my instructions would make me more unpopular. But I had no intention of wavering.

"Any questions?" I asked, breaking the silence.

He shook his head slowly. I wondered if he had a tongue.

"Okay then. See to it," I said in dismissal. "Tell Bakar to report to me the moment he returns," I added.

He nodded his head again and went out.

I was lying on the bed reading a book when I heard the armoured car return. I checked with my watch. It was just after six o'clock. I continued reading with one eye on the door, expecting Bakar to come in at any moment. When, after twenty minutes, he was still absent I became impatient. I closed the book and laid it on the floor. I pulled on my sandals. I went out on to the verandah. A few of the men were ambling back from the river after a bathe. I could hear a babble of conversation emanating from the canteen. I looked in Peter's billet, but he wasn't there. His few belongings were scattered untidily over the floor. I walked half-way along the verandah, passing empty billets. I shouted Bakar's name with the full force of my lungs and stamped back to my room.

I had barely sat down behind my desk when the subject of my mounting wrath came in, sneering all over his face. I should say 'waltzed in' because that word is most descriptive. One would have thought he was gliding over a dance floor instead of entering his commander's quarters. I pulled him up about it, and he stood to attention. The sneer left his face and his lips spread out into a thin line. After a few seconds I detected the smell of repulsive scent in the air. I had smelt it on previous occasions when I had been close to Bakar, but this time it was more pronounced. Maybe Lovie was right; maybe he was a nancy boy.

"When you returned, did Ming tell you I wanted to see you?" I asked slowly.

"Yes, tuan."

"Why didn't you report to me at once?"

"I eat my food in the canteen first, tuan."

My eyes narrowed slightly.

"In future you will bear in mind that an order comes first. Is that quite clear to you?" I said firmly.

"Yes, tuan." It was no more than a whisper.

"Why did you go to Kulim?" I asked quickly. I expected to catch him on the hop. But he had his answer ready.

"To shop, tuan."

"Did you ask permission?"

He hadn't asked mine, but he might have asked Lovie, unbeknown to me.

"No, tuan."

"Why not?" I snapped angrily.

He didn't answer. He scrutinised me insolently.

"You know that you must not leave base in the absence of your commander," I went on, "unless you receive orders to the contrary?"

"Yes, tuan."

"You also know that the misuse of Force transport involves a disciplinary charge?"

He nodded his head slightly.

"And knowing the consequences, you openly violate regulations. Why?"

Again he did not answer. He continued his insolent scrutiny. I contemplated disciplinary action. If I took it, he might lose his stripes. The least he would get was a reprimand and a fine. I changed my mind in his favour. I really do not know why. I should have soaked him good and hard; taught him a lesson.

"All right," I wound up. "I will overlook matters this time. As an N.C.O. you should know better. Never let it happen again. If you do, you'll be for it. Now get out and take that infernal, stinking scent with you."

He beat Peter for speed in departure. Inwardly I was seething, but I had to smother a chuckle when I thought of his retreating figure. I think my reference to the scent had disrupted his vanity. As it was, the smell hung about the room long after he had gone.

I opened the side window to let in more fresh air. I went back to the bed and the book. I lit a cigarette and wriggled my toes while I read. Slowly the room darkened and Goo Ling

came in to light the pressure lamp. The evening wore on and base became silent, except for an occasional cough from a sentry. I read until eleven o'clock which was good going for me. It was an interesting book, and I wondered why it had once been banned. It wasn't half as crude as I had expected. That rather disappointed me. I placed the book on the floor and turned out the lamp. I stretched myself and yawned. I returned to the bed and the comfort it afforded. I was very soon in the Land of Nod.

[5]

My first weeks at Sungei Lembu passed uneventfully. They had been one continuous round of monotonous routine patrols culminating in no contact with the enemy. Each time we had returned to base dejected, quarrelsome and unhappy. Even the customary flow of information from isolated squatters had abruptly ceased. There was little doubt that an enemy force was lurking in the area, but to find them was a huge problem as always. Their own undercover agents and informers were of the best. It was frustrating, and matters at base did not help. Lovie had undoubtedly been a good commander and the men had taken him to their hearts. I was a new-comer and they did not quite know how to accept me. I was strict, maybe too strict at times. So the men allowed their personal feelings to overcome a fair sense of judgment, and resented my intrusion into what had been their former happy carefree circle. That was the only conclusion I could form as an answer.

Enemy action had not depleted the ranks of the Jungle Squad. But sickness had. Dysentery, malaria and jungle sores had taken their individual tolls. I reflected gloomily that with a patrol scheduled for the following morning, I could only muster eleven fit men in addition to myself. Replacements were out of the question. Only the army were privileged to be given replacement soldiers for sick personnel. The police just had to

muddle through. It was only a routine patrol, but one never dared speculate exactly what might happen on any patrol. To those sitting in high command a patrol was merely a report on paper. To those who actually did the dirty work, it was a nightmare. Never knowing whom to trust. Never knowing from behind which tree or clump of jungle grass the enemy would pounce. The Communist 5th Platoon was calculated to be eighty strong, and in addition to first-class automatic weapons, it boasted having three bren guns. I thought ruefully that it would be in keeping with my usual run of bad luck to run into the 5th Platoon on the morrow; and having only eleven men who so far had not been in action with me. They were nearly all veterans, and Lovie had been full of praise for them. But until I had seen them in action, I preferred to reserve judgment. No doubt they were probably thinking the same about me.

I cast aside despondency and concentrated upon the coming patrol. I studied the map spread out before me, and traced a line due north from Sungei Lembu, embracing a fair area of the Relau hills. At Kampong Beba I switched west, taking in Penanti Estate, and finally finishing at the starting-point. It would mean a forty-eight-hour patrol, and if nothing untoward happened we should arrive back at base before nightfall on the second day. I had included a fair proportion of Kulim territory within the circle, but a code-signal to O.C.P.D., Kulim, outlining my intentions, would suffice. I was satisfied with what I had outlined provisionally on the map. I completed the matter by retracing a thick blue line over the original thin one. Momentarily I thought of my last patrol in a sector of the Relau hills and the setbacks we had had. A sigh whistled through my lips. I folded the map carefully and placed it in the desk drawer. I turned the lock and extracted the key through force of habit. It was my own security measure never to let the squad know a chosen area of patrol. It was not that I doubted their integrity, but both Asians and Chinese are irresponsible gossipers.

I lit a cigarette and sat back in my chair. There was a knock and Ming walked stiffly into the room, not forgetting, as usual, to give me what I always interpreted as an exaggerated, elaborate salute.

"Orders for the next twenty-four hours, tuan?"

"The rest of the day in base, cleaning guns and equipment. Usual fatigues to be performed. The sandbags on No. 2 bren post want refilling. Tell Corporal Bakar to detail five of his men for that. Rations lorry will leave for B.M. at the usual time. Detail three Jungle Squad P.C.s as escort. Reveille will be at 4 a.m. We depart at dawn for a routine foot patrol. Rations for forty-eight hours to be issued to each man. Is that clear?" I replied coldly.

"Yes, tuan. The men will be ready," he replied hollowly. He saluted and left the room hurriedly.

"Send Peter to me," I shouted at his retreating figure.

I rummaged in my thoroughly untidy desk for the code sheet and signal-pad. I found it under a pin-up of Jane Russell. I had just finished the message to O.C.P.D., Kulim, when Peter entered. I had noticed that during the past weeks his dress and general appearance had improved considerably.

"You sent for me, sir?" He did not speak until I had signed my name at the foot of the signal.

"Get this off at once, will you? Tell the operator it is priority."

I passed the signal to him, and he glanced at it briefly. He paused uncertainly and looked back at me.

"Well?" I raised my eyebrows questioningly. There was something in the wind. I could read Peter's face like a book.

"Constable Daud would like to see you, sir." He was respectfully formal.

"What's the trouble?" I guessed it would be nothing else but that.

"Family troubles, sir. His wife is going to have another baby any day."

"Well, I can't be blamed for that. What does he want me to do?"

"I think it best if he tells you, sir." He looked down at the floor and shuffled his feet.

"All right, bring him along and make it snappy," I replied. "But hand in that signal first."

Peter scattered like a startled rabbit. I grimaced behind my hand. I think sometimes I rather overplayed my aggressiveness towards Peter. His reactions were always amusing, and that encouraged me. I sat back, and waited for him and Daud. I almost laughed outright at the terrified look on Daud's face when they came in. He stood in front of the desk, trembling. I told him to be at ease and not act the bloody fool. I wasn't going to eat him . . . much.

"Now, what's your trouble?" I tried to appear friendly.

He made several attempts to speak. Precious little that was coherent passed his lips. There was obscure mention of wife, baby, money, but nothing really constructive. I started picking at my finger-nails. I realised we were getting nowhere. I turned to Peter for guidance.

"What exactly is the trouble?" I asked him.

Peter ran his tongue over dry lips. "He wants to send his wife some money, sir. To help with the confinement." His voice was barely audible.

"Well, what's stopping him?"

"He hasn't any, sir."

I drummed my fingers on the chair arms.

"Then he must wait until pay-day at the end of the month," I replied. It was the only answer I could give.

"That will be too late, sir." Peter spoke in a restrained manner.

Oh hell! I let rip with all the swear-words I could muster, Malay and English. My visitors prayed that the floor would open up and swallow them.

"So what the hell am I supposed to do? Lie down and cry? Daud knew the baby was coming. He should have made pro-

vision last month," I concluded. Asians never came straight to the point. They always evade the issue. Miraculously I controlled my sudden bout of temper. I waited for an answer, looking from one to the other. It came from Peter.

"Daud was wondering if you would lend him twenty dollars until pay-day, sir."

Peter's face had adopted a grey tinge. His large doe-like eyes became larger until they seemed to cover the whole of his face. He transferred his gaze to the ceiling and stuck his tongue into the side of his mouth. He reminded me very much of a naughty schoolboy. I think both of them expected me to explode or burst a blood vessel.

"How old is Constable Daud?" The question and the tone of my voice must have shaken Peter. He pulled his eyes away from the ceiling and gaped at me

"Twenty-three, sir," he answered eagerly. The look of relief on his face was amazing. Even Daud looked happier although he could not understand the conversation.

"And what number baby is this coming up?" I asked. I knew it would not be the first for a married Malay of twenty-three. They bred rapidly.

"Number six, sir." Peter was more eager.

Number six. That was good going. I heaved a long, drawn-out sigh and slumped down into my chair. Daud was a regular, had been in the police about eighteen months. His princely pay was one hundred dollars a month; it was hopelessly inadequate. He must be having one hell of a struggle. I passed a hand wearily across my forehead and rubbed my eyes. Regulations strictly forbade a superior to loan money to a subordinate. I sat bolt upright so suddenly that it made the two men jump. I pulled some notes from my shirt pocket. I extracted two ten-dollar bills and passed them to Daud without saying a word. I did watch him closely as he clutched them in his brown hand. It was impossible not to notice the fleeting spark of gratitude in his eyes.

"Thank you very much, tuan. I will give back at the end of

the month." He looked as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Poor devil, I thought inwardly. There were thousands like him in Malaya. Easy prey for Communist propaganda if they weakened. Few of them did.

"You cannot possibly repay all at once. Five dollars a month will be sufficient. As you are on patrol in the morning, you can go to B.M. as escort to the ration lorry today. That will enable you to post the money to your wife. You may go now." Daud saluted and turned smartly about. I watched him as he left the room. Peter started to follow, but I called him back. I looked at him sternly for a few seconds, then relaxed.

"Since I have been here I have given you a lot of thought. Have you ever considered transferring to the regular police?" My approach put him at ease. He probably considered himself due for a ticking off.

"No, sir." For all the brevity of his reply, he was mildly curious.

"Pity. You have had a good education and your background is sound. Besides English, you speak four other languages. As a Special Constable you have no future. As a regular you have everything before you. You would be an Inspector in next to no time," I prophesied.

He hesitated for a moment.

"If I transferred, would I have to leave the squad?" The question surprised me. I thought he would jump at the chance to get away.

"Only temporarily. You would have to go to the depot at Kuala Lumpur for the usual recruits' training. I could put in a word, and get you back here when you had finished training, if that's what you want."

"I see." He replied casually, but he was obviously thinking hard.

"I take it that you don't want to leave the squad permanently," I probed.

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I like it here, sir."

"I'm pleased to hear that. Tell me, you have mentioned your mother several times. Is your father alive?" I was curious.

His face changed rapidly and became astonishingly hard. I never thought Peter could look like that.

"No, sir. He was beheaded by the Japs."

I felt decidedly uncomfortable. I could have kicked myself hard.

"Oh, I am very sorry. I didn't know. Forgive my asking." I groped helplessly for words. "If you ever decide about transferring, give me your application and I'll push it through." It was best to change the subject. I did not want to revive the fate of his father. I think he preferred it that way.

"Thank you, sir, I'll think about it." I could see that he wanted to leave, so I dismissed him.

"Oh, Peter." It was the first time I had called him by his Christian name. He turned in the doorway, his face had lost its hardness.

"Yes, sir."

"Have a quiet private talk with Daud. Tell him there is no need to repay the twenty dollars. Say it's a kind of premature birthday present for number six. I think you could explain it better than me. Can I count on that?"

"Yes, sir. I'll tell him. I know he will be very grateful. He won't show it openly, though. Malays have funny ways of expressing gratitude. Some day you will be repaid in another way, sir."

He had gone before I could thank him. His final remark puzzled me. I could not throw any light upon its explanation. Much later I was destined to appreciate its significance under tragic circumstances.

I tidied the desk for the hundredth time, and locked the code sheet in a drawer with my personal papers. The hottest period of the day was approaching, and my room was becoming unbearably stuffy. I decided I needed some air. I took off my shirt and flung it on to the bed. I lit a cigarette and walked out into

the compound. The sentry at the gate was leaning idly against a post, his sten gun propped against the barbed wire. I shouted at him. He jumped as if electrified, picked up the sten and began pacing up and down the roadway. I glanced over my shoulder at No. 1 bren post. I could see the head and shoulders of No. 1 gunner above the sandbags. No. 2 was probably asleep on the floor out of view. I did not mind that so much in the daytime. It must have been very hot under the corrugated canopy.

I walked over to No. 2 bren post to see how they were progressing with the sandbagging. Corporal Bakar was there with five constables. They were making good headway despite the heat. Bakar turned round at the sound of my approaching footsteps. He looked as effeminate as ever. He was a creeper, and I think that is why I detested him so much.

"Good afternoon, tuan." He saluted smartly. I returned the greeting and stood beside him. I continued to watch the men fill the sandbags.

"I want this work finished by nightfall. The post must be manned by then," I told him.

"Oh yes, tuan. You can rely on that, tuan." He was full of cocky assurance. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. A faint smell of cheap scent assailed my nostrils. I spat on the ground. It made me feel better. He stank like a brothel bitch.

"Be sure to live up to what you say. Have it completed on time," I grated.

"Certainly, tuan."

"Report to me in my room at six o'clock sharp," I told him as I turned to leave.

"In uniform, tuan?"

"Certainly not in your bloody birthday suit with all that scent," I flung over my shoulder. I doubt if he saw the implication.

"No, tuan. Six o'clock, tuan." One day he would run out of 'tuans'.

Bloody bastard!

I called at the wireless office to see if there was any reply to

my Kulim signal. None had arrived. The O.C.P.D. was probably playing golf.

I told the operator to let me have the reply as soon as it came through. I heard the ration lorry's engine revving and strolled across to see it off. Daud and another constable were sitting in the back. The third member of the escort was seated beside the driver. I checked their guns and ammunition as a routine precaution. I found everything in order and signalled the driver to move off. I watched the lumbering vehicle pass through the gateway and out on to the road. Daud waved from the back as the lorry rounded the first bend. I grinned and waved in return. I think that was the first sign of friendship I had received from any member of the squad, apart from Goo Ling.

I returned to my room and started to prepare my equipment for the patrol. Carbine. Ammunition. Automatic pistol. Hand grenades. Tinned rations. Water-bottle. Clean jungle green. Sheath knife. First-aid kit. Morphine, Hypodermic syringe. I checked each article and laid them out carefully. Cleaned and oiled the guns, primed the grenades. When I had finished, it was tea-time. Goo Ling came in and asked me what to prepare. I went to my store cupboard and surveyed the impressive array of tinned foods. What wouldn't I have given for a good English roast and two veg! I selected tinned bacon and mushrooms for first course. A tinned jam pudding on the bottom shelf caught my eye. That would do for dessert. I passed the tins to Goo Ling and he ambled off to the canteen. I laid the table for my lone meal, choosing my favourite gaily coloured table-cloth. It was perhaps a silly thing to do in an isolated spot miles from anywhere. But it had its compensations. It brought some cheer into my bare, frugal surroundings, and made the place look a bit like home. Sometimes, for fun, I imagined that I was dining with a ravishing beauty. Up and coming Marilyn Monroe was my first choice. Just the person to jerk one out of the doldrums! Once when I mentioned the fact to Paddy Regan, he

remarked that it was the surest sign that I was going round the bend. I answered that it was a damned fine way to go mad.

I was reading the comic strips of a month-old *Daily Mirror* when Goo Ling brought in the bacon and mushrooms. He set them down tenderly before me. The odour was delicious and the fare looked appetising. I tucked in with relish, thinking of the next few days' canned beans and weevilled biscuits.

"Pudding ready soon, sir."

I waved my knife in acknowledgment, my mouth too full to speak. I mopped up the gravy with a piece of bread and pushed away the empty plate. I slapped my stomach with a profound feeling of inner satisfaction. Within a few moments Goo Ling returned with the pudding. I leaned forward to do it justice and my eyes opened wide in stupefied amazement. My precious jam pudding was a steaming, soggy wet mess, deflated and revolting in its greasy messiness.

"What the matter, sir?" Goo Ling craned forward. For once his pidgin English was not amusing.

"What've you done to the pudding?" I blurted.

"Writing on tin say boil in water twenty minutes, sir. I open tin, put pudding in water and boil for twenty minutes as writing say."

Instantly I realised the tragic error. I had completely forgotten to tell him to heat the pudding in the tin.

"No, clot, no! You must leave the pudding in the tin to heat. Then take it out afterwards."

"I no understand, sir. At same time I think it funny to put pudding in water. But writing say so. Very sorry, sir." He was very apologetic.

I handed him back the plate and told him to throw the massacre away. The pained expression on his face made me smile. Then I saw the funny side. I threw back my head and roared with laughter. The tears rolled down my cheeks. Goo Ling was so relieved that he joined in, too.

"Very sorry, sir," he repeated through his laughter.

"It's all right, Goo Ling. It was my fault. I should have told

you. You will know next time." I wiped the tears from my eyes.

"Yes, sir. Anything more?"

"No, that's enough for one day, thank you."

He departed rapidly, holding the pudding at arm's length in front, thankful to have got off so lightly. He had witnessed my bursts of temper before. I cleared the table, lit a cigarette and relaxed. I retrieved the *Mirror*, and followed the adventures of Buck Ryan, Jane and Garth. Belinda did not interest me any more. I thought it high time she scrapped her baby talk. Bakar reported to me promptly at six o'clock. He seemed to sense that he was in for a dressing-down. Not wishing to disappoint him, I sailed straight in.

"I am going on a two-day patrol tomorrow and, as you know, in my absence you will be in charge here. Now"—I leaned forward and waggled my forefinger almost under his nose—"all personnel will be confined to base, and when I say all personnel that means you, too. I want no repetition of a previous escapade when I was away. I was lenient then, but I shall not be if there is a next time. I'll have those stripes off your arm quicker than it took you to sew them on. Do you understand?"

"Yes, tuan, I understand. Before I was foolish, very foolish. It will not happen again, I assure you, tuan."

I curtly dismissed him. I was searching for a book to read when the operator brought me the reply from Kulim. I broke down the code and felt satisfied with what I read. I had been granted a free area of patrol at Relau. I applied a match to the piece of buff paper and watched it slowly burn. The ashes dropped into the waste-paper bin, and I resumed my quest for a book. I scanned through several of them, and finally settled for Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. I read for two solid hours. Darkness was falling fast and the mosquitoes were coming to life. I changed into jungle green and lit the pressure lamp. The small room was transformed into a blaze of glaring light, making it look more garish than ever. I closed

the windows and door; that helped to keep out the mosquitoes. I walked over to No. 2 bren post and checked that the sand-bagging was finished. I stayed there for a short while talking to the two gunners, ensuring that they were as comfortable as possible. As I retraced my steps back to my room, the ration lorry pulled in through the gates. I was very relieved to see it and its escort safely home.

The evening passed quickly, which was just the way I wanted it. I always hated the periods of boredom between patrols, shut in behind barbed wire with only the everyday routine tasks to break the monotony. I stretched myself lazily on my bed. I ploughed through seven or so more chapters of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, marvelling over the superior detection skill of Hercule Poirot. If only real-life murders could be solved so easily, I reflected. I glanced at my watch and closed the book with a loud snap. It was time for bed. Thirty-three was not so far away.

[6]

THE incessant shrilling of the alarm clock shattered what had every indication of being a beautiful dream. I blinked open heavily swollen eyes, and tried desperately to muster some semblance of order into my bemuddled brain. I stretched out my arm, and made several unsuccessful attempts to grasp the clanging, screeching timepiece reposing on my bedside locker. I finally succeeded, only to be thwarted by dropping the damned thing on to the floor in my half-awake stupor. It rolled across the floor still clanging like merry hell. In the confined space of my room it was unbearable. Somehow I managed to crawl out of bed. I fell over a chair, tripped over my one and only mat, and banged into the desk in my search for the clock. In fact, I did everything but shoot it. If I had laid hands on my carbine I would have done precisely that. At last, to my utter amazement, I found my tormentor. It was under my bed in

exactly the opposite direction in which I had so blindly careered. I threw it on to the bed with a muttered oath. Miraculously, it stopped clanging. I managed to find some matches and light the lamp. At three-thirty in the morning the fierce light was ghastly. I stripped off and grabbed a towel from the cupboard. Thus equipped, I ventured out into the cold unfriendly early morning darkness. Through bleary eyes I saw policemen dashing here, there and everywhere, no doubt roused also by my clock and thinking themselves late for patrol. Some of them gaped at me, still not accustomed to the sight I looked. I am confident that it is totally undesirable for Asian policemen to witness their European officer stumbling crazily across a compound to take his morning bath, clad only in his briefest of brief underpants.

I somehow charged through the gates, respectfully opened by the sentry and crossed the road. At last I stood poised by the river bank staring down into its murky depths, fervently praying that the men were still using the lower part for a latrine and had not moved their spot upstream. Once or twice a little streak of cowardice flowed through me, and I asked myself bluntly if my bath was really necessary. I knew that I would stink at the end of the patrol, so I consoled myself with the fact that it would be un-officer-like to commence in the same way. I was supposed to set the example. I do not possess the stature to pass as a ballet dancer, and I have often wondered what effigy I resembled those mornings by the river. I sighed and prepared to perform what I considered to be my greatest feat of courage at any time. I levered myself downwards gradually, gingerly, until my feet touched bottom. The cold, swirling water closed over me and completed what the alarm clock had begun.

I returned to the hut, sat down, lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, mentally objecting to expelling the smoke. I flicked the cigarette butt out through the doorway and began to dress. That task was soon completed. I fastened my pistol belt, pushing it well down on to my hips, cowboy fashion. I gathered up

the rest of my equipment and sauntered out to where my depleted squad were already waiting. They looked bright and cheerful. I believe they were happy to be going on patrol again. Even Ming's grim countenance had softened. Once during conversation he actually smiled. I wound up by telling him the patrol area. There was nothing to be gained by keeping it to myself longer. He appeared very interested at the mention of Relau. I checked the time and discovered we should have left ten minutes ago. I slung my carbine by its sling over my shoulder and led the squad out of the camp and into the rubber.

I purposely avoided Pondok Labu, keeping well to the west. I knew the tappers would be working in the fields. It was not advisable to let them see us. I was always suspicious of rubber-tappers giving information to the Communists. After three miles I considered it safe to come into the open, and accordingly altered course. We had left the rubber by now, and were in comparatively open country, flat and undulating. Dotted here and there were a few squatters' huts and coconut groves. It was still early and the inhabitants had not yet risen from their slumbers. Occasionally a dog barked or growled as we passed close to the huts. It was rapidly becoming light, and I increased the pace so that we would be well clear of the huts by full dawn.

For the next three miles I set a fair pace. It was always advisable to make good headway when the opportunity afforded. It was one thing to map a patrol theoretically on paper. It was a totally different matter when put into practice. We now had two miles or so to go before we reached the jungle. I could see it looming ahead above the open plain. The squatters' huts had completely receded into the distance. Except for isolated huts, which I wanted to sidetrack, scattered in the jungle, the next village was Kampong Beba. I covered roughly another mile at a leisurely lope before calling Daud and Sobh to take up positions as leading scouts. They sauntered past me grinning like a couple of Cheshire cats. I slowed down, allowing them to get twenty-five yards or so in front, then increased

the pace. The men were keeping prescribed open-patrol formation behind, stretched out in Indian file. The line would get a bit ragged in the jungle, poor visibility making it necessary to close ranks. There was always the prevalent danger that a patrol could split, one half going one way, the other half in the opposite direction.

We entered the jungle at 0700 hours. The sky and the rising sun were blotted out with the speed of a closing camera-shutter. We were alone in the awe-inspiring gloom of the jungle wilderness. Twelve men pitted against the unrelenting forces of nature and perhaps, at any moment, the Communists. We were completely encircled, cut off. We had no means of contact with the outside world, no means of telling how many of us would come through alive. Our only salvation was to go forward and place our faith in God. For the most part we would traverse the maze by instinct, leaving navigation to the scouts. When the going got really tough and visibility was almost down to nil, we would rely on compass and maps. Even that could fail at times, so blindly, frantically we would stumble on.

Daud and Sobh had dropped back to ten yards. I could just discern their heads bobbing up and down as they battled against the foliage. Now and then the swishing thump of a jungle knife told its own tale. The hardest work always fell to the lot of the scouts, cutting through so that the rearguard could follow. But even then, although only ten yards would separate them, I have known many occasions when I have had to hack my way through and so on down the line. I could never hope to relate the jungle hazards in true perspective. I would prefer to sum them up in one very effective word—indescribable. I never served in jungle country during the war. I wish somehow that I had. Then I could have been more understanding when men of the glorious 14th Army talked of their ordeals in Burma. I used to listen in apparent disbelief, taking it all in with a pinch of salt. What a blind, misguided fool I was then! Now I know the true story of how the bravest man can be afraid in the green hell. Yes, afraid. I mean exactly that. I remember very vividly

a recent song-and-dance back home when some young soldiers said they knew fear in the jungle. Their critics were the die-hard chairborne adventurers, many of them brainless young girls, who had never penetrated anything deeper than a Christmas pudding. I know how those young soldiers felt: what it is like to be afraid.

We moved on for two hours. I doubt if we had covered more than two miles. Occasionally, very briefly, the fierce sun pierced the close-knit tree-tops, casting incandescent shafts of light into the shadows. Then, swiftly, the shafts snapped and semi-darkness returned. I mopped my face with a neck-rag already saturated with sweat. My shirt and trousers clung to me like wet sacks, irritating the skin. I felt as if the weight of my pack had trebled, my feet slowly turning into lead. Even the carbine became heavier, and the slap-slap of the holstered pistol on my thigh became monotonous. To cap it all I stank like a pole-cat. The men were in just as poor shape, if not worse than I. I couldn't see many of them behind me, but I could hear them puffing and panting. At least I had not reached the puffing stage. Peter was next in line behind me. Then Pyman with his precious bren. Harap, the second bren gunner, came next, closely followed by Ming. Those were the only ones I could see each time I glanced round. They were all caked with sweat and grime. Peter was nearly all in. He was tottering and swaying like a drunken man. Then in an effort he would pull himself together, move reasonably well for a few yards, only to falter again. I contemplated a halt to give him a breather. It appeared the human thing to do. Eventually I decided against it in view of our unstrategic position. He would have to hold out until we reached the river.

We arrived there just after noon. Five hours of hard, tortuous slogging were behind us. We had covered about six miles during that time. When I emerged from the thick foliage, Daud and Sobh were already by the river peeling off their shirts. I heard a thud and a moan behind me. I turned and saw Peter sprawled out full length. I ran back to him and propped his head on my

knee. Feverishly I unbuckled his webbing and opened his shirt. Ming and the others crowded round as they broke cover. I told them to disperse and get stripped off before their wet shirts gave them prickly heat. I concentrated on Peter. I noticed that his breathing was becoming less laboured, but it could have been touch and go if we had carried on much longer. Exhaustion is a pretty grim thing. I gave him a short drink from my water-bottle and pushed three salt tablets down his throat. I tipped the water-bottle quickly before he could spit them out. I knew he loathed salt tablets. So did I, for that matter. I wiped his face and cursed myself for being so inconsiderate back on the trail.

"Sorry, sir." He smiled at me with those big round eyes of his.

"You've nothing to be sorry about." I recriminated myself. "I should have stopped the squad for a breather. Feeling better now?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

He started to rise shakily and I helped him to his feet. I supported him to the river bank and eased him down on to the grass. I went back and collected his webbing and gun.

"Come on, peel off," I said.

I laid the equipment down beside him. He started to do as I told him, and I did likewise. There was a faint breeze drifting up the river. It felt good on my skin. It's always recommended to let the air dry sweaty skins as often as possible. Then douse with clean water. It has a tendency to ward off prickly heat, which can be a swine when it sets in. I had just begun to unlace my jungle boots when Ming came over. I took one brief squint at his face.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I smelt trouble.

"It's Yapp, tuan," he answered vaguely.

"What's wrong with Yapp?" I tried again. Ming rarely rendered the full story in one lap.

"He's sick in the head."

Christ! So was I. In the guts, too. I went into reverse gear. "Okay, I'll be over to see him."

Ming turned tail and beat it.

"Get your bloody shirt off!" I yelled after him. He started to do it as he walked. I rummaged in my pack for the medical kit. Bloody doctor as well! I muttered to myself. Thank heavens, as far as my 'patients' were concerned, that directions were printed on every container.

I went over to where Yapp was lying. I knelt down beside him and felt his forehead. It was very hot. His whole frame was shivering violently. Asians and malaria go together. Recurring attacks of the virulent malaria, despite medical treatment, come on suddenly. They usually pass after two or three days of agony. Yapp had chosen this particularly awkward time to have an attack. I jammed a thermometer between his teeth and groped for his pulse. I removed the thermometer and read the temperature. The boy was in a bad way. I sat back on my heels and stroked my chin. The men clustered around, looking at me in wondering silence, probably expecting to see an act of white man's witchcraft. That amounted to little white pills and directions which read: 'Take two tablets three times a day.' That wouldn't help Yapp much. He needed rest and stronger white man's medicine. I was sorry to disappoint my audience. It was obvious that Yapp could not complete the patrol. There was only one answer. I looked up at Ming.

"Yapp must be taken back to Sungei Lembu. Take two men and cut stakes. Then make a stretcher with a ground-sheet. You know the idea." Ming nodded. He scuttled off with Pyman and Harap to cut the stakes. The other men gradually dispersed and started 'tommy' cookers going for tiffin.

I went to the river and filled my jungle hat with water. I returned to Yapp and made him comfortable. I washed his face, neck and chest. I trickled fresh water over his lips and gave him a drink. I took three Paludrine tablets from their bottle and made him swallow them. I waited a few seconds and followed up with two aspirins. They would help a little. I tore a strip

off his shirt, soaked it in water and wound it round his head. All the time he was watching me with his bloodshot almond eyes, mumbling thanks. I had done all I could. I looked at him for a while, thinking of his age and how helpless he seemed. Just seventeen years old, and already a veteran in combat. And yet back home the public and press were raising hell about British National Servicemen fighting in Malaya at nineteen. No one worried about Yapp and thousands of Asian policemen like him. Perhaps it was because their skins were a different colour. It gave one food for thought.

"Will he be all right, sir?"

I had been so engrossed in my thoughts that I had been unaware of Peter's approach.

"Yes, he'll be okay," I answered. I started to pack the medical kit.

"You're a good officer, sir," Peter went on.

I was slightly shaken. I fumbled with the kit straps.

"Pity everyone doesn't think so," I replied bitterly, meaning the squad.

"They will in time, sir." Peter had cottoned on. "We are cautious with our friendship. We are not what you say effusive. I believe that is the word. What you did for Daud, then me and now Yapp very few officers would do. The men notice these things. You can be kind if you want to be, sir."

"You'll have me crying in a minute," I said sarcastically.

"No, sir, I mean what I say. I've wanted to say these things for a long time. I'm not seeking favours now. I know you hate 'crawlers'. Mr Lovie told us about you," Peter went on, determined to have his say.

"What did Mr Lovie say?" I asked, surprised, mildly interested.

"He knew of your record before you came to Sungei Lembu, sir. He told us that you were a hard, strict man, always putting duty first. But under the surface you were a kind, understanding man who'd give your last dollar to anyone in need. He said that you always appeared to be tough because you were hiding

from something. I do not exactly understand what he meant, but I know he thinks a lot of you, sir. So will the squad someday. Mr Lovie said so."

"That was very kind of Mr Lovie. As for the squad, I couldn't care less whether they like me or not," I grated coldly. I began to realise how the penghulu of Mengkuang had heard.

I fastened the buckle and slapped the kit. I sat back on my heels again. I looked across at Peter. He got up and peered down at me. His eyes never wavered from mine.

"I'm sorry I have made a fool of myself, sir. I respect you because you are my officer. Someday I pray in my simple way that I can respect you as man. Excuse me, sir."

I shall never forget the look he gave me as he said those words. I have never before seen hurt so expressed. I stared at his thin figure retreating to the river bank. I did not drop my gaze until he reached the bank and got out his rations. I rose to my feet stiffly and ambled back to where my kit was lying. For some obscure reason I wasn't especially proud of myself. I wanted to swallow pride and go to that Tamil boy and ask his forgiveness. I hadn't the guts. I felt like a dirty stinking heel.

Ming and his helpers made a good job of the stretcher. They brought it over and displayed their handiwork. The four of us trooped over to Yapp and laid him gently on it. Ming and I lifted it to test for durability. It surpassed all expectations. We replaced it on the ground, and I called Latif over to me.

"I expect you know why I have called you," I said. He nodded his head. I pointed to Yapp.

"Right. Get him to Sungei Lembu as quickly as possible. Then you can use the armoured car to B.M. I'd like the doctor to see him. If Bakar says anything, tell him those are my orders. You can take Goo Ling, Hassan and Haji with you. Take turns to carry Yapp, two at a time. Keep your eyes open and take no chances. Okay?"

Latif said he understood. I dismissed him to collect his three men and prepare for the trip. While we had been talking, Yapp had fallen asleep. I declined to disturb him again. Silently, I

wished him and the others the best of luck. Inwardly I felt uneasy about the whole damned thing. Mentally I argued with myself over and over again. I weighed up the points for and against. Each time I arrived at the same conclusion. Yapp just had to go back. I shrugged my shoulders and left it at that.

I trailed back to my kit and slumped on to the ground. I checked the time. 1410 hours. I totalled the hours on my fingers. Half an hour to the river bridge. Five hours to Kampong Beba. We'd be lucky to make it by nightfall. I heaved a sigh. Why the heck worry? I fished out map, pen and paper. I drafted a signal to Rodway.

Effective strength now seven; I grimaced. Latif came over to say that he was ready to leave. I handed him the signal and told him to send it off when he arrived at base. He folded it carefully and tucked it away in his shirt pocket. I walked with him to Yapp. The boy was still sleeping peacefully. Goo Ling and Haji picked up the stretcher and the party moved off. I followed them a few yards, then I watched them melt into the jungle.

At 1500 hours we broke camp. We went upstream, hugging the bank. The breeze had finally yielded to the overpowering strength of the midday sun. Its rays poured into the river, striking the water with lurid light. The river was clear along the edges. As I walked I kept my eyes glued downwards, hoping to see some tropical fish. My vigilance was duly rewarded. I saw several brilliantly coloured species darting in and out among the reeds. Tropical fish have always fascinated me, more so in their natural surroundings.

I rounded the first bend in the river and the rope bridge came into view. These bridges are very common in some parts of Malaya. They are flimsy affairs and difficult to cross until one learns the knack. It is similar to walking a triple tight-rope, except that the bridges have the added security of side guide-ropes. Sometimes a crossing called for Commando tactics. It all depends on luck, or if one man starts to lose balance and wobble. Then the whole bridge starts to jive. The unfortunate

humans are then poised precariously in mid-air, swaying sickeningly from side to side. When that happens you might just as well give up the ghost, jump into the river and swim for it. Invariably you'll land there, anyhow.

I was within fifty yards of the bridge when I stopped abruptly. I saw the man crossing it, coming our way. He was a big fellow, his face hidden by the wide brim of his cone-shaped hat. The men had stopped a few yards behind me. I felt pretty certain that the Chinese had not seen us. He did not behave as if he had. He came straight on, head thrust forward as if he was in a hurry. There was no specific reason why he should worry about us. Legitimate travellers are in order. I watched the Chinese reach the end of the bridge and step on to the bank. He looked up and down the river once or twice, then started to run in my direction. I stepped forward to meet him, and I think that was the first time he had seen me. He braked full stop, paused a few seconds, then ran like hell in the opposite direction. I yelled at him to stop. He ignored me and ran faster than ever. I raised my carbine and fired a shot over his head. He fell and disappeared in the grass. I ran forward eagerly.

The Chinese was lying in the grass when I reached him. I pulled him roughly to his feet. He gaped at me and the men clustered around him.

"Do you speak Malay?" I asked. He lifted his eyes a bit.

"Yes, tuan," he bleated, shaking like a leaf.

"Why didn't you stop when I shouted?" I flung at him angrily.

"I thought you were bandits, tuan," he answered, less shakily.

Silly bastard! The same old answer. I told him that the next bullet would have been in his body. He shrugged his broad shoulders. He mentioned something about being sorry. Bloody idiot! The public are well aware that they must stop when challenged by the police or suffer the consequences.

"Where are you from?" I asked. He pointed a stubby finger up river.

"Kampong Beba, tuan."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Where are you going?"

"To Bukit Seraya."

"Why do you go there?"

"To visit a friend, tuan."

"What is the name of your friend?"

He paused and shifted his eyes again.

"Wong Ah Toi."

There was no one of that name in Seraya. He had obviously not connected me with the area. He probably thought I came from Kulim. Lie number one. Ming winked at me over the man's shoulder.

"Why come this way?" I asked disinterestedly, appearing satisfied. I wanted to catch him off guard.

"I call on friends, tuan." He had a lot of friends, I reflected.

"Who?"

"Yat Kee, tuan."

I had heard of the man from Lovie. He lived in a squatter's house on the other side of the river. I had never met Yat Kee, but I knew that he was a staunch anti-Communist and had defied many threats against his life. I eyed the Chinese with considerable suspicion. Apart from the lie about Seraya, his story did not ring true. If he was going to Seraya, as he had stated, he would be away a few days. And yet he carried no baggage.

"Produce your identity-card," I said slowly, watching him closely.

He took the card from his pocket and handed it to me. I noticed that his hand trembled slightly. I opened the card. Name: Wong Ah Loy. Age: 26 years. Occupation: Rubber-tapper. Address. I checked the photograph for likeness. I closed the card. There was no need to read further. The card was in order, although I thought twice about rubber-tapper. I passed the card back and watched him return it to his pocket. He looked at me, relief written all over his ugly face. Ming still stood opposite me, behind the Chinese. The rest were squatting

on the ground, speculating on the next move. Suddenly I grabbed Wong Ah Loy's wrists. I turned the palms of his hands uppermost. I inspected them closely. They were very smooth for a rubber-tapper's hands. They were delicately manicured, too much so. He peered at me with narrowed eyes. I released his hands and they flopped to his sides.

"Now tell me the truth," I rasped.

"I speak the truth, tuan," he replied, completely unashamed.

"You speak only lies. There is no Wong Ah Toi in Seraya. My base is at Sungei Lembu, and the Seraya people come there for their identity-cards. That is how I know there is no Wong Ah Toi in Seraya."

He was shaken. For a moment he was near panic. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. He stepped back a pace and collided with Ming. Ming pushed him forward again. I gave him my extra special brand of nasty look. I didn't wait for him to speak.

"How far is Yat Kee's house?" I addressed Ming.

"Three, four miles." He pointed over the river.

"Search this man. Make a good job of it," I told Ming.

I stood back while he and Peter did so. I believed that by the merest fluke I had stumbled on to something. I doubt if Wong had ever seen Yat Kee. As for his reputed occupation, I bet my boots he'd never tapped a rubber tree in his life. Not with lily-white hands like he had. The search was thorough, but revealed nothing to work on. I was disappointed. There were two hundred odd dollars in his wallet. A lot of spare cash for a rubber-tapper to carry around. I folded my arms across my chest and waited for him to dress. I shot admiring glances at the iron-musclcd contours of his body. He was shorter than me but much broader. He wouldn't be easy to break down. The Chinese are pretty tough and can take a lot of hard knocks. It was more or less a case of finding their weak spots. He finished dressing and turned to face me, fiddling with his hat.

"I am detaining you for further questioning. You will accompany us. I am not satisfied with your story. I must warn you

that if you make any attempt to escape you will be shot," I told him.

He squinted at me narrowly. His face paled a bit.

"But why, tuan? I am a peaceful man. I have done nothing wrong. You cannot detain me on such simple suspicion."

He thumped his chest as if to emphasise what he had said. An insolent look crept into his features. He knew the ropes a bit, but not all that well. Old man suspicion was nibbling strongly at my vitals. I was in no hurry to finish the patrol. I wanted to see my hunch through. I sighed and kicked the ground with the toe of my boot.

"Don't argue," I snapped. "I have powers under the Emergency Regulations to detain you. That is final."

He planted his feet firmly apart. He hunched his shoulders and glowered at me.

"No, tuan. I demand my rights as a citizen. I wish to go on my way. You have no right to detain me."

He adopted a belligerent attitude. A slightly educated type, I mused. The men rose to their feet menacingly. I unfolded my arms and waved them back. There is only one way to deal with these situations. If the press critics think they can do it better, then let them come out and try.

I slapped him across the mouth with the back of my hand. He reeled a pace or two. I slapped him again, harder. A thin line of blood trickled down his chin. He spat out a loosened tooth. He sank to his knees, moaning. He got up and mouthed at me in foul language. His face expressed explicit hatred. He lunged towards me, huge arms outflung, fingers twitching. I stepped to meet him. This time I hit him really hard, right in the guts. Every ounce of my fourteen stone was behind the punch. His eyes glazed. He sagged at the knees and went down. This time he stayed down, hissing like a punctured tyre. Pretty soft for all his bulging muscles.

"Tie his hands behind his back."

Ming leapt forward to obey. I glanced at the men. They

stared at me in mingled wonderment and admiration. I grinned at them. They reciprocated. Friendly gestures at last!

"What do you make of it?" I asked Ming.

He put the finishing touches to the rope round friend Wong's wrists.

"I do not believe him, tuan. I think maybe he is mixed up with the Communists. Maybe Min Yuen, or courier taking verbal message somewhere."

"You and I think alike. I would say courier. Min Yuen usually carry a weapon of some sort. If he is a courier, that means terrorists somewhere near. Where, we can't say. I'll have to rely upon our friend here giving in. He thinks we are returning at once to Sungei Lembu. I still have one card up my sleeve. I hope I play it right. . . ."

I broke off as I noticed Wong stirring. I didn't want him to overhear what I was saying. He began groaning and climbed unsteadily to his feet. It was a bit awkward with his hands behind his back. I felt fatherly and helped him the last few inches. He looked wildly around, trying to grasp where he was. I must have hit harder than I thought. He finally came to, sullenly silent. His earlier belligerence had evaporated.

"First we go to Yat Kee's house and check your story with him," I said.

That did it. I'd played my card right, according to the rules. I had found his weak spot.

"No, no, tuan. Not that way. To Sungei Lembu, yes. Not Yat Kee's, tuan!"

He gurgled out the words, frothing at the mouth. He reminded me of a wet sherbet dab. He swayed from side to side, doing a belly dance. He rolled his head, first one way, then the other. I caught hold of his shirt front and pulled him towards me. Our faces were bare inches apart. I could smell his fetid breath.

"Quiet, bastard!" I shouted, beside myself with anger. "Why not to Yat Kee's house? Why not? Tell me, you lousy whore!"

I shook him like a rat. His eyes shot up and down like ping-

pong balls. I did not release my grip on him. His eyes stopped dancing. I pushed him from me in disgust. I turned him round and prodded him towards the bridge with the tip of my carbine. I was content now to play pussy and wait for him to unfold. There was a good reason why he did not want to go Yat Kee's way. He stopped at the bridge and turned round. He was shaking like a jelly. I believe he was temporarily incapable of further movement. He made several attempts to speak, but failed. I lowered my carbine and waited patiently. The men mumbled among themselves in the background. At last he became calm and spoke.

"No, tuan, not this way. Please, tuan, please." He pleaded and cried like a baby, repeating what he had said before. I wanted more. I drew in a deep breath.

"Because we shall meet your comrades?" I flung the question at him. He dropped his shoulders and adopted an air of resignation. I had finally hit the jackpot. It was as easy as that.

"You win, tuan," he whispered.

"Where are they?" I asked eagerly, tingling with excitement.

"Not far across the river. They camp in a small clearing."

I hoped they had not heard my shot.

"How many?"

"Sixteen, tuan."

I whistled through my teeth. They were nine up on us.

"What is their regiment or platoon?"

"Independent, tuan. They come through Siam from Indo-China."

"Why?"

"To join the 5th Platoon."

I started and Ming craned forward.

"Where is the 5th Platoon now?"

A small flash of defiance showed in his eyes, then died away.

"I cannot tell you that, tuan."

"What is your business with these sixteen Communists?"

"I was taking a mouth message for them to Nibong Tebal. To the Min Yuen. I was to bring back a guide to take these

men to the 5th Platoon. They are waiting for my return with the guide."

I made a wild guess that the 5th Platoon were somewhere near Nibong Tebal. Right on the O.C.P.D.'s doorstep. He'd have kittens if he knew!

"It is a long way to Nibong Tebal; how did you plan to get there?"

"By bus from Machang Bubok."

He had it all planned to a nicety.

"Who are the Min Yuen in Nibong Tebal?" I asked persuasively.

"I cannot tell you that, tuan," he repeated. There would be time later. I did not press that point. It would have served no immediate purpose.

"These sixteen men you speak of. Have they a bren gun?"

He looked at me puzzled. I pointed to Pyman's bren. The Chinese shook his head.

"No, tuan. Only rifles and automatic guns." By the latter he probably referred to stens or tommy-guns.

"How are they dressed?"

"They wear green uniforms like you, tuan."

"Are they all Chinese?"

"Yes, tuan."

"Have your comrades molested Yat Kee or his family?"

"No, tuan. They wish to move silently. They have touched no one."

I believed him. I glanced at my watch.

"They will kill me, tuan. They will know who betrayed them."

He hung his head. I did not feel sorry for him. He was a Communist courier, and deserved all that justice would give him.

"You are in my custody, and while you are so I shall give you protection. That is my duty even if personally I hate to protect scum like you. My men and I are about to attack your comrades. While we are doing that, I shall leave you hidden

with one of my constables. I cannot say what the outcome of this fight will be. The enemy outnumber us. But so long as I or any of my men are alive you will be safe. If things go wrong, then I am not responsible for what happens to you. I want you to guide us within two hundred yards of the camp. If you make one false move, I promise you that I shall shoot you dead without any compunction. You should be in the service of your country. Instead you are a traitor. You stink."

He showed no outward sign of shame. I beckoned Din to me.

"You will guard this man when we attack. If things get out of hand, you will retreat at once to Sungei Lembu then report to the O.C.P.D. He will want you to guide him back here with reinforcements. If it becomes necessary for you to do that, tell the O.C.P.D. we tried to keep the flag flying. He will know what you mean. Is everything clear?"

He nodded slowly. His face hung a little. He no doubt felt giggled at missing the fun. If one could call it that. I turned to Wong.

"All right, let's move. And remember, no tricks." I wagged the carbine under his nose.

We crossed the bridge without difficulty. Probably because our thoughts were elsewhere. We had discarded our fatigue like an old worn-out cloak. We were alert and eager, resembling dogs unleashed for the kill. We didn't give a damn what lay ahead. We only knew that adventure called us on with all its potent mystery. And there was a job to be done. When we reached the other side of the river our prisoner steered slightly left and picked up a narrow, sparsely worn track. I kept close behind him, giving him an occasional dig with the carbine, just to show him that I still loved him. The men were strung out in the rear, carbines held in port position. Pyman had swung the bren on to his hip, mobile combat style. Comrade Wong jogged on for the best part of three miles, still keeping to the track. Then, suddenly, he slowed down and moved silently into the bushes. I followed and crouched by his side. He was quivering again and bathed in sweat. I sniffed at the air and smelt wood

burning somewhere up front. I cocked my head to one side and strained my ears. I could faintly hear voices in the distance. I glanced to the rear. The men were kneeling in the bushes beside the track.

"How far now?" I whispered in Wong's ear. He ran a tongue over dry lips.

"A little past the bend in front. The track leads into the clearing, then out the other side," he replied softly.

I signalled Din to come forward. He withdrew with Wong farther into the bushes. I stepped back on to the track. The men sidled towards me. Their expressions were a picture of supreme confidence. We were going into action together at last. I gave them Winston Churchill's famous war-time sign. I turned round and lead them up the track. This was it. We only needed Errol Flynn.

A few yards short of the bend I chose to re-enter the bushes. It has been said that discretion is the better part of valour. There is something in that. I moved furtively towards the sound of voices. They were becoming clearer. My rubber-soled boots glided noiselessly over the damp grass. The undergrowth began to thin, and I calculated there was not much farther to go. I glanced back once to make sure the men were following. I levered myself downwards and belly-crawled the rest of the way. The men followed suit, wriggling through the grass like long, green snakes. The enemy were still talking loudly in a Chinese dialect. There was no sign of panic or alarm. Nothing to show that our presence had been detected. So far, so good. I could hardly believe our stroke of good fortune. I had a plan in mind. I meant to tax our luck to the full. I prayed it would hold out just a few moments longer. I reached the edge of the grass and gently parted it a few inches.

I looked across the clearing, taking in every detail. I saw the Communists no more than fifty yards ahead. They were gathered round a cooking fire. Some standing, some sitting, completely at ease and unsuspecting. Two or three were leaning on rifles. The others had guns laid out by their sides. Only

one person was talking now. The tall one in the centre. He spoke eloquently with self-assured authority. I couldn't understand what he was saying, but his manner gave me that impression. He had more than one red star on his cap. That denoted he was the leader.

I felt a slight movement beside me as Pyman moved up with the bren. Sobh and Peter followed. Then Daud and Ming closed in on my right. The leader was still holding the floor, waving his arms about like a puppet. It must have been a good story. The Communists were arranged like sitting ducks. It was a pretty picture. Too pretty to miss. I reached out and squeezed Pyman's arm. He cuddled the butt close into his shoulder and squinted along the sights. I saw his knuckles whiten as he squeezed the trigger. The bren sliced the air with its death-song, vicious, menacing.

The peaceful scene before us became transformed into a screaming mêlée of twisted bodies. The Communists went down like ninepins. We gave them all we had. They hadn't a chance. Half of them were out of action with the first bursts. They screamed and kicked, terrified: the maimed, the dead, the dying. I saw the tall officer on the ground. He was crawling around in circles, one leg trailing uselessly behind. An ominous crimson stain seeped through his shirt front. He was groping around blindly, moaning like a tortured, demented beast. I pumped two bullets into him. He jerked with the impact, then rolled over and lay still. I heard the carbines barking either side of me. Three more wounded wretches ceased their struggles, pouring their life-blood on to the green earth. The remainder regrouped behind their comrades' bodies and hit back. A bullet smacked over my head. Another followed, closer this time. I singled out two Communists running crazily for shelter the other side of the clearing. I fired at them and missed. I cursed under my breath. I fired again, taking my time. One of them folded up and fell. The other dropped to his knees, then dived into the thick grass. I rammed home a fresh magazine. I climbed to my feet and called the men.

We surged across the clearing, a thin green line in the sun. I heard a cry on my right. Daud staggered and waved a shattered arm. He was hit again as he went down. Then we were among them. We were engulfed in a sea of threshing, sweating bodies, every man for himself. I heard shouts, curses and the sickening thud of a carbine butt as it cleaved a Communist skull wide open. Fragments of brain clung to the steel heel-plate. A yellow face from nowhere bobbed before me. A sten's wicked snout curved upwards in line with my belly. I thought I heard angels singing. I swung my carbine up from the waist. Ming beat me to it. The face disappeared in a blaze of red. I shouted my thanks. I looked wildly around. It was all over. My first thoughts were for Daud. I felt a tightness in my chest as I looked across to where Peter and Sobh were kneeling beside him. The Tamil was working swiftly with tourniquet and bandage. Briefly he turned my way, shouting that he had the situation under control. I have never known relief to be so gratifying. I glanced quickly sideways at Pyman. He was standing over a couple of wounded Communists. He ran a finger across his throat and shrugged his shoulders. I turned and ran towards the far side of the clearing. Ming pounded at my heels. There was still the one who had got away.

I glanced down at the one I'd dropped as I passed. There was no need to check if he was dead. The small black hole in the back of his head told its own tale. We paused at the fringe to get our bearings. It wasn't difficult. The bloodstains and broken-down grass showed the way. We followed the trail cautiously for the best part of a hundred yards. Suddenly it petered out. Ming caught my arm and pointed to his left. The trail started again, not so clear. I noticed the bloodstains had stopped. We crouched and followed it up. I cannot truthfully say that either of us were prepared for the bullet which whipped between us. We should have been, I agree, but the point is we were caught napping. We scattered like two startled rabbits. We flattened ourselves in the grass and lay motionless. Not a second too soon. The next couple of bullets ploughed through

the spot where we had been standing. The Communist was not far in front. He was wounded. But apparently not all that bad. He could still use a gun effectively.

I continued to lie still, hardly daring to breathe. The sweat began to pour down my face. It dropped in neat little pools on my arms. Everything was deathly quiet. Somewhere out there in the grass the Communist lurked, waiting, ready to pick us off if we moved a muscle. He definitely had the drop on us. We were bogged down hard and fast. Situations like this were only supposed to happen in fiction or on the films. The minutes ticked slowly away. Cramp began to set in, just to help matters. I looked across at Ming. He returned my gaze, and shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation. I hoped that Peter or any of the others would not come barging in. They would have heard the shots and wondered, no doubt. Once the cramp had started it moved in rapidly. I would have to move soon and to hell with the consequences. It was either that or become half paralysed.

I heard a sound in front, slightly to my right. At first I thought I was imagining things. It gets like that after a while. I cocked my ears and listened. I heard it again, a faint rustling. Like someone crawling. Ming had heard it, too. He raised a forefinger to his lips. A tingling sensation rippled up and down my spine. Cramp or not, I had to hold on. I wriggled my toes in my boots. I clenched and unclenched my fists. The action gave me some relief. For a few seconds the rustling stopped, then started again. Gradually it became more pronounced. It was coming towards me. I gritted my teeth hard and waited.

I saw the green cap and red star framed above the grass. Then I saw the pock-marked evil face. The bastard was walking! I rolled on to my side and loosed off a round. It went wide of the mark, but it had the desired effect. The face disappeared. I heard the sound of footsteps running away. I cursed and stood up. The Communist was about forty yards away, running hell for leather. He had a piece of white rag tied to his right arm, just above the elbow. That must have been where I'd

winged him earlier. I charged through the grass after him, forgetting all about the cramp. Abruptly the grass thinned. The Communist began to run zigzag fashion. Crafty beggar. I paused and loosed another round. I missed. I cursed again at my own incompetence.

The brief respite was what the Communist wanted. Suddenly he swerved to his right and planted himself behind a large tree. I told Ming to keep behind me: that we presented less target area. I walked forward slowly. It was not a case of heroics. I had no option. Ming yelled at the man to surrender. He wasn't biting. I'd covered a good half of the distance before anything happened. At this stage I couldn't see the Communist because of the tree. Then his head and shoulders came into view. His rifle snaked round the tree. Then he fired. I felt a wrench at my waist. My water-bottle clattered to the ground. Twin jets poured out of two neat holes. I pumped three shots at the figure crouched behind the tree. I saw wooden chips fly into the air.

The Communist came out of hiding, unarmed. He stood perfectly still, clenched fists raised above his head in a token of surrender. That's what I thought. I inched forward warily, watching him. He remained still, impassive, silent. There was something odd about all this. I didn't like the look of it. It was too darned easy. Then like a thunderbolt the truth dawned on me. I switched my eyes to the clenched fists. I stopped petrified, rooted to the spot. My heart raced like a steam engine. I watched the long, tapering fingers of the left hand slowly unfold. I caught a glimpse of the small grenade as the arm went back for the throw. I accelerated into action. I'll never know how I managed it. I pumped bullets rapidly at the Communist. I didn't stop until the magazine clicked empty. The bullets ploughed into his chest. He toppled backwards. He tried to scream, but couldn't make it. He collapsed as the blood gushed from his mouth. The grenade dropped from his hand. The lever shot up. Four seconds to go!

"Down, for Christ's sake, down!" I screamed.

I pulled Ming down with me. We put our hands over our ears and dug in. The grenade exploded with a muffled roar. The shrapnel made angry whistling noises in the air. Then it stopped. I lifted my head and looked where the Communist had fallen. His huddled body was visible through the thin veil of smoke. He was in a horrible mess when we reached him. I turned him over with my foot. I wished I hadn't. I gazed stupidly at the huge, raw hole in his back. He'd taken the full blast from the grenade. I turned away and left him there. I wanted to be sick.

"Shall we move the body, tuan?" Ming asked. Then he vomited. I wished I could have done so.

"Leave him there. He won't run away," I answered.

We retraced our steps back to the others. They looked as if they never expected us back. Din had brought Wong into the clearing. He was sitting in the shade looking a picture of abject misery. Pyman told me that both the injured Communists had died. That made matters easier. The men had been busy. They had pulled the bodies into the grass, finally covering them with ferns. They would either have to be buried or carted away tomorrow: after Special Branch had taken photographs and fingerprints. Ming started to tell the men about the Communist we had chased. I left him to it and went over to Daud.

Peter had patched him up efficiently. I inspected the bandaging and the roughly improvised splints on his arm. The second bullet had got him in the thigh. It wasn't a deep wound. Miraculously it had missed the main artery. I loosened the tourniquet on his upper arm. The bleeding had stopped. I spoke softly to Daud, doing my best to assure him all was fine. He tried to answer several times, but had to give in. Loss of blood had weakened him. I told him to relax and leave the talking to me. I injected anti-tetanus, then gave him a shot of morphia. It would ease the pain and induce sleep. I dumped my kit beside him and trooped back to the others. Ming was winding up the story, receiving grunts of approval from his audience.

"Okay, the fight's over," I said. "We've done our job. Now

it's up to Special Branch. There's no need to tell you we won, but I do want to tell you why we won. We had the advantage and the Bren. That and team-work saw us through. But remember, it might not be so easy another time, so don't get cocky about it. There's something else to remember, too. The men we killed were Communists. I know their creed and so do you. But apart from that, some of them died bravely, and don't forget it. A fighter should always be prepared to acknowledge good qualities in his opponents, whoever they may be. As long as I am your commander, never forget what I have told you today."

I allowed my brief speech to sink in. I wanted to get in from the beginning, and stamp firmly on any signs of swollen-headedness. The men shuffled their feet and glanced sideways at each other. Then they switched to me and nodded in agreement. That's the way I wanted it. I checked the time and turned to Ming.

"This is where we shortly split up," I told him. "Have a meal, then leave for Sungei Lembu. Sobh and Din will go with you. Report what has happened to the O.C.P.D., and he'll fix things with Special Branch. They'll want you to lead them here at dawn, so I'm afraid you won't have much rest. I'll need a stretcher party and a doctor for Daud. The O.C.P.D. will lay that on, too. Peter, Pyman and I will hang on here until you return with the O.C.P.D.'s party. You ought to leave well before sundown, so that allows you about half an hour for some food. Luckily you'll have a full moon tonight. That will help you."

I sheered off and left them to it. I didn't give Ming a chance to ask any questions. Actually I felt disinclined to answer any at that moment. Now all the excitement was over I felt dog-tired. Daud was asleep when I squatted beside him. I searched my pack for something to eat. I polished off the rest of the day's rations, leaving some tinned glucose sweets to see me through the night. I got the tommy-cooker going and brewed some tea. I relaxed, drinking sparingly, making the most of each refreshing mouthful. I glanced over my mug at Wong. Peter was feed-

ing him, not too delicately I admit, but at least he was feeding the fat brute. I lit a cigarette and inhaled thankfully. I rationed myself to one more mug of tea. The loss of my water-bottle had made me short of fresh water.

Ming left an hour before sundown. I more or less repeated to him my previous instructions. He took it all in, nodding his head up and down. So long as he had a head, Ming would never be speechless. We talked for a few moments about minor matters concerning the next day. I noticed a changed attitude in Ming as we talked, he was more at ease with me. The time crept round for him to depart. He had gone only a short distance when he turned back towards me. What he did then took me momentarily unawares. He thrust out his right hand. I couldn't miss the message in his eyes. I gripped the hand hard and held it for a few seconds. His eyes never left mine, never wavered an inch. There was no need for words. We stood there face to face, silently saying what we both thought. We had been in action together for the first time. We had proved ourselves, measured up to each other's high ethics. Our future together was firm, based upon a solid foundation of mutual trust. The barrier between us had been crushed for ever.

I watched him and the other two disappear slowly into the distance. He paused briefly once to wave. Then he was gone. I went back to my kit and laid out my bedroll. The sun was going down rapidly. It would soon be dark. I put the morphia capsules in a spot where I could lay hands on them quickly. I would need them for Daud before the night was through. I called Peter to come over. Pyman took his place beside Wong.

"How's the prisoner?" I asked.

"He wants to . . . , sir," he stated.

"Tell him to do it in his trousers."

"It will smell, sir."

"That's his bloody fault. I'm not a blasted chambermaid, neither are you," I answered crossly.

"No, sir." Peter dropped the subject. He was friendly enough. He bore no malice towards me over our last conversation.

"You and Pyman can take turns at sentry duty," I went on. "Under the circumstances, it is best if you stay by the prisoner. Keep his hands tied, though. You can do two hours on, two off. I don't think we'll be disturbed tonight, but keep your eyes open all the same."

"Yes, sir. What about you?"

"I'm staying up all night with Daud. He'll want someone on hand later." I inclined my head towards the figure stretched out beside me.

"Sir."

"Yes?"

He paused and coloured up a bit. He looked uneasy.

"Nothing, sir."

"O.K., then. If Wong does do what you said, get to windward of him. You won't smell it then." I grinned.

"Good night, sir."

"Good night, Peter."

He scampered off back to Pyman. I took out my diary and completed the entry for the day. I wrote until daylight ended and night began. I stretched full length on my bedroll and lit a cigarette. I gazed upwards thoughtfully at the darkening sky. I thought of three men threading their way through the jungle, carrying with them new hope and news of an achievement. They were tired, whacked out, but I knew they would get through. The blackness dissolved a little as the moon rose above the trees, bathing the earth in ethereal light.

As I lay there thinking of my men, my attitude towards Asians softened a little, and loneliness seemed to fade into the background.

[7]

WHEN we returned to base with the O.C.P.D.'s party we were treated like kings. I was more interested in the welfare of the men. Yapp's malaria had gone as rapidly as it had come. Daud

was taken straight to hospital, and immediately received the essential medical care. He had only been in there a few hours when he heard that Number Six was a bonny, strapping boy. I think that was the best news he could have received. Special Branch took Wong Ah Loy to Penang Island. After ceaseless interrogation he spilled the beans, naming the Min Yuen agents in Nibong Tebal. Special Branch and Jungle Squads from Sungei Bakap pounced swiftly and made the necessary arrests, but nothing was learned of the 5th Platoon. Even so, early on the third day Jungle Squads and elements of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry combed the Nibong Tebal area. Two or three small camps were found and destroyed, but the birds, if they had been around, had flown. We took no part in these operations. The high-ups said we had done enough for a few days, and to show their gratitude they gave the squad six days' leave. That was the best reward we could have had.

I did not go away for my leave. I had quite a stack of paperwork to clear up, and I was well in arrears regarding letters home. This afforded me an opportunity to get up to scratch, much as I loathed writing uninteresting reports and poring over monotonous files. I received an invitation from Alec Wilmot for lunch on the Friday, and Paddy Regan invited me to spend the week-end at the Mess. I accepted both gratefully. I had all the work completed by the Thursday evening. I felt quite satisfied with my efforts, and all that remained was to make the most of the week-end. Peter was the only member of the squad to stay in base. I didn't press him for the reason, but I had the feeling that he liked to be around. Friday came not too soon. I told Peter to have the Land Rover and Rahman ready for eleven o'clock. When he learned that I was going to Kulim and B.M., he asked if he could come as escort. I had no objections. I wondered if he had had a row with his girl-friend in B.M. It wouldn't do to ask him outright. I packed my essentials and went along to Bakar's quarters. I told him where I would be for the next three days, but not to contact me except in an emergency. I wanted nothing to spoil my brief period of liberty.

I heard the Land Rover revving in the compound as I left Bakar's room. I picked up my belongings and went over to it. Peter was sitting in the back, looking immaculate in his 'civvies'. He appeared to be a bit brighter. I would say it was girl-friend trouble.

Rahman dropped me at the main gates of the police-station. I gave Peter ten dollars to split between them. It would pay for a feed and a cinema show. It was nearing the end of the month, and I guessed they would both be hard up. Kulim offered many temptations to a man without spare cash. By being a little generous, I was at least preventing two of my men from falling into trouble. I told Peter to pick me up at four o'clock. I grabbed my holdall and carbine. Rahman drove off in a cloud of dust. I passed through the gates and started to cross the compound. Wilmot must have seen me arrive. He came out to meet me half-way. I viewed him critically as he approached. I thought he looked much paler and thinner than the last time I saw him. He needed a rest from operations.

"Welcome, Bill. Hail the conquering hero! Sorry there's no red carpet out." He hadn't lost his high spirits. He pumped my hand vigorously.

"Can it, Alec," I grinned. "I came to forget all that."

"Forget it? How can you?"

I did not comment.

We walked over to his quarters. Wilmot had done us proud. I threw my kit carelessly on to a chair and surveyed the spread laid on the table. I rubbed my hands together.

"Excuse me if I make a pig of myself, Alec," I pardoned myself in advance.

"Special for you, Bill. Get weaving."

I took him at his word. Conversation during the meal was strictly limited. There was a time and place for everything. We pushed our plates away together.

"Better than at Sungei Lembu, eh, Bill?" Wilmot asked. He waved his hand at the food still left.

"Guess I must agree with you there. Sungei Lembu is, shall we say, a dead end."

"Honestly, I don't know how you stick the damned place. It would send me crackers. Poor old Lovie just pulled out in time." I fished between my teeth with a toothpick.

"Oh, it's not so bad as all that. It grows on one after a while. I've known worse places." I smiled wryly.

"Where, for Pete's sake? I'm insatiably interested."

"During the war, for instance. It wasn't all honey then, you know."

"No, I suppose not," he admitted. He knitted his brows thoughtfully. He leaned forward, resting his crossed arms on the table. He peered at me queerly. The humour had left his face.

"I've never asked you this before, Bill. What do you think of the killings out here?"

The directness of the question surprised me.

"The killing of whom?" I asked gently.

"Communists. Day in, day out, it never ends. Surely these terrorists are worth more to us alive than dead. Look at the information they could give us alive. It all seems so bloody useless to kill just for the sake of killing." He drummed his fingers on the table.

"The bastards are better dead," I said bluntly.

"They can't talk when they're dead, Bill."

"Neither can they kill any more." I was still blunt. "What's on your mind, Alec? Let's get down to brass tacks on this. Get it off your chest," I said.

"In confidence? Just between you and me?"

"Of course."

I looked at him intently. At his flushed face, burning eyes deep set in their sockets. I didn't like what I saw.

"This is the point, Bill. Three terrorists have been using a certain track near Junjong for the past five nights. Their movements are regular as clockwork. Information has it that they are collecting subscriptions from the kongsis. Under the guise of a routine patrol, I've inspected the track and there is one

excellent ambush point. So tonight I am laying an ambush there were five men. If the three Communists come along, then bob's your uncle." Wilmot leaned back and looked hard at me.

"Well?" I arched my eyebrows.

"I'm going to take them alive, Bill."

His statement left me cold. For a moment I was at a loss for words.

"Alec, you're kidding?" I found my voice somehow.

"No, Bill, I'm not. I'll try this way for a change. I believe they're collecting for the 5th Platoon. It wasn't your fault, but you thought the courier you caught at Relau would tip us off about them. I think these three tonight will be a sound shot. That's why I'm not going to kill them," he answered adamantly. I could see only too clearly that he meant what he said. I knew him too well.

"Alec, for Christ's sake, give up this crazy idea. Do you think for one moment they'll let you capture them, even if they are cornered? You've seen the atrocities committed by the Communists. What they've done to women and children and our own chaps. How the hell you can sit there and calmly say that you're going to capture three in an ambush beats me. They never give quarter to us, you know that. Kill the bastards or scrap the ambush!" I pleaded with him.

"Sorry, Bill, but my mind's made up," he answered calmly.

I groped desperately for words. Something I could say or do to make him see reason.

"Who else knows about this but me?" I asked hollowly.

"No one."

That made it worse. The onus was on me to keep my mouth shut. The only way I could stop him was by telling his O.C.P.D. I dismissed the temptation to rat on him. It was pretty loathsome. I lit a cigarette and passed one to Wilmot. I noticed that his hand was as steady as a rock. Mine was shaking.

"You won't let on to anyone, will you, Bill?"

My thoughts must have been telepathic. My face reddened a little.

"You know better than that," I said gruffly.

We were silent for a few seconds. A cloud had settled over the room.

"What about your men? They'll have to know," I continued casually.

"I'll brief them just before we take up ambush position."

He was not leaving anything to chance. I stubbed my cigarette.

"I still think you're a bloody fool," I reproached him.

"Maybe. It's worth a try, though. It could mean the end of the 5th Platoon. That's what we're all crying out for, isn't it?"

I did not answer him. Alec Wilmot was worth scores of 5th Platoons; thousands of illiterate Communists. He obviously hadn't given a thought to what would happen if he failed to pull off his plan. He leaned across the table and laid his hand on mine. He squeezed hard.

"You have every right to see the O.C.P.D. and have me taken off the job. I couldn't blame you, if you did. I know the book of rules doesn't allow terrorists to be taken alive in ambushes. I've just got a hunch that I'll be successful. That's why I asked you to keep this between the two of us, Bill."

"Okay, Alec. Have it your way. But for Pete's sake be careful. You know I wish you all the luck in the world." I made a poor attempt to be reassuring. Wilmot withdrew his hand and smiled at me.

"Thanks, Bill. I knew I could count on you. Bet you ten bucks I'll pull it off."

"That's a bet I'll gladly lose."

"I'll go one better than that. After it's all over I'll treat you to a day out on Penang by way of celebration."

"I'll keep you up to that, you blighter."

We laughed together and went out on to the verandah. The tension had been eased. We stretched out lazily in rattan arm-chairs. We talked of home and Wilmot's native Somerset. The lovely country lanes and, in contrast, the bleak yet overwhelming beauty of Exmoor. I had never been there, and I listened

enraptured to Wilmot's descriptive narrative of the West Country. I visualised rolling moors, the pleasing fragrance of wet heather and God's own pure fresh air. The legend of Lorna Doone, cream teas and strawberries. A cool pint with the locals in the village pub on a summer's evening. It was all so very beautiful, so green and pleasant, so very far away. I watched Wilmot as he spoke. I noticed the colour replace the pallor in his cheeks; his happy expression as he talked of home. I was content to be the interested audience, not wishing to intrude upon his oratory. As time passed I, too, became encompassed in his earthly dreams. I was sorry when he ended. He shot a guilty glance sideways at me.

"Hope I haven't bored you, Bill," he said apologetically.

"Far from it. You have filled me brimful with desire to visit Somerset some day. It makes me think I have seen too much of the world and too little of my own country."

"Is that bad?"

He passed me a cigarette. I lit it and reflected, watching the smoke spiral upwards.

"I suppose it is, in a way. A chap never appreciates home until he's away from it. Yet travelling around teaches one a lot."

I continued to gaze fixedly at the cigarette burning between my fingers.

"Why did you join the police, Bill?"

I could feel Wilmot was studying me pretty closely. I kept my eyes glued downwards.

"For what I could get out of it, I guess. High pay and all that. What else would induce a fellow to come to this damp, sticky corner of the earth?"

"I don't believe those were your true reasons. I'd say a spirit of adventure, coupled with an ambition to help out."

I raised my eyebrows quizzically. I took a long pull at the cigarette. I inclined my head towards Wilmot, a slight flicker of amusement playing around my lips.

"You seem to know me better than I know myself."

"That's possible. I just don't believe that you would go into anything purely for personal gain. Even if you swear you did."

"Thank you, kind sir," I mocked half angrily. "Now let's get down to hard facts. The days of chivalry, adventure, doing something for nothing, whatever fancy name you choose to call it, are gone. Today we're out to get the maximum with the minimum exertion. Collectively as a nation we have become apathetic, lazy, indifferent, always with an eye open for easy pickings. The war taught me that. I was patriotic then. I thought my country really needed me. Yes, it needed me all right, but only to fight its war caused by the bungling politicians. We were great chaps while we were fighting. Then peace came and they dropped us like so many hot potatoes. War-time salt of the earth became the post-war scum. We were shunned by society, cast aside until the next time, but for me there'll be no next time in a world conflict. I never expected pavements paved with gold when I came back. I just wanted to leave the war behind, settle down in civvy street and lead a normal, decent life. All of us who came back wanted that, but no one took any interest when the war was over. So I have my grudge against society, and I came to Malaya for what I could get out of it. If you think I came here as a crusading knight bent on helping these clueless, dim Asians, put their country right, then you've made one big miscalculation, Alec."

I flicked the cigarette end on to the ground and watched it burn out slowly. Wilmot appeared unmoved at my outburst. He continued to look at me in his usual honest, unbelieving way. For a moment his calm composure infuriated me. I bit back a second bitter outburst. Wilmot shook his head slowly from side to side.

"You're being cynical, Bill. That wasn't you speaking. Not the real you, anyway. You remind me very much of the chief character in Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. You've got his problems. You've got to find your true self."

He spoke kindly, much like a father. Suddenly he appeared older than his years. I felt like a louse.

"Sorry, Alec, for blowing my top. You touched one of my sore spots. I don't want you to misunderstand me. Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

I searched his face anxiously, wanting to see his good humour return.

"Yes, Bill. Let's leave it at that," he agreed.

We switched to other topics. We kept Malaya out of it. It was best that way.

Peter and Rahman called for me, bang on schedule. Wilmot and I said our farewells. In the best of high spirits I climbed into the Land Rover. Rahman engaged the gear and we slipped away. I turned in my seat and waved to Wilmot until the buildings hid him from view. Once we were out on the open road, the gnawing pangs of doubt returned. I tried hard to forget what Wilmot had told me. I turned the matter over and over in my mind. Each time I arrived at a dead end. Perhaps I was being a complete fool over the whole affair. I know I wanted to convince myself so. In the end I gave up the unequal, disturbing struggle. I resigned myself to the inevitable.

Behind me Peter was chattering twenty to the dozen about the Roy Rogers film he and Rahman had seen. Asians go great licks on Roy. Peter was no exception. His praise of the popular western hero pierced the noisy rush of wind. I didn't answer him or offer any comment. After a while he ceased his chatter. I was in no mood to interest myself in Roy Rogers. Rahman soon covered the eighteen miles to Bukit Mertajam. The Land Rover squealed to a halt outside the Mess. I unlimbered myself. I gave Peter my carbine to lodge in the police-station with his. I gave him another twenty dollars, and told him to contact me three times over the week-end.

"Where will you be over the week-end?" I addressed Peter.

"At my girl's place, sir." He blushed a little.

"Everything all right?" I asked in a friendly manner.

He crimsoned up a bit more, and hung his head like a naughty baby.

"The last time I saw her we had words."

"Why? You needn't tell me if you prefer not to."

"She won't agree to marriage." He wanted to tell me, obviously.

"How old did you say she was? I've forgotten."

"Fourteen, sir."

"Rushing things a bit, aren't you? There's plenty of time."

"No, sir. We believe in early marriages."

"Yes, I know. But let her get the cradle marks off her behind first."

"Yes, sir," he whispered.

"Oh, well, have a good time. Your girl will be pleased to see you. When you go out walking, keep away from gooseberry bushes."

He looked at me queerly. That had him beat.

"Keep away from the brothels. I don't want any of my men picked up in raids." I spoke to Rahman.

His mouth split in a toothy grin.

"Yes, tuan. Rahman not like brothel in B.M. One dollar too cheap. Very nasty. I go to Penang brothel some day. Very good girls, tuan."

"Very good pox, too," I added.

They both laughed, and drove away like a couple of excited kids. I went into the Mess. The amah was busy preparing tea. She beamed at me, displaying a firm row of pearly teeth. Her brilliantly coloured sari added glamour to her attractiveness. She told me that Regan was detained at the police-station, but expected him in any moment. I didn't ask her where the others were. I dumped my kit, and told her I would be back shortly.

I went down to the police-station to find Regan. I found him by the parade ground. He was watching the sergeant-major drill some Special Constabulary recruits. He heard my footsteps and turned round. His huge, cherubic face creased into a big smile. His glistening bald pate was hidden under his blue beret. Regan was always the essence of good-natured, unaffected friendship. He often reminded me of Friar Tuck. I sometimes wished I could take a leaf out of Regan's copy-book.

"Hi-ya, Bill. Sorry I was not at the Mess to greet you." His soft Irish voice gurgled with delight. Regan could be a tonic. Right now I needed one.

"That's all right, Paddy. New charges?" I jerked my head at the men on the parade ground.

"Yes, by Christ. What a blasted shambles! Talk about Fred Karno's. Enough to make a good policeman cry," Regan exclaimed. He dabbed the sweat from his forehead with a large red handkerchief.

"They'll make the grade some day. What are most of them destined for, anyway?" I waved my arms sideways. "Estates, where they'll be expected to guard some pot-bellied, whisky-swigging planter day and night. They'll be cursed at and treated like muck while the almighty white master empties the bottles and sleeps with somebody else's wife. That'll be their lot, Paddy, and you know it."

"Your views on planters are still unchanged, then?"

"They'll never change so far as the majority are concerned."

"Planters get killed sometimes, you know, Bill."

"In most cases it's only because they ask for it."

I tried to keep calm.

Regan looked at me levelly. His blue eyes changed from laughter to sympathy.

"I've known you for a long time, Bill. I've seen you change a lot. Don't let the rot eat in too much. It's bad for you. Sometimes I wonder which you hate most—the planters, the Asians or yourself."

It wasn't like Regan to think or talk like that.

"Sorry, Paddy. I had it coming to me." I humbled myself.

Regan cocked his head, peering at me like a frustrated owl.

"The thing I like most about you, Bill, is that you are always so bloody cheerful. Come on, let's go and have a cuppa."

He put his arm across my shoulder. We made off towards the Mess. The cuppa was just what the doctor ordered. The amah was very proud of the cakes she had made. Prouder still of the praise we heaped upon her. I did justice to her cooking. She

kept peeping round the door. If the plate was getting empty she would bring in some more. Finally, we had to stop her. She hadn't the foggiest idea of our stomach capacity. Through a bulging mouthful of cake I asked Regan where the rest of the boys were. He told me that Sheldrick and Madill had gone to Penang for week-end duty. Donnelly was sleeping out on Val d'Or Estate.

"Where's Fisher?" I asked out of mild curiosity. He hadn't mentioned him.

"Gone to Penang, too. He's got a week-end leave. Playing the lone wolf. Whore-hunting as per usual, I guess."

I did not overlook the contempt in Regan's voice.

"Can't blame him in a way, you know," I said defensively. "He's got a cow of a wife back home. Thinks the world of her, worse luck. He wasn't the father of her child, you know."

"Agreed, but that's no excuse, Bill. He had the chance of compassionate leave. He turned it down flat."

That was something I didn't know. "Maybe he had his reasons. We mustn't judge too harshly or set standards too high, you know."

"I won't agree, Bill, so let's skip it." Regan wound up.

I was willing. It was none of my business, anyway.

We lit cigarettes and leaned back in our chairs. We puffed out smoke like railway engines. Regan broke the silence.

"You pulled off a neat job at Relau, Bill."

I knew it had to get round to Relau some time or other.

"Just a bit of jam," I shrugged.

"Mr Modest, eh? Unfold, brother," Regan taunted.

"No modesty about it, Paddy. It bore out my theory. You can have a carefully prepared operation involving hundreds of men, both police and soldiers, and nine times out of ten you get nowhere. On the other hand, you can go on any ordinary routine patrol like I did and run slap into something. Ian Hyde did just the same when he shot Ah Ping. Before that, half the Province Wellesley Contingent had been looking for him."

"I'm bound to agree there, Bill. Still, it was a good show, me boy."

I knew he meant well, but I just didn't want to discuss it.

"How's the wife and family?" I pounced on a loophole to close the subject.

"Fine. The eldest girl leaves school next month. The wife said in her last letter that once she gets me home on leave, there'll be no coming back." His voice rippled with laughter.

"That'll teach you, me boy," I grinned.

"It's all right for you bachelors to talk. You've always appeared the marrying sort, Bill. Feet on the mantelpiece, slippers by the fire, wifey on the doorstep waiting for your pay-packet on Fridays, baby cooing in the cot and all that. Why haven't you taken the plunge?"

"Washing nappies with a peg on my nose," I put in.

"Be serious. Why haven't you?"

I swept some crumbs into my cupped hand. I scattered them on a plate.

"For one very sound reason, Paddy. I'm a rolling-stone. Have been since the war. That makes me no capture for the fair sex. Apart from my snoring habits. Girls just won't have rolling-stones for husbands. They quite naturally look for security."

"Ever have any particular girl in mind?"

I inhaled and puffed out more smoke.

"Yes, but it was a long time ago. Too long ago." I raised my eyebrows. "She was nine. I was ten," I added, chuckling.

"I'll belt you in a moment. I want to find out what makes you confirmed bachelors tick. Now, this girl, not the nine-year-old. Was she blonde or brunette?"

"Blonde. At least as far as one can say. It's difficult to say these days. Quite a lot of blondes come out of bottles. Anyhow, her hair looked golden and she had blue eyes, too. The butter-wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth type. After a while I had it."

"What happened?"

"One day it started to rain and the dye washed out. She was a mousy mid-brown!"

"You bloody clot! Come on, the truth!" Regan was fit to explode.

"All right, serious now. I can see I'll get no peace. The other fellow had plenty of money. I only had my gratuity from the R.A.F. and my demob. suit. That's it in a nutshell."

"Tough luck. You were unlucky. I prefer brunettes myself."

"What difference does the colour make?"

"A hell of a lot. Brunettes have fire, guts and passion."

"Really! I'll stick to bachelorhood."

"Confirmed?"

"Confirmed."

"I've heard you chaps talk before. You'll slip again."

"I'll wait and see."

The amah came in to clear the table. Regan glanced at his watch.

"How about going to the flicks, Bill?"

"Okay by me. What's on?"

"*Samson and Delilah*. Hedy Lamarr and Vic 'Muscles' Mature."

"It's a date," I said.

Regan heaved himself out of the chair.

"I'll slip and change. Be with you pronto."

"Don't forget the bug powder," I shouted after him. B.M.'s cinema bred its own particular type of man-eating bug.

I moved on to the verandah and watched the people scurrying up and down the main road. I received handwaves from shopkeepers who recognised me. I also received good-sized raspberries from cheeky street-urchins. I began to think of Wilmot again. I wished Regan would hurry up. I had wanted desperately to talk to him about Wilmot. For once in my life, I was at the crossroads of indecision. Completely lost in a conflict of mixed loyalties. I lit another cigarette without even realising I had done so. I took a couple of pulls and threw it away. At last Regan joined me. He passed some innocent remark about my looking suddenly off colour. I told him to shut up. We walked to the cinema in frigid silence.

We had chosen the first performance because then the cinema would not be too crowded. The overhead fans were revolving swiftly, churning the already fetid air. We plumped for a row near the back. I took particular note of who was sitting behind. Two or three Chinese lads. I eased my pistol in my pocket. It was not uncommon for Europeans to be knifed or shot during cinema performances. It had happened before in Bukit Mertajam. Regan passed over a cigarette. I lit it and watched the people trooping in through the doors. I recognised one or two Asian policemen from B.M., but no one I particularly knew. Regan struck up conversation again about Fisher. He was still contemptuous, so I let him carry on. Occasionally I nodded my head and grunted. Once Regan had a bee in his bonnet it stuck.

At first I did not pay much attention to the peanut shucks flying over my shoulder. Asian cinema-goers are great nut chewers. One becomes inured to it. This time they started coming over fast. I got annoyed. I turned to face the Chinese lad sitting two rows back. I had no hard-and-fast objection to him chewing nuts, even if he did make a noise like a pig lapping swill, but I did object to him spitting the shells over my shoulder. I gave him a withering stare. He wasn't perturbed. He continued to spit, obviously proud of his indisputable accuracy. I told him in no uncertain tones to direct his barrage elsewhere. He looked at me and went on spitting. Regan swore at him in the best English fashion. It had no effect. I shouted to the lad that if he didn't stop I'd belt him in the teeth. He must have thought a lot of his pearly molars because the threat stopped him. He looked surlily away and gobbled on the floor. I returned my attention to the screen just as the show began. I settled myself comfortably and forgot everything. Even the bugs.

A light, misty rain was falling as Regan and I left the cinema. We threaded our way through the darkness back to the Mess. The amah had left us sandwiches on the table and coffee in a flask. Neither Regan nor I was hungry, having eaten too much

cake at tea-time. So we concentrated on the coffee. We had both enjoyed the film. It had made a welcome change. We talked about several things, finally getting back to jungle squads.

"There's a chance I'll be asked to take over the squad on Penang Island," Regan said.

"What about the present O.C.?" I asked.

"He's due for home leave shortly. There's no one left to take over."

"There's Quayle at Sungei Bakap," I suggested.

"He's there for keeps. Lodge won't want to lose him," Regan said.

I suppose he was right. Lodge did not like changes.

"Think you'll like it?"

"Yes, I think so. It'll be a change from going round inspecting estates and tucking managers into bed." Regan grimaced dryly.

"You're right there," I agreed. "I wish you luck if you get it."

"Thanks, Bill."

I poured two more coffees and passed one to Regan. We lapsed into silence. The telephone in the hall began to ring. I was the nearest. I got up to answer it. I picked up the receiver. The B.M. police operator spoke.

"Is Mr Moran there, please?"

"Speaking," I answered.

"I have a priority call for you from Kulim Ops. Hold the line, sir."

Kulim Ops. Priority call!

My heart skipped a beat or two. I looked at my watch. It was nearly ten-thirty. The line was dead for a few seconds. Then a voice came over the wire.

"Hullo, is that you, Bill? Becky Sharp here. How's it going?"

"Okay, thanks, Becky. What's the gen? You haven't phoned me this time of night for fun."

My voice was low-pitched, husky. I tried to feel at ease. I could think only of Wilmot.

"I've bad news for you, Bill." Sharp's voice had taken on a different edge. There was something kind yet brutal about it. He continued before I could chip in. "Alec Wilmot was killed an hour ago. He took out an ambush party, and from what we can make out of it, he tried to take the Commies alive. It misfired, Bill. They shot him first. His men finished off the terrorists. Poor consolation, though."

Sharp's voice sounded so terribly faint. I stood transfixed to the spot, shaking. I tried several times to speak. My tongue knotted and the words wouldn't come. A horrible gnawing sensation cut into me like a knife. I could hear Sharp's breathing over the phone.

"Bill, are you still listening?" he asked worriedly.

I pulled myself together.

"Yes, Becky, I'm listening." I sounded calmer than I felt.

"Thought you'd like to know at once. I know you and Alec were very close. I'm terribly sorry, Bill. It's a bloody rotten business," he said gently.

"Yes, Becky. We were very close," I echoed.

My voice trembled. For once I wanted to cry like hell. I'd seen death, heard about it many times. Somehow this was different.

"The funeral will be late tomorrow afternoon at Penang, Bill. Sorry to have to be so blasted formal."

"That's all right, Becky. I'll be at the funeral. Thanks for being a pal and telling me. I'd like to ring off now."

"Sure, I understand. Keep your chin up."

I heard the click as he rang off. I cradled the receiver. I stared stupidly at the bare wall opposite. I bit my lip until it bled. I wiped the wetness from my face, kidding myself it was sweat. I don't know how long I stood there. I had ceased to count time. It didn't matter any more, anyway. Nothing seemed to matter; the guts had been knocked out of me in one blow below the belt. I rejoined Regan and slumped into the chair facing him. He never spoke. He sat staring at me curiously. I lit a cigarette. I inhaled gratefully, sending the smoke up to

the ceiling. The match burned out in my fingers, scorching the skin.

"What's wrong, Bill? Talk and get it off your chest, me boy." Regan broke the silence. My heart warmed to him. Good, stout, dependable Regan. I took another pull at the cigarette. I leaned across the table towards Regan.

I told him about Wilmot.

[8]

I BLAMED myself for Wilmot's death. It's not an easy light-hearted thing to admit. But the truth never is. I walked away from the cemetery feeling depressed, conscious only of the tragedy I could have averted. The funeral party and the rest of the mourners had left long ago. The long evening shadows were slowly creeping in as I passed through the huge iron gates. The keeper bowed his head, watching me from under his eyelids. Mechanically I nodded in return. I heard the jingle of keys, and the gates clanged shut behind me, enclosing Wilmot in his own world so far away from mine. I made off down the dimly lit Western Road. I needed the bright lights and people to take me away from myself. I heard the Town Hall clock strike six-thirty in the distance. Another two hours to go before I met Rahman and Peter at Police Headquarters. I wandered aimlessly through the streets towards the town centre. Now and again a tri-shaw boy glided near to me, hoping to snatch a fare. I took no notice of them, and in turn they trundled away, muttering under their breath. I had a few chores to do in town. It would help to pass the time and occupy my mind.

It was dark when I reached Penang Road. The friendly atmosphere acted like a tonic. I was captured by the bright lights, the gaily decorated shops and the bustle of a small thriving metropolis. Penang had its own way of overcoming the blues. After a while, I became part of it, and I ceased to feel sorry for

myself. I sorted out an Indian florist who I knew could be trusted. I arranged that he take flowers to Wilmot's grave once a week. I paid him a year in advance, adding a few dollars for his services. He declined to accept them at first, but I insisted. He signed a receipt with a flourish and bowed me out of the shop. I browsed around several shops and bazaars, making one or two small purchases. I really wanted a couple of check shirts. I looked at scores, but couldn't make up my mind which to buy. Most of the checks were too loud, even for me.

I suddenly felt peckish. I hadn't eaten since the previous evening. I think it was the smell of food cooking in the cafés which reminded me. Perhaps I'd be able to make up my mind about the shirts and finish my shopping after a meal. I can't exactly say what made me do it, but I found myself walking up the steps leading to the Broadway Café. Nothing spectacular in that, I suppose. But as I went up the steps I experienced a peculiar feeling I cannot describe. Maybe if I'd concentrated a bit harder, I would have found the answer. Instead, I dismissed it as a matter of over-sensitiveness. There were very few people in the café. It would fill up later when the cinemas turned out. Then the beer would flow and tongues become loosened. Some families would go short of food until the next pay-day. Police and soldiers alike would spend more than they could afford, living for the moment and not caring a damn about tomorrow. They would fill their bellies with beer, and then totter blindly, drunkenly out into the night. Down in the streets the prostitutes would be waiting for them.

I chose a table at the top of the steps. The fan revolving swiftly above me created a welcome current of air. I was a bit steamed up after my walk. A radiogram beside the desk blared out the latest jazz monstrosity. The Eurasian girl sitting at the next table shot a glance my way. She was high-class, probably half English, dressed in impeccable Western style. She sipped delicately at her Martini, and shot me a second, more prolonged glance. Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought she raised her eyebrows invitingly. I may have been wrong there, but I

wasn't wrong over the slightly provocative smile which formed around the corners of her bright red mouth. I took it all in. The wide irresistible brown eyes, the flawless, smooth-creamed skin. The long shapely legs sheathed in sheerest nylon. The long tapering red-tipped fingers gripping the equally long, fashionable cigarette-holder. She was attractive, beautiful, whatever you would describe her. You felt compelled to lap up what you could see of her. Imagination helped out with the rest. She continued to look at me through the smoke curling up from her cigarette. She didn't speak. With her eyes, it wasn't necessary. One could make a wild guess what she was. Then second thought made that guess out of place. I felt myself weakening as I looked at her. I jerked my attention away from her with a sudden surge of will-power. I felt hot around the collar. Girls like her can be very unnerving. For want of something to do, I switched my eyes around the room. Then I saw Fisher.

He was sitting alone by the window, at an angle from which I couldn't see his face properly. I was interrupted by the waitress. She thrust a menu unceremoniously under my nose, at the same time asking me what I wanted. She obviously didn't believe in letting one read the menu first. I ordered a mixed grill, and she slouched off, her loose sandals clicking on the floor. She paused briefly at the radiogram and changed the records. Then she shouted for my mixed grill. On impulse I went over to Fisher's table. I'd forgotten about the Eurasian girl, a matter which reflected rather adversely on the ingratitude of man. I took the chair opposite Fisher, and peered at him over the empty beer bottles. He must have been soaking himself pretty well. He stared down unseeingly at the table-cloth. He clutched a half-empty glass in his right hand. He was, at that moment, completely unaware of my presence. I studied his face closely. The handsomeness had gone. In its place was a weary, drawn haggardness. The dark stubble on the cheeks and around the chin did not improve matters. I was looking at the mere shadow of a man I once knew. My own troubles appeared utterly meaningless.

"Hullo, Jack," I said gently.

He jerked himself upright with surprise. He looked at me through bleary, red-rimmed eyes. For a second a spark glinted in them, then the glassiness returned. He ran a hand through his hair and stroked the stubbled chin.

"Christ, Bill, you made me jump. I was miles and miles and miles away."

He spoke more coherently than I would have expected. He forced a grin and filled the empty glass.

"You look as if you want someone to wake you up," I joked.

He put the bottle back on the table. He took a long pull at the beer, finally wiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

"What're you doing in the gay city of Penang? I thought you loved Sungei Lembu too much to leave it." He paused to burp, then went on, "Why, of course. I'd forgotten for a moment. Poor old Alec Wilmot. Lousy rotten mess that. Heard about it last night during a binge in the Headquarters' Mess. It's always the clean, decent-living ones that go, eh, Bill? Never the rotten, useless bastards like me. I know that's what you're thinking. Just like the rest of the boys are. They're all thinking that."

"Don't talk like an ass," I snapped. "Pull yourself together."

"Well, it's the truth, isn't it?" he repeated argumentatively.

"I never said that. You're doing all the arguing. You're behaving like a two-year-old kid that wants his behind smacked. Snap out of it, you're not a very good advert for the police."

"Blast the police!"

He pawed the air and went sullenly silent. The waitress brought my mixed grill, and banged it on the table in front of me. She glanced at Fisher in disgust. I caught her eye and winked knowingly. She shrugged her shoulders and went away. Fisher ogled at my plate.

"What's that?" he asked stupidly.

"Food, you clot. You should have had some before you drowned yourself in that bottled gas. It might have balanced your stomach."

Fisher sniggered and crooked a brown, nicotined finger at me.

"You're wrong, Billy boy, you're wrong. Beer's good for most things. Little doses are no good. No, siree." He wagged his head for emphasis. "You've got to wallow in it, drown yourself in it like you said. Then when you're good and pickled and it's pouring out of your ears, you forget all the nasty little things you want to forget. You should try it some time."

He leaned back and surveyed me critically. His tone had become less blurred.

"I'll get over my troubles my own way," I said testily. I was beginning to wish I hadn't joined him. Fisher drained the glass and stoked up from another bottle. I started my meal while I had the chance. I watched Fisher guzzle while I ate.

"When are you due back in B.M.?" I asked conversationally.

"Noon tomorrow." He burped again, much louder.

"I'm going that way shortly. I could drop you off at B.M.," I offered. I felt the sooner Fisher left Penang, the better. In his condition he was too near Headquarters for comfort.

"Nope, tomorrow it is, Bill. Thanks, all the same. I've got a date tonight. Wouldn't miss it for the world." He took another swig at the beer.

"A date?" I asked curiously.

"Yep. The lush piece over there." He nodded his head in the Eurasian girl's direction. "She's on the game. Expensive, though. Real high-class. No quick nip on a park seat with her, I'll tell you. Does everything in style. Fifty dollars a night. Breakfast ten dollars extra."

He spoke so casually matter-of-fact. His attitude was repulsive. So she was a whore, after all. I clicked my teeth, first in surprise, then in annoyance. I pushed away my half-finished meal. It wasn't tempting any longer.

"You're a bloody fool," I said slowly and coldly.

"Why am I? She's willing to sell. I'm willing to buy. That's business, isn't it? It's the way life goes. I'm no sanctimonious hypocrite. Lots of men would like to sleep with her but lack the guts to do it. You wouldn't have the guts, would you, Bill?"

I ignored what he said. I didn't bite. I reflected that I was having one hell of a leave.

"Let's talk about something else, Jack."

"About what?"

"Your home troubles, for instance." I did not miss my cue.

"You've heard, then?"

"In a roundabout way, yes."

"What the hell's the use of talking about it?"

"It might help a bit."

Fisher drained the glass and watched the bubbles settle. He slapped the glass on to the table. He folded his arms and stared straight at me. His eyes weren't glassy any more. They sparkled with open defiance.

"There's not much to it, really. She's had a kid that's not the produce of my loins," he said.

"Who's the father?"

"A chap she knew before she met me. He apparently stepped back into the picture soon after I left home. It was going on all the time she was writing me lovey-dovey letters, telling me how much she missed me, especially at night. Christ, why do women act like that?" he asked himself.

"Didn't you have any idea at all? Not a word or hint from friends or relatives?"

"Not a sausage until I received her last letter. Here, read it yourself."

He fished a grimy letter out of his pocket. I took it and opened it. I scanned the neatly written words. It was the same old story. Loneliness, boredom. Then flattery and attention from another man. An old acquaintanceship revived. First it was casual, then it deepened into something more tangible because the man was lonely, too. Then before she knew what had happened they were sharing the same bed. She didn't really want to do it, but he had been so persuasive. Now the only solution was divorce because she wanted to marry her old flame. All the usual excuses were there in cold ink. There wasn't one word of regret written. No feelings for Fisher. He apparently

didn't count. The silly bitch! I was on the point of handing the letter back when my eyes caught something. The words stood out. 'It's no use, Jack. We must be divorced. Knowing you, I'd say that you would oppose this, but don't, Jack. It wouldn't do for certain people to know your past, would it? What happened before you knew me. You may think me wicked or even threatening, but you should not have told me about your past, Jack.' I folded the letter carefully and handed it back.

"I'm sorry, Jack," I said with feeling. I stewed on the last bit I'd read.

"Well, it's all over now." Fisher waved his hand in finality.

"Why did you turn down the compassionate leave?" I asked. He faced me square. His wide mouth set in a firm line.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"Because if I'd gone home I would have killed both of them!" he hissed vehemently.

I believe he meant it. I was alarmed at the hatred in his voice.

"Just as well you didn't go," I countered lamely. "Did you always get on well together?"

"We had our ups and downs, like any other couple. I can't say we were ever unhappy together. She always liked to have a gay time, and she knew lots of men before me. I just put that down as being natural for a modern girl. She was young and pretty. Still is, if that's any consolation. I guess she was never meant to be left without a man. Some women are like that. I never thought of her being unfaithful. I thought she was too wrapped up in her love for me. A kind of false sense of security. I suppose that's what you'd call it."

He banged his fist up and down on the table. He did not attempt to pour any more beer. I thought about the letter again.

"Do you still love her after all this?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. Oh, God, I do."

His voice broke and his shoulders heaved. I knew then what he meant by beer making one forget. I looked around the café. The Eurasian girl was still sitting at the table alone, sipping

Martini. The few other people were either eating or talking. The waitress was seated at the desk reading a comic. No one appeared to be interested in Fisher. I felt relieved.

"Calm down, Jack. It was a silly question to ask," I said uncomfortably. It was time to call it a day. The letter could wait. "I'll see you to your digs. Where are you staying?"

He stopped sobbing and wiped his face. He perked up a bit, but under it all he still looked groggy.

"At the Piccadilly," he answered. "I'll make it alone, Bill. I'll be all right. The evening's not over yet."

I did not force the issue. In some cases it is best not to.

Fisher called the waitress and paid his bill. I ordered a coffee. Fisher got up unsteadily and pushed the chair in under the table. He stuck out his hand. I gripped it.

"Cheerio for now, Bill. Thanks for listening to me. Don't let the others influence you too much. It might happen to them some day," he said shakily.

"I draw my own conclusions, Jack," I replied warmly, giving his hand an extra squeeze.

"I know you're straight, Bill. That's why I opened up to you," he said. "Wish I'd been with you at Relau, though," he added with a forced chuckle.

"We'd probably have got in each other's way in the panic," I laughed. "Now on your way, boy, and have a snooze. You'll feel better afterwards."

"Now that's an idea. But I shan't snooze alone." He pressed a finger to his lips and winked.

"Cheerio, Jack."

He swayed across the floor. Once I thought he was going to prang. He couldn't resist making a pass at the waitress. She looked down her nose at him and brought my coffee over. Fisher stopped at the Eurasian girl's table. He bent down and whispered something in her ear. She smiled and passed him a card from her handbag. He glanced at it, then shoved it in his pocket. He turned towards me and gave the thumbs-up sign. I waved my hand at him in playful disgust. He poked out his

tongue in return, then disappeared down the steps. I didn't hear a crash, so I gathered he had negotiated them safely. I looked at my watch and gasped. It was later than I thought. I gulped the coffee and left the table. I paid my bill on the way out. I didn't look at the Eurasian girl. Somehow I felt she was watching me, though.

Fisher was nowhere in sight when I reached the street. I crossed the road and dived into Tong Aik's. The assistant was very obliging. He showed me about twenty check shirts. I finally came across two I liked, and bought them. They were Black Watch and Royal Stewart checks. On my way out of the shop I suddenly remembered one or two more items I needed at base. It would probably be a long time before I came to Penang again. I hurried round the shops and completed my purchases.

I arrived at the Transport Yard an hour late. Peter and Rahman were sitting in the Land Rover looking very fed up. I inquired what was wrong, more out of curiosity than anything else. They told me that they'd spent all their money and it was still a few days to pay-day. So that was it. I might have known. This was what one commonly calls a 'touch'. They hung their heads sheepishly and twiddled their thumbs. I gave them a good dressing down, definitely not mincing my words. Peter learned a lot more English swear-words in those few seconds. They looked more sheepish than ever. A short while ago they would never have dared put out feelers. No doubt I had set the precedent with Daud. My anger evaporated swiftly, and I wanted to laugh. The scheming little devils! I emitted a long-drawn-out sigh of defeat and ten dollars changed hands. Peter climbed over into the rear seat. I smacked his backside as he did so. That made him giggle.

We glided out into the Yard path, narrowly missing the sentry's bayonet, and into Penang Road. The cinemas were turning out and everything was chock-a-block. It was slow work manoeuvring through the mass of people, cars and tri-shaws. I told Rahman to take the short-cut down Chulia Street to the

ferry. After a struggle, he made it. The traffic congestion lessened and we made good headway. The headlights carved a path through the blackness. Our progress, however, was short-lived. As we approached the junction with Bishop Street, I saw a knot of people across the road in the glare of the headlights. I didn't see the lorry in their midst until a few seconds after. Rahman braked to a halt, and I stepped out to see what the hold-up was. Everyone was talking excitedly. I caught something about a man under the lorry. I pushed my way roughly through the crowd. In the distance I could hear an ambulance bell. I finally reached the lorry, and the two Asian policemen kneeling in front of it. I could see two legs sticking out from under the front wheel. One of the policemen turned round and told me the man was dead. The crowd had become hushed. I moved closer and peered over the policeman's shoulder. The other wheel had crushed the man's chest. I glanced down at the face framed in the light of the policeman's torch. It was calm and peaceful in death. I closed my eyes and shivered. This evening and every other evening was over for Fisher.

[9]

THREE weeks after my return to Sungei Lembu, I received an urgent signal from Rodway. Nothing to denote its urgency was divulged in the message, but I guessed that there was plenty behind it. Rodway was not the sort to worry over trifles. I lost no time in answering the summons. I hared off to Bukit Mertajam in the Land Rover as fast as Rahman could drive within the bounds of reasonable safety. In next to no time I found myself firmly implanted in Rodway's office. I studied him closely as he stacked and lit his pipe. I wondered why he had been so ruthlessly by-passed in the promotion scramble. He was, and still is, the perfect police officer. Far more so than I could ever aspire to be. Only in Frank Fielding have I found

Rodway's equal. As a result of my long association with Rodway, I formed the opinion that there are two sides to his nature. On the one side he was cool, calmly efficient, given at times to fleeting periods of ruthlessness. No doubt a throw-back to his P.O.W. days in Changi Gaol under the Japs. On the other side he was always kind and considerate, always ready to help one out of a jam. I am happy to say that is how I always found him; how I'll always remember him.

He relaxed and shifted the pipe into the corner of his mouth. He peered across at me through the wreaths of fragrant smoke.

"You got here quick," he remarked casually.

"Yes. Your signal appeared important."

"It was. To you, I mean. But before I go into that, there are one or two other things I'd like to discuss with you."

He sifted through the papers on his desk. I watched him, trying to tell myself what was coming. I think somehow, when I reflect back, that I knew before he told me. He finally pulled one sheet out from the rest and scrutinised it carefully. I caught a glimpse of the heading on the sheet. It stood out clearly in bold print. Transfers. I sank back into my chair. I felt the muscles tense in the pit of my stomach.

"How long have you been on jungle squads?" he asked without moving his eyes from the sheet.

"Since the start of the Emergency, sir. Nearly three years."

"That's a long time without a break."

"I suppose it is," I said weakly.

He laid the piece of paper on top of the others. He leaned forward, pressing his forearms along the desk. He crooked a forefinger round the pipe stem.

"Are you happy at Sungei Lembu?" he asked.

"Yes. Definitely."

"I'm happy having you there. Someone I can rely on."

"I don't want to leave Sungei Lembu," I said in an effort to speed up the conversation.

"Oh." He arched his eyebrows, not taking his eyes off me.

"Why not?"

"There are various reasons," I stammered, colouring a bit.
"What's the main reason? There must be one for you to be so emphatic about not wanting to leave."

"Because I think I'll find the answer to a lot of things there."

"You're talking in riddles."

"To you maybe, but not to myself."

"I see," he said slowly. Then went on, "Your name is down for transfer to Administrative Duties at Contingent Headquarters. You know about the new Federal Police Jungle Companies that are being formed. Well, after a period of rest at H.Q. you're down to command one of those companies. Their strength is four hundred officers and men. It will be a big leg up for you in promotion. If that's what you want, now is your chance to take it. It's entirely up to you. What do you say?"

"I don't want to go. Believe me, I don't. If I did I would ask for a transfer," I answered without hesitation. "As for the promotion and command of a jungle company, I don't want it. I'm happy as I am," I added.

"Okay. It may seem selfish on my part, but I'm glad you answered like that. I am reluctant to lose you from my district, but I would never stand in your way if you wanted to go. I'll see that your name is taken off the list. Satisfied?"

"Yes, thank you, sir. That's a load off my mind."

"I really believe it is." Rodway grinned. "By the way, Regan's taking over the Penang Island Jungle Squad next week."

"I guessed as much. He'll like it, though."

"I'm sure he will. Regan's a sound chap. Good operational type. More suited to that than to what he's doing now."

"Yes," I agreed.

Rodway leaned back as far as his chair would permit. "You've got subscription collectors back in your area," he stated bluntly.

"Where?" I queried, all ears and brightness.

"Mengkuang," he said.

"Phew!" I whistled. "How did you know?"

"The penghulu came to see me this morning."

"Why the heck didn't he come to see me? The silly sod."
I was vexed.

"It's nothing against you, but you are comparatively new around here, and honestly I think the old boy was wary how you would accept him. I don't believe he's forgotten the first time he met you. On top of that, jungle squads have, shall we say, a reputation for not being too gentle when handling people. The majority of the public regard jungle squads as being packs of cut-throats, as you know. A good thing in a lot of ways, but it can be a disadvantage at times. I'm going the long way round all this because I don't want you to feel put out at all. Finally, you have little scope at Sungei Lembu for a pow-wow in absolute privacy. Am I not right?" He swung the chair forward on to its four legs and leaned once more on the desk. He screwed his eyes at me over the pipe.

"You are," I admitted grudgingly, although the facts were not quite true.

"Thank Christ for that. Now here's the set-up. These collectors have been coming and going for the past five days. Strange as it may seem, their approach to the village never varies. They always enter from the same direction and leave likewise. I think that's a show of over-confidence for the villagers' benefit. As if to say 'Look, we come and go as we please, and fingers up to your running-dog police!'"

"Could be. Where do they enter, then?"

"Down the track which passes in front of House 45. That is the first house that way. You know it?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, number one snag is the actual time they come. It's anything between 4 a.m. and dawn. We can't pin-point a clear-cut time of arrival, but they usually leave by 7 a.m."

I rubbed my chin and pondered over what he had said. They arrived during darkness or near daylight, and departed during full daylight. It would be strategic to intercept them during darkness—if they came again. There was always that way to look at it.

"You mentioned snag number one. What's number two?" I digressed a little.

Rodway sucked at his pipe. Little bubbles formed at the corners of his wide mouth.

"There are three collectors dressed in civvies. Min Yuen, as sure as eggs are eggs. Snag number two is that they are escorted by two uniformed terrorists, fully armed. These two bright boys hang around outside the houses while the collectors go inside to reap the cash. It's the old set-up. If anyone should feel reluctant to give, then the uniformed bods will give a little persuasion."

"They've been given money, of course."

"Wouldn't you give if you were unarmed and had a rifle stuck in your stomach?"

"I guess I would. Are the collectors armed?"

"They've not been seen with guns, but the penghulu says their pockets bulge a lot. They are probably carrying revolvers or grenades."

I pursed my lips and mused for a few seconds. It would be difficult to trap the Communists in a village full of people. There was bound to be gunplay, and some innocent was likely to get hurt.

"Were they in Mengkuang this morning?" I asked, matter-of-fact.

"Yes. They left the village at five to seven."

"I wonder if we can count on them coming back tomorrow morning?"

Rodway sighed and shrugged his broad shoulders.

"That's anybody's guess. I think there is a fair chance they will. They are obviously regarding it as easy pickings."

"Obviously," I agreed as a matter of course.

"Well, that is it in a nutshell. What's your plan of action?"

He fixed his eyes on me, waiting. I rubbed my chin again, groping for inspiration. I did not relish the idea of a shooting-match in the village. Then of course we did not know where the collectors were hiding out. It could be anywhere in the

jungle around Mengkuang or in the hills. We would never find them by looking for them. We would have to wait for them to come to us. There was no alternative. It would have to be in the village.

"Did you tell the penghulu that you were contacting me, handing the job over to me?" I asked him.

"Of course. That goes without saying. Only he knows, though. I pledged him to silence. We can trust him."

Rodway seemed convinced of the penghulu's trustworthiness. I pulled out a cigarette and took a light off Rodway's lighter.

"There is only one course of action here," I said decisively. "Ambush is definitely out owing to the nearness of the village. I'll have to plant men in houses. One man to a house over a certain area. Scatter them around a bit. It will be necessary to choose the men carefully. No trigger-happy ones. They could kill a lot of villagers if they let rip. I don't entirely like this idea, but I'll keep my fingers crossed and hope for the best."

"I think that is your one and only plan in this case. It fits in okay," Rodway agreed.

"I shall exercise correct tactics. Shoot first and ask questions afterwards," I stated bluntly.

"All I have ever asked for are dead terrorists and live policemen out of any job. Is your squad back to strength?"

"All except Constable Daud. He'll be another week or two yet. So the doctors say."

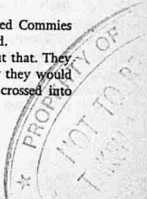
"Yes, of course. Can I lend you any men?"

"No, thanks. I'll manage all right." I appreciated his offer, but beat policemen were not the same as jungle squad men.

"Okay, then. We'll leave it at that."

"Any idea which Platoon these two uniformed Commies belong to?" I asked as the thought crossed my mind.

"Not a clue or burp out of the penghulu about that. They must be Independents, I'd say. It is hardly likely they would be from the 5th Platoon, seeing as they have crossed into Perak."



"Have they?" I asked in surprise.

"Special Branch told me on the q.t. yesterday. They ferreted it out. Cloak-and-dagger stuff, as usual, but we've got to hand it to them. Perak can keep them so far as I'm concerned, but I regret to say they'll be back some day. This is their hunting-ground."

"Yes, they'll be back," I echoed dreamily.

"Don't look so ruddy cheerful about it," Rodway grinned. I stared at him vacantly. I had been conscious of what I had said, but at the same time I had been thinking of something else.

"Sorry. My mind was dwelling elsewhere. I see the critics are hammering us again," I said.

"Anything new? Startling?"

"Basically, no. It's the same old stuff, re-hashed in London. We're still corrupt. We're still incompetent, inefficient, totally disloyal. Liable to mutiny at any time. Doing everything but fight the Commies. The usual banal claptrap. I'd like to have some of the sods out here who wrote it." I stubbed my dog-end savagely in the ash-tray.

"They would never come. The truth of what they would see would knock a big hole in their sensationalism." Rodway applied a match to his dead pipe. He threw the piece of wood away in disgust.

"They're content to keep up circulation by slandering us because they know we can't hit back. Somebody must be the scapegoat and carry the can. That is our lot."

"Changing the subject for a moment," Rodway said. "Take things easy after this job. You've not been looking too good lately. When are you next due for local leave?"

"About six months to go. Don't worry, I'll make it."

"I hope you will, but go steady all the same."

"Okay, I will," I said, getting to my feet. I thought it was time to leave. Rodway tapped the ashes out of his pipe bowl. He looked up at me and grinned in his old friendly fashion.

"I'll push off now, sir," I said. "Is there anything else?"

"No." It was a long-drawn-out word. "I think I've given you enough for now."

"All being well, I'll get in touch with you by R/T tomorrow morning," I said in finality.

He cocked his head on one side. His usually pleasant face became strained and tensed.

"I hope you do get in touch with me. I'd hate it if it wasn't you," he said meaningly.

I turned my head away. I glanced down at my boots. I hadn't missed the message behind what he had said.

"I'll do just that, sir," I muttered awkwardly. "Cheerio for now."

I turned towards the door. I knew he was watching me as I turned the handle. I did not want to look back at him.

"Cheerio, boy. Good luck."

His words followed me down the passage.

Back at Sungei Lembu, I told Peter to bring Ming, Yapp, Haji, Sobh, Pyman, Latif and Haroun to my room. I had chosen those men because I knew that they would respond admirably to any emergency. Presently the eight of them filed into my room. They halted in a line in front of my desk. I repeated word for word what Rodway had told me and outlined our plan of action. Ming's knowledge of Mengkuang helped me considerably, and he drew me a rough sketch of the house positions nearest to House 45. I had to plan on the assumption that the collectors would again enter that way. I was therefore to some extent restricted in placing the men. I reminded each of them of the important role they would play: the necessity for accurate timing, and no sudden impulses to go it alone. I believed that in the long run it would pay dividends. They would be called upon to shoulder responsibility, which was a good thing. They listened in attentive silence, drinking in every word. I impressed upon them that our success depended 95 per cent on luck. I had no illusions about that.

"Now you have your house positions," I concluded. "I shall occupy House 45. When we get there you will file away and

occupy yours. You will warn the inhabitants that they must lie flat on the ground inside and stay there until the all-clear. If any of the collectors enter your house you will shoot first and no messing around. The two uniformed Communists will have to be dealt with as best we can. Keep your fire low and try not to spray other houses. At the first sound of any firing we all pile out and get stuck in, and for Christ's sake don't shoot each other. Carbines will be unsuitable for this job. You will each carry a sten and four spare magazines. I'll draw a tommy-gun from the armoury. We leave base at 2.30 a.m. I think I've covered everything."

I scanned their expressionless faces.

"Any questions?" I asked out of sheer habit.

There were none forthcoming, much to my relief. I dismissed them, and they filed back out of the room. I heard the pad of their feet slowly fade away down the verandah. I lit a cigarette and relaxed. I smoked through two more in swift succession. My hands trembled slightly. I passed a hand over my forehead and rubbed my eyes. I badly needed sleep. Perhaps that was the answer. Perhaps it was something else. I ground out the last of the three cigarettes. My hands still trembled. My head began to ache, and I couldn't stop it doing so. I was decidedly on edge.

The blissful lassitude of fitful sleep eluded me that night. Even during those brief periods when I had dozed off my slumbers were distorted by garish nightmares. I saw myself staring down the barrel of a gun. Framed above it I saw a yellow face and a green cap and a huge red star. Inch by inch the barrel would come nearer until it seemed it would devour me. The face leered at me, displaying twin rows of uneven broken teeth. Somewhere in the distance I could hear a faint voice urging me to retreat. Abruptly I would awaken and find myself sitting up in bed trembling and sweating violently. In its intensity the dream was uncanny, intangible. A cold, clammy feeling of fear clutched at me and flowed through my body. I shouted at the gun-barrel and the yellow face before I realised that both had gone away. I listened for the voice, but

all I heard were the snores of the men in the next room. As my eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness of my room, the familiar surroundings began to take shape. Only then did I cease my trembling and lie back on a sheet sodden with sweat.

The moon was slowly descending in a silver, watery ball as we left base. The sentry muttered something and closed the gate behind us. We spaced out, three yards between each man, and followed the road for two hundred yards. Then we veered off into the thin jungle, picking our way by memory. My movements were cumbersome and mechanical. I felt uncomfortably lethargic. I kept telling myself to jerk out of it. In the end I managed to control myself and I did so.

The moon dipped beyond the trees when we reached the track leading to Mengkuang. We stood in the track and waited to get our second wind. It had been a strenuous pull so far and we were out of breath. The cool early morning air was invigorating. Even so, we were all sweating profusely. I cocked my ears to listen for any sound of movement. There was a sudden rush in the grass behind me and I gripped my tommy-gun hard. Then I heard a second rush and a harsh squeal. I relaxed and grinned in the darkness. It was only a wild pig. I glanced at the luminous dial of my watch. It was exactly 3.30 a.m. I started off down the narrow ribbon stretched out before me. The men shuffled silently behind.

Presently the dim outline of House 45 appeared out of the darkness. I halted in the track. At a signal from me, the men stole away and dissolved in the darkness. I went to the door and pushed my way in. Somewhere an angry male voice shouted in Malay. The door squeaked as I closed it again. I whispered who I was, and told the inhabitants to get on the floor. Their movements sounded like thunder in the confined space. I cursed at them and told them to be more quiet. The scuffling finally stopped, and I guessed they had all gone to ground. All I could hear was laboured breathing. I tiptoed to the nearest window and pulled the rough sacking aside. The inside of the house smelt like a brothel. I was glad to smell fresh

air. I thumbed over the safety-catch on my tommy-gun and riveted my attention up the track. I stood motionless and waited.

The darkness can play tricks with the imagination. I imagined I heard footsteps and saw men coming down the track. Several times I tensed and then relaxed. Slowly the black curtain of darkness began to lift as the coming day intruded upon its sanctity. The track stood out clearer as the minutes passed. I glanced over my shoulder at the figures sprawled on the floor. A man, a woman and three young children. I smiled and spoke a few whispered words to reassure them. They stared at me and said nothing. I could hear the village coming to life in the distance. I began to grow impatient. It would be full light in another half-hour. I switched my eyes back to the window. I had heard something this time. I strained my ears to full pitch. I caught the unmistakable sound of muffled footsteps coming down the track. I held my breath in excitement. My heart pounded against my ribs like a trip-hammer. This was not imagination.

They came into view down the track. The three collectors were leading, dressed in white shirts and black trousers. Close behind them came the two escorts in green. They came on unconcernedly, talking with a guttural accent. I withdrew back into the shadows. They passed within three feet of the window. I resisted the temptation to shoot. I could not have bagged all of them without reloading. So I let them pass unmolested and gradually their footsteps died away. I went to the door and inched it open carefully, remembering that it squeaked before. I stepped out into the half-light and looked towards the village. Lights streamed out of windows and doorways. I saw figures silhouetted against the lights. None of them were the Communists. I sidled to the end of the house to get a better view. It was then that the pantomime started. The savage chatter of stens ripped the solitude. Then the sharp bark of a rifle added to the din, followed by yells and screams.

I dashed towards the village. A figure in a white shirt cut

across my path. I saw a flash of red as he fired his revolver wildly. I raked him with a burst from the tommy-gun. He heeled over and lay still. The firing had increased farther down the path. The rifle was having plenty to say. I ran between two huts and into the village centre. I saw Haji doubled up, lying in an ever-increasing pool of blood. Near him was another of the collectors with most of his face blown away. I heard Ming shout, and I looked in the direction of his voice. The other collector and one of the uniformed men were holed up in a pigsty. They were putting up a fight. There was no sign of the other uniformed man. I shouted to the men, and we converged on the pigsty. We saw their faces peeping between the rough boards. A shot whipped close from behind. I whirled round and caught a glimpse of a green uniform. I thumbed two bursts and the figure disappeared round a hut. It reappeared thirty yards away, belting like hell for the open country. I went after it. I ran madly, careering crazily through the short grass. In my excitement I disregarded all sense of warning or danger. In my haste I underestimated my quarry.

That was my big mistake. The Communist suddenly wheeled round to face me. He jerked his rifle upwards and fired. The bullet smacked into me, just above the knee. All the life ebbed out of my leg. I pitched forward helplessly on to the hard ground. The tommy-gun butt plunged into my stomach. My wind hissed out between my teeth, and red and white lights flashed before my eyes. I struggled to reach my feet, but my muscles refused to help. Dimly through the haze I saw the Communist coming at me: the long rifle thrust forward and the steel bayonet glinting in the rising sun. I stared mesmerised at the rifle-barrel and my dreams flooded back to me. I heard the click of a rifle-bolt, and I began to drift on a black sea of nothingness. I floundered helplessly on the rising waves, and in my terror I found strength. The mist cleared and my brain began to function. I groped under me. My fingers clutched the cold steel of the tommy-gun.

I put all I could muster into my next move. It was now or

never. I swivelled on to my left side. At the same time, I swung the snout of the tommy-gun upwards. I winced as the exertion sent the pain jabbing up and down my leg. I gulped the air greedily down into my lungs, and the mist before my eyes cleared away. The Communist was no more than fifteen yards away. He was walking towards me slowly, the rifle still in line with my body. I noticed the look of surprise spread across his broad face, the almond eyes open wider. In those few brief seconds that our eyes locked I do believe that he thought I was dead, that he had hit me vulnerably with the first shot. He came out of his stupor and jerked the rifle up to his shoulder. Poised on the black, yawning abyss of death, I acted. I squeezed the trigger and the tommy-gun bucked against my chest. The empty shells made odd metallic noises as they landed beside me. The green shirt became spattered with crimson, and his bullet sang harmlessly through the air. The long rifle clattered to the ground, and the Communist moved two or three paces drunkenly. He clawed at his chest and screamed, the awful frenzied screaming of a man who knows he is dying. He bent at the knees and slowly sank to the ground, squirming in his death-throes. I closed my eyes to shut out the sight. I buried my face in the grass, and cursed because it took a man a long time to die.

I told myself a dozen times that it was all over. Then the reaction set in. My frayed nerves broke down completely, and I raved and gibbered like a maniac. I forgot what had just happened, the numbing pain in my leg. I forgot everything in my loss of physical control and the desire to escape from reality. I was oblivious of the hands easing me gently on to my back. I fought against them and tried to crawl away. They closed on me more firmly and held me to the ground. I renewed my struggles, then I heard Peter's soft, comforting voice whispering to me. I came out of my trance, and I knew that I was still alive. I searched the faces around me anxiously. One was missing.

"Haji?" I asked weakly.

"He is dead, sir," Peter answered softly.

"And the other Communist?" I had to say something, anything, quickly.

"Dead also, sir."

I laid back and looked up at the blue sky, lined with fleecy white cloud. Peter leaned over and drew my hunting-knife from its sheath. I felt the steel against my leg as he ripped my trousers. I clamped my teeth together hard as his hands explored the wound and the tourniquet was tied tight. A shadow flitted across my face, blocking out the sun. I looked up at the penghulu standing over me.

"My thanks and the thanks of my villagers are yours, tuan. Today you have delivered us," he said humbly.

"I have also delivered one of my men to his Maker, inche."

"For that we all grieve, tuan. But what is written in the Book must always be."

"Yes, inche. What is written in the Book."

I raised my hand and he gripped it hard in his. In a fleeting moment of doubt I had misjudged him. Peter and Ming caught hold of my shoulders and helped me to my feet. They locked their arms behind my back.

They supported me between them as I hobbled back to the village to where Haji lay.

[10]

THE wound put me in hospital for three weeks. My return to Penang was sooner than anticipated. The first ten days were spent in bed, and I read more books than I could ever remember. Then I was allowed up, and began the movement treatment to get back the full use of my leg. The thigh muscles were a bit stiff at first and restricted movement, but gradually the leg worked itself back into shape and I forgot all about it. I went into Penang town quite a lot. I intended to take full advantage of the opportunity, even if a bullet had been behind

it all. There was a definite purpose behind my sorties into town. I wanted to find the Eurasian girl. The one who was in the Broadway the night Fisher was killed. I had a couple of questions to ask her—unofficially, of course. Maybe she could help me to put two and two together and reach the right answer. Four evenings on the run I visited the Broadway and waited. Each time I drew a blank. She didn't turn up. I had just finished dressing for what would be my last visit but one, when the ward sister walked in.

"Going out again?" she asked casually, even if it was obvious that I was.

"Yes, must make the most of it," I answered. "The chance might not come again."

"We shall miss you when you go," she said simply.

"I take it that I have been a model patient. Except for once or twice."

"You have, indeed. As you say, you misbehaved once or twice, but taking all into consideration you've brightened the building. Not all patients are like you."

"That's some consolation, but now it's my turn to pay a compliment. Personally, I think all of you have been swell. But next time—if there is a next time, that is—I'll spare you even the brief trouble I gave you."

"How's that?"

"I'll see to it that I come draped in a nice pinewood box. Then I'll be no trouble at all." I smiled at her.

"You're incorrigible." She laughed with that magic little ripple she produced so attractively.

"As bad as that?" I looked hurt.

"Well, not exactly. Maybe I used the wrong word. One never knows when to take you seriously."

"Don't ever take me seriously, sister. I'll break your heart if you do."

She didn't answer that time. She watched me pick up my cigarettes and stuff them in my pockets. I looked everywhere for a handkerchief, and finally found one under my pillow,

rolled into a tight little ball. The sister looked at me in mock anger. I felt guilty of a terrible crime.

"Is she nice?" she asked, a smile reappearing on her lips.

"Really, sister, you amaze me! And me, a confirmed bachelor, a veritable woman-hater. How did you guess, anyhow?"

"One can always tell when a man's going to meet a girl. The attention he pays to detail. A girl does the same when she's meeting a man."

I tiptoed towards her. I looked around me and raised a finger to my lips. I gave her a saucy wink.

"Shall I tell you a secret?" I whispered.

"If you like," she replied, more casual than she looked. Her blue eyes opened a trifle wider in expectation.

"I'm going to meet a rich, young, beautiful widow. She married an old man on his death-bed. Now I'm going to help her blue all the hard-earned cash he amassed."

I stepped back and peered down at her, looking the picture of innocence.

"You devil," she exploded with mirth. "You'll never change."

"That's precisely what my dear old grey-haired mother says. I'm really the black sheep of the family, you know. Ex-pirate, cattle thief, bushranger stock and all that. All the ancestral bad points have been reborn in me."

"I give up," she sighed. "I suppose I'd better pass on the reason for my visit."

She handed me a small piece of lead. I rolled it around the palm of my hand.

"That's the bullet from your leg. The surgeon thought you might like it for a souvenir," she said.

"Thanks a lot, sister. Give the surgeon my thanks, will you, please? I'd like to keep it."

I slipped the lead in my pocket. I made towards the door while she turned my bed back.

"Where are you going?" she asked again. "You are in our

care until you're discharged. We're responsible for you, you know. We ought to know where you're going."

I wheeled round in the doorway.

"I have a date with the past, I hope," I said.

I left her standing speechless by the bed.

The radiogram was blaring full gusto when I reached the Broadway. I went in and occupied my usual table. The manager waved to me and the waitress beamed. I had passed my initiation test and was now regarded as a regular. The room was barely a quarter full. I scanned everyone briefly. They were mostly Chinese drinking fizzy lemonade and mopping up bird's-nest soup. I ordered a drink, my favourite orange juice, and sat back, watching the top of the steps.

The time dragged on. I sipped at my third drink and continued waiting. For a while I was calmly reposed, then I became agitated. I glanced at my watch a dozen times in as many minutes. The radiogram had been silent for some time. I was glad of that. I had begun to get a bit fed up with Tony Martin's singing. Any other time I would have enjoyed it. As time sped on, the café began to fill up. A couple of soldiers tottered in, well soused. They believed in letting everyone know it. The manager left his desk and tried to reason with them. It was like pouring water over a duck's back. He looked across at me appealingly. Then the Military Police arrived and I heaved a sigh of relief. They bundled the two soldiers away, still singing and shouting. I heard an occasional obscene swear-word as they bumped down the steps. I heard one shout that he would get Mum to write to the *Daily Mirror*. The same old tack and bull. I drained my glass and plonked it back on the table. I mentally registered this as another fruitless vigil. I was on the point of leaving when the reason for my visit entered the café.

She glided across the floor with an ease that one usually associates with débutantes. I watched her every movement, lithe and graceful. I have said before that she was beautiful. That was an error of judgment, inadequately descriptive. I

doubt very much if there is a word to describe her. She dominated the scene completely, she was out of this world. Again I found it hard to believe what she really was. She sat down at a table not far from me. She glanced my way once, but cursorily. Some of the Chinese locked their heads together and muttered in muffled undertones. They peered at her salaciously, slobbering at the jowls like hungry dogs. I drummed my fingers on the table, pondering what to do next.

The opportunity I had waited for so patiently was within my grasp. For a moment I thought I'd funk the final step. I took the bull by the horns. I went over to her table and sat facing her. I was conscious of the eyes watching me. But now I had made the plunge, I didn't care. She met my gaze across the table. Her face bore the expression of mute surprise at my abrupt intrusion. Perhaps I smelt like police.

"May I talk to you for a moment?" I asked. "I won't keep you long," I added hastily.

"Yes, if you must." Her answer was coldly aloof.

"Would you like a drink?"

She eyed me for a few seconds, then relaxed. Her face lost some of its tenseness.

"Please. A Martini." Her voice softened.

I ordered her drink and one for myself. A stronger one this time.

"What do you want to talk about?" She knitted her eyebrows in puzzlement.

"Do you remember me being in here about seven weeks ago, and the other European who, shall we say, was a trifle drunk?"

I continued to watch her. The large, dark eyes clouded and she averted her gaze.

"Are you a police officer?" she asked.

"Yes, but not a very good one," I replied.

"Is this an official questioning?"

"No, definitely not. Purely personal."

"I see."

The tone in her voice was dry. She lowered her eyes and fiddled with her handbag. Then she faced me again.

"We could talk much more privately in one of the cubicles," she suggested. I detected a glimpse of appeal in her eyes. I agreed with her suggestion. I collected the drinks and followed her to a cubicle. I slammed the door shut behind me. I passed her her drink, and settled myself comfortably in an arm-chair.

"What do you really want to know?" She appeared willing to talk.

"You haven't answered my first question," I reminded her.

"I'm sorry. You took me a little by surprise. I do remember you and the other European." She smiled faintly.

"Do you know his name?"

"Fisher, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Did you see him after he left here that night?"

"No."

"Had you arranged to?"

"Yes, at my flat."

"Do you know what happened to him?"

She paused for a moment and sipped her Martini.

"Yes," she answered slowly. "The police have questioned me about him. They found my card in his pocket."

I had forgotten about the card she had passed over. Some of my questions had been pointless up to now.

"Had Fisher been to your flat before?"

"Yes."

"If that's so, why should he want your card? Surely he knew your address?" I was the policeman all at once.

"I thought you said this was not an official questioning. You are making it appear so by your manner."

"Sorry, it's force of habit. Forget what I've asked you up to now."

I smiled at her and she reciprocated. It suited her better to smile.

"What I am trying to get at," I continued, "is—did Fisher ever tell you anything about his private life? The police who

interviewed you would not bother about that part of the business."

She creased her forehead in a frown. She adopted a thoughtful expression.

"I remember that he mentioned something about a faithless wife. And a man who was her lover. Most times he was so drunk that I couldn't understand what he did say," she finally answered.

"Was he always so incapably drunk when he came to your flat?"

"Yes. He would sleep most of the time."

"Only sleep?"

"Yes. That and talking. Nothing else." She eyed me openly.

"Why did you act the mother to him?"

"Because I felt sorry for him. I didn't quite act the mother, as you express it." Her eyes flashed defiantly.

I offered her a cigarette. She took it and slipped it into her long holder. I lit her cigarette, then mine. I crossed my arms and leaned on the table.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Lois."

"Lois what?"

"De Sulva."

"Okay, Lois. Now let us be frank with each other. Men come to your flat for other things but sleep and to talk about the weather. Isn't that so?" I was getting warmed up. I was a little nettled over her self-expressed martyrdom, acting like a sister of mercy.

"Yes. I sleep with them sometimes, and they seduce me, if that's what you mean to imply."

No one could say that she wasn't being frank. She surprised me quite a bit. I looked at her quizzically. Her eyes were wet. I realised I had gone a little too far.

"I'm sorry." I was suddenly penitent. "I shouldn't have been so unforgivably mean. You see, Fisher did have a faithless wife and she has had a child by another man. When he learned

about it he became a changed person and went off the rails, so to speak. He wouldn't confide in his fellow-officers, maybe because they lacked a little human understanding, but I think that in his frame of mind he might have confided in you. I have come here several nights purposely to meet you. I don't believe Fisher's whole trouble was his wife's infidelity. I believe there was more in it than that. I was hoping that maybe he would have told you something. Fisher was a decent type of fellow really, not like the usual run of men out here. I know it sounds silly to open up the past now he's dead and gone, but I thought somehow I might be able to put things right if he was being blackmailed by his wife. That's how it looked to me. I doubt now if I shall ever know the whole truth," I concluded.

"What makes you think there was something else?"

"The last time he was in here, just before his death, he gave me a letter to read from his wife. It was something she said in that letter. Nothing tangible but veiled threats."

"I wish I could help you, but I cannot see how that is possible. I cannot recollect anything of significance," she said quickly.

"I feel sure you would help if you could. It was just an idea I had. We'll just have to mark the matter as 'closed'. Have another drink?"

"Thank you. The same, please."

I fetched two more drinks. Lois was putting on some fresh lipstick when I returned. I set the glasses on the table. I watched her for a few seconds.

"I hope I'm not detaining you?" I asked lamely.

"No, I am . . ." she paused; "I have no engagements tonight."

I half emptied my glass and pulled out two more cigarettes. We fell into a brief silence, one closely studying the other.

"Have you been in Penang long?" she asked.

"Nearly three weeks this time. I've been in hospital. They're kicking me out the day after tomorrow."

"Have you been ill?"

"No, not exactly ill."

"What, then?"

"A Communist terrorist took a pot at me. He got me in the leg."

"Oh, I see. Your work is very dangerous."

"I wouldn't call it that. Just uncomfortable at times."

"Where are you stationed?"

"I command a police jungle squad at Sungei Lembu."

"That's not far from Kulim."

"That's right. Most people have never heard of it. How did you know where it was?"

"I have reason for not forgetting."

Her reply was annoyingly incomplete. I was keen to ask more, but I had a feeling that she did not wish to elaborate at the moment.

"Do you mind if I ask you a very personal question?"

I felt completely at ease in her presence. It prompted me to ask her the question I had been burning to ask since we met.

"I don't mind." She opened up the way.

"Why are you what you are?"

I could have been briefer.

"A prostitute, you mean?" she asked with no sign of emotion.

"Yes."

Her eyes misted over again. Then she shrugged back the tears.

"It's a long, sordid story," she murmured.

"Tell me about it," I coaxed.

I had got that far. There was no harm in going the whole hog.

"Are you that much interested?"

"Yes, very."

"Why?"

"Because I am at a complete loss to understand you. You just don't look the type."

I watched her face turn pale, then a sudden blush of colour crept into her cheeks.

"It's very nice of you to say that, believe me it is." The dry note was in her voice again.

"Go on," I said, wanting her to start the story.

"I think it best if I start from the beginning. My mother was governess to some children in Bombay. She was English, by the way. She met my father while she was in service there. He was an Indian merchant. I should say he was Anglo-Indian, his father was English. A bit twisted, but that is how it was. After their marriage my mother and father moved to Malaya, and he set up business in Kuala Lumpur. We were a very happy, united family. Mother, father and my three brothers. We children attended the best English schools in Kuala Lumpur, and it was my father's intention that later we would finish our education at English universities." She broke off, and a wistful smile spread across her mouth. Then she went on. "That was what was planned, but the Japanese came and our dreams became dreams, nothing more."

"How old were you then?"

"I was fifteen when the Japanese occupation started. My father was a very proud man. He would not recognise defeat. After a while he became connected with the guerrilla movement. By day he was the respectable business man, more or less left alone by the Japanese. By night he was the active guerrilla. One night he and three others were caught helping some British soldiers escape from a prison camp. He had done this many times before. There were rumours that he had been betrayed by a Japanese informer working within the Underground. Whatever it was, he was caught, and that was the beginning of the end. Mercy and the Japanese commander did not belong together. My father and the other three men were shot on the spot, and their bodies tied to trees for everyone to see. Four of the British soldiers were shot, too. Then the Japanese came to our home. I don't think they ever realised my mother was English. She always dressed Eastern style. They wrecked our home and dragged us outside, shouting what they were going to do with us. They put me into a camp until daybreak. Then they fetched my mother and brothers. They press-ganged a lot of people to come and see what they intended doing. They lec-

tered the crowd on what happens to saboteurs and enemies of Imperial Japan. When they had finished they executed my mother and brothers. They left their bodies to rot and smell in the sun, refusing them decent burial. It was horrible, horrible."

Her voice broke and she shuddered. Then she took a grip of herself. I leaned forward and held her arm tightly.

"Perhaps it would be as well if you didn't finish the story," I said kindly.

She looked across at me and shook her head slowly.

"I'm all right. Sometimes it hurts a little, deep down inside. I'd like to finish. I'd like you to know the truth, then you can judge me for yourself."

"Hadn't your mother any relatives in England?"

"No, she was an orphan. She came to India when she was quite young to take up teaching."

"Why did the Japanese spare you?"

"The Japanese officers' brothels were short of girls. That is why they spared me," she answered simply.

I was beginning to see daylight. The dirty, insufferable swines!

"Where did they send you?"

"To the brothel at Kulim. That's how I knew about Sungei Lembu."

"It wasn't very nice?"

"No. At first one fights against it. They seemed to like that because it gave them an excuse to commit rape. Then after a few rapings one loses the will to fight and you don't care any more. You submit to the sex-crazed advances of drunken officers, and when it's all over you feel dirty and unclean and it's too late to make amends."

"It's never too late," I said meaningly.

She glanced across at me queerly.

"I don't quite understand you," she said.

"What I meant was, it's not too late for you to start a new life."

"Where?"

"Anywhere but Penang, or we could go so far as to say Malaya. It would mean you'd have to go away somewhere. To India or Hong Kong, for instance. No one would know you there."

"It's not so easy as all that."

"Why not?"

She halted briefly and was sunk deep in thought again.

"What about my passport?"

"That can be arranged. You've never been convicted, have you?"

"No."

"That makes it all the easier," I said assuringly. I could not fail to notice her mounting interest.

"It all sounds very nice. But who would want to give me a chance now? A whore from a Japanese brothel. Putting it crudely, that is all I am," she murmured despondently, her shoulders drooping.

"In one sense, maybe, that's all you are. On the surface, that is. But in another sense, a much greater one, you are something vastly different if you try to recognise the fact. Let us put it briefly this way. At the time of the Liberation you came back into the old world you knew, an embittered person, yet still only a young girl. I am not saying that you hadn't reason to be embittered. God alone knows you had, seeing what you had been through. You were at a crossroads then, and there were two paths open to you. In understandable desperation you took the wrong one. That's the answer. It's as simple as that."

"Perhaps it's easy to say that now. It wasn't easy at the time. I had no money, no home, no one to turn to. I started to earn money in the only way I knew how," she answered softly.

"You hadn't any money, but you had a lot more if you'd only realised it. You had good family background, intelligence, ability, looks and a first-rate education behind you. Those are the assets you could have used and still can, if you want to. You've got to face the future and bury the past. Thousands upon thousands of girls do the same as you've been doing. The

only difference is that they don't get paid for it. They conduct their illicit love affairs in the guise of love. It's just another way of looking at it, I suppose. Very few of them marry the man who seduces them, anyhow. That consolation is not helping you, I admit, but you have your chance yet if you'll only find the courage to face up to it."

"Do you mean that?"

"Every word of it."

She sat back wrapped in contemplative silence. I allowed my eyes to rove freely over her as she sat gazing dreamily down at the table. I was damnably, wretchedly sorry for her. Briefly, I reflected upon the amazing twist of events during the past two hours. I had come with the purpose of meeting this girl. I had achieved my objective, and now we were behaving like long-lost friends. Somehow I had pierced her outer armour of bitterness. I saw in her something of myself, and it wasn't entirely pleasant. I cannot exactly say why, but I wanted to help her regain her faith in human beings. To do that I would have to dig deep down inside her and reach the exact spot. She would have to meet people, real people. I wanted to finish the job, and I hadn't much time. Broadly speaking, I suppose it was no business of mine. I should have left her there and then, and let her go her own way. But some instinct told me not to, and so I stayed.

"I really don't know what to say next. You have been very kind and considerate. I'd forgotten men could be like that." She interrupted my reverie.

"Don't run away with the idea that I'm a saint, a kind of paragon. I can assure you I am neither. Sometimes, against my better judgment shall we say, I try to act like a man. On the whole, men are a lousy lot of wretches, believing everything and everyone is theirs exclusively, but there are some decent ones around, I am thankful to say. You'll find out some day."

"You're very convincing, you know."

"Not always. Sometimes I'm just plain stupid. Especially on occasions like this, for instance."

"I can't believe that entirely. What's your name?" She was brightening up.

"Moran. Spelt with only one 'r'. I possess a whole string of useless Christian names. I had no say in the matter when they were given me. Most people call me Bill. It's short and sweet."

She flashed me one of her special smiles. She glanced at her watch.

"It's getting late. I mustn't detain you any longer," she apologised.

"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you. Look, I have a clear day tomorrow. It's my last in Penang for some time, I expect. May I take you out for the day?" I said enthusiastically.

She looked at me in stunned surprise. I noticed the quickening of the pulse in her throat.

"It wouldn't be correct for you to be seen around with me. Not a man in your position. . . ."

"Look, I'm a very impatient man," I cut in. "My mother says I couldn't even wait for the doctor to be present at my birth. I don't give a damn what people say or think. My private life is my own, to do with as I please, and blast convention! Heavens alone, you're not all that notorious."

"You are a funny man."

"Thanks," I muttered resentfully, pursing my lips.

"I mean in a nice way," she added quickly.

"Well, do we go out tomorrow or must I tear Penang apart to find you?"

"That won't be necessary. I'd like to come, really I would."

"Okay. It's a deal. Let's say outside the Odeon at ten. Is that convenient?"

"Yes. The Odeon at ten."

She got up from her chair and collected her bits and pieces. Like all women, she stuffed the lot in her handbag, filling it to bursting point. I waited by the door of the cubicle. I'd only just noticed how rowdy it was outside in the café.

"Shall I see you home . . . I mean, as far as the door?" I asked.

"No, thank you. I think it better if I go alone. I can get a tri-shaw outside."

"As you wish."

She brushed past me and gripped the door-handle. Her perfume nearly knocked me for six. It was the expensive, exotic variety. The kind that goes with moonlight and palm-trees. She paused in the half-open doorway and turned towards me.

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

That's all she said, but it was enough.

"Don't mention it," I replied, slightly embarrassed.

She closed the door gently behind her. I heard numerous wolf-whistles and long-drawn-out sighs from the café. Then they abated and I guessed Lois had gone. I gave her a few minutes' start, then I stepped out among the noisy crowd. I received sadistic stares and an occasional moan of envy. I heard one chap ask another what I'd got that he hadn't. I stopped at the top of the steps and wheeled to face the crowded café. Quite a few inebriated characters were still staring at me. I blew them a choice raspberry and bounded ungallantly down the steps to the accompaniment of mingled jeers and good-natured laughter. The hospital was in semi-darkness when I returned. I crept guiltily to my room, thankful that I had not bumped into anyone. My eye caught the brief note on the top of my locker:

'I hope your past turned out to be very pleasant.

P.S.—Don't forget to take your pills. Sister Morris.'

[11]

I GULPED my breakfast and dressed hurriedly, paying strict attention to detail. As I combed my hair I reflected briefly on the dubious wisdom of man's eternal vanity. I stepped back and viewed the results in the large wardrobe mirror. I resembled something out of a fashion magazine. I walked out of my room and down the long, narrow hospital corridor. Someone shouted

from behind and, on turning, I saw Sister Morris at the other end. I stood motionless and waved. She waved back, then she shouted again as she disappeared through a ward doorway. I did not catch what she had said. I made off towards the main entrance and bumped into Paddy Regan. He was perspiring and red-faced as ever.

"Hi-ya, Paddy," I greeted him, pumping his hand up and down.

"Phew!" he grunted. "I tried to contact you last night but the ward sister said you had not arrived back from town. I'm off to K.L. for four days. Spot of local leave. Thought I'd look in before I left. Sorry I couldn't make it before. Blasted patrols and what not."

"That's okay. I'll forgive you this once. Be careful in K.L., won't you? No cutting the meat too near the bone," I chuckled.

He didn't answer. His face had clouded over.

"Remember Norman Wride, who was sent temporarily to Kulim?" he asked.

"I've only heard of him," I commented.

"He was killed yesterday. Ambushed," Regan remarked flatly.

I whistled through my teeth. I looked over his shoulder through the doorway.

"How did it happen?"

"I don't know all the facts. You know how secretive they are at first. Appears he was caught on the road in a jeep. Only had one constable escort. The bastards made a good job of it."

"They always do," I said half to myself. "Has my squad gone in the follow-up?"

"No. They're at standby. At least they were last night."

"Well, that's that," I sighed. "The poor devil. Another price has been paid for Malaya's freedom. We're the lucky ones, chaps like you and I, aren't we?"

"So far we are, Bill."

I looked at him quickly. I got what he meant. The way he had said it. I linked my arm through his and strolled out into

the sunlight. I was thinking of Wilmot, Wride and many others. I looked around me, and realised how gratifying, how beautiful it was to be alive.

"The sister said you were being discharged tomorrow," Regan stated.

"Yes. Back to Sungei Lembu tomorrow. Nield will be pleased, no doubt."

"I guess he will. Sungei Lembu is not his cup of tea," Regan agreed. He glanced at his watch. The conversation had lagged. We were both thinking of the same thing. I knew that.

"Well, Bill, I won't keep you. Apart from that, the train won't wait for me. And the taximeter is clocking up. Have a good time, Bill, and the best of luck."

I gripped his outstretched hand hard.

"Thanks, Paddy," I said warmly. "Have a good time yourself. Let's enjoy it while we can."

"That's right. I'll be seeing you. Cheerio."

"Cheerio, Paddy."

He went a few paces, then turned to face me. The sun glinted on his shiny pate.

"Look after yourself when you get back to Sungei Lembu, Bill," he said awkwardly.

"I will," I said. "You do the same when you return."

I watched him climb into the taxi. I stepped out into the road and waved until it was only a tiny dot in the distance.

I made my way to a garage recommended to me by someone at the hospital on an earlier occasion. I had mapped out quite a lot for Lois, and a car was essential. I lost my direction twice, but after doubling back on my tracks I finally found the garage tucked away in a side street. I went inside and rapped on the door of the poky little office. The door opened and a small, fat Chinese came through, beaming all over his face.

"Good morning, sir. What can I do for you?" he asked in good English. There was the characteristic lisp about his voice.

"I want to hire a good car for the day," I told him.

"Come this way."

I followed him to the yard at the rear of the premises. He pointed to four cars lined up in the centre of the yard. They were current models, and looked in good trim. I took my time inspecting them. I finally chose an Austin saloon.

"How much for the day?" I asked.

The Chinese meditated for a few seconds. Then his face split into a most disarming smile.

"Forty dollars, sir," he replied, rubbing his hands together.

I screwed up my eyes. It was twice the customary charge. He must have mistaken me for a tourist. I took out my police warrant card and waggled it under his nose. He looked at the photograph on it, then at me.

"How much?" I asked for the second time.

"Twenty dollars, sir. So sorry."

"Okay," I said sternly. "Fill her up with petrol."

Lois was waiting outside the Odeon when I drew in to the kerb. She was dressed in a white pencil-slim dress which hugged the right places. A handbag and strip sandals of the same colour completed her ensemble. Exquisitely so. It was a clean, simple outfit. The whiteness accentuated her beauty and made her look more radiant than ever. She did not recognise me at first. I had to blow the car horn and lean my head out of the window before she realised it was me in the car. Then the penny dropped and she hurried forward. Her high heels clicked on the hard pavement. I reached over and opened the passenger door for her to get in.

"I was not expecting you to arrive in this," she said, looking round inside the car.

"Must do things in style today," I remarked good-humouredly.

"Where did you get it?"

"Hired it from a garage. It's ours until midnight tonight."

"You ought not have gone to all this trouble."

"It's nothing," I exclaimed with a touch of chivalry. "It's a special day."

"It's very thoughtful of you. Where are we going?"

"First of all, I think, a drive round the island. That should give us an appetite for lunch. Have you ever been round the island?"

"No."

"Well, now's your chance to see the wonders of Penang. So off we go. Hold tight because I haven't driven a car for ages."

She clutched the door as I piloted the car into the stream of traffic. She had obviously taken me literally!

I threaded my way through Penang's peak-hour traffic. Once I was on the open road I gave the car the gun. Soon I had left the taint of the city behind me and was glorying in the fragrance of the open spaces. I passed through numerous villages and padi-fields.¹ I slowed down as we approached Bayan Lepas Airport. We watched a Dakota come in to land after the flight from Singapore. After the airport, the road began to climb into the hills. It became narrow and treacherous, flanked either side with towering escarpments. The sun was streaming out of the full blue sky, illuminating everything in a beautiful kaleidoscope of colour. At the summit the road began to flatten out in preparation for the downward journey to sea level. I pulled to one side and braked the car under a canopy of tall, green trees. I looked out across the rolling sweep of blue-grey ocean, hundreds of feet below. The sun danced and rippled on the foam-flecked waves. I took out my cigarettes and passed one to Lois. We had not talked much during the journey. Individually we had been attracted by our surroundings, drinking in everything in mutual silence. I watched her face as she bent forward to take a light from my lighter. She was as cool and fresh as the sea below. I snapped the lighter shut and inhaled, still watching her.

"Where was your mother's home in England? You never said last night." I asked the question out of mild curiosity.

"A place called Northampton. She never spoke about it a lot. I don't think she was very happy in the orphanage there. Where exactly is Northampton?"

¹ Rice-fields.

"It's an industrial town in the Midlands. World-famous for its boots and shoes. Frankly, I know little else about it. I passed through it once before the war."

"Mother used to mention about it being industrialised. She loved the countryside best. Sometimes she used to go into the country on picnics."

"The English countryside is the most beautiful I have ever seen. Perhaps you think me biased, being an Englishman, but it's the truth and foreigners admit it, too."

"You love England, don't you?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Something in your voice when you speak about it."

I flicked the ash from my cigarette.

"I do love it in a roundabout way. All the things that are really England. The Royal Family. The old castles. The villages and the quaint thatched cottages tucked away in the hills. The big estates and the forests. Those are the things that are England. They can never be replaced or equalled. But it is all a matter of what you have been accustomed to. Have you ever thought of going to India? Perhaps seek relatives there?" I asked.

"I have never thought of it, although I must have people there on father's side. But India is not the same since the partition. An Anglo-Indian like myself would be an outcast there now. Neither one thing nor the other. A stateless person."

I detected the sadness which had crept into her voice. It must be hell to be half and half, not owned by either.

"Come on now. Cheer up," I said light-heartedly. "By the way, can you use a typewriter?"

She looked across at me quickly. The sun came in the window, and slanted across her shoulders, making her dark hair appear more contrastingly alive.

"Once I was very good at typing and shorthand, too. Why do you ask?"

"No specific reason. Just curious, that's all," I said lightly. I don't think I had convinced her that my interest was all curi-

osity. I glanced at my watch to hide the embarrassment I felt. I had my reasons for asking her, but at that moment I wanted to keep them to myself. It could come out into the open later.

"Feeling hungry?" I asked.

"I am a little," she admitted.

"Good! It's time for lunch. At the E. & O."¹

"That's very expensive," she said shyly.

"It's where all the blue-bloods wine and dine. Today you and I are nobility. Tomorrow I shall return to canned ham and beans, but that's tomorrow. Another day," I grinned.

I started the engine and depressed the clutch. I swung back on to the road towards Penang town.

The E. & O. was filling up when we arrived. The lunch-hour rush was building up from the banks, multiple stores and municipal offices. I managed to bag a small table for two, tucked conveniently away in an alcove. I sat opposite Lois and passed her the menu. She stretched across the table, and we browsed over it together. The waiter stood beside the table. A small flicker of boredom crossed his face, and he fiddled agitatedly with his little black bow. He brightened up and actually smiled when I ordered the lunches. I glanced at my watch. I thought up some excuse and left the table. I wanted to use the telephone. To put the first part of my plan into action. Lunch was ready on the table when I returned. Lois looked up at me reproachfully.

"Hurry up. It will get cold," she said.

"In this climate? Now that's a laugh," I grinned.

"All the same, you were a long time." Like all women she wanted to get in the last dig.

"I was held up on the phone," I stated in defence.

Her eyes puckered and creased her forehead. "The phone?" she asked. "Now what have you been doing?" She looked at me very suspiciously.

"You'll see in good time," I answered vaguely. "Now eat up."

¹ Eastern and Oriental Hotel.

She attacked the heavily laden plate of food before her. I did the same, but with more finesse than I would have shown at Sungei Lembu. I had not had the luxury of an audience there. Except Goo Ling at times. He ate with his fingers, anyhow. Lois and I were well and truly full when coffee was served. We sipped it delicately from the stupid little cups. I have always had the greatest difficulty in preventing my nose from getting stuck in them. We drew lazily on our cigarettes, watching each other closely through the smoke.

"I can hardly believe I am here. It all seems so wonderful. Like a very pleasant dream," she said quietly.

"You are here, and that is all that matters. Enjoying yourself?"

"Very much so. Thank you. I'm sure I shall never forget this day." I detected the earnestness in her voice; the sparkle of happiness in her eyes.

"There could be other days like this," I said meaningly. "Although I don't profess to be good company."

"But you are good company. Interesting would be more like the word."

She had the knack of saying the little things which sometimes please a man.

"Thank you. I'm glad to hear it." I stammered a little. "Have another coffee?" I added.

"No, thank you. I'm full right up to here." She drew a hand across her throat and smiled. It was like sunshine through the rain.

"You've asked me an awful lot of questions about myself," she said suddenly. "Now it's my turn to ask some about you."

"Fire away."

"Are you married?"

I reflected how many people had asked me that during the past three years. It seemed to be a stock question.

"No," I answered. "I'm a woman-hater."

"I don't believe you." Her voice rippled with laughter.

"I admit the present pleasant occasion does not substantiate

my statement, but nonetheless I am, at heart. What I mean to say is I have no wish to become involved romantically with any girl. I like them as friends to take out occasionally, but nothing more serious."

She puckered her eyebrows again.

"Maybe you have some reason." It was a statement more than a question.

"I have. Shall we leave it at that?"

Her lips pouted as if she were angry at my request.

"If you like. Where's your home in England?"

"I am really a native of Reading in Berkshire. But since 1939 I've travelled around a bit. War service mostly. So I can't lay claim to any real home in England. Only somewhere to go on leave. My mother lives in Hove. That's in Sussex."

"Is your father alive?"

"No. He was killed in the First World War. He was an Australian. A cavalry officer. He died in action. I never knew him."

"I'm very sorry," she said softly.

"That's all right," I said uncomfortably.

"Has your mother been alone ever since?"

"No. She married again later. To a fine man. He was the only father I ever knew. He couldn't have treated me better if I had been his own son. But he died in 1935 of an incurable disease. He was only forty-four. In the prime of life, one might say."

"How terrible for your mother."

"Yes. She's had a hard life one way and another. She was farming before the war. But she went broke in the crash during the thirties. Thousands of other farmers, too. There was no subsidy then to help them out like there is today. Farmers are paid to work in England today. They can't go wrong."

"You're very bitter sometimes when you talk."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Maybe I have just cause to be. When I think how my

mother slaved all the hours that God made to make a living. Depriving herself of most things to make ends meet. All she has now is a small widow's pension which she can't possibly hope to live on. It's one example of where the Labour Government's much-vaunted Welfare State has slipped up. Even I haven't repaid my mother for what she has done for me. I abused the education she strove so hard to give me."

"You mustn't blame yourself."

"But I do in most cases. I've been no good to my mother or to anyone else."

"I don't believe you."

"I try sometimes not to believe it myself, but I make a poor job of it."

"Last night you said to me, 'It's never too late'."

"Well?"

"You could well apply that to yourself."

"That's another story."

She didn't answer me. I glanced subconsciously at my watch.

"Time to be moving," I said.

She picked up her handbag and powdered her nose. She drew the bright red lipstick across her lips. I called the waiter and paid the bill. I followed Lois outside and into the street. The sun overhead was warming up to its highest heat pitch. The interior of the car was like an oven. I lowered the windows to let in what little air there was. I drove down Penang Road and turned into Chulia Street. Suddenly I remembered Fisher and wished I had chosen another route. I glanced at Lois out of the corner of my eye. She was looking out of the window, deep in thought. Her dark hair was blowing in the breeze created by the car's movement. I entered Bishop Street, cut across George Street and swung round by the Hongkong Bank. The wharves and railway sidings were stretched out on my left. There were a couple of ships unloading cargo. The dockers were stripped to the waist, hot and perspiring in the heat. For their toil they received a few paltry dollars a month. And they didn't strike for more. They got on with the job.

There were only two cars ahead of me in the queue when I reached the ferry. I considered myself lucky. Usually the ferry queue was half a mile long at that time of the day. I closed in on the car in front and stopped a couple of inches from its rear bumper. Once the Austin was stationary the effect of the heat came back. I pulled out a handkerchief and wiped my forehead and neck. I looked over at Lois. She was as cool as I was hot and clammy. She was still looking out of the window. I would have given a penny for her thoughts. The car in front moved forward about twenty yards, then stopped. I started up and closed in. At the head of the queue they were already on the pier. Some army vehicles were holding things up. They were cumbersome lorries to negotiate on the pier at the best of times. The cars started up again and I nosed as far as the pier entrance. I went over to the office and bought two tickets. Lois looked my way as I got back into the car.

"Where are we going?" she asked guardedly.

"Province Wellesley," I replied rather stupidly.

"Why?"

"To meet people. Real people."

I noticed the pulse in her throat quicken. She coughed slightly. A short, nervous cough.

"Friends of yours?" She turned to face me. Her brows furrowed above the bridge of her nose.

"Yes. Harry and Margaret Jones. I knew them when I was in Sungei Siput. They run a small estate now near Bukit Tambun. They are good types, as you'll see. Out of the ordinary run. They'll make both of us very welcome." I spoke carelessly, laying emphasis on the word 'both'.

"Are they expecting us?" She was still guarded. I could understand why.

"Yes," I replied casually to set her at ease. "They're the people I phoned from the E. & O."

"Oh," she exclaimed briefly.

She looked out of the window again. A slight colour crept up her neck and into her cheeks. Knowing her past and guessing

what she was thinking, I pondered whether I had done the right thing. I was interrupted by the car in front. It moved off down the pier and finally on to the ferry ramp. I followed at a ten-mile-an-hour-crawl. The car bumped and heaved as I steered on to the ramp. It bumped more when I reached the bottom. There was quite a swell in the sea. I nosed the car under the awning below the first-class deck, and stopped just behind one of the big army lorries. I handed Lois a cigarette and lit it for her. I absently rolled another between my fingers to loosen the tobacco.

"Like to go up on deck?" I asked, to break the silence.

"I would rather stay here. Thank you." She was annoyingly formal.

"As you say. What's on your mind?"

She looked across at me steadily. I saw a glimpse of fear in her brown eyes.

"These friends we are going to see. Do they know anything about me?" she asked breathlessly.

"Of course not. It wouldn't make any difference if they did. I can assure you of that."

I reached over and placed my hand on hers. I squeezed gently.

"You are being very kind," she said earnestly. The fear had left her eyes.

"I'm just trying to help," I said sincerely. I smiled at her and withdrew my hand.

"I know you are, and I am grateful. Believe me I am. But the thought of meeting your kind of friend took me unawares. It was stupid of me," she said earnestly.

I agreed.

I had been so busy, engaged in conversation with Lois, that I had not observed the ferry draw away from the pier. We were half-way across the water before I realised it. A Malay constable came out of nowhere to check identity-cards. I showed him my warrant card and he went away, muttering an apology.

I heard a slight noise beside me. When I turned I was very close to Lois. She had moved nearer.

"I have a confession to make," she said suddenly; so suddenly that it caught me on the wrong foot.

"Have you?" I managed to cover up.

"You won't be angry if I tell you?"

"It depends. Let me hear the confession first."

She drew away from me and leaned her head back against the window frame.

"I know the truth about Fisher, why his wife was threatening him," she said quickly. Her face had turned very pale. I looked at her sharply.

"Why didn't you tell me last night?" I asked harshly.

"I can see by your face that you are going to be angry."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Why didn't you tell me last night?" I repeated more harshly than before. I gripped her arm tightly. I saw her wince and realised that I was hurting her. I let go of her arm. The skin where I had gripped her was white, then it slowly changed to blue.

"Because I couldn't make up my mind whether or not you were on an official inquiry. It was so sudden that at times I doubted you. I had never met you before, and police officers are the last persons in the world to approach me as you did, unless it was official." She replied edgily. All the joy had gone out of her voice, her eyes. She looked at me appealingly: like a wounded animal. I realised what she had been thinking about after leaving the E. & O.

"You were a fool," I said brutally. "Now, for God's sake tell me."

Her lips quivered. I felt no pity for her. I was angered, blinded, by the knowledge that she had mistrusted me. I steeled myself to become as hard as granite. I wanted to know the truth. I was prepared to go to any lengths to know. If she didn't tell me now, I would beat it out of her. Smash her as I had smashed every obstacle which stood between me and getting my own way. The anger welled up in me. Cruel, consum-

ing, brutal. I gripped the steering-wheel hard, and I was about to lose control of myself when I was halted by the terror I saw on her face. She must have guessed what was in my mind, because she yielded and told me the truth. There wasn't a lot to it. I had made a wild guess weeks before and arrived near the mark. When Lois had finished I gazed out across the sea. At the pale green, foam-flecked water. The ferry was swinging round for the approach run to Mitchell Pier. Penang had gone out of view behind, and in its place were only the sea and a large empty expanse of sky.

"This morning I realised the truth about you," Lois was saying. Her voice seemed strained and far away. "I realised that you were being honest and sincere. No one wishes more than I that I had realised that last night. Won't you try to understand?"

I was not paying particular attention to her. I was busy turning events over in my mind. I am sure that I have never hated anyone so much as I hated Fisher's wife at that moment. I was just about to say something when the ferry bumped against the pier. There followed a continuous hooting of sirens as the ferry jockeyed into place. Finally the ramp was lowered, and the army lorry moved off. I switched on the engine and engaged gears irritably. Half-way up the ramp the lorry chose to stall, and I had to apply my handbrake quickly. The car behind me hooted its horn and I said something very rude under my breath. The army lorry lurched forward after three or four attempts, and I lengthened the distance between us. It might stall again. I paused briefly at the Customs checkpoint and shouted that I had nothing to declare. I accelerated before the officer on duty had time to answer. I slipped into top gear rapidly, and gave the car its head once I was on the broad highway through Butterworth. I relaxed and sat behind the wheel in sulky silence.

"I'm sorry." There was no harshness in Lois' voice. Only a deep penitence. I began to soften my attitude towards her. The past hours had been hectic for her and, after all, my intrusion in the Broadway could have been bewildering.

"For the second time during our brief acquaintance I have been unforgivably mean," I said softly, keeping my eyes on the road. "To ask you to forgive and forget is perhaps the coward's way out, but that is what I am asking."

"I am willing if you are," she said simply but honestly.

"Good. Now let's dismiss the whole rotten thing from our minds. In a way you make me feel very inferior. I think it's a good thing for me to feel like that. By the way, you could do with some touching up of your war-paint. The sea must have splashed you."

She rummaged in her handbag for lipstick and powder. I took my eyes off the road for a brief second and smiled at her.

"I would like you to promise me something," she said.

"What?"

"That you never look at me again like you did on the ferry. I thought for a moment that you were a different person. For a moment you made me really frightened of you."

"I promise. Never again. You can depend on that," I said.

I felt her relax in her seat. I thought it was time I tried to become human again. I hadn't been that way for a long, long time.

Harry and Margaret were sitting out on the verandah of their bungalow when we arrived. I swung the car in through the gates and pulled to a screeching halt at the bottom of the steps leading up to the verandah. I helped Lois out of the car and bounded up the steps, dragging her behind me. I went through the usual ceremony of introduction and handshakes.

"Well, Lois," I said when I had recovered my breath. "Don't you think they are a charming couple?"

"Enough of that, you hound," Harry cut in before she could reply. "It's great to see you again. A long time since the Sungei Siput days, Bill."

"Not all that long. Only a few months," I said. "You look as fit as ever. Even if your hair is greying rapidly."

"That's women for you, Bill. Never marry one several years younger than yourself," Harry chuckled.

"Men!" Margaret exploded. "You would be lost without women to fuss and pet you. Come along, Lois, you must want a brush and powder up after the drive."

I watched Lois go into the bungalow, arm in arm with Margaret. I sat down in a rattan chair facing Harry. I flung out my legs and stretched lazily. Across the road I could see the labourers working shirtless in the hot sun. Now and again one would shout to the other. The climax would be peals of excited, ribald laughter. Everything about Harry's estate reflected peace and contentment. He knew how to handle his men and get the best out of them. He had always had the golden touch. I turned round to face him. He opened a fresh tin of Player's and handed me one. I took it, and we lit off the same lighter flame.

"I say, old chap, where did you nab that beauty?" he asked with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Which beauty?" I asked teasingly, looking down at the car.

"The girl, you clot. Not the bloody car."

"I came across her on patrol. Sungei Lembu breeds 'em like her," I grinned.

"Don't be a bloody ass." He was getting rattled.

I wiped the grin off my face. It was time for serious talk. Lois and Margaret would not be away much longer.

"Harry, we've known each other some time. Always been honest with each other, haven't we?"

"Yes. But what's this leading up to?" He was serious, too.

"I want to talk about Lois. I need your help and so does she. She needs it far more than I do, really. You and Margaret are my only hope."

"Let's have it, Bill. What's the score?"

I began the most important and difficult part of my plan. If I failed now, I could not help Lois any more. I told Harry all about her. I skipped a fair amount of detail, but I drove home the most important points. Harry listened to me non-committally, drawing thoughtfully on his cigarette. Once or twice he

raised his eyebrows, and when I got to the part about the Japanese brothels I saw his mouth harden. Then suddenly he would relax, and look at me as if he was not aware that I was there. As I talked I felt the going become easier and to some extent Harry's attitude helped me. I got the whole story out much better than I anticipated.

"That's it in a nutshell," I concluded. "Does it make any difference to us, Harry?"

I faced him levelly across the small table. I saw the answer in his grey eyes before he told me.

"Of course not, you ass. You ought to know better. The poor kid! We've got to think up something if she will let us."

"I think she will in time. I have an idea, but I wanted to sound you on it first and, if you agree, to get you to do the spade-work. I have been thinking of old Lim in Ipoh."

"Where does Lim fit in?"

"Well, Lois has got to get away from Penang. That sticks out a mile. I believe she's pretty good at secretarial work; I've done a bit of pumping on the matter. Now, Lim is rich and prosperous. I think with the right approach, and that's where you'll come in, he would take her on at a decent salary. If you remember, he was always wanting a good secretary. Up to a few months ago he hadn't got one."

"How did you know? Have you heard from him?"

"No. But I just know." I didn't mention what Fisher had told me.

There was a brief pause while Harry thought things out.

"Now, I don't want to appear pessimistic over this," he said slowly, "neither do I want you to misunderstand me, but we cannot completely ignore one important fact. Supposing I fixed this with Lim, would Lois be able so easily to discard the life she has known for a long time? It won't be easy, Bill."

"I've thought of that angle, too. But I believe that with the right encouragement she'll break away completely. I'm convinced of it. I do think it's worth a try."

"I'll accept your word on that. And I agree it's worth a try.

I think Lim will play ball if he still wants someone to fill a post. As you know, I put him on the path to riches, and he always maintains he's in my debt over that. Tell you what I'll do. When I get the chance I'll nip inside and phone Lim. I expect you'll want to know today. That's all I can do. I'll have to give him a bit of her background. You appreciate that, don't you?"

"Of course. Thanks a lot, Harry," I said.

"Thanks for nothing, old chap. What hell she's been through! Makes one think what a hard, cruel world lurks outside," he stated bitterly.

I could hear footsteps and the sound of laughter coming through the bungalow.

"Just one more thing, Harry," I said hurriedly. "Don't mention about Fisher."

"Why not?" he asked curiously.

"Just don't, Harry, please."

"Oh, all right, mystery man," he grinned. But he looked puzzled.

I turned my head to meet Margaret and Lois as they returned to the verandah. Margaret peered at me with a glint in her eye.

"Don't tell me what you two have been talking about," she declared knowingly, waving her hand through the air. "I know. Sungei Siput. The start of the Emergency. How you and Harry could end it almost overnight. I've heard it so many times."

"Well, you're in for a surprise," I chuckled. "We never mentioned it. Did we, Harry?"

"Not a peep."

"I live and learn," Margaret commented, not to be outdone. "Haven't you even asked Bill about his leg?" she added, addressing Harry.

"Right as rain," I chirped in before he could reply. I wagged my leg in the air to prove my point. Harry spread his hands in mock agreement.

"There you are, my dear," he said to Margaret. "How about a drink? It's thirsty weather."

"Yes, please," we all chorused.

I went with Harry to fetch the drinks. It gave me the opportunity to talk some more about Lois. He asked me if I had any objection to Margaret knowing at that stage in the proceedings. I replied in the negative, adding it was only fair she should know. We returned with the drinks and handed them round. I slumped back into my chair. Margaret was finishing telling Lois something about Sungei Siput. The unpredictable woman's angle! I winked at Harry the other side of the table. He put his hand across his mouth to stifle a laugh. We waited for Margaret to conclude. Then she became aware of our close observations. She blushed guiltily.

"Cheers," Harry said, raising his glass.

"Cheers," we chorused and down went the first intake.

We started to talk about the old days. A lot had happened since I last saw Harry and Margaret. There was plenty of fuel with which to keep the conversation going. So as to keep Lois informed of the shape of the discussion we explained most things in detail to her. She did not feel at a loose end that way. I could not help noticing how completely at ease she was among us. It was very gratifying. I had to watch my step at times. The conversation drifted dangerously near to Fisher. I managed to divert it pretty well without causing undue suspicion. Margaret was the one I had to watch for. She, of course, did not know what I had asked Harry. We wound up in time for tea. The talking had made us very thirsty. We had another drink before we went inside for tea.

After tea I took Lois for a walk round part of the estate. It was a scheming manoeuvre on my part. It gave Harry the opportunity to get in touch with Lim. And tell Margaret. At one point I was contemplating telling Lois the facts: what we were trying to fix up. But I told myself in another breath that the time was not yet ripe. Both that and the occasion had to be carefully chosen. I would need all my cunning to persuade her when the time came. We walked among the rubber trees, making the most of the cool evening air. The sun had lost its fierce heat. In the distance I could see the long lines of tappers'

quarters. The men relaxing in the doorways in little groups, whilst their women prepared the evening meal. The whole setting reflected such an atmosphere of tranquillity that the Emergency and all its horrors appeared nothing more than a ghastly nightmare. Finally, we came to the main road leading to Nibong Tebal. We sat on a small stone bridge and amused ourselves by tossing stones into the river flowing underneath. The insects buzzed around us like angry little aircraft. Occasionally the deep-throated croak of the bull-frog sounded as it called to its mate. Lois threw her last stone into the river. She watched the ripples as it went to the bottom. We talked and time passed quickly.

"Are you a fatalist? Do you believe one's life is planned?" she asked suddenly.

"I have a tendency to be that way. I do believe our lives are mapped out when we are born."

"My father was like that. He always said he would meet a violent death. We used to shudder about it at the time, but he was correct, after all."

I did not comment on what she had said. I had no desire at that moment to pursue her line of conversation. Somehow it did not fit in with the surroundings. The sun had dipped out of sight and the night was drawing near. I suggested that we go back to Harry and Margaret. She got up and stood beside me, very close. I caught hold of her hand and we walked back to the bungalow.

When we got there I left Lois with Margaret and went in search of Harry. I found him in his office. He glanced up as I entered. He told me that he had had a long telephone conversation with Lim and that Lim was willing to help Lois. They had even gone so far as to discuss salary, and by mutual agreement it had been fixed provisionally at eight hundred dollars per month. That was a very fair offer, and I learned it was open to increase once Lois had settled in. I suppose I should have jumped for joy at what Harry had told me, but when I finally knew that everything was in the bag I began to feel pangs of

doubt. I guess one would say I was jibbing at the last fence, but at the back of my mind was fixed the thought that Lois might not grasp the opportunity that was now hers. She might even be annoyed, and tell me I should have minded my own business. It would have been a logical reaction and I doubt if she could have been held to blame if she had adopted a belligerent attitude. Then as Harry wound up I gained confidence, and I told myself quite frankly that I had started the ball rolling and I would have to see the matter through to its final stages.

"You're a great guy, Harry," I said warmly when he had finished.

"Nothing to it," he assured me. "The lousiest part is up to you now. And the greatest decision must come from Lois herself. You'll have to be tactful. Hardly any need to remind you of that."

"I'll have to be as you say," I said slowly.

"Feeling nervy?" he asked kindly.

"Just a bit," I admitted. "But I'll see it through."

"I'm sure you will. By the way, now we're alone again for a few minutes, what's all the hush-hush about Fisher?"

I told him about the association with Lois and how I came to meet her.

He glanced at his watch when I had finished.

"I suppose you'll want to push off now, seeing what you've got to put over with Lois."

"Yes, the time's running short. I go back to Sungei Lembu tomorrow."

"I hope you'll come again some time, Bill."

"I will. I shan't need any encouragement over that. Have you told Margaret?"

He looked at me steadily with his grey eyes.

"Everything. And she agrees with what we're doing."

"Good. I'm very happy about it all," I said seriously.

We went outside on the verandah and joined the two women. In the last flickers of daylight Margaret had gone into the garden and picked Lois some flowers. Lois showed them to me

proudly. I doubt if anyone had given her flowers for years. Both of them looked dazzling under the electric light. I looked across at Margaret, and I saw all I wanted to see in her eyes. The four of us went out to the car and Lois and I climbed in. We lingered awhile before I drove away with Harry's and Margaret's wishes ringing in my ears. I felt contented as I drove along the road towards Butterworth.

I turned right at the police-station and headed towards the beach. Some police billets were exposed in the full glare of the headlamps. Traffic on the road was infrequent and the lights revealed some humorous sights. A few policemen who, up to then, had been answering the calls of nature hastily gathered sarongs around their brown bodies. One or two were less fortunate. They had no sarongs handy. I dipped the headlamps in sympathy, much to Lois' amusement. I reached the end of the road and piloted the car on to the grass. I stopped it about a couple of feet from the silvery sand. I switched off the lights and looked up at the moon slowly ascending in the sky. The sea lapped rhythmically on the sand, and little stars popped out one by one around the moon.

"Had a nice day?" I asked Lois.

I could see her face framed in the moon's mellow light. The dark hair cascading in tempestuous waves down to the bottom of her neck. I could feel her eyes upon me, searching.

"A beautiful, lovely day," she sighed.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," I said.

She leaned forward and looked through the windscreen. The fragrance of the flowers mingled with the scent in her hair. I handed her a cigarette somewhat clumsily and lit one for myself. I inhaled deeply and blew out the smoke. It settled mistily on the windscreen.

"The big ships pass along there to England, don't they?" she asked wistfully, nodding her head towards the sea.

"Yes," I replied. "You think a lot about England, don't you?"

"I suppose I do. After all, I am half English."

I swivelled in my seat so that my back was resting against the car door. In that position I could look at her better.

"I may be jumping ahead, but have you thought about yourself and the future since last night?" I asked. It was time to get started on the last lap. She turned towards me again. The light was not all that good, but I think I saw an expression of deep longing flit over her face.

"I have thought a lot about it and about what you said. I lay in bed thinking for hours before I slept," she said slowly.

"And what solution did you arrive at?"

She shrugged her shoulders and leaned back in the seat.

"It would be honest to say nowhere."

"Why?"

"Because everything appeared so elusive. Nothing would fit conveniently into place. So far removed from reality."

I ran my thumb idly round the steering-wheel.

"Things only appear out of reach because you allow them to be," I plugged on. "You must listen to the guidance of reason and not let adverse impulses tempt you otherwise."

"You try to make everything appear so easy, don't you?"

I did not answer her. I shifted in my seat. I formulated my next approach in my mind. As it was she beat me to it.

"What time do you leave for Sungei Lembu tomorrow?" she asked, changing the subject. I cursed under my breath. I decided to play it her way for a little longer.

"About nine o'clock. Transport is coming over for me. It's been laid on by my relieving officer."

"Will you go back immediately to active service?"

"Of course. I've had a good rest."

"That may be so, but I notice you limp at times."

"You're very observant. Anyhow, a limp now and again can be expected. It'll work itself off. Patrols will see to that," I said lightly.

"Are all your men Malays?"

I curbed the temptation to sidetrack the issue and get back to the real reason why I had stopped at Butterworth. Then I

remembered Harry's advice about tact. So I continued to play it her way.

"The jungle squad's a mixed bag. Chinese, Malays and one little Tamil," I answered.

"Are they loyal?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. She still looked at me steadily.

"I think so," I said shortly.

"You're not sure, are you?"

I lowered my eyes, not wishing to look into hers. I had not been so convincing as I had thought.

"One can never be too sure of loyalty from any quarter. I feel that some of my men are loyal, but I can't speak collectively," I said.

"One reads so much about the disloyalty of the Asian policeman," she went on. "I remember once that there was a suggestion of desertion when a patrol was ambushed. The two European officers were killed. The same could happen to you if your men deserted, couldn't it?"

"I don't think my men would do that," I stated, more to reassure myself than her.

"I hope you are correct. But be careful, won't you?"

"Does my safety mean so much to you?" I asked softly.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you are the only man who has treated me like a human being since my father . . . since my father died," she said frankly.

I was moved by her sincerity. She did not know it, but she was teaching me quite a lot about human kindness. I would have liked to have told her, but I didn't. I changed my mind only because I felt she was in the mood for settling the other business.

"I would like you to listen to what I have to say," I began. "You will probably think me an interfering nuisance and quite rightly assume that I have been deceiving you, but the point is

that with Harry's help I've managed to get you a secretarial post down country. It's yours for the taking."

Her manner completely changed. I was totally taken in by her next move. She flung open the car door, got out, and then slammed it with a resounding bang. She ran straight ahead towards the sea. She was half-way across the strip of sand before I realised that she had gone. I leapt out of the car and raced after her. I did not know her intentions, but to me it did not look very healthy. I caught up with her a few feet from the water's edge. I gripped one of her arms hard in an effort to stop her. She fought against my hold silently and violently. I was surprised at the strength she had. I adopted harsher tactics and, exerting my strength, I pulled her back towards the car. She renewed her struggles, and among other things began to kick. I know what I would have done to a man, but with a woman I was a little out of depth. We reached the grass and suddenly she ceased struggling, but I retained my hold on her. She looked up at me, and I saw the fire flash in her eyes.

"Why didn't you let me do what I wanted to? What's the use of a job to me? What do I know about such things? What do I know? You tell me. All I know is sex and men and what men want. How to please them so they will come again instead of going elsewhere. Those are the only things I know now. I have forgotten everything else because they are not important any more. Nothing is important any more. Do you hear me? Nothing." She spat out the words. I tightened my grip and pulled her towards me. I had not spoken to her since dragging her away from the sea. Somehow words from me seemed out of place at that moment. She made no effort to pull away from me. She rested her head on my chest when she had calmed down. The headiness of her scent struck me like a bombshell. The top of her head came up to my chin, and I realised for the first time how tall she was. Then I became aware of her closeness, of her body pressed close to mine and I fought to overcome my mounting passion.

I held her tight for several minutes, her head still resting on

my chest. Then I began to talk to her without reference to what she had said or what she had intended to do. I spoke to her softly, my lips almost brushing her hair. I told her everything. What had transpired at Harry's. About Lim and the job in Ipoh. I told her that both Harry and Margaret knew of her past, and in the same breath I asked her forgiveness for deceiving her. I could feel her body tense against mine, then relax and begin to tremble. I asked her to take her time and think everything over clearly. Not to rush headlong into something she might later regret. And when she had decided I asked her to write to me so that I could post her Lim's address. She tilted her head upwards and I saw the tears running down her cheeks, smudging her make-up. I pulled out my handkerchief and wiped away the tears.

"It is I who should ask your forgiveness," she said softly. "I don't know why I behaved like I did. Maybe it was an impulsive reaction of fear. Fear that something I had always longed for was now mine and yet I could not find the courage to accept it. Something in my head seemed to snap, and all I wanted to do was run away until I could not run any more. That's why I fought you because you were preventing me from running. Now I want to leave all that behind me. That and other memories. I think I owe that sudden change of mind to you and Harry and Margaret. I am thinking of them just for a minute now. You told them what I am, and yet they still behaved as they did. Margaret even picked some flowers for me. Her best flowers. She told me she would not give them to anyone else but me. And all the time she was saying that she knew the truth."

"I told you we were going to meet people. Real people. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember," she said half to herself. She looked away briefly, then back to me. Her lips parted slightly, revealing her white teeth.

"Will you write to me when you have decided?" I asked again.

She didn't answer. She moved closer to me, keeping her eyes upturned towards mine.

"Why are you doing all this for me?" she asked. I saw her lips tremble.

"Because I believe in you. Now you must learn to believe in yourself once more," I said softly.

She buried her head against my chest again. Her arms snaked round my waist, pulling me closer to her. All her pent-up emotion exploded in one gigantic outcry of anguished pain. I could feel her breasts heaving against me. The tears coursed down her cheeks, and the wetness penetrated my shirt. I never attempted to stop her. I allowed her to cry until the tears dried up and ceased to flow. I stroked her hair and rested my chin on her head. Her grip around me tightened in her quest for sanctuary and understanding. I thought of her, and I cursed the men who wantonly bought women's bodies for their amusement. The sex-crazed despots who preyed like craven vultures upon girls, finally casting them aside like broken toys once their sexual desires had been satisfied. Then I remembered the girl I held close on the beach in the moonlight. And I forgot the ugliness I had been thinking about.

I knew what she would say in her letter.

[12]

NIELD was pleased to see me back. After a few brief exchanges of conversation he departed for Bukit Mertajam. After he had gone, I remembered several things I wanted to ask him. One change had occurred during my absence. 'Becky' Sharp had been transferred to Butterworth as O.C. Operations. That meant he was now serving in the same contingent as myself. I was very pleased to hear the good news that Daud had returned for

duty. Barring any accidents, we were now back to normal strength. With the exception of a replacement for Haji, that is.

Nield had left a few outstanding matters for my attention. I thumbed through them listlessly until I came to a signal graded 'Priority!' It had come in that morning from Butterworth. Egan, of Special Branch, had got hold of a surrendered Communist for interrogation. This man claimed that there was a food dump and a small band of Communists hiding out on Bukit Berapit. He was willing to lead Egan and a police party to the actual spot. I was asked to supply some men for the patrol at the earliest possible moment. I laid the signal in front of me and lapsed into thought. Automatically my mind went to Ching Moi Chai. The man was becoming an obsession with me. There were a lot of loose ends to be put together where he was concerned. I had never understood why he had steered clear of Sungei Lembu for so long. I shrugged my shoulders, still unable to find the answer, and drafted a signal to Egan suggesting that the following morning was to be the day. Within an hour I received confirmation. Fast worker, Egan.

I called Ming to my room and told him to alert the squad at standby from dusk. Before he went away he told me that the men were happy at my return. I could tell by his attitude that he himself was genuine, but I doubted if he spoke for everyone's feelings. Bakar came into my room next. I took in his smartly groomed appearance in one glance. I asked him what he wanted, making it as curt as possible. He told me he was getting married in Seremban in two weeks' time and wanted leave of absence. The news took me by surprise, but I covered up well. I wondered who was going to marry a cissy like him. I felt sorry for her, whoever she was. I told him coldly to apply in the normal manner. He should have known that without my telling him. He saluted and walked out. He still left that trail of scent behind. I prophesied that if ever the Teddy-boy craze hit Malaya, Bakar would be among its first members.

Peace was not to be mine for long. Peter was next in the procession. He stated that he was lodging a complaint on be-

half of the men. I had some considerable time previously accepted the fact that Peter acted as spokesman where any dispute was involved. Maybe the men had faith in him, that he would soften me up first. I must admit that in the end he usually got what he wanted. There was a certain intangible appeal about Peter. I could never really put my finger on it, but I felt it often.

"What's the complaint this time?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"It's about the canteen contractor, sir."

My eyebrows shot up.

"What's he been doing?"

"Overcharging on tea."

I pursed my lips. The bastard!

"How much?"

"Ten cents with milk. Five cents without, sir," he said readily. It was rather a lot to overcharge. I called him a bastard again to myself.

"How long has this been going on?" I queried.

"Since you went in hospital, sir," he confessed sheepishly.

"Why didn't you tell Mr Nield?"

He hung his head towards the ground, as he always did when he wanted sympathy. It was one trick of Peter's with which I had become conversant.

"Well?" I prodded, stifling a grin.

"Because Mr Nield might have done something terrible to the contractor. He might not have acted like you."

That was the funniest statement I had heard from anyone for years. Nield would have been mad, but he would have been more genteel in his methods than me. I didn't know whether Peter was being serious or taking the mickey out of me.

"Bring the contractor to me. I'll see what he has to say," I said.

I was not prepared to condemn the man without a hearing. There are two sides to every story. Peter returned with the contractor in a matter of seconds. That worthy soul behaved

most warmly. He poured out torrents of joy at my return. He gave me the impression that I was the most sainted white to step foot in Malaya. If he thought he was impressing me, then he was barking up the wrong tree.

"What is this I hear about you overcharging on tea?" I asked when he had ended his patter either by loss of vocabulary or sheer exhaustion. He deflected his hands inwards towards his chest. His face wrinkled into a picture of abject misery.

"Me, tuan? Overcharge on tea, tuan? Never. I swear it. You have heard lies, tuan. All lies," he said in broken English. He turned to Peter for confirmation. It was no dice.

"Lies, my fanny," I snapped. "I want the truth." I doubt if he knew what 'fanny' meant in English. I translated it into Malay. It made it sound much cruder. His ego deflated slowly. He shrugged his thin shoulders and rolled his eyes. Now he looked like a gypo bum-boy from Port Said.

"Unless I charge a little more I make little profit, tuan. Times are hard, tuan," he mumbled. I leaned forward and crossed my arms on the table.

"I'm not going to waste time with you," I snapped back. "You know your prices are controlled. They give you a fair profit. If you charge one cent, just one little cent, above the controlled price on anything again, I'll wreck your bloody canteen with my own hands and kick your arse out of here. Now get out. Quickly."

He did not pause to argue further. He went like the wind, muttering under his breath. I have a feeling that he did not exactly love me at that moment.

"That's that," I said to Peter.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "There is just one more thing," he added quickly.

"What now?" I asked with a fair show of boredom.

"The men would like some sports equipment for when they are off duty. We have nothing here for leisure time, sir. The jungle squads at Sungei Bakap have all these things."

He retreated a pace or two as if he expected a blast from

me. But there was a lot in what Peter said. Only an old pack of cards to while away the long hours in base. In my selfishness I had never thought of it. I felt an urge to remedy the matter.

"Has Rahman returned from taking Mr Nield into B.M.?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, then. Tell him I want to go in myself now. You can come with me. We'll go and see the Welfare Officer, dig down into his kitty and see what we can find."

"Thank you, sir," Peter said it as if he could not believe his own ears. I smiled at him to show I meant it.

"Get cracking, then," I grinned at him.

He did. Real fast.

I looked into Rodway's office when I arrived in B.M. His Sub-Inspector told me he was out and would not be back till late. I left a message to say I had called. On chance I peered into Zannuddin's office before I left the building. He was out also. I rejoined Peter and routed out the Welfare Officer. I outlined what I wanted, and he listened dreamily, counting up in his mind how much stock he was going to lose. He put various obstacles in my way, but I beat him at his own game, because I knew police regulations also. A bit better than he did. The Welfare Officer gave me the impression that I was asking for his life-blood, instead of something the men subscribed for out of their monthly pay. I won the tussle and got what I wanted. Peter and I went round to the store and loaded the Land Rover. When we had finished, it looked like a Whiteaway Laidlaw's bargain basement from Penang Island. I climbed in beside Rahman. I looked around for my carbine. Then I remembered it was on the floor under the sports gear. I hoped I wouldn't need it in a hurry on the Sungei Lembu road.

"The men will be happy, sir," Peter remarked.

"I hope so and that they'll look after it. I've just signed for a hundred dollars' worth of stuff." I grinned at him.

I stopped at the Mess on the way out of Bukit Mertajam. I thought that maybe someone would be at home to have a chat.

I went inside and looked around, but could not see a soul. I was on the point of leaving when I heard the chink of glasses from Madill's room. The door was ajar. I rapped my knuckles on the thick wood and peeped inside. Madill was sitting by the window, resplendent in a gaily coloured sarong. He looked very much like a prosperous horse-race punter. He looked my way when I whistled.

"Hallo, Bill. Take a pew," he greeted me, pushing a chair my way with his foot.

"Howdy, Alf," I replied, lighting a cigarette. "Finished early today?"

"Blast it," he grunted. "I'm sick of the bloody job."

"You don't mean that," I said jokingly. I knew he was too conscientious to be serious. He took a swig at his beer. The froth clung around the glass, then evaporated.

"I do. I'm fair sick of it. All the years I've served with the Colonial Police, I've found that the biggest mug is the man who does his job properly, according to the rules. It never gets you anywhere in the end. The more you do, the more you flaming well may. B—s to the lot of them."

"You're in a bad way, chum. I've never known you moan like this before," I chuckled.

"It's bloody true. It was just the same in Palestine. Slug hard all day and, many times, nights, too. What reward do you get? Some silly sod calls you a fool for doing it," he said savagely. Something really had upset Madill.

"You've said a mouthful there, bud," I said cheerfully. "The only way to get anywhere today is by crawling to the nobs. In the majority of cases. We know there are exceptions."

"You'll never get me crawling to anyone. Never," Madill grunted again. It wasn't the beer talking either. It never was with Madill. He was immune. He drained his glass, and gazed at its emptiness stupidly.

"I'll get you another," I offered.

"Thanks, Bill."

I went into the kitchen and took a bottle of beer from the

refrigerator. I poured an orange juice for myself. I returned to Madill's room and placed the glasses on the small pahit table. The orange juice looked lifeless against the rich, dark beer.

"How's the leg, Bill?" Madill asked. "Sorry I forgot to ask earlier."

"Fine."

He picked up his beer and held it up to the light. It had changed to an amber clearness.

"How's things in your section?" I asked.

"We're losing Johnny Mee, our A.S.P. He's going to K.L. on transfer," Madill said, lowering the glass.

"Who's stepping into his shoes? You?"

Madill gave a short laugh. My question must have been funny.

"Not flaming likely. Neither is Jock Lindsay. There's a new A.S.P. taking over. Name of Van Andel."

I began to see the reason for his mood. He was taking it pretty hard. Madill should have got the leg up. He was worth every bit of it.

"Know anything about him?" I asked conversationally.

"Not much. He was one of the old European sergeants. Came here at the start of the Emergency. By what I hear he's good at his job."

"Sounds Dutch by his name. If that's anything to go by."

"He was born in the U.K. I believe his grandfather was Dutch."

We tilted our glasses and drank in silence.

"Sorry you missed the promotion boat," I said sympathetically, wiping the back of my hand across my lips.

"Oh, that's all right. It would have been a dead-heat between Lindsay and me, anyway. He works hard at the job over on Penang. Trying to get a 999 Emergency service going. On the Metropolitan Police lines. If he succeeds, it will be the first in Malaya. Anyway, talking of promotion, there's someone else who keeps missing the boat."

"Rodway?" I asked, thinking of the first likely name to creep into my mind.

"Nope. You, Bill."

"Me? Come off it, for Christ's sake."

"No kidding. Johnny Mee says you ought to be an A.S.P. He swears you could be if you tried."

"What does Mee know about me? Not having met me?"

Madill burped and asked to be excused.

"He knows quite a lot about you. He moves in the right circles. Your main trouble is you upset too many influential people. Planters, to name only one species. You speak your own mind too much. Admirable in a sense, but you're only cutting off your nose to spite your face. Outspokenness does not go down very well in this contingent," he stated frankly yet kindly.

I ran my fingers round the rim of the glass. I could have said a lot. Instead, I fetched two more drinks. Madill's thoughts were miles away when I returned. He snapped out of it when I sat down and the chair creaked. I heard a door open and shut at the back of the Mess. I guessed it was the amah returning from town. Madill and I finished our drinks in meditative silence. I checked the time and rose to leave. He looked up at me and grinned again. Then his face became serious.

"What was the trouble down south before you went on leave, Bill?" he asked unexpectedly.

"Nothing. Why?" I stammered.

He averted his eyes and drank half the beer.

"Only I thought you left under a cloud, that's all," he commented.

"News to me." I lied very well.

"I must have got hold of the wrong end of the stick, then. I could have sworn——"

"I said there was nothing. Alf," I cut in, facing him levelly. He looked up at me, then lowered his eyes again. Back to the glass.

"Sorry, Bill," he mumbled. "I must have been mistaken."

"I'll push along now, Alf. See you some other time," I said.

"Sure. Cheerio, Bill. Sorry."

"So long, Alf."

I left him alone with the beer and his thoughts.

Darkness had already set in when I arrived back at base. I told Peter and Rahman to unload the sports gear into the guard-room for the night. One by one the men appeared on the verandah, straining their eyes to see what was going on. I dropped one or two hints as I passed them *en route* to my room. That set them talking among themselves in subdued whispers.

I lit the pressure-lamp and turned it up to full beam. I pumped it vigorously for a few minutes. Goo Ling had made my bed and laid out my kit neatly for the morning. I checked my carbine, pistol and grenades. I laid them all on the floor beside my bed. I sat down at the desk and pulled out my diary. I turned over the pages, and briefly I thought of Lois. What she was doing at that moment. I returned my attention to the diary and stopped at the page I wanted. I ran my thumb down the centre division, creasing the pages flat. I picked up my pen and began to write. I had a lot to do, and I wanted to finish before I went to bed. I guided the pen over the pages, and as I did so the lamp above me burned lower. It was nearly midnight before I finished.

[13]

EGAN was true to his word as regards punctuality. In spite of a cold, brisk washdown, my eyes were still thin puffy slits when he came into my room. I gripped his outstretched hand warmly.

"Pleased to meet you," he said. "Haven't had the pleasure before."

There was a faint trace of Irish brogue about his voice. I took a liking to him from the start. His round, chubby, open face

and easy-going manner. I would say he was a man who said what he meant and did not believe in half-measures.

"That goes double with me," I replied heartily. "Take a pew."

I spread out my hands towards a chair. He sat down and cupped his hands between his knees. I looked out of the window at his detectives standing by the gateway. They were resplendently dressed in spotless jungle green. The little wizened runt, whom I identified as the Communist terrorist, was standing apart, a few paces away. There was a woe-begone expression on his face. His shoulders sagged and skinny bones stuck out through his green shirt.

"I see you have brought a good few men. Expecting to meet a whole Communist regiment?" I grinned at Egan.

"Not exactly. But it's good instruction for my Glapps.¹ They don't get much patrol work," he answered coolly.

I sat on the edge of my bed facing him. I finished lacing my jungle boots. I offered Egan a cigarette, but he declined. I lit one for myself. I blew the smoke out into the room.

"I take it you're sure of the information?" I asked.

"I'm never all that sure," he replied seriously, "but we have to bite on every bit we get, as you know."

"Somehow I cannot imagine a crowd of Commies holing up on Berapit. There's the monastery up there, and also a detachment of Specials guarding the reservoir. Seems strange."

"I agree it's odd, but as I've just remarked, we can't pass it up."

"I guess you can't," I admitted.

"Have you been up Berapit before?"

"No. I've confined my activities to Seraya, Bukit Mertajam and the low country."

"Have you warned the S.C.s that we'll be around?"

"There is no phone or wireless communication, and I can't shout that far," I said testily.

"What do you know about the monastery?"

¹ Chinese detectives.

"Nothing much. It's run by some Chinese brotherhood. Lovie visited it on and off. A good shake-down for patrol halt-point."

"That doesn't help much. I just had a hunch. Occasionally monasteries do harbour C.T.s. Or keep them supplied with food," Egan said wearily. He got up and walked to the window. He kept his back turned to me. What he had said was a point I had not thought of.

"How many Commies are supposedly up there?" I asked.

"Ten. So our friend out there says."

"Has he spilled any names?" I thought of Ching Moi Chai again.

"Not a damned thing. We can't expect him to, really," Egan said. He turned round to face me. "How many men are you taking?" he added.

"Seeing you have about nine Glapps, I'll take only one section. Between us we could eat ten—if there's ten up there, which I doubt. But I'd like to be proved wrong, all the same."

"I guess we had best shove off," Egan commented.

"Have you brought rations?"

"Only water. It won't be a long job, will it?"

I shook my head.

"Not too long. Berapit's about 1,400 feet up. We should be back by late afternoon, whether we make contact or not."

"If they are at the top, they'll have the drop on us, won't they?"

I noticed the concern in Egan's voice.

"They'll certainly have the advantage because we'll be climbing. Let's hope for the best. Come on." I forced a smile.

I went along to Ming's quarters, and told him that only the bren section was required. I waited with Egan and the Glapps until they came running out and climbed into the armoured car. The C.T. looked more miserable than ever. I spat on the ground near his feet. He squinted at me and shuffled off to Egan's jeep.

We debussed two miles beyond Mengkuang. I told Peter to go back as escort to the vehicles and return to pick us up at five

o'clock. We stood in the middle of the road until the convoy disappeared out of sight. I suggested that the C.T. stayed in the lead with Egan and me. I told the Glapps and my men to string out in the rear, five yards apart. I walked to the rear of the line and detailed Sobh as tail scout. I returned to the front, where Egan and the C.T. were waiting. I grunted and made off into the blukar.¹

An hour later we reached the foot of Bukit Berapit. Looking upwards the top seemed very far away, lost in low-lying cloud. I studied the immediate hill surface and cursed when I found it was rock base. That made everything just dandy. Our rubber-soled boots were not exactly ideal for rock climbing. There was one small consolation. We could cling on to the undergrowth as we went up. I had a word with Ming before we started. I asked him if anyone lived on the hill, apart from the monks and Specials. He said there were a few scattered huts and rubber trees about half-way up. He knew some of the tappers living there. He told me that he had been up to the monastery with Lovie, and knew the best route to climb. He warned me that the undergrowth was thick at the top. I nearly kicked myself for being a fool. The fact that Ming had been up Berapit more than once had completely slipped my mind. No wonder he had looked at me as if I was crazy all the time I had been talking. I put him in the lead and we began to climb.

By the time we had reached the half-way mark I was lathered in sweat and aching in almost every limb. To add to my discomfort, my leg was giving out a fair amount of pain. I felt as fit as a louse. Egan was not much better off. He was panting like an old worn-out pair of bellows. His face was one mass of dirty, sticky sweat. The C.T., however, was taking it in his stride. He appeared none the worse for wear. He looked so fit, for all his scrawniness, that it made me see red.

"If there's nothing at the top, I'll shoot that bastard!" I gritted between my teeth. Egan merely chuckled.

Ming had stopped about three yards above us. I signalled to

¹ Secondary jungle.

the men below that we were stopping for a breather. I sat on a piece of rock and pulled off my floppy green hat. I wiped my face and ran the sweat-rag through my hair. I made a mental note to get a crew cut at the first opportunity. It might make one look like a convict, but at least it would be cooler. I pulled out some cigarettes. This time Egan took one and we lit up. I massaged my leg and the pain decreased.

"Sorry to have brought you out so soon after your return from hospital," Egan said apologetically.

"Don't worry about that," I said lightly. "Can't sit on my backside all the time."

"You jungle squad chaps make me envious," he went on.

"Not much thick jungle in Province Wellesley. We have to go into Kedah for that."

"I still envy you," Egan repeated doggedly.

"Why? You Special Branch bods do a fine job of work behind the scenes. I admit you seldom get the limelight, but nevertheless you do the work, quietly and efficiently," I said affably.

"It's not the same, though. All this cloak-and-dagger stuff. My heart's on your kind of work."

I flipped the butt of my cigarette on to the ground. I was beginning to understand Egan. He was like so many Special Branch and C.I.D. officers I had met. They had a chip on their shoulders because they thought they were not doing their share in the Emergency. It was useless trying to convince them otherwise. To me jungle squads were only a cog in the wheel of a gigantic police machine. Every man was doing his share to end the Emergency. From the lowly, shunned storekeeper to the actual combat man. I felt sorry for Egan.

"I presume you are married?" I asked, glancing at the gold ring on his finger.

"Yes. I have a family, too," he replied proudly.

"All the more reason why you should stick to your job. Leave my work to bachelors like me."

"I don't agree. Married or single, it makes no difference to

me. A single chap is taken too much for granted these days. He deserves a chance to live like everyone else. To get married some day and have a family like any other man."

"Nobody would miss us if we got bumped off. No howling wives. No crying kids," I said.

"Haven't you got a mother or father living? Wouldn't they miss you?"

"My mother's still living. In a way, I guess she would miss me if I caught a packet. But not so much as a wife. I should imagine that the bottom of a woman's life would drop out if she lost her husband. Someone she loved and cherished."

"It's decent of you to put it that way," Egan said gently.

"I meant it. Still, there are plenty of married men on jungle squads—Asian and European."

"I know. That's what makes it harder for me. In your job you are a good advertisement for the police and what it's doing to stamp out Communism in Malaya," Egan said slowly.

"I wouldn't exactly say we are a good advertisement. We are a fairly wild bunch, harsh in our methods. Shoot first and ask questions afterwards. Not really police officers any more. Just highly paid professional gunmen," I stated truthfully.

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't," Egan grunted sourly.

"Have it your way," I grinned. "I guess we'd better be moving. It looks like we're in for a spot of rain," I added, glancing up at the blackening sky.

The climb became more arduous as we progressed upwards. For a hundred yards or more we had to traverse sheer, slippery rock. Several times I slipped downwards and had to grope frantically to regain my balance. Once that was achieved, I would grip the unyielding rock-face so hard that my fingers showed white and small spurts of blood oozed out from under my finger-nails. In the lead we had been forced to adopt single file. Ming and the C.T. were directly above me, and Egan below. My legs and arms began to ache again. My lungs felt as if they

would burst at any moment. My breathing was laboured and sporadic. Somehow I mastered my fatigue and summoned energy into my aching muscles. Once or twice I dislodged a small piece of loose rock. It clattered and banged down the hillside, landing with a hollow thump hundreds of feet below. Presently I cleared the rock-face, and the undergrowth made climbing easier. I obtained relief from gripping the vines and levering myself upwards. My shirt was saturated worse than ever. The carbine sling dug into my shoulder, rubbing the skin raw and leaving open sores which became irritated by the salty sweat. I paused briefly to catch my breath. I looked downwards over my shoulder. Egan was a good fifteen yards away, just clear of the rock. His face was now a bright red scarlet and in the stillness I could hear his panting. Farther below I could see the Glapps and my section hugging the hillside like little green beads on a string. I have always been accustomed to height and could more often than not stomach it, but at that moment I felt dizzy and I looked upwards again quickly.

Then the black clouds overhead rumbled, and the rain came with all its savage, turbulent swiftness. It pelted down in a solid glasslike sheet. The clouds crashed again, louder and more intense. Vivid lightning flamed and split the air in two. It would have been suicidal to continue climbing in that deluge. I dug my toes into the soft, slushy earth. I entwined my arms among the vines and, pressing myself hard against the hillside, I waited for the storm to abate. It was not the full monsoon season, so it would probably blow itself out rapidly. Suddenly I heard a crash above me. In my preoccupation I had overlooked the fact that most Malayan trees have no tap-roots. I looked up and saw a large tree, uprooted by the torrent of water, crashing downwards. Its roots were spreadeagled like a giant spider's web. It missed Ming and the C.T. by inches, then it came straight at me. I gripped harder and pressed closer into the hillside. I steeled myself to meet the full force of the impact, knowing that my efforts were puny and only a miracle could save me from being swept away. I watched it coming down,

down. I was mesmerised, held by the wickedness of its spell. Then suddenly, when I have given myself up for lost, the miracle happened. The tree canted in mid-air and sheered away from me, passing close on my right. Something, perhaps a root creeper, smacked across my cheek. A shower of wet mud splattered over me, then the tree was gone. I could feel the warmth of blood running down my cheek. I waited with my eyes closed, my mouth moving in speechless prayer, expecting to hear a scream from one of the men below. I heard nothing until the tree finally hit the ground far below. Only then did I realise that I was trembling violently.

As I had anticipated, the storm soon abated. It had been a humdinger whilst it lasted. The black clouds quickly dispersed, and the sun came out again, stronger than before. It was safe to carry on. I signalled to Ming and we started to climb again. Another three hundred feet, and the worst was behind us. The hill began to slope upwards at a gentle gradient. Not sheer as it had done before. We were able to move along tracks and gullies and make up for lost time. Presently we came to a knot of rubber trees standing straight and clear against the green background. I noticed that they had been recently tapped. The rubber was still slowly dripping into the small cups fixed at some of the tree bases. On my right I could see two huts tucked away among the trees. There was no evidence of life in the vicinity of the huts. I whispered to Egan, and asked him if he wanted to search the huts. He said he preferred to push on to the top. I took him at his word. After all, it was his patrol.

Eventually we came within seventy feet of the summit. The last few hundred feet had not been so laborious. I had regained my fitness, and the pain in my leg had gone. A thin stream of blood trickled down my neck to remind me of my cut cheek. I dabbed at it with my sweat-rag. Above me the C.T. stopped suddenly and waved one arm through the air, from side to side in a slow windmill fashion. I sidled up beside him and Egan followed. They conferred in whispers for a short while. Occasion-

ally the C.T. pointed to the summit and shrugged his thin shoulders. I did not take much notice of what was being said. My attention was diverted by a commotion below. I heard a loud click as the bren was being cocked. Din was remonstrating with Pyman. They were arguing who should take the bren. I hissed at them to be quiet. They obeyed and Pyman kept the bren. Egan looked over at me and asked my opinion on the next move. I told him flatly there was only one. We would have to go over the top boldly but carefully. He looked along his carbine barrel in deep meditation. Then he smiled wanly and gave me the thumbs-up sign. I replied with a two-fingered gesture which did not mean victory.

I unslung my carbine and released the safety-catch. I eased my Browning in its holster and thumbed back the hammer. There was not a sound emanating from the summit. It hovered above me, clear and mystifying in its greatness. If the Communists were there, then they were either asleep or waiting for us. There was no other possible answer. Together Egan and I crawled up beside Ming. I winked at him and he grinned in return. I looked down at the men below and gave the pre-attack signal. I nudged Egan and with Ming we moved upwards, keeping our eyes glued to the summit. At the last moment a thought flashed through my mind about Egan. And his wife and kids waiting at Butterworth. The proud way he had spoken about them. I shot a glance at him out of the corner of my eye. He had suddenly become a lot older around the face. It was hard and tensed, and I believe he was thinking the same as myself. He wouldn't like what I had made up my mind to do. I wasn't going to allow him to risk what was over the top. I caught hold of his arm roughly and pulled. He slid down behind me, taken by surprise. I shot ahead and breached the last remaining feet. I went over the top alone.

I stopped and dropped on to one knee. I waved my arm in the 'stay' signal for the benefit of those behind. I strained my ears and listened. I swept the immediate vicinity with my eyes, absorbing every detail, looking for every sign which would tell

me that the Commies were around. I heard nothing but my own breathing and the noise made by Egan and the others moving up in the rear. I saw nothing but the trees, the ferns and the blukar. And the old attap hut about thirty yards ahead. I rose and walked slowly towards the hut. I reached the door and lowered my carbine. I raised my boot against the wood and pushed hard. The whole lot collapsed inwards, sending up a fine shower of dust. The air was heavy and foul inside. There was the remains of a small cooking fire in one corner. I kicked over the ashes. I bent down and ran my fingers through them. They were warm. There were four empty Heinz bean tins beside the fire. A few beans and some juice were still sticking to the sides. They had not been opened all that long. I went outside to where Egan and Ming were waiting with the C.T. I deployed the Glapps and my section around the hut. I warned them not to make any noise. I sent Ming and Sobh to look for tracks leading away from the hut.

"Well?" Egan asked when I had finished.

I placed a cigarette between my lips. I struck a match in its waterproof box. I blew out smoke carelessly.

"They were here and not so very long ago," I answered. I added about the fire and the tins. He raised his eyebrows interestedly.

"Do you think they'll come back?"

"Difficult to say. I'll bet a pound to a penny they know by now that we're here. So the chances of them coming back are very remote."

"How will they know?"

"You'd be surprised. Don't forget some tappers live on this hill. They must have known the Commies were around. They'll have warned them by now. Sometimes it pays them to."

Egan looked dejected.

"The tappers couldn't have seen us come here," he said hopefully.

"They don't have to. They can smell us," I replied shortly.

"What do you suggest we do now?"

"Nothing at the moment. Let's wait until Ming and Sobh return. They may find some tracks."

Egan shrugged his shoulders in resignation to my suggestion. I had a feeling he did not entirely agree with me. It was my turn to shrug my shoulders. I pushed the carbine safety-catch to 'on'.

The C.T. had slipped away while we were talking; a matter which reflected adversely on our security. We did not realise the fact until he called to us. He was standing on a huge mound of earth which almost reached the hut roof. Egan and I scrambled up the mound and stood beside him. He began clawing at a heap of ferns on top of the mound. He reminded me of a terrier dog scratching out a rabbit-hole. He pulled the last of the ferns away and revealed a food-dump hidden below. We dived into the hole and sorted it over. There were sacks of rice and dried salted fish. There were about forty tins of Carnation evaporated milk and thirty tins of corned beef stacked neatly in two wooden boxes. The labels were intact and the tops and bottoms of the tins were not rusty. It indicated that they had not been there too long. Between us Egan and I pushed the sacks of rice to one side. Some of them split and the rice poured out around our feet.

Underneath one sack I found a medical kit. I opened it up and rummaged through the contents. There were a fair collection of assorted bandages, some lint and boracic ointment, two large bottles of iodine, several packets of cotton-wool and a pair of tweezers. Two bottles of Beecham's pills and six tins of Elastoplast dressings completed the outfit. Even the Commies were constipated at times. I repacked the contents tidily into the metal container and closed the lid. I grinned to myself when I saw the red cross and the faint initials 'B.R.C.' on the outside. I tucked the kit under my arm. I could do with it at Sungei Lembu. The Red Cross never got round to us. Egan and I climbed out of the dump. We dusted ourselves down and stamped our feet to dislodge the rice stuck to our boots.

"What do you make of that little lot?" Egan asked. His face had brightened to a salmon-pink shade.

"It proves that your informer boy is telling the truth," I admitted. "It also proves that I have some Commies around I do not know about."

"I think it would be a good idea to question the tappers on the hill," Egan suggested.

"Waste of time," I answered uninterestedly.

"What about the monastery, then?"

"Waste of time," I repeated.

"Can't you think of anything?" Egan almost groaned it out.

"Wait till Ming comes back," I grinned, enjoying myself.

"Christ!" Egan breathed.

"Where did this C.T. Johnny surrender, by the way?" I asked suddenly.

"Nibong Tebal. Why?"

"I'm still thinking about Ching Moi Chai."

"I'm sure there's no connection. My bod has never operated in your area. He only heard of the food-dump and camp stopping-place through some of his contacts."

"Then he wouldn't know," I said dismally.

I took a swig at my water-bottle. It was warm and uninviting. I went back to the hut and slaked my thirst in the cool spring water bubbling down the troughs beside the hut. I risked infestation from hook-worm. I rinsed my face and wetted my hair. My cheek started to bleed again.

"Nasty cut," Egan said. "I thought I was a goner when that tree cut loose."

"You weren't the only one," I chuckled.

I felt Egan's hand grip my arm.

"By the way, thanks for pulling me back just before the summit. There was no need for you to do it, but thanks all the same," he said quietly.

"I had no alternative. I began to slip and I had to grab you."

"You are a bloody good liar," Egan said. I didn't answer him.

Ming and Sobh returned a few minutes later.

"Any luck?" I asked Ming.

"No, tuan," he said, shaking his head. "I go a long way down the hill. No tracks."

"Just as I thought," I muttered to myself. The Commies had pulled out before the rain. I sat down in the shade and lit another cigarette. Egan slumped down beside me.

"They must be somewhere," he stated.

"I couldn't agree more," I said. "Right now they could be anywhere within a ten-mile radius of here. They could be in the valley. Or on Seraya or even Bukit Mertajam. It would take an army to search for them, and even then I doubt if we would find them. In instances like this they are always one jump ahead. Some day they'll get brazen and come out into the open, and that will be our opportunity to strike. When that day will be, no one can forecast."

"I suppose you're right," Egan sighed wearily.

It wasn't all action and success in Malaya, as our expedition up Berapit proved. It was those failures which ate into us and spurred us on to greater efforts until finally we did succeed. After we had destroyed the food-dump we scouted about and rounded up quite a few of the tappers living on Berapit. I had no hope of gaining any information, but I went ahead with the idea of satisfying Egan. The tappers were all Chinese working their own private holdings. We grilled them for the best part of three hours. I threatened them, did everything short of actual bodily harm in an effort to break them down. I might just as well have rammed my head against a brick wall for what I got out of it. Those tappers were the biggest pack of liars I had ever met. I could not even find a loophole to detain them for further questioning. I began to lose faith in my own ability. I came out of the interrogation mentally and morally fatigued. Inside me there burned a desire for action and a chance to turn my failure into success. If I could have looked not so far ahead into the future at that time, I doubt if I would have kindled that desire until it became a consuming flame. I got my action later, but at a price I never want to pay again as long as I live.

I HAD a late breakfast the following morning. I was not particularly enthusiastic about the meal. For one thing I was experiencing a fair amount of muscular stiffness, a legacy of the day before. For another the greasy tinned sausages and beans did not look appetising. Goo Ling had done his best, but both his cooking capabilities and facilities were limited. I satisfied myself to some extent by consuming more tea than usual. At least its quality never varied. There was a third point which troubled me: the discovery of the Communist halting-camp on Berapit. I walked over to the large Ordnance map pinned to the wall of my room. My eyes roved over the large area of my district. As I had told Egan, they could be anywhere within its confines. Or maybe farther afield. I doubted if the latter was likely. I clung to the idea that they were still in my area for a definite purpose. Maybe to link up with Ching Moi Chai. It could be that; it could be for many other reasons. The picture was vague and indistinct, but I was certain of one thing. At that precise time the small band of Communists were not strong enough for any concentrated attack on Sungei Lembu.

I went along to Ming's billet, and told him that he could distribute the sports gear and indoor games. I impressed upon him the necessity for it to be treated with care, especially the shuttlecocks. I told him that I held him responsible for the safety of the gear, and he was to report any breakages to me immediately. He took it all in with his usual expressionless manner. He asked me if the men could have part of the compound for a badminton court. I thought over the idea for a few moments. Then I replied in the affirmative, and was blessed by one of his rare smiles. They would have to work hard to make a badminton court. But it would give them some interest as it was for their own pleasure. I spent a short while with Daud and

asked after his general health. He looked fit after his rest, and he perked up when I asked him about Number Six. I was assured that the baby was growing into a really bonny boy. I was about to leave when he thanked me for the twenty dollars. I told him to think nothing of it, but I reminded him that I considered under the circumstances I had a share in Number Six. A kind of foster-father. He saw my point and good-naturedly accepted my view.

I went back to my room and had a shave. The cut on my cheek was still sore, so I manoeuvred around it gently, leaving some beard around the edges. I called in Bakar, and told him that the sentries must be doubled at night until further orders. I gave him no specific reason because I did not want to cause any undue alarm. It was purely a safety precaution and I left it at that. After he had gone, I went down to the river and had a good wash down. It revived me and I felt better. A hefty massage afterwards dealt with most of the aches and pains. I wandered over to No. 1 bren post and checked the bren. It was clean and well oiled. The sentry watched me as I fiddled with the mechanism. I asked him to explain the absence of the second gunner. He told me that he was in the canteen drinking tea. I did not take exception to that. I had a soft spot under my outer armour for the men who manned the guns and had such a lousy existence.

I returned to my room, and waded through a pile of Force Orders and secret information leaflets which had come in during my period in hospital. There was one marked 'Top Secret', and I read through it carefully. It was a warning to all jungle squad commanders about the latest Communist devilry in laying ambushes. It was customary for the actual ambush to be laid on one side of the road or track only. Then, when the ambushed party was fired upon, it was quite natural that they would seek the shelter given on the opposite side of the road. That generally gave them the opportunity of re-grouping and hitting back. But the Communists had invented a means to stop that. It had been established that they were using sharp wooden

panjis¹ protruding about eighteen inches above the ground and hidden in the undergrowth beside the roadside. The purpose was very clear and deadly. When the ambushed party flung themselves into the bushes they became impaled on the panjis and, if not killed outright, they suffered a horrible and lingering death. It was pointed out that at times the trap was used where deep ditches ran along the roadside. The panjis ran the full length of the ditch, covering a distance of perhaps fifty yards. An example of the deadliness of the device was given when a recent patrol of Special Constables were ambushed in Johore State. When the relief party arrived, seven out of a total of ten Specials were found at the bottom of a ditch impaled on the panjis which had penetrated their stomachs and hearts. I withdrew the leaflet from the pile I was reading, and placed it in my Secret File which was locked away in a part of my desk. I thought about what I had read for a long time afterwards. I was still thinking about it when Goo Ling brought in my lunch.

After lunch I sat out on the verandah. It had been my intention to finish reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. I started off with the best intention in the world, but I found it difficult to concentrate. In the end I gave it up as a bad job. Not to be outdone, I cheated by turning over the pages until I came to the last few. To satisfy my curiosity I wanted to find out who the murderer was. It was the person least suspected of the crime. Most thrillers were the same. I folded the book on my lap and looked across the compound. The men were already working on the badminton court. It was a refreshing change to see them toiling so energetically in the hot afternoon sun. Had they been on patrol, it would have been a different matter. There would have been plenty of suppressed groans. I suppose working like hell to make a badminton court was not in the same category. It certainly looked that way.

I was on the point of dozing off, lulled by the heat, when Bakar came along and broke the spell. He handed me his leave application and his fountain-pen, taking it for granted that I

¹ Sharp-pointed wooden stakes.

would sign. I scanned the application briefly. I signed my name with a flourish at the foot of the form, and handed both that and the pen back to Bakar. After he had gone I attempted to do several odd jobs in my room. I started a lot and finished none. It was one of those days when I felt completely at a loose end. I needed something to help work off my listlessness. Then an inspiration blossomed in my mind. I pulled off my shirt and went down to the compound. Honest work had never harmed anyone.

I entered into the work of constructing the badminton court with a sudden spurt of energy. At the start I was a little out of form using the hastily improvised tools, but after some instruction from Peter and Pyman I settled into rhythm. The space for the court had been chosen between the wireless mast and the canteen. It wasn't the best and smoothest stretch of the compound but it was the area which would give the players more space to move around and bash hell out of the shuttlecocks. Two hours of hard slogging saw the court taking shape. Then we were faced with our biggest problem: the levelling off. We did not boast a steam-roller at Sungei Lembu, so we resorted to the next best thing, the armoured car. It did its work admirably even if it did leave behind a mosaic of tyre marks. To remove those, we routed out a supply of large sacks and, after wetting them thoroughly in the river, we drew them over the court surface, the result being that the tyre marks were erased and the ground left smooth and flat. Next came the erection of the net and posts. This operation was completed in record time, and I took a great delight in being one of the persons who dug the first post hole. We finished the job just before tea-time, and the whole crowd of us stood back to admire our handiwork. We were tired and bathed in sweat but, most important of all, we were happy.

I had my second wash in the river within a short space of time. The manual work had done its stuff. It had blown the cobwebs out of my system and I became more industrious than earlier in the day. I completed the odd jobs I had started and

neglected to finish. I wound up by typing out a report for Rodway dealing with my patrol up Berapit with Egan. I spent a little time thinking about the next day's programme. I hadn't anything particular in mind, so at the back of my mind I kept a routine patrol to Penanti Estate in reserve. Goo Ling popped his head round the door and asked if I wanted any tea. I told him I did not, and asked him to send Peter in. He wasn't long in coming.

"Sit down," I said to him when he appeared in the doorway. I nodded my head towards a chair by my desk. He looked at me oddly, but he sat down. I lit a cigarette and flicked the match across the room.

"I'd like to have a little talk with you," I said pleasantly. "First of all, about the tombola game I brought with the other stuff. I know what Asians are like for gambling, especially the Chinese, and they can't afford to lose a lot of money. So I am going to put you in charge of running the tombola. I'm not intending to abolish a little flutter altogether, but I want you to control the stakes. Limit it to five cents a card, winner take all. Got that?"

He shifted in his seat. I think he was getting a bit suspicious at my amiable attitude.

"Yes, sir," he murmured after a pause.

"Good. Now there's one other thing. Is Din's wife still living in the hut across the road?"

He deliberated a little. He licked his lips and his Adam's apple bounced.

"No, sir. She's gone to Butterworth to live with her people." He gave me the impression that he was afraid of what he had told me.

"When did she go?"

"While Mr Nield was here."

"Was there any trouble between her and Din?" I asked. "I'm only asking because I can see a change in him since I came out of hospital. It is not like him to act like he did yesterday on Berapit," I added when I saw concern creep over his face.

"There was no trouble between them, sir," he said quietly. I did not believe him. I could always tell when Peter was lying.

"Now we'll get back to you again," I said, switching the subject. "Have you thought any more about being a regular?"

He hung his head and shifted in the chair again. Then he looked at me levelly.

"I don't want to be a regular, sir," he said emphatically.

"You still do not want to leave here, is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I told you I could pull some strings and get you back here after your depot training. Remember?"

"I remember, sir. That part of it is all right, but if I was promoted I would have to leave, wouldn't I?"

"Only if you became a sergeant or an inspector. And as I am sure you would one day get your inspectorship, then you would have to go in the long run," I said easily.

"That's the trouble," he commented gloomily.

"I can't say any more. If you want to make the police your career, you must become a regular. The Special Constabulary will be disbanded when the Emergency ends. By the way, Mr Lovie mentioned you were an interpreter for the Japanese during the occupation. Did you know Japanese before that?" I asked. Then I remembered about his father and I felt a clot. I studied his face. He showed no outward emotion.

"No, sir," he answered. "When the Japanese took over they singled out all the English-speaking Asians because they were short of interpreters. Then they pruned us down until only four were left in the running. I refused to collaborate at first. That was how they came to behead my father. When they threatened to do the same to my mother, I gave in. Then they sent me to school to be taught Japanese by an English-speaking Jap officer".

"Did they ill-treat you at all?" I asked. He wasn't suspicious any more. And talking to him helped me a lot.

"No. I came directly under the Japanese general. He issued

me with a special pass, and I used to drive around in his staff car with the Japanese flag flying on the bonnet," he said excitedly. I saw his eyes light up briefly.

"And what about the Japanese soldiers?"

"They left me alone. They were afraid because of their general. He was a fierce man. He called himself the Tiger of Malaya."

I had read about him. He committed suicide before the Allied invasion of Malaya.

"But you must have hated your work, remembering your father," I asked gently.

His eyes clouded over and he hung his head again.

"I hated all of them, except the general. I can't say that I could really hate him. He was a difficult man to understand," he answered truthfully.

I pinched out my cigarette and lit another. I looked across at Peter. He was smiling at me in a way I cannot define.

"Tell me," I said quietly. "Why is it you are so keen to stay at Sungei Lembu? Apart from just liking it here?"

His face turned serious. Then he looked a shade embarrassed.

"Because you are a lonely man, sir. Because I feel it my duty to stay here. Because I like you, sir," he said frankly.

I have had some unexpected things said to me at times. Nice things. Bad things. Mostly the latter. But I think that what Peter said to me that day touched me more than anything I can remember. Peter, the Tamil boy, whom I had at times treated worse than dirt. And yet, for all that, he could find it in his unspoiled heart to speak to me as he did. Looking back now I feel that those few simple words of his, said honestly and truthfully from deep down inside him, became the turning-point of my life.

"Thank you, Peter," I said softly. I could not say anything else.

"I know why you called me here today, sir. Because you were lonely. Because you wanted someone to talk to. That is the truth, isn't it?" he said gently.

I nodded my head. I had given up trying to hide anything from him. I couldn't keep back the truth from him any longer. Or from myself. I looked around the room that had been my prison for a long time.

"In base I've shut myself inside these four walls. I've looked at them for hours on end, day in, day out. I know every little mark and scratch on them. Which way the grain runs where the paint doesn't hide it. I've thought of nothing else but myself and this room, and now I hate it so much I want to tear it down, never want to see it again because it reminds me too much of myself. Then today I went and helped the men build the badminton court and everything changed. I worked with them and I helped them to build, and when it was finished I felt as I had never felt for a long time. I looked closely at their faces and instead of hardness and mistrust I saw friendliness, and when I saw that in their faces I emerged not from the prison of my room but from the prison of myself," I said dreamily.

"I noticed those things, too, sir. It made me happy as well because I have waited a long time to see them. I think now I begin to understand what Mr Lovie meant when he said you were hiding from something," Peter said, still softly.

I ground the cigarette butt into the floor. I looked across at Peter again. A different Peter than I had known before. He was no more a boy to me. In a few brief minutes he had grown suddenly into a mature man.

"During the war I lost the best friend I ever had. We were like brothers. After he was killed, I vowed that I would never grow to be fond of another man in the way I was fond of him. I became accustomed to people disliking me, and in turn me disliking them. Once or twice I nearly slipped, at moments when I was caught off guard. So I became hard, as strict as it was possible to be. I knew that was the way to make men hate me, and while they were hating me there was no chance of them getting to like me. But I know now that it didn't quite work out that way. This afternoon the truth came to me that all I had built up over the years was a hateful loathing of myself

because in a moment of self-pity I had been too weak to amass the courage to combat reality. That is what I have been hiding from all these years. The truth about myself. I always looked upon myself as the wronged person, the victimised person. I wrapped myself up in self-pity so tightly that I couldn't see anything clearly."

"And now, sir? The future?" Peter's voice drifted across the room to me.

"I want to leave the past behind me. It has died this afternoon, and that is how I want it to stay. These four walls are not going to hold me any more. I have freed myself from them, and from myself as I was, for ever. There are some instances where I still stand by my convictions, but they in no way concern Sungei Lembu. And that is why they are best left unmentioned. I am grateful to you, Peter. Very grateful indeed."

He left the chair and came over and stood beside me. I felt his hand press on my shoulder. I looked up into his face. It was not white like mine. It was dark because he was born that way. But it was honest. I studied it and assessed it, and I accepted it as such.

"I can understand now, sir. And I know that the men, too, understand. They like you, sir, but they also have been afraid to show it. Their action has not been guided by little things you have done for them, money you have loaned or given, but because of the intention behind what you have done."

I reached up and closed my hand over his small brown fist. I watched his back as he left the room. As I had watched it at Relau. But there was a difference. This time I was not looking at a hurt, embittered man: I was looking at a friend.

I did not notice Goo Ling come in to light the lamp. I did not know he was there until he began to work the pump, and the light stabbed the darkness. He asked me again if I wanted any tea. I glanced at my watch. I ruminated for a few seconds, then I asked him to bring me in some biscuits and some tea in about half an hour. He hung the lamp on its hook from the rafter and went quietly out through the back door. I lit a

cigarette and wandered over to the guardroom. I wanted to check if any signals had come in. The operator was bent low over the set, twiddling the knobs. He looked round at me and shook his head, having guessed why I had come over. Then he went on twiddling. The reception was not very good, but after a while it became clearer. I heard the Penang operator passing routine messages to his Butterworth counterpart. Then the set faded out just as something important was going over the air. I had caught only a faint reference to the word 'ambush' and Fraser's Hill. Then suddenly the set came back to life and the volume needle whisked half-way across the dial. The message was still being read. I craned forward and listened. The message ended, and the set went dead. The operator switched off, then turned to face me.

"Very bad, sir. A very bad day for Malaya," he murmured softly.

"Yes. Very bad," I repeated mechanically.

Sir Henry Gurney, the High Commissioner for the Federation of Malaya, had been ambushed and killed on his way to Fraser's Hill.

There would be no holding the Communists now.

[15]

I WAS aroused from my sleep during the night. The room was in pitch darkness except for the thin beam of carefully shaded torchlight which shone on to my face. I blinked several times into the light before I recognised Peter's shape looming above me. He was saying something about Bukit Seraya, and I detected the urgency in his voice. The torchlight snapped out and I heard him rummaging for matches. I saw the pale orange glow flicker as he struck one. Then he lit the pressure-lamp and began pumping until the room was flooded with light. I swung my legs out of bed and sat on the edge. I looked at my

watch. It was a little after 3 a.m. Peter replaced the glass over the mantle and left the lamp burning on the desk.

"What's on?" I asked him dreamily.

He came over and stood above me again. "A tapper brings information, sir," he replied.

I lit a cigarette and puffed away. The smoke made me cough.

"Where is he?" I asked in between spasms.

"Outside with Ming, sir."

"Bring them in," I grunted.

He drifted outside and returned with Ming and the tapper. I eyed him up and down critically. He was a squat, round little fellow, no more than five feet tall. His shirt and trousers fitted tightly to his overweight body. He looked something like a trussed-up sack of potatoes. Ming was talking to him in Cantonese. I couldn't understand a word of it.

"What have you to say?" I asked the tapper in Malay. I smiled at him.

He took comfort from my friendly attitude. He told me his story. He had awakened just after 2 a.m. He had a few chores to do and a meal to prepare before commencing tapping. He had gone outside his hut to urinate. It was then that he had noticed a camp-fire burning on Seraya. In the light from the flames he had seen several figures moving around. They were too far away for him to say who they were or what they were wearing, but he knew they were none of the villagers. The tappers had a hut there, where they made their rubber and hung it out to dry, but it was too early for them to be there and they did not light camp-fires. I butted in and questioned him closely on one or two points. He answered promptly and clearly, leaving no doubt in my mind that the campers were Communists. Probably the gang Egan and I had missed on Berapit.

"Where are the other tappers now?" I asked.

"In their houses, tuan. They are afraid to go out," he answered sensibly enough.

The room became very quiet. Peter stood over by the desk

in silence. Ming stayed in the background, nodding his head up and down. I looked at my finger-nails. I began to chew one, spitting the loose pieces of nail on to the floor. I went back over what the tapper had said, adding a few of my own deductions. The Communists would obviously move off at dawn or just before. They would never stay where they were in daylight, so near a village. They occupied a good defence position on a ledge, wide and flat. There were two tracks leading to it, one on either side, with a fair drop in between. The vital thing which concerned me was that if the Communists made a stand, they could hold us off for hours and all the advantages would be on their side. As I could not foresee which way they would go after leaving their position, it was useless to contemplate ambush. It would have to be a frontal attack on the ledge. I grinned at my nails when the thought struck me that the Communists were camped barely three miles from my base. The cheeky bastards!

I stubbed out my cigarette. I briefed Ming.

"Get No. 1 section ready to move off within half an hour. Carbines, stens and grenades. No bren. Grenades primed with four-second fuses. The method of attack will be two-pronged frontal. We'll take cover in the blukar until dawn. Then we'll move off through the rubber trees. We'll have to run across the open ground between the trees and the foot of Seraya, and trust to luck. Deploy zig-zag running tactics when necessary. If any man is hit, he must be left and the others carry on. You take four men and use the right-hand track to the ledge. I'll take the rest and use the left-hand track. If there is any sign that the Communists are pulling out before dawn, then we attack immediately. The signal for the break-away from the rubber trees and the subsequent attack will be my fire. I shall aim at the enemy, and there is bound to be some confusion. That will see us part of the way across the open ground. Finally, one very important thing. No crossfire across the gully. We may hit each other. Got it all?"

He nodded and went off. I could hear his bare feet thumping down the verandah. I turned to Peter. I pointed at the tapper.

"Take this man to the guardroom," I said. "For his own safety, he must remain here and not be seen with us. Tell the wireless operator to give him anything he wants. Then you get dressed and join the section."

Peter sidled towards the door. The tapper bowed and followed him. I dressed quickly. I slammed a magazine into my carbine, and put eight more into my pockets. I checked and cocked my Browning pistol. I slipped it back into its holster and fastened the leather strap over the butt. I clipped two brace of grenades on to my belt. Ming came along to tell me the section was ready. I glanced briefly at them standing silently on the verandah. No. 2 section men were lounging around in doorways, looking very glum. I tried to cheer them up by telling them their turn would come some day. It made little difference; they still looked miserable.

We moved off through the gates and down the road towards Pondok Labu. The surface showed pale and insipid in the darkness. It was easy going on the road, and I set a fast pace. We reached Pondok Labu with ample time to spare. We passed through the scattered village quietly, unobtrusively. The inhabitants were out of sight behind closed doors; even so, I was conscious of unseen eyes watching our every move. We moved silently through the blukar and halted where the rubber trees started. I melted back into the sparse cover of the blukar, and around me the men followed my example. I looked up at the sweeping slopes of Seraya. The fire had burned low on the ledge, and it was too dark to see anything clearly. I strained my ears and caught the sound of muffled movement. Occasionally I heard the sharp click of a gun-bolt. I sat back on my heels and waited for dawn.

It came grey and bleak out of the east. Swiftly it became lighter and transformed the area into sharp relief. I looked up the hill again and focused my field-glasses on to the ledge. I drew in my breath sharply and felt my blood tingle with excite-

ment. In the greyish light I saw some figures moving about. I counted up to twelve. Ten in khaki and two in green. I concentrated on their armament. I could see some had rifles slung over their backs. It was difficult to see what the others carried. I gave the ledge one final sweep, looking for a bren. I could not see one. I lowered the glasses on to my chest. I pulled the strap over my head and wound it round them. I laid them in the grass and memorised the position. I looked across at Ming and gave him the signal. I changed my tactics on the spur of the moment. It was too light to walk down the avenue of trees. We would be spotted before we had gone twenty yards.

I rose to my feet and leaned against the first tree. I lifted my carbine and nestled the butt into my shoulder. I squeezed the trigger five times, and I was racing along the line of trees before the sound had died away. Rapid firing burst out on my right, and I knew Ming and his men were in action. Then the others opened up on my left. I did not pay any attention to the ledge or what the Communists were doing. I knew I had only seconds to get across the clearing, and my life and the lives of others were in the balance.

I reached the last tree bare inches in front of Latif, Peter, Sobh and Daud. The open ground lay uninviting before me. I felt as if it were mocking me, daring me to go on. I glanced quickly to my right. Ming and his men had already broken clear of the rubber, running zig-zag like scalded cats. Then the firing started from up the hill and the bullets whined everywhere. Wide at first, but gradually becoming more settled in their accuracy. I had been a good sprinter at school, usually carrying off several prizes for my prowess. I had my chance to shine again after a lapse of some twenty years. I gritted my teeth and broke into a sprint almost from scratch, praying that the Communists were bad shots.

My legs thrashed beneath me like overworked pistons. There were no cheers from the grandstand. Only the angry, whistling whine of bullets to remind me where I was. Then, abruptly, the years rolled back. I remembered the training I had had.

The correct breathing co-ordinated with movement. I was running down the hundred yards stretch at Prospect Park. The cheers from the grandstand were coming back like sweet music to my ears. They were shouting for me, spurring me on towards the white tape stretched across the green field. My feet were running smoothly, effortlessly over the soft turf. Overhead the sun was a shining golden ball set in a deep blue sky. I kept my eyes fixed to the white tape. With each leg movement it came nearer and nearer, and somehow I knew I would win. The cheering increased to a voluminous magnitude, deafening in its intensity. Then, swiftly, the applause died away and with it the tape disappeared. The blukar, the rocks and the bullets took its place. The years had crowded back on me again. I put on an extra spurt and dived headlong, my arms stretched out above my head, the carbine gripped between both fists.

The undergrowth broke my fall. It acted like a soft, padded cushion. I had sorted myself out when I heard a cry to my rear and Latif disappeared into the bushes. I scrambled back to where I had seen him fall. I found him sitting up and rubbing his left foot. Then I saw the reason. A bullet had ripped away part of his rubber sole and heel. It had been a narrow escape. I returned to where I had landed. Peter and Sobh were safely tucked away a few feet in front. Daud was crouched a little to their left. He looked a bit white around the gills.

I raised my head above the grass, as far as safety permitted. The Communists were more clearly outlined now. They had firmly entrenched themselves along the line of rocks which formed the edge of the ledge. Behind them the escape route to the top of Seraya gleamed white in the rising sunlight. I glanced across the gully and saw small puffs of grey smoke dart out of the foliage at infrequent intervals. Ming and the others were retaliating. The Communists appeared to be concentrating on their position, But not for long. Some of them switched their aim in my direction. The bullets whined and smacked into the cover around me. Several ricocheted off the rocks, adding a new danger to the position. We had to keep our heads down.

Temporarily the tables had been turned with a vengeance. We were the ones who were bogged down!

The Communists maintained a steady barrage for the best part of an hour. In the main it was only wild shooting. We were determined not to offer ourselves as open targets. I assessed the enemy's chief armament as being Lee Enfield rifles. They had higher velocity than our carbines and also outranged us. Occasionally I could pick out the smaller cough of a carbine which told me that Ming was still in action.

The Communist fire began to ease off. I waited about ten minutes before I considered it prudent to move. I inched my way forward until I came to the edge of the grass and found myself confronted with a few small boulders. I raised my head slowly and again looked up at the ledge. Some of the Communists were pulling out. I could see five or six figures moving cautiously up the track, away from the ledge. It was too blatantly open to be true. I was not falling for that one, and I hoped Ming would not either. It was an old dodge. Some of the Communists were still down behind the rocks waiting for us to show ourselves. I lowered my head and nodded to the four men with me. I began to belly-crawl through the grass. Slowly at first, then gradually increasing speed. The silence made me bold.

I came to rest beside a large boulder precariously poised on the edge of the gully. Beyond that, the cover was ominously sparse all the way to the ledge. I bit at my lips in annoyance; undecided what to do next. I eased myself round the edge of the boulder as far as I dared. Only two Communists were visible on the track. The others had been swallowed up in the undergrowth. I ruminated that perhaps they were lying in wait, intending to return when I showed my hand. I mouthed an unprintable oath under my breath. I was becoming fed up with the cat-and-mouse tactics. I loosed off the remaining five rounds in my magazine. The two figures broke into a run, telling me by their actions that I had missed. I changed magazines and pumped off two more bullets. Across the gully Ming and his

men joined in. So did Peter, Sobh and Latif. Then the fun began again.

Heads popped above the rocks like lightning. Rifle-barrels hove into view. The Communists became trigger-happy, firing wide. We peppered them from both sides. Heads bobbed down, then up again in disorderly rhythm. It was like a puppet-show on the seashore at Brighton. In less than half an hour I was down to my last three magazines. The rest of my men must have been in the same plight. In between the exchanges of fire I had time to observe that there was no sign of gunfire from the track. It indicated that those Communists had beaten it while the time was ripe, leaving their comrades on the ledge to face the music. Then suddenly the opposition gunfire began to lessen. I took advantage of the situation.

I unclipped a grenade from my belt and pulled out the pin. I knew the throwing distance was too great, but the explosion would liven things up. I jerked myself upright with the grenade clenched in my right fist. It was the fastest throw I have ever made. I ducked down behind the boulder as the grenade left my hand. It soared through space above the gully and exploded in mid-air, yards short of the ledge. The smoke had not disappeared when I stood up and launched the second grenade.

The Communist resistance started to crumble. In ones and twos they withdrew from the ledge towards the track. Occasionally one would turn round and take a pot-shot at our position. I gave the order to advance. We went forward in united co-ordination. Forward. Pause. Fire. Forward. Pause. Fire. The Communists continued up the track, faster, more desperately. Two stumbled and in the next second picked themselves up and carried on. I pumped two bullets at the last man in line. He flung up his arms and toppled. He righted himself and staggered a few paces. I gave him two more and he stopped his staggering. His legs ceased to move as if they had been severed by a huge scythe. He fell and remained still.

I made my way boldly towards the ledge, conserving my fire.

By the time I reached it the last of the enemy had disappeared. I had the feeling that they were running out of ammunition, too. I stepped over the rocks and on to the ledge. At the same time Ming and his men joined me from the other direction.

I detailed Peter and Daud to remain on the ledge, and then I moved up the track with the other men for the follow-up. With a brief downward glance I stepped over the wounded Communist. He was delirious and moaning. My boots slipped in the blood from his body as I went on.

I paused and studied the track surface. There were a few blood spots visible, but nothing to denote profuse wound bleeding. I followed the trail for the best part of three hundred yards before I ran into a dead end. My main source of follow-up had ceased. I took stock of the situation. Higher up, the terrain became more dense and treacherous. One man could conceal himself anywhere and pick us off at will. I lodged that knowledge at the back of my mind, to remind me if I became too careless. I split my party up into two sections, and we went in separate directions in our quest for fresh evidence of the Communists' retreat route. I was working on the assumption that our quarry had left the track and were escaping through the undergrowth. It was the tactics most people would have employed, and I did not look upon the Communists as exceptions.

After considerable patience and manœuvring I was fortunate. I came upon a clear trail crushed through the undergrowth. I kept to it for a reasonable distance, prodding thick clumps with my carbine before venturing through them. Presently the trail began to thin as the foliage became thicker, but some fresh blood-spots told me I was on the right track. I was now moving up Seraya parallel with the original escape route, and as the gradient became steeper the going became harder. I gave a signal to the men in my rear to space out. If my luck was going to hold, we would run into something soon. I moved slower and with more caution. Several times I paused and listened, and when I heard nothing I moved on. I adopted the half-crouch

position as a precaution during future movement. My eyes and ears were working overtime. The gradient gradually lessened and became flat when I reached the edge of the undergrowth. I looked ahead at the unrevealing rock, and I knew I had lost. The trail had gone, and I was back where I had started.

I was disturbed by a sudden outbreak of firing way over to my right. It had started with rifle fire and had finished with carbine. I shouted to my men and bounded off in the direction from which the firing had originally emanated, keeping to the rock. I could not express an opinion as to what had happened, but Ming must have found something. I careered madly and blindly, bruising myself and tearing my shirt on the thorns. The sweat poured down me. I reached the track in the last stages of exhaustion. I was about thirty yards ahead of the men. At that point I was above the dense undergrowth part of the track, exposed on a clear, winding ochre stretch.

I stood in the middle of the track and listened, concentrating on my right where Ming and his men would have been. Suddenly I was attracted by a crashing in the undergrowth ahead. I did not know the cause until the bloodstained Communist burst out on to the track several yards in front of me. He was a tall fellow, big and square. He was unarmed except for a long, wicked-looking jungle-knife held firmly in his right hand. He had lost his cap in his flight, and his thick black hair stood up like a hedgehog. He remained motionless for a few seconds, staring down at me. Then he let out a bellow and charged down the track like a mad bull, waving the knife round his head. The sun glinted on the steel and produced a glistening silver arc. I heard a movement behind me as Latif and the others came on to the track. Then my attention was focused full on the Communist.

I raised my carbine and got him fixed in the sights. I squeezed the trigger twice. I could almost see the bullets thud into his broad chest. I might just as well have thrown paper pellets at him. He just shook his head and came on, faster. I squeezed the trigger again and the hammer clicked on emptiness. I had no

time to re-load a fresh magazine. I imagined the knife cutting into my neck or piercing my chest. I yelled to Latif and reversed my carbine. I laid the butt out before me at an angle like a cricket bat. I braced myself to meet the impact. I hadn't thought of my pistol or running away. The gap between the Communist and me narrowed. The knife began to whirl slower, a sign of the thrust. I swung my carbine up over my right shoulder and balanced my weight on my left foot. Then a carbine spat beside me and the chatter of a sten followed. I lowered my carbine easily and gratefully.

I caught a glimpse of Latif's face, grim and hard, as he went past me and fired again. The Communist stopped as if he had run into a steam-roller. He stood upright for a few split seconds and the knife clattered to the ground. The blood gushed out rich and red all over him and he buckled at the knees. He went down slowly, tiredly, his mouth working noiselessly and his eyes rolling around in their sockets. His legs thrashed in wild spasms, then became still. I went forward and stood over him. I bent down and turned him over on to his back. It had taken a lot of bullets to stop him. I picked up the knife and handed it to Latif. Then I shuddered when I thought of what it might have been. I heard movement again above me. I tensed, then relaxed when I saw Ming and his men step on to the track. I trailed my carbine and went forward to meet them.

I questioned Ming about the Communist. His answer put the picture into perspective. After leaving me he had struck a straight course into the undergrowth, then swung north when he found tracks. At first he had thought he was on to the remnants of the main body, then he had become suspicious when he had noticed several obvious clues and no attempt made to hide the trail. He had fanned his men out and proceeded cautiously, rightly assuming that one man had been left behind to fight a rearguard action. He had come across the Communist concealed among some bushes, and from there I knew the rest of the story. I summed up the situation quickly. The delaying action caused by the one Communist had given the

others the opportunity to escape. There was no way out but to abandon the follow-up.

We dragged the body back to the ledge. Peter and Daud had made the wounded Communist comfortable in some shade. I was surprised to find him still alive, but he was clinging to life tenaciously. Several bullets had passed through his body, which proved that some of the men had scored hits as well as myself. There was nothing I could do for him. I knew he would die before I could get him to Sungei Lembu. I knelt down beside him and wiped the blood from his upper body. I forced some water between his lips, and he opened his eyes and looked up at me appealingly. Like a dumb, tortured animal. Then he recognised me and what I represented, and his eyes turned to hate. He started to twist and turn, mumbling deliriously. I held him down and he stopped struggling. But he continued to mumble away.

"What's he saying?" I asked Peter, looking up at him. His face was ashen. Peter never did like the sight of blood. There was a long pause before Peter spoke.

"He is saying, death to all Imperialists, sir. He talks of the day of reckoning when Russia and China govern the world and everyone will be free. He talks of Stalin and Comrade Mao and the extermination of the white race. All is not clear what he says, but what I have said I understand."

The Communist's breathing became shallow and he ceased to talk. He was perfectly still. A thin trickle of blood began to run out from the corners of his mouth. The eyes opened again wide and bored into mine. The sweat dripped from my chin on to his face. Beneath my hands I could feel his body tensing weakly. I bent closer towards him and whispered in Malay. He made one last despairing effort. His mouth twisted and he spat in my face. The effort proved too much. He sank back and lapsed into unconsciousness. I wiped the spittle off my face with the back of my hand. I stood up and continued to look down at him.

To the last he had been defiantly contemptuous. He had lived

and fought for his Communist faith. For years he had followed it blindly, faithfully. In return it had done little for him, and now he was dying for it. He had never paused to think that Stalin and Mao were rich and prosperous and wanted for no luxury. While he had to live a life of being hounded, stealing his daily food and, if he couldn't steal any more, having to rely on the fruits and berries he could pick for sustenance. Throughout Malaya and the world there were thousands, perhaps millions, like him. Communism was his salvation. He believed in nothing else. I did not feel any anger towards him as he lay there at my feet. I only pitied him and wondered what he could have been.

He died five minutes later, believing to the end.

[16]

As I had prophesied, the death of Sir Henry Gurney boosted Communist morale. It was an achievement which their propagandists could not fail to crow about. They set to and made the most of it, and the result was a new upsurge of terrorism in many parts of the peninsula. In sharp contrast, the public morale declined. It had been a big blow to their sense of security. It has always been my opinion that the Malayan Emergency was a direct result of the pacifist attitude of the British Labour Party: their failure to go to the aid of France in Indo-China; had they done so, I doubt if the Malayan crisis would have arisen; their failure to envisage the threat of Communist domination in the Far East; their failure to hit out with the mailed fist and suppress an uprising before it had obtained a firm hold and, finally, their obvious pandering to Russia and Communist China, the twin desecrators of freedom in the East.

Sungei Lembu was one of those small, isolated places which escaped a general shake-up. Life continued for some weeks in a run of humdrum, unexciting monotony. I received the long-

awaited letter from Lois, and she was ready to start a new life in Ipoh. In a way I admired her courage. I replied to her letter by return, giving her Lim's address and wishing her the best luck in the world. She wrote to me twice during her first fortnight in Ipoh, telling me that she was settling in nicely and what a grand old fellow Lim was. Then I heard from Lim himself, writing at great length to assure me that everything in the garden was rosy. Taking all things into account, I experienced a considerable amount of satisfaction, and I relayed that feeling in a long letter to Harry and Margaret.

Bakar had gone off and got himself married. He must have had a riotous time because when he returned to Sungei Lembu he looked like nothing on earth. A lot of his cockiness had been knocked out of him. I could almost go so far as to say he was a changed man. He was reserved and, most amazing to relate, efficient. He surprised me by presenting me with some of the wedding fare, neatly packed in a very colourful cardboard box. It tasted very much like granulated sawdust, but I ate it all, just to show friendliness.

I took the opportunity of once more catching up with my personal mail. Eventually I came to the last item on the list. The outside of the envelope was clearly marked Inland Revenue. I screwed my eyes at it in disgust. This was going to hurt. I glanced at the date at the foot of the demand note. It was several weeks overdue. Someone must have been hopping mad in Kuala Lumpur. Leeches. Bloodsuckers. In my mind I called them all sorts of nasty names. Reluctantly I wrote out a cheque and slipped it into the envelope. I licked the flap savagely, and sealed it with a bang from my clenched fist. I threw it into my 'out' tray. It nestled on top of the other letters and still mocked me.

In the afternoon the travelling barber came. His presence jogged my memory that I needed a crew cut. I went over and sat on the chair outside the guardroom. I lit a cigarette and told the barber to cut it short. I illustrated it by showing him my thumb and forefinger no more than half an inch apart. He

gaped at me. He was accustomed to grooming the long, waved tresses of the Malays, and he just could not grasp why anyone should choose to resemble a scored pig. He reminded me that on previous occasions he had always trimmed my hair sparingly. I told him that I had changed my mind. He still looked doubtful, not knowing whether to believe me or not. I insisted, and he gave in. When he had finished I looked in the mirror he thrust in front of my face. I really looked a sorry sight. I asked the barber if he thought it would grow again. He hunched his shoulders in a manner which could mean anything. He was not very helpful.

I wandered over to the badminton court and watched a four-some in play. Pyman had all the makings of a good player. During the interval he asked me if I would like to join in, offering me his place. I explained that I was not a very good player, and in addition I was not feeling too energetic. He appeared satisfied with my explanation, and returned to finish the game. Peter waylaid me on the way back to my room. He told me that Din would like to see me on an urgent matter. I told him to bring the fellow along. Din looked pretty grim when Peter ushered him in. He was agitated and looking seedy around the eyes. I waited for him to calm down.

"Now, what's the trouble?" I asked after a long pause.

Din started talking so quickly that it was impossible for me to follow. My general knowledge of the Malayan language was never brilliant, and fast speech always stumped me. I saw no likelihood of Din calming down inside half an hour, so I butted in and told him to take it easy. I turned to Peter.

"You tell me," I said.

"It's his wife, sir."

"Obviously," I said shortly, having translated that much.

"Come on, spill the beans," I added.

"Well, sir, there has been friction between Din and his wife ever since you stopped him sleeping in the hut across the road."

"Go on," I prompted when he paused.

Peter drew in a deep breath and gulped hard. I peered at him from under my eyelids.

"While you were in hospital there was a terrible row between Din and his wife. She said you had no right to keep him away from her all the time. She said she would go away, and never return if Din could not stay with her some nights."

"Is that why she left when Mr Nield was here?"

"Yes, sir," he said slowly.

"And you knew that then?"

"Yes, sir." His voice had dropped to a whisper.

"Then why didn't you tell me so when I asked you before?"

He paused to lick his lips.

"I thought you would be angry."

"You bloody clot!" I snapped.

Peter shuffled his feet. Din just remained dumb.

"Now let us get this straight once and for all time," I began slowly to Peter. "Din is my responsibility and I have every right to insist that he remains in this base. When he used to sleep in the hut, he was unknowingly exposing himself to danger. Any Communist agent could have sneaked there at night, and slit his throat and taken his gun while he was asleep. Din would have been the target, not his wife. As for his wife, I have no jurisdiction over her whatsoever. If she chooses to stay in the hut or clear off that is entirely her affair. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, sir. But his wife says she will write to the Commissioner about all this."

"Colonel Young will be pleased. She can write to whom she damn well likes. Now, back to where we were. I want Din to understand that I am not going to allow him to sleep in the hut at any time. I will now tell you what I propose to do about this business. If Din cares to submit an application to me asking for transfer to B.M., I'll arrange it with Mr Rodway. He'll be able to get married quarters there, and then his wife can return to him. I don't want to lose a good man, but at the same time I do not want to keep a discontented man here. It's bad

for general morale and discipline. Now tell him what I have told you."

I lit a cigarette and waited while Peter translated to Din. I watched Din's face cloud over as he listened. Peter was doing his best, but not getting far. I could tell that from the gist of the conversation. I puffed away at my cigarette and let them get on with it. They were arguing well. I heard quite a few choice swear-words.

"What does he say?" I asked.

"He doesn't want to leave jungle squad, sir," Peter replied, all hot and bothered.

"Hell's bells!" I hissed. "Take Din away and go over it with him again. Drill into him what I have offered."

"I'll speak with him, sir. Maybe I can convince him," Peter replied somewhat doubtfully. The pair of them moved off, arguing again like mad. I wondered if it would all turn out all right or what would happen next.

After tea I wandered down to the river and had my usual treat. It was what I needed to freshen me up. I sat on the bank and dried out in the sun. For a few minutes I watched the big, fat fish swimming lazily through the water. I envied them their lives free from restriction and control. The chatter of voices sounded behind me, and I turned in that direction. Several of the men were coming down for their baths. I noticed Din walking alone, still sour and seedy. He paused as he neared me and I thought he was going to speak, but at the last moment he changed his mind and carried on with his head bent towards the ground. I was preparing to return to base when Ming strutted over and sat down beside me. His round face split into a friendly grin.

"Good fish, tuan," he started the conversation by pointing at the subjects of my earlier meditation.

"I must ask Goo Ling to catch some for me to eat," I said, the thought having struck me at that moment.

"Goo Ling is a very good fisherman, tuan. He knows a lot about these things."

"He has never told me so."

"Goo Ling does not speak of what he can do."

"I can believe that," I admitted. "What was his work before he joined the police?"

"He worked in the paddy-fields gathering rice. In the evenings he would go to the river and fish for many hours. His father was a very good fisherman, too. Those were happy times for Goo Ling. Now he is not happy any more."

"Doesn't he like being a policeman?" I asked.

There was a long pause before Ming replied.

"No, tuan. He does not like to fight and kill. He is a peaceful man, like his father. He likes to cultivate and make things grow. Not destroy them or his fellow-men."

"He kills fish, though," I said jokingly.

"That is different. He must do that to eat and live." Ming had taken me seriously.

"But he volunteered for jungle squad. He must have known that would entail killing."

Ming dangled his feet in the water and flexed his toes. The fishes darted away at his intrusion.

"He came here as Mr Potter's orderly. Then Mr Lovie's, and now yours. He did not come to fight."

"I didn't know that," I said dully. "Why didn't someone tell me?"

I studied Ming's face closely.

"Goo Ling would not tell unless you asked, tuan. He would be afraid that you think him a coward."

"I would never think that of Goo Ling," I said softly.

"Maybe not you, tuan. But many people would think so. Many untrue things are said about the Chinese. People say that because we are Chinese we must also be Communists."

"There is a difference. Chinese like you and Yapp and Goo Ling are Malayan Chinese. This is your home. The country of your birth. You do not know of this country, China, where the Communists we are fighting come from."

"Maybe that is so. But our forefathers came from China

many years ago. We still have the same blood. We maintain the same customs. Our faces and our skins are the same colour. We speak the same languages. In those ways we are not different."

"It is in a way true what you say. But one important thing you have forgotten. In appearance and customs you are akin to those Chinese who now come from over the seas, but are you the same in your heart? That is what matters. What you feel in your heart."

"I understand now what you mean, tuan. If our hearts are different, then we can have hope that some day we will not all be classed as one, and despised because we bear the mark of Chinese," Ming said slowly.

He moved his feet around in little circles in the river. The tiny waves lapped against the bank.

"Let us talk about something else. Ching Moi Chai, for instance." I paved the way purposely. I believed I had Ming in the right mood for talking. He did not speak for some moments. He drew his feet up under him and wiped them with his towel. He squatted on his haunches and stared out across the river.

"Ching Moi Chai," Ming said slowly with feeling. "He is a devil man. A bad man. It is those like him who disgrace my race."

"I believe you lived in Mengkuang together when you were boys. Went to school together." I did not mention that Lovie had told me.

"That is true. His people came from Hong Kong. He was only four years old at that time."

"Was he always bad? As a boy, I mean."

"I cannot say so, tuan."

"When did he change?"

"During the Japanese occupation. He hated the Japanese. He ran away to be a guerrilla fighter when the British dropped leaflets asking for them to form. Then he directed his hate at me and the peoples of Mengkuang."

"Why?"

"Because I and some of the young men were conscripted into the Japanese secret police. We were stationed at Sungei Lembu."

"Is that why Ching Moi Chai also hates Sungei Lembu?"

"Yes, that is why. He has not forgotten. Before I told you did you know I was in the Japanese police?" he added the question suddenly.

"Mr Lovie did tell me. Anyhow, you cannot be blamed. It was that or the life of your people. You had no choice."

"Have you always thought like that, tuan?"

His question took me unawares. I felt the colour flood into my cheeks, and the burning increased when he turned to face me.

"Not always," I admitted frankly. "But circumstances have changed," I added.

"I am happy to hear that, tuan," he said seriously.

"When did Ching Moi Chai become a Communist?" I asked.

"I think maybe he was always a Communist in his heart. Some things he used to say. He does not like Chiang Kai-shek."

"And his people?"

"They are Nationalists, like me. Ching Moi Chai was always making them unhappy because of that. That is what makes me think he was always a Communist supporter."

"Where are his people now?"

"They went away to Johore at the start of the Emergency. When Ching Moi Chai ran away to join the Communists. He has one brother living in Pondok Labu."

I did not mention that I knew about the brother.

"What about your people in Mengkuang. They must be in danger from Ching Moi Chai."

"I think," he hesitated, "if I remain at Sungei Lembu they will be safe."

By the way he spoke I don't think he wanted to discuss his people further. I took the hint.

"This friend of Ching Moi Chai—Ah Cham. Do you know him?"

"I have only heard of him. He is like the fox, very cunning."

"Do you think either were on Seraya the other day?"

"No. Of that I am sure. Both of them are marksmen. If they had been there, some of us would have been killed," he said resignedly.

I heard a movement behind me, and I half turned. Din was going back to base. He looked straight ahead, still full of misery. I realised it was getting late. The sun had set and the mosquitoes were getting busy. I got up and stretched myself. I yawned and looked down at Ming.

"You've missed your bath," I commented.

He scrambled to his feet and shrugged his shoulders. He flashed me one of his rare smiles.

"Never mind. Tomorrow will do," he said.

We walked back to base in silence. I think Ming had spoken too much for one day.

"Take Goo Ling off active patrol. In future he only goes if he volunteers," I told him when we reached the verandah. He nodded his head.

"Can I go to Pondok Labu tomorrow morning for two hours?" he asked.

I said he could.

He nodded again and went into his billet.

[17]

It was a little after three o'clock. The room was hot and stuffy and it reeked of stale tobacco smoke. I switched off the torch and climbed out of bed. I looked out of the side window, and saw the bren gunners' heads framed in the light from the perimeter lamp. I went over to the front window and eased the blackout board out of the frame. A cool breeze drifted in through the window and started to clear the air. Absently I picked up my cigarettes and slipped one between my lips. I

lit it and inhaled slowly, blowing the smoke out into the room. I dressed in my trousers and slipped my feet into my sandals.

I walked slowly towards the main gate. The sentry paused and nodded his head. He remarked that it was a nice night, then continued on his patrol. The air was quite chilly out in the open, and I wished I had put on my shirt. I saw a light burning in the canteen, and I made my way over there. The contractor glanced up from his steaming pots as I entered. He greeted me affably and asked if I couldn't sleep. It was a bloody silly question, but I did not take offence. He offered me a glass of steaming tea which I gladly accepted. I sipped slowly at the refreshing brew, lighting another cigarette into the bargain. All the while the contractor maintained a steady commentary, pausing now and then to inspect the curry cooking over the wood fires. It was a jumbled commentary dealing mainly with relatives of his I had never heard of, but it kept my mind occupied.

"This man Din, he is no good now," he suddenly remarked out of the blue.

"Why's that?" I asked, only mildly interested.

The contractor shrugged his skinny shoulders and rubbed his greasy hands down his shirt front.

"He always making trouble lately. He say the food no good. The tea no good. Taste like piss. Chinese no good. Everything no good, tuan."

"I wonder what he gets out of living," I said jokingly. The contractor did not see the point.

"Last night he try to make trouble with Ming. He say that Ming sit for long time by river with you, tuan. He say that Ming try to lick your backside. Then he shout that all Chinese are Communist, and then Ming get up from the table and tell him to shut up. He was very angry, and I think for one moment he kill Din."

"Ming can take care of himself," I said.

"Maybe. But that Din one big trouble-maker."

I did not doubt that the contractor was being truthful. He more or less confirmed my own theories.

"Don't worry too much," I said without committing myself.

"I not like trouble-maker, tuan," he said, wiping his hands down his shirt again.

"Was Peter here last night? While this trouble was going on?"

"Yes, tuan. Peter no trouble. He is good Tamil boy. Not stinking Malay sonofabitch."

"Where did you pick that word up?" I grinned.

"I with British soldiers long time. Scots Guards, Somerset Light Infantry and many others. They all teach me very bad English words."

"I bet," I remarked.

I placed the empty glass on the table and rose to leave. The contractor fished a crumpled piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and handed it to me.

"What's this?" I asked as I unravelled the paper.

"Account for tea you have, tuan."

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He looked a trifle abashed. I read through the neatly written figures. They started on the day I had arrived at Sungei Lembu and terminated on the day I had gone to hospital. I glanced at the total figure. Twenty-three dollars and thirty cents. I must have consumed buckets of tea.

"All for now, tuan. I give new account later. I be happy if you settle. I am poor man and I make special price for you. Not charge so much as I charge P.C.s."

I yawned and scratched my head.

"Seeing that I am paid nearly ten times as much as a P.C., you must charge me the same, if not more. Make out a new account with correct prices. Then I'll pay it."

I handed him the piece of paper. He grabbed at it and expressed his thanks.

I left the canteen and walked along the rear perimeter fence. One of the sentries was busy pumping the large Aldis lamp. I stopped half-way along and leaned my forearms over the wire. The short, sharp barbs dug into my flesh. Over on Berapit the

monastery gleamed white in the dying moonlight. For all its outward purity and reverence, it gave forth the feeling that underneath it was treacherous. I looked at it with a mixed sense of wonderment and dread. The towers at each corner gave it a fort-like appearance, formidable and deadly. I turned over in my mind if the monks were really what they professed to be. They were isolated, easy prey for intruders, and yet they had never been molested. That is what struck me as being strange. Dozens of their brother monks had been slain in other parts of Malaya because they had refused to give the Communists food and shelter. And yet . . .

I was disturbed by the sound of footsteps behind me. I half-turned and saw Bakar making the rounds. He came up and stood beside me. Neither of us spoke for a few seconds. He spoke first about his leave and marriage. I noticed again the sudden change for the better in his attitude. I also noticed he did not use scent any more. I asked him if his wife was going to stay in Seremban. He replied that she was moving to Bukit Mertajam as soon as he could fix up accommodation for her. He would have to be choosy because her parents were wealthy and wanted only the best for her. Listening to him, I formed the opinion that he was genuinely in love with his wife, and in my thoughts I gave him full credit. I enjoyed listening to him, and for once I was profoundly grateful for his company.

It was a quarter-past four when I walked noiselessly back along the corridor. I did not go inside my room. I squatted in the ancient rattan chair. I kicked off my sandals and rubbed one toe idly up and down the outside of my other foot. I lit another cigarette and tried to relax. I leaned back and rested my head on the sloping chair. I fell asleep and the half-burned cigarette dropped from my fingers.

The sun was streaming across the verandah when I awoke. I rubbed my eyes and yawned long and hard. I stretched my arms above my head and yawned again. As it was half-past eight I had made up for some loss of sleep. I started to buckle my sandal strap when Peter hove into view.

"What's cooking?" I asked cheerfully.

"Latif wants to know if there is to be a patrol today, sir."

"Where's Ming?"

"Gone to Pondok Labu. You said he could, sir."

"Oh yes," I remembered. "Has Ming got a secret love in Pondok Labu?"

"No, sir. He doesn't like girls any more."

"Why not any more?"

"Once he had a girl in Kulim. Then one day she bit his nose."

"What made her do that?" I asked, puzzled. It did not sound very loving, unless the Chinese expressed passion that way.

"She had been seeing other men behind his back, and he scolded her about it."

"So she bit his nose. How romantic!" I exclaimed.

"Don't tell him I told you, will you, sir? He'll get mad at me."

Peter looked awfully serious.

"Of course not. But he's discouraged very easily, though. Now to duties. Tell Latif no patrol today. That's the mood I'm in. I'll see Ming about a patrol when he returns."

They started to move away, but I called him back.

"There was something I wanted to ask you," I began. "Everything all right in the canteen last night?"

He stared at me vacantly as I waited for his answer.

"There was a little trouble," he replied sheepishly.

"It was to do with Din and Ming, wasn't it? Supposing you tell me your version."

He remained sheepish, and looked down at his feet. Then he told me, and his version tallied with what the contractor had said. Din was out to create trouble among the men, using the Chinese members as a lever.

"What you have told me is in confidence. You understand, don't you, Peter?" I said when he had finished.

"Yes, sir. I understand," he stated firmly.

I dismissed him and sat cogitating over the problem. My stomach rumbled and reminded me it was time to eat.

My breakfast consisted of one glass of tinned pineapple juice,

two sausages and three slices of greasy bacon. I rounded off with a liberal helping of tinned peaches and cream, at least four cigarettes, and I lost count of the cups of tea. I was not surprised when I felt sick afterwards. The contractor came along with the revised account as I was draining the last cup of tea. He was not wasting much time. Maybe he did not trust me all that much. I paid up and slipped him an extra ten dollars as a tip. Goo Ling brought in some hot water and I had a shave. I returned to the verandah and the arm-chair.

I lit another cigarette and puffed at it hungrily. I always do when I am a bit worked up. Automatically my thoughts went back to Din. He was proving himself to be a fly in the ointment. The kind of chap I would never have suspected. Although it seemed distasteful, I could find no alternative but to have him compulsorily transferred to B.M. There was a lot to be said for and against the idea, and I wondered whether a transfer was the complete answer to the problem. It did occur to me that the simplest way out was to allow his wife to return so that they could lead a normal married life again. But I was against that on principle, because my gesture might be interpreted as weakness, and I did not want that. I was still thinking about the best solution and, as usual, arriving nowhere, when Ming returned from Pondok Labu. I did not notice him until he shouted and waved as he entered his billet.

It must have been ten minutes later when the trouble started. It commenced suddenly, without warning, in the men's billets at the far end of the verandah. Within the space of a few seconds, it had developed into a minor war. I jumped to my feet as a sten chattered in a short burst. Then Din came out through one of the doorways brandishing a sten. He was dishevelled and murderous. Half of his shirt hung loosely from one shoulder; the other half, torn in the fracas I had heard, drooped downwards from his waist. He became partially obscured from my vision as several of the men poured on to the verandah and made uncertainly towards him. The space was narrow and they jostled into each other, restricting their

movements. I walked slowly along the verandah watching Din as he retreated, keeping the sten lined on the men. I knew the symptoms. I had seen it many times before, only this time it looked a little tamer, although anything could happen when a man became half-crazed.

"Stay where you are! All of you. Don't move forward!" I shouted to the men.

They stopped without looking round. Din had reached the end of the verandah. He swung the sten upwards and squeezed the trigger. The bullets ploughed into the roof, dislodging some of the attap. The men scattered, and I ducked instinctively. In the brief confusion Din vaulted over the verandah rail and, turning towards us again when he landed on his two feet, continued to menace us with the sten. The men were huddled in the doorways, and I had regained my feet. I walked slowly down the centre flight of steps and towards the man with the gun. He tossed his head like an angry bull, and shook the long black hair away from over his eyes. He drew the sten upwards in line with his waist, then he began to step backwards towards the compound. He was either genuine or playing to the gallery. I could not make up my mind which it was. I admit he had me puzzled. Normally he would have gunned me down, and that was that. So I played it the hard way, and accepted him as the real thing. My stomach began to turn over.

I continued to move forward, watching Din like a hawk. The danger period had not been reached. So long as he could move freely and keep me at bay, he would not fire. The crucial moment would be when he was cornered and could not move any more; when I would have no option but to rush him, and either wrest the gun away or grab at it and deflect its fire. I moved my feet slowly over the hard ground. My eyes never left his face for an instant. I wish in a way they had for a few seconds. Then I would not have recognised the lust in his eyes, the blood lust of a man temporarily insane. He was out for blood, my blood, and my stomach turned over faster than ever.

A hush fell over the camp. The stage had been set, and Din

and I were the central players, the characters in that crazy set-up. The one cold, deadly, intent only on wreaking vengeance over a pent-up, brooding sense of persecution, fortified by the gun he held in his hands. The other unarmed, appearing outwardly much bolder than he felt, ever mindful that one slip, one brief flash of weakness, could prove to be his last. That was the position as we sized each other up like a couple of punch-drunk boxers in the hot afternoon sun.

Din halted half-way across the compound, to the left of the tall wireless mast. He shook his head again and thrust the sten forward. I saw his finger curl round the trigger like the long tapering claw of a bird. I continued to walk towards him, shortening my steps slightly. I ran my tongue over dry, hard lips. The sweat broke out on my face, then hotly coursed down my cheeks, finally trickling down my bare chest in tiny rivulets. My mouth dried up and my movements became sluggish. The distance between us shortened, and I looked at him now through a semi-haze.

"Put down that gun!"

My voice sounded weak and strained. He took no notice of what I had said. He remained in the same position, defiant, like a bronzed statue carved out of marble. The sten was moulded immovable in his hands until it became part of him. I blinked my eyes and the haze lifted.

"Put down that gun!" I repeated. I had found authority, and I put it into my voice.

"No, tuan. No. I cannot. I have been disgraced by my wife leaving me, and in my disgrace I must find restitution. It is you who is responsible for sending my wife away. It is you who has brought this shame upon my house. It is you who must——"

His voice broke off and his eyes burned like red-hot coals in their sockets. His wide lips worked convulsively and he began to froth at the mouth. His whole body started to tremble and the sten danced in his hands. The will to fight ebbed from me, and I braced myself to meet the impact when he squeezed the trigger. Briefly, in my despair I reflected that it was a queer way

to die. Then I saw the break in his armour. I saw him weaken and totter. I gathered my wits about me and I acted.

"Put down that gun!"

It was a command.

The sten clattered to the ground and lay there, pointing away from me. Din stepped backwards, still mouthing nothingness. His eyes protruded from beneath his lids so huge and round that they looked as if they would burst. I quickened my pace and came within reach of him as he began to rave. I slapped him hard across the mouth with the flat of my hand. I struck him again and again, brutal in my ferocity. I did not stop until the lips split and the blood spurted, and he sank whimpering to his knees. I stood over him, breathing heavily. I looked down at him, and as I did so I realised that I was looking at the result of my own officiousness.

I suddenly felt very weak and very tired. I turned away from the sight on the ground and went back to where the men were still clustered on the verandah. I paused briefly opposite Ming.

"There will be no further trouble," I said. "Neither will there be disciplinary action. Din can make arrangements for his wife's return. I accept full responsibility for that, and for what has happened here today."

I did not wait for any comment. I went to my room and threw myself on my bed. I pulled a cigarette out of the tin, and my hand shook as I struck the match.

An hour later the wireless operator handed me a signal. I read the carefully printed message:

ELEMENTS COMMUNIST 5TH PLATOON AND INDEPENDENTS HAVE CROSSED INTO PROVINCE WELLESLEY STOP CROSSING POINT AT PRESENT UNKNOWN STOP ALL JUNGLE SQUAD UNITS ARE ALERTED AS FROM NOW STOP DO NOT RELAX VIGILANCE ENDS.

I screwed the signal into a small ball and tossed it across the room. The significance of the message did not penetrate my brain until hours later.

THE 5th Platoon hit us for six. Before their location had been established, they struck at Sungei Bakap. Sixty strong, they ambushed a section of ten men returning to base at the conclusion of a two-day patrol. They snared the section half an hour after it had quit Val d'Or Resettlement Camp, its last stopping-place and less than three miles from home. I knew nothing about the ambush until I received a signal from Rodway ordering immediate stand-by. I acted swiftly. I gave Ming the necessary instructions, and the squad was under stand-by orders within four minutes. We were ready to move off at a moment's notice. The signal had been vague, and I went over to the wireless room to see if I could get any further information. I was naturally thinking of Lodge and Quayle. Had either or both been in the ambushed section? The R/T channels were open for emergency rating, and I had no difficulty in contacting Bukit Mertajam. I was told that Rodway and Zannuddin had left for Sungei Bakap, and so the Bukit Mertajam operator routed out the Sub-Inspector. He could not tell me much. The police casualties had been one hundred per cent. No names had been released, so he could not confirm if Lodge or Quayle had been involved. That was the limit of the Sub-Inspector's knowledge. I could do nothing but wait.

The information I wanted came through two hours later. Lodge and Quayle were safe. They had been engaged elsewhere. The ambushed section had been under the command of a Chinese corporal. They had been stripped of uniforms and weapons by the Communists. The dead had been conveyed to Nibong Tebal and the wounded to Penang General Hospital. Chief Police Officer Wylie and Deputy Lawrence had left for Sungei Bakap directly news had arrived of the ambush. The whole of the Sungei Bakap and Nibong Tebal areas had been

cordoned off, house curfew imposed, and police and military combat units had moved in for the follow-up. That was the extent of the information. Compact and satisfying, but at the same time infuriating. I had received no orders to move into operation. I was left to cool my heels at Sungei Lembu while others were doing the hard work. I envied them immensely.

I had begun to feel I had been completely forgotten when I was ordered to proceed to Bukit Mertajam and assume stand-by there. It was not all that encouraging, but it did have a ring of hope about it. The police-station was almost deserted when the squad and I arrived there. I went into the wireless room and discovered the reason. Most of the personnel were in there listening to a very interrupted commentary on the follow-up. As the news came over the air, I pin-pointed various places on a large Ordnance map which adorned one wall. I was thus able to formulate a fairly comprehensive picture of the chain of events. The police and military units had not made contact, as the most recent information showed, but it had been ascertained that the Communists had split up into two or three groups and the largest concentration appeared to be moving in a northerly direction from Sungei Bakap. At a rough guess they were making for my area. The wireless suddenly went dead and nothing more came through. I waited for about half an hour, then went downstairs and rejoined the squad.

After a further period of boredom, I received my cue. I was summoned to the wireless room by an extremely excited constable. A signal had come for me. A Communist unit had broken through the cordon in the north. Their destination was doubtful, but it was suspected that they would skirt Bukit Mertajam to the east and make for the Kedah border. I was given the choice of two intersection points. I checked them with the map, and on impulse I chose the Bukit Tambun area. I did so because, if I were bent on escape, it would be just the route I would have chosen. Hilly, thickly wooded and sparsely populated. I read the last part of the signal carefully. If I had not made contact within forty-eight hours, I was to return to

base and await further orders. I folded the signal neatly and put it in my shirt pocket. I sent off an acknowledgment of its receipt and map-referenced my area. Then I hurried out and assembled the squad.

We debussed at Bukit Tambun Police-station and left the vehicles in the small transport yard. I gave explicit instructions to the drivers that they were to await our return and not go galivanting off on a binge. I held counsel with Ming, and together we traced a circular area on my patrol map, covering a fair amount of ground. I was working on the assumption that the Communists would keep to the hills in their trek north. I could not see any conceivable likelihood of their suddenly deciding to double back on their tracks, firstly because of the cordon and secondly because of the police and military units. I did not overlook the fact that they had broken through once, but a repeat performance in reverse was most unlikely. They knew the follow-up parties were behind them, but what they did not know was that, with a stroke of luck, I and my squad would quite likely be in front, blocking their escape route.

There is only one village of importance after Bukit Tambun. It lies along the banks of a small stream at the foot of the hills, about six miles from the police-station. Its inhabitants are all Chinese, most of whom earn their own living off the land. It was late in the afternoon when we arrived there, and as we had marched the six miles non-stop, I called a halt for twenty minutes. I did not find the villagers friendly. I can honestly say they were the most sullen, hostile collection of Chinese I had ever met. I wanted to conserve my own water ration, so I approached one house and asked for a drink. The old, wrinkled-faced woman standing in the doorway swore at me better than most men could have done, spat at me with devastating accuracy and slammed the door in my face. There was the same inimical attitude everywhere. The men experienced it the same as I did, and minutes after we had arrived in the village the streets were deserted. Not a soul could be seen. Everyone was tucked out of sight behind locked doors.

I drank some of my water, after all. Perhaps it was a wise precaution. Judging by the reception I had received, any water given me might have been poisoned. I sat down by the stream and lit a cigarette, intending to make the most of the few minutes left before we moved on. Ming came over and started a conversation. As the villagers were Chinese, I suppose he felt justified in making excuses for them. Impolitely, I told him to shut up, and he slouched off looking somewhat offended. I had been so engrossed with other matters that day that I had temporarily forgotten Din. I glanced over to where the men were sprawled in the shade. I saw him in what appeared to be humorous conversation with Pyman. He was laughing a great deal just as if nothing had happened. I shrugged my shoulders and grunted loudly. Perhaps it was me who was going 'troppo'.

I had stubbed out my cigarette when the rumbling started in the distance. At first I thought it was thunder, but as I listened I distinguished the sharp, intermittent crack of gunfire. The squad got to their feet, and Ming came over and listened with me. He cocked his ears and looked at me in an old-fashioned way. He didn't say anything. He spoke with his eyes. The gunfire rumbled and crashed for about five minutes, then died away, and I was conscious of Ming's heavy breathing penetrating the calmness which surrounded me. Then the gunfire started again and appeared to be coming nearer. I called the squad into formation and quickly checked their equipment. I gave them their last-minute instructions, and they listened in solemn, speculative silence. Then I led them out of the still lifeless village and into the towering hills beyond.

We did not make contact with the enemy. Somewhere in those hundreds of square miles of mountainous jungle they slipped past us. We were out for two nights and three days. Except for short intervals during the nights, when we had rested and slept in turn, we were mobile, ceaselessly pushing onwards towards an elusive goal. After leaving the village, we did not encounter a living soul. On the second day we heard brief snatches of gunfire. Each time it appeared to come from

different directions. It was the jungle playing tricks with the imagination. That night and during the third day we heard nothing.

We were much the worse for wear. Three of the men had gone down with mild fever attacks. They used the last of their water supply to wet bandages and wind round their heads. I dosed them with aspirins, and that helped to prevent the fever rising. Others had broken out in large ulcerated sores on their legs. I patched them up as best I could from my medical kit. By the afternoon of the third day we had not eaten or drunk for over ten hours. Our physical condition had deteriorated rapidly, and we became clumsy in our movements. The men with fever worsened and had become passengers on the rest. To relieve them a little, we took turns at carrying their carbines and equipment. I doubt if there was a square inch of my body which had not been ravaged by insects. I was a red, blotchy mass of irritating bites. For hours I fought against the urge to scratch at them.

It was late on the night of the third day when we returned to Bukit Tambun Police-station bedraggled and footsore. The station sergeant was very helpful. He quickly got a meal going in the canteen, and I sent the men packing. I sent off a signal to Butterworth reporting the cessation of patrol and asking for the latest information. Ming came in to see me while I was waiting for the reply. He said the men were asking if we could wait at Bukit Tambun overnight and return to Sungei Lembu in the morning. I was feeling bad-tempered as it was, and his request, innocent enough under normal circumstances, made me worse. I snapped at him and told him the men must wait for my decision. He shrugged his shoulders and ambled off back to the canteen.

I was unsettled in my mind about the whole project. It was all conjecture on my part, but if the Communists were still in Province Wellesley, then they would undoubtedly be warming up for an attack somewhere. Bukit Mertajam itself could be ruled out straightway. So could the minor police-stations. If

Communists ran true to form, they would choose an objective where, if successful, they could capture plenty of arms and ammunition. That left only Sungei Bakap and Sungei Lembu in the running. I doubted the former because it was not isolated and was too impregnable. I was left with the only place I could think of: Sungei Lembu. A depleted garrison, and abundant arms and ammunition in the armoury for the taking. The more I thought of it, the less I liked it. I had learned to have confidence in Bakar and I had cast aside my earlier prejudices, but I knew that he and the base personnel could not hold off a determined night-attack. With the jungle squad there, too, morale would be higher, and all of us together could repel an army if need be.

The reply to my signal cut through my thoughts. The follow-up had been unsuccessful. The cordons on the Kedah and Perak borders had been strengthened to such an extent during the past thirty-six hours that it was considered impossible for the Communists to have passed through either unnoticed. It was conclusive, therefore, that the enemy forces were still in Province Wellesley. All police and military units were alerted, and relief patrols were moving into designated areas for operations at dawn. All roads had been declared possible Communist ambush targets, and accordingly I was advised not to return to base until daylight. As I read that part of the signal I reflected that it might be too late in the morning. I struck a match and set light to the signal. I watched it float, still burning, on to the floor, and then stamped my foot on the ashes. They disintegrated into little black specks. I checked the time. It was exactly 10 p.m. If an attack was going to be launched on Sungei Lembu, it would be between midnight and 3 a.m.

I called Ming and briefed him.

"We are returning to base," I began, letting my words sink in. "We will split into two groups at Bukit Mertajam. I'll go with the Land Rover and truck via Mengkuang. You take the armoured car via Machang Bubok. I'll have Daud and Peter in the Land Rover with me and only four men in the truck. The

men with fever must ride in the armoured car. I must impress upon you the need for vigilance once you are on the Sungei Lembu road. Tell the driver to drive like hell and stop for nothing. All being well, both groups will arrive at base about the same time. Are you happy about everything?"

I eyed him to see the effect of my question. I might have guessed I would see nothing. He faced me squarely.

"You have chosen the most dangerous route, tuan. With very few men."

It was more a statement than anything else.

"Perhaps," I said lamely. "I believe you are concerned and think to yourself, 'Is he doing the right thing?' But I'll feel a lot easier in my mind if we reach base tonight. Now run off and get the men into the vehicles."

I gave him a playful shove to help him on his way. I picked up my carbine and went over to the Land Rover. Rahman looked half-asleep in the half-light from the perimeter lamps. I looked behind and watched the last man climb into the armoured car. I gave Rahman the all-clear and we rolled out of the gates.

It was eleven-twenty-five when the armoured car broke convoy at Bukit Mertajam and headed towards Machang Bubok. It was eleven-fifty when the Land Rover turned off the main road and nosed towards Mengkuang. I do not remember the time when the Land Rover rounded the first bend and smashed into the tree which had been placed across the road. I do not remember much what did happen that night; but what I do remember, what is imprinted in my mind still today, is what I want to forget. But I know I never shall. The tree silhouetted white and ghostly in the glare of the head-lamps haunts me. I see it in my mind's eye when I am awake. I see it time and time again in my dreams when I am asleep.

I was at the bottom of a shallow gully beside the road when I came to my senses. I was conscious of the unbearable pressure on the top of my head, the warm sticky blood which ran down my face, and the excruciating, stabbing pain in my back. I

wiped the blood from my eyes with the back of my hand. I shook my head in an effort to clear my befuddled brain, and the pressure increased. It was some seconds before I realised where I was, before I heard the gunfire and shouting above me. Gradually my head cleared and the pressure was replaced by a dull, aching throb. I looked around me, and in the darkness of the gully I could distinguish nothing. I tried to crawl upwards towards the road, but my limbs refused to function. I sank back on to the hard rocks and I breathed heavier than normal. I clenched my teeth hard and tried again, clawing at the rock with my bare hands. I moved a few inches before nausea began to overwhelm me again, and my head swam crazily in the air. I heard a slight rustling movement beside me, and I felt a strong hand grip my arm. A voice, low and gentle, hissed something in my ear and I groped stupidly as my carbine was thrust into my hand. The figure glided away from me upwards towards the road. I clenched my teeth again, and I felt myself moving slowly, painfully in the same direction. The throbbing in my head increased and my back felt as if it were on fire. I continued to claw upwards and somehow made it. I reached the top and collapsed, spent and helpless, half on the edge of the road and the other half dangling into the gully.

"Surrender, Johnny. Surrender to us. We will not harm you. Leave your Imperialist Officer."

The Communists were shouting from their position on the cliffs. They started again, but the words were drowned in gunfire from the road. When it abated I heard one or two derisive replies from the men, then more gunfire. My breathing became shallow and I levered myself into a defence position. I glanced down the road and saw the heavy transport vehicle clumsily outlined in the darkness. The Land Rover was canted to one side, straddled over the tree. I saw small spurts of red dart out from under the transport vehicle, and then a carbine opened up only a few feet away from me. The soft voice hissed again, and I was encouraged as I recognised Daud.

"Surrender, Johnny. Surrender to us."

The Communists were at it again. I forgot the pain in my head and back. I jerked my carbine forward and pumped bullets up the cliff face. I called out to the men and ordered them to stand fast. In doing so I gave away my position and the bullets whined and thudded into the road. I shifted slightly to my left and emptied my magazine, aiming at the red flashes dotted along the cliffs. I heard a piercing scream high above me, then another from farther away, and I rammed home a fresh magazine. I paused briefly when dizziness attacked me again. After it had passed, I loosed off my second magazine. I heard a swish through the air and I dug myself in as the grenade exploded on the road. The mushroom of smoke drifted towards me, then passed, and the smell of cordite hung about my nostrils. I heard the second grenade almost as soon as it had left the cliff. I became transfixed, incapable of mental reaction or movement. I waited for the night to split wide open in one short death-laden roar. Then suddenly, as if from nowhere, a shadow appeared above me and I was conscious of a warm body pressing me to the ground. I shouted at the body to go away, but it persisted and pressed closer until it completely enveloped me. Then the black night tore itself asunder when the grenade exploded with a dull, merciless whump. Then the blackness closed in on me and I remembered no more.

The large round orange light bored into me. Beyond it I heard the loud, throbbing noise of an engine ticking over. Then the light faded away and the blackness returned. I felt myself floating through space like a toy balloon on the end of a string, floating on and on through the grey clouds towards the deep blue sky above. I felt relaxed and luxuriously comfortable. Occasionally a wisp of fleecy cloud would caress my cheeks. I held out my hand to clutch at it, but my fingers closed on emptiness. Then suddenly I ceased to float and the blue sky changed into black. Somewhere far away in the distance I heard voices, low and sweet. I could not distinguish what they were saying, but as they came nearer and louder they were not voices at all, but

dazzling white coats. They moved around me, touching my body and pressing into me. I tried to rise and reach out to touch them, but the more I reached, the farther they went away from me. Then the coats turned to black as the sky had done, and I felt a heavy weight pressing me down . . . down . . . down . . .

The gunfire started again. Loud, ominous and deafening. The shouting increased and descended upon me like a huge black carpet. I twisted and turned, and my head rolled from side to side. The gunfire increased in volume, and then abruptly receded into the distance and became a hollow, coughing moan. My head and back throbbed and I stopped my twisting. I endeavoured to focus my eyes and pierce the blackness which surrounded me, but I was beaten and I closed my eyes in defeat. Then I heard the gunfire and the shouting again. I stumbled crazily to my feet and thrashed my arms in desperation.

"Mind the tree! That blasted white tree . . ." My voice trailed off into a meaningless crazed jumble.

Slowly the blackness lifted, and I saw a thin shaft of light ahead of me. I stumbled towards it, and I felt my fingers grip something wooden. I ran my fingers up and down its rough surface. My mouth sagged open and I wanted to shout, but no words would come. It was a long time before I realised I was clutching the door-frame of my room. I staggered out on to the verandah and took in everything in one wild, petrified glance. The smack as the bullets ripped into the attap roofs; the shouts of the men, cool and defiant, and farther away the demands of the Communists to surrender as they pressed home the attack. I covered my eyes with my hands and cried to myself that it was not true. I uncovered my eyes and staggered forward, and I began to scream with the intensity prompted by fear.

"Stand fast! For Christ's sake stand fast!"

I was still screaming when I pitched headlong down the short flight of steps.

THE sunlight flooded into my room. I blinked my eyes against its fierce glare. As I became accustomed to it, I stopped blinking and looked into Peter's strained, serious face.

"How long have I been lying here?" I asked weakly.

"Three days, sir. You have been delirious most of the time."

"Has anyone been to see me?"

"Mr Rodway came yesterday, sir. He did not disturb you because you were sleeping soundly. The first time for many hours."

"What did he say?"

"He said you looked bloody awful and that you ought to be in hospital. Those were his exact words."

He came closer and sat on the edge of the bed. I trailed my hand across the sheet and gripped his. I watched his brown eyes framed in his dark face. His face was pinched and haggard as if he needed sleep.

"What happened at the ambush? After the second grenade exploded?" I asked him. He looked at me unbelievably for a few seconds. The lines furrowed deep across his forehead.

"Don't you remember, sir?" he asked slowly.

"I remember nothing between then and when I found myself out on the verandah during the attack on base," I said.

"You are ill, sir. Too ill to talk of such things. You must rest," he said hurriedly. He started to move away, but relented when my grip tightened on his hand.

"I want to talk. You must tell me what happened. Did we suffer casualties? Fatal casualties?" I pleaded with him.

He turned his head away and looked at the door.

"Did we?" I asked him again.

There was a pause.

"Daud was killed, sir." He said it as if he were speaking to the door. Then he faced me again, and I saw the tears in his eyes.

"Daud," I breathed to myself. "God, why did he have to die? How did he die?"

Peter continued to look at me without answering.

"How did he die, Peter?" I gasped. "For God's sake, tell me."

I attempted to raise myself to a sitting position. A jarring pain shot up my spine to the top of my head. I became dizzy and felt violently sick. I swallowed what had come into my mouth. I lowered myself back on to the pillow and the pain went away. I gazed dreamily up at the ceiling. The sweat seeped through the bandage round my head. I lifted a hand to pat it as if to convince myself it was there.

"You were in the direct line of the second grenade, sir," Peter's voice sounded a long way away. "Daud realised that, because he shouted to me before he threw himself on top of you."

"What happened then? I mean after the grenade exploded?"

"We exchanged fire with the Communists for about five minutes. At that time we thought both you and Daud were dead. Then we saw the lights of the armoured car coming up the road from the direction of Sungei Lembu. We learned afterwards that Ming had heard the firing and guessed we had been ambushed. The Communists saw the armoured car, too, and they must have thought large reinforcements were coming because they sounded their whistles and withdrew quickly."

"And then?"

"We removed the tree from the road. The Land Rover was a complete wreck so we put Daud in the transport vehicle and you in the armoured car. Then we took you to hospital. The doctor examined you and said he could not find any fractures. But to make sure he had you X-rayed. Then he gave you injections and stitched the wound in your head. He said your injuries were not caused by shots or shrapnel, and all he could think of was that when you were thrown out of the Land Rover you struck your head and spine on the rocks in the gully.

He gave you another injection, and said it would make you sleep. I asked him if he was going to keep you in hospital, and he didn't reply for a long time. Then when he answered me he said you were probably suffering from shock or concussion or something like that, and you could be taken back to Sungei Lembu in the morning. I was surprised, and so was Mr Rodway and the other officers, but we saw no point in arguing with the doctor."

"Who was the doctor?" I cut in.

"The Chinese Medical Officer. I forget his name."

"Okay. Go on."

"I sat beside your bed all night, and in the morning we brought you back to Sungei Lembu. The doctor told me you might be unconscious or delirious for some time and he showed me what to do. Later that day you did become delirious and you kept sitting up in bed shouting, 'Get that tree out of the way! The white tree! Take it away! For God's sake, take it away! It's an ambush!' I tried to soothe you but you would not listen and so I waited until you wore yourself out. Once you looked at me, and although your eyes were open, I felt they were not seeing, if you understand what I mean. You said, 'Where am I?' I told you you were at Sungei Lembu. Then you said, 'Sungei Lembu? Where is that?' And then you fell asleep."

"And the attack on base? That's the first thing I remember since the ambush."

"That was last night, sir."

I shot him a quick glance. My head began to swim. I waited for it to stabilise.

"So for about three days I've seen nothing. Loss of memory, they call it," I said slowly. "That doctor is a bloody clot," I added savagely.

Peter said nothing. He just stared at me.

"Did we lose any men during the attack last night?" I prodded cautiously.

"No, sir. We repelled them until three this morning, then reinforcements came from Bukit Mertajam and Kulim. The

Communists withdrew and the follow-up started. A signal came in two hours ago. Three Communists have been killed."

"Good," I grunted. "The same party who ambushed us, I suppose?"

"That is not established yet."

I released Peter's hand and rubbed my eyes. They ached a great deal, and I still felt a bit dizzy.

"Get me a cigarette, will you?" I asked.

He went over to my desk and handed me the tin. I took one out and lit it. I inhaled deeply and the action soothed me. I looked across at Peter, and watched his face closely. My thoughts came back to a subject I had wanted to avoid.

"Daud died for me," I said simply.

Peter looked down at the sheet. "Yes, if you put it that way, sir," he said slowly.

"What other way can I put it? When I gave him that twenty dollars you said he would repay me some day in another way. Do you remember saying that, Peter?"

He looked up at me and his eyes were wet again.

"Yes. I remember, sir," he said quietly.

"But you never thought it would be this way, did you?"

"No."

"Neither did I. God believe me, neither did I. I know what you are thinking, Peter. And the men, too. That he sacrificed himself for nothing. That I'm not worth one drop of his blood. A hell of a price to pay for twenty lousy dollars," I said viciously, at the same time searching his face for something I wanted to see.

"There is another way of looking at it, sir," Peter said softly. "No one asked Daud to do what he did. He did it because he believed it to be right. I am sure of that. Just before he threw himself to shield you he shouted, 'I go to him. He needs me now.' That wasn't because of twenty dollars or anything you had done materially. It was a bond which had matured spiritually between both of you. I would say unconsciously on your behalf and consciously on Daud's. That's why he said, 'He needs

me now.' As for myself and the men, I will speak for all. None of us blame you for what happened. None of us hate you for it. We accept Daud's death as the will of God. You must believe what I say."

I finished my cigarette and ground the butt between my fingers. Suddenly Peter had become a man old in reason, steeped in wisdom. I gripped his hand again, and this time it was his which squeezed hard.

"Thank you, Peter," I said. I couldn't say any more. I was too choked with emotion. Peter went over to my desk, and returned with a glass of water and some tablets.

"Your medicine, sir. It's overdue." He grinned down at me. I swallowed the tablets and handed the glass back to him; I suddenly felt very tired. I cradled my head deeper into the pillow and closed my eyes.

"The penghulu of Mengkuang is coming to see you this afternoon, sir. That is, if they let him pass the cordon. He was here two nights ago, and did not anticipate the attack," Peter said.

I opened my eyes and frowned at him.

"What was he doing here?"

"He came to treat your back with oils and herbs. Also to pray for you, sir."

"That was very kind of him," I said gently.

"You must sleep now, sir," he said softly.

"Yes, I must sleep," I agreed.

I watched him put the glass back on the desk and walk towards the door.

"Peter," I called to him.

"Yes, sir."

"Is it known who was responsible for the ambush?"

He shuffled his feet and looked embarrassed. I sensed he knew, but did not want to tell me.

"Does it matter all that much, sir? At this moment?" he asked awkwardly.

"Yes. Very much. Who was it?"

"Ching Moi Chai, sir."

His face turned grey.

"Ching Moi Chai." I hissed the name between my teeth. I fell asleep with the name still upon my lips.

I had a good sleep, and I felt much better when the penghulu arrived. I had not seen him for some time, and I thought he looked considerably thinner, although his face was still round and flabby. He brought me fruit and sweetmeats which he arranged carefully on the top of my bedside locker. He pulled over a chair and sat beside the bed. I was able to study his face from a closer angle, and I could see that his eyes looked very tired and deep lines had furrowed either side of his nose.

"So they allowed you through the cordon, inche?" I asked when he had settled himself.

"Yes, tuan. At first they refused, but I insisted and so they issued me with a pass."

"Have you any news of how the follow-up is progressing?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Very little. The activity seems to be beyond Berapit now. I think the Communists are moving south."

"Nibong Tebal area, maybe."

"Maybe. One cannot exactly foretell, tuan."

He lapsed into silence. I watched a big emerald ring on one of his stubby fingers. I had not noticed it before. Sometimes, when the light caught it at a certain angle, it glinted and flashed sparks of green fire. It must have been worth a king's ransom, I thought.

"I am thankful for what you did for me, inche. Peter told me," I said softly, breaking the silence.

"It was nothing, tuan," he stated, uncomfortably fingering the ring. "You are a sick man, and sometimes our native herbs are better than the professional doctor's medicines. Long before the doctors came my people used herbs and handed down their secrets from generation to generation."

"Still, I am thankful, inche. And more so that at last we are friends."

Our eyes met and we saw in each other's what we meant to say.

"I am in a talkative mood at the moment, inche," I went on. "During the past weeks I have learned many things much to my benefit. But one particular matter evades me and adds to my curiosity. I would like to discuss it with you because I think you hold the key to the answer."

"You must not tire yourself, tuan. Too much talk is not wise." He framed his remark like an excuse.

"It won't tire me, inche, I can assure you."

"What do you wish to discuss?" he asked heavily. The lines went deeper round his nose.

"Your apparent hatred of me when we first met. I was a complete stranger to you, and I could not understand why you hated me. No more than I could understand your references to Sungei Siput."

I watched his face grow lined and older. His shoulders sagged and he slumped in the chair. Then he spoke so directly that he startled me for a moment.

"It concerned the man you shot the day before you left Sungei Siput, tuan."

"He was a Communist."

"He protested his innocence to you."

"They always do, inche."

"There may have been a chance that this man was genuinely innocent."

"As it turned out, he was not," I parried.

"His Communist activities were not proved until long after you shot him. You had then returned to Malaya."

"I can see what you are driving at. It could be said that at the time I shot a man who, to all intents and purposes, was innocent. My own personal suspicion of his guilt did not justify my action as executioner."

"That is correct."

"When did you learn this man was a proven Communist? That he had been responsible for the murders of three people?"

"After you came to my village with Tuan Lovie. You were not the type of man I expected to meet, and a seed of doubt began to form in my mind. So I went to Sungei Siput to learn the truth about the man you had shot. The truth I had up to then been denied."

"What was this man to you?"

"He was my brother."

The pieces of jig-saw began to fit together. The reason for his initial hatred of me, and then his warm friendliness.

"I would not be true to myself if I said now that I am sorry for your brother, inche. I think you will understand if we discuss the subject no more."

"I understand, tuan. It is better that way."

He rose from the chair and towered above me. I was lulled by the warmness of his presence. I had not felt so peaceful for a long time.

"You must get well before you commence duties again, tuan."

His words floated down to me. I looked up at him, and his face did not seem so old.

"There is much to be done, inche. Many wrongs to put right. I cannot remain idle for long."

I was thinking of Ching Moi Chai and Daud. Then, like a child, I wanted to cry. But the tears never came.

"You are thinking of Ching Moi Chai when you speak, tuan."

"Yes, inche. I think of him," I admitted.

"And the boy Daud?"

"He also. He is my burden, my burden alone. The goad of my conscience."

"You must learn to share your burden, my son. It will be easier then."

My son. He had never called me that before.

"I will share, if you are willing." I said earnestly.

"I am willing, my son."

"When will you come again?"

"In a few days. It depends on the cordon."

I gripped his hand, and he lingered for a few seconds. Then he was gone, and he did not hear what I called after him.

I never saw the penghulu again. Two days after the cordon had been withdrawn, he was murdered by a Communist killer squad.

[20]

I SHUT myself off from the outside world. I excluded from my mind everything but Ching Moi Chai. I became obsessed with the determination to find him and bring him to book. I spent endless hours working out plans to trap him, and my frustration increased when each time I found myself in the end against a blank wall. Then an idea filtered into my mind and I called for Ming.

"I want you to take me to Ching Moi Chai's brother," I said to him when he appeared.

He looked sleepy. "When, tuan?"

"Now. Tonight," I snapped.

"But——"

"I know what you're going to say," I butted in. "Mr Potter failed and Mr Lovie failed. Maybe I'll fail, too. I won't know the answer unless I try. We'll go in a small party. You and I, Peter, Latif and Sobh. We leave in ten minutes."

Ming nodded his head and shuffled off. He did not look so sleepy.

It was bright moonlight when we filed out of the main gate. We marched down the road for about three hundred yards, then broke into the undergrowth. We picked out the tracks without having to use our torches. I was in position immediately behind Ming, and sometimes he paused to get his bearings. I felt sometimes he was overdoing it, and I told him so. He just grunted and carried on, no quicker. Presently the track narrowed and formed the edge of a deep gully. Ming stopped suddenly and dropped to one knee. I went forward and knelt beside him.

He pointed down into the gully. I followed the direction of his finger and saw the small attap hut among the trees. There was a solitary light burning in one window.

Ming started to pick his way down the slope. There were no tracks to guide us, and we made a certain amount of unavoidable noise. A dog barked somewhere outside the hut; we waited for it to stop. I heard a movement inside and a man's voice shout with a guttural accent. The dog stopped barking, and a figure appeared in the open doorway. I could see it outlined against the background of light. A torch snapped on, and its beam was directed along the slopes like a miniature search-light. The figure moved outside the doorway and walked among the trees towards where we were waiting. I slipped past Ming and stepped downwards through the undergrowth. The figure came nearer and a voice called out in Hokkien.¹

"Police," I shouted back in Malay.

The torch-beam flicked round and focused itself upon me. I stepped forward, and stopped a few feet from the man. I could see his face, angular and pale in the torchlight. His eyes roamed over me and narrowed to thin slits.

"Put out that light," I snapped.

I heard a faint click and the beam snapped off.

"What is it you want at this late hour?" the man asked.

"I wish to talk with you," I said easily. "Inside your house," I added.

He spread his arms out sideways. "We can talk here," he replied arrogantly.

"Inside your house," I repeated.

The man remained facing me for a few seconds, then he turned and walked back to the hut. I followed him, and went inside with Ming and Peter. I propped my carbine against the wall near the black and white dog which growled in a corner. The interior of the hut was clean and tidy. It boasted the one main living-room, a small bedroom and the usual large cement-floored cookhouse at the rear. I sat down at the table in the

¹ Chinese dialect.

centre of the room and motioned the man to sit opposite me. He did so with a noticeable show of resentment, and glared at me across the table. I lit a cigarette and puffed at it slowly. I was able to study the man more closely in the light from the paraffin lamp hanging in the centre of the room. His face was youngish, but inclined to hardness when the mood suited him. He was dressed in a spotless white shirt and khaki slacks. I wondered how much his face resembled Ching Moi Chai's.

"What is your name?" I asked as a formality.

"Ching." He did not render it in full.

"You know who I am?"

He nodded his head and a sneer crossed his mouth.

"Where is your brother?" I shot the question at him.

"I do not know," he answered levelly.

"When did you last see your brother?" I asked calmly.

He put a hand across his mouth to stifle a yawn. He turned his head sideways and spat on the floor.

"Some years ago," he replied casually.

"You speak lies," I snapped.

"I speak the truth. Many times police officers have asked where is my brother. Always I say the same. I do not know."

"You know he has returned to this area?"

"No."

"You speak a lie again."

He did not answer me. I realised I was a fool to go there in the first place, but desperation is a strong driving force. I finished my cigarette and stamped it out on the floor. I knew failure when I saw it. I decided to pull out, but not without having my last say.

"I cannot compel you to tell me where your brother is," I went on. "I appreciate you know that also. But I am convinced in my mind, as were the other police officers before me, that you do meet your brother and you know where he hides in this area. Therefore, I give you a message to pass on to him. Tell him that I shall eventually find him, and when that hap-

pens I shall kill him without mercy as he has killed many others. That is all I wish to say to your brother."

A silence settled over the room. The only audible sound was the dog still growling softly in the corner. Behind Ching, Peter and Ming stood like two statues against the wall. Outside I heard a soft sound as Latif and Sobh moved into the shadows. Then Ching broke the silence. He threw back his head and laughed until the shrill notes filled the room with their derisiveness. Then the laughter ceased and his face became hard and callous. He twisted his lips into a mocking grin.

"You kill my brother? That is a joke so big I must laugh at you. For years the police have tried to do as you intend, but they have failed because my brother is too clever. Every time he tricks and baffles them. I shall not see my brother, so I cannot deliver your message. But I warn you this. If killing is to be done, it will be you who will die. It will be my brother who will kill you. Imperialist swine!"

I leapt at him across the table. I smashed my fist into his mouth and felt my knuckles crunch on bone. His chair overturned with a crash and he lay bleeding on the floor. The dog ceased its growling and cringed farther into the corner. I walked round the table and picked up my carbine. I stood over Ching and looked down at him.

"Give your brother my message," I grated.

I left him groaning on the floor.

I took my failure with Ching Moi Chai's brother to heart. I still clung stubbornly to the hope that he might some day make a false move and lead me to Ching Moi Chai. In the ensuing weeks I made Pondok Labu, Bukit Seraya and Mengkuang areas the targets for intensive patrols. I saw Ching Moi Chai's brother several times in Mengkuang during this period, but I made no move to apprehend or question him again. I tapped all available sources of information. I laid false trails, and made a point of circulating incorrect rumours as to my future movements. I split the squad in two, sending one section into a certain area to bluff residents and at the same time to

step up the rumour campaign discreetly, while I patrolled with the other section in an area which was supposedly not included in the patrol itinerary. But the false move I was hoping for from Ching Moi Chai's brother never came.

I switched my activities to other areas. I drove myself to it. I spared nothing to bring about the fulfilment of my ambition. I grouped information as I received it. I sorted it over and persevered until it began to make sense. I checked locations on my map and marked each one with a small black cross. When I had finished the markings and had linked the crosses, I had drawn an egg-shaped area embracing Mengkuang, Arakuda, Penanti and the south side of the Relau hills. I studied my handiwork and my interest became aroused. The more I concentrated on the matter, the more I became convinced that the area I had ringed would be the one Ching Moi Chai would choose in which to operate. I felt that I was getting somewhere at last, and regarded Ching Moi Chai's inactivity since the ambush and subsequent attack on Sungei Lembu as the calm before the storm broke again.

I briefed the squad and moved into the area. It was a large one, and the task before me was not going to be easy. We patrolled for five weeks, returning to Sungei Lembu only for fresh provisions, water and a brief rest. All the while I maintained contact with reliable informers either personally or through Ming, and I was satisfied that Ching Moi Chai had not quit the area. I was unable to ascertain the actual strength of his gang. Information varied considerably on that detail, and putting two and two together I made a shrewd estimate by assessing it at between fourteen and twenty men.

Half-way through the five weeks' operation I began to feel the strain. I had been losing weight rapidly for some time. I became lethargic and emaciated. The pains in my head and spine had never completely disappeared, and when, on top of that, I experienced frequent attacks of giddiness and occasionally my vision became blurred for minutes at a stretch, I began to feel concerned. I gave the men no indication of how I felt,

but my noticeable decline in physical condition and the frequent rest periods I required must have made them think. I did my utmost to show a cheerful front irrespective of what I felt inwardly, but I realised once more that I was fighting a losing battle and that if I did not pack in soon I would ultimately collapse through pain and general fatigue. More through pig-headedness than anything else I carried on, and when at last common sense pierced my outer veneer of stupidity, I was on the verge of breaking down. Thus I ordered the withdrawal to base. I did so with mixed feelings, and I comforted myself with the knowledge that there would be a next time. I had tried, but, on that first lap, Ching Moi Chai had always been one jump ahead.

I rested at base for three days. Most of the time I lay on my bed or sat out on the verandah. My interests were somewhat restricted. If I read too much, it hurt my eyes and made my headaches worse. If I lay on my back too long, it sent sharp, stabbing pains shooting up my spine. I experimented, and discovered that the position by which I best gained some form of relief was to roll over on to my stomach. Goo Ling showed by his actions that he sensed my discomfort. He fussed over me like a broody old hen with her chicks, and prepared some most interesting and nourishing meals. But my appetite was not with me, and I did not eat one half of what he cooked. I found an outlet in the evenings which distracted my thoughts from most things. I went down to the canteen and played tombola with the men.

On the third day I received a confidential report by dispatch-rider stating that two uniformed Communists were using the Bukit Seraya track. They had passed through the village two nights in succession between eleven o'clock and midnight, and had returned by the same route just before dawn. The report indicated that they were probably couriers running between Bukit Mertajam and the kampongs south of the Relau Hills. It was not anticipated that they would make a third run, but the report had been passed on for my information. I burned the

document and while I watched it burn stewed on the news. I could not see any connection between the couriers and Ching Moi Chai. They were travelling in the wrong direction, but their presence did prove that other movements were going on. I took a chance on their making a third run and laid my plans. I selected and briefed Ming, Sobh, Latif and Peter for the ambush party. Then I went over to the armoury and collected the Savage repeater shot-gun. I placed four cartridges in the magazine and a fifth up the spout. It was a vicious, destructive weapon guaranteed to decapitate a man at thirty yards. I returned to my room and waited for nightfall.

We left base at ten o'clock, and reached Seraya forty-five minutes later by using the back way and keeping the village between us and the hill. We occupied ambush positions along the bank above the track, and our vigil commenced. I looked up at the moon. It was not very bright at that moment. We lay in our position a long time before anything happened. I told myself we had missed the boat. I became impatient when the ants and mosquitoes started nipping into my flesh. I remember lying with my chin resting on my forearm when I heard the first sound. I cocked my ears and listened to the faint swishing sound coming down the track. The kind of sound that was made by bare feet. I raised my head and fixed my eyes on the track. At that moment the moon decided to help out. It emerged from behind some clouds and bathed the track in a soft, silver glow. The sound was becoming louder and I could distinguish a sharp, thudding noise. Someone was putting his feet down hard.

I eased the Savage forward and curled my finger round the trigger. With my thumb I disengaged the safety-catch. Latif stirred beside me, and I felt a hand grip my forearm, then go away. I flicked my tongue over my lips and lowered my head. I cuddled the heavy butt into my shoulder. There was a faint rustle on my right as either Ming or Sobh changed position. I crooked my left arm and elevated the Savage's barrel as the two

Communists came out of the shadows about fifty yards up the track.

I watched them as they approached step by step. One was in front of the other. It was difficult to judge how far apart. The first one seemed a lot taller than the second one, but it could have been an illusion caused by my sighting angle. Suddenly the moon took a spurt and became brilliant. It enabled me to see the two figures clearly, except for their faces, which were shadowed under the peaks of their cloth caps. The distance between us shortened. Forty yards . . . thirty yards . . . twenty-five yards. . .

I squeezed the trigger and the Savage thundered. The stens chattered on either side, and I squeezed the trigger again as I pointed the Savage down at the writhing mess below. We slithered down the bank together and grouped round the bloodied, mangled bodies still writhing at our feet. The taller one had taken the full force of the Savage. What little remained of his head was smeared over the track like butter on a piece of bread. I switched on my torch and played the beam on the second corpse. He was riddled like a sieve. I stared at the large cavity which had once been his chest. I began the unenviable task of searching the bodies. I found a few bloodstained and torn wisps of paper stuck to the exposed tissues of the small man. If it had been a document it was rendered useless. I switched off the torch and stepped back a few paces. The men followed my example. I think we all felt a bit sick inside.

I pointed at the taller man.

"Ching Moi Chai?" I asked Ming. I was not being serious.

"No, tuan."

"How do you know? His face has gone," I said impishly.

Ming shook his head slowly from side to side.

"He does not smell like Ching Moi Chai. That is why I know," he answered seriously.

I think Ming's summing up was exceedingly funny.

THREE weeks later I received my first real lead to Ching Moi Chai. It came from a most unexpected source. I was in my room writing letters when Ming announced that a Special Constable from Berapit Reservoir wished to see me. I told him to bring the man in. Ming reappeared a few seconds later with the special. He was sweat-streaked and looked a bit on the nervous side. I smiled at him and waved him to a chair. He sat down and mopped his face with a large white handkerchief. I glanced over his shoulder and motioned Ming to remain.

"What can I do to help you?" I asked, flashing him another smile.

"It is I who have come to help you, tuan," he replied in a manner which sounded important.

"How?"

"I know where Ching Moi Chai and his men are camping."

I arched my eyebrows and drew in my breath with a harsh, hissing sound. My heart skipped a few beats. I looked across at Ming. His face reflected interest.

"Where are these Communists camping?" I asked the Special calmly.

He mopped the last of the sweat from his face.

"In the quarry north of Mengkuang, tuan."

I knew the place. It was a large quarry which had been dis-used for years. It had become overgrown with weeds and undergrowth. There was an old ramshackle corrugated-iron and wood shed at the far end, and an abundant supply of fresh water. It was an ideal place to hide. I recalled the number of times I had patrolled close to it in the past weeks.

"You are quite sure of this information?" I asked.

"Yes, tuan."

"Is it your own information or that of others?"

"It comes from a trusted friend of mine. I cannot disclose his identity, but I know it to be true, tuan."

"I understand the necessity for your friend to remain anonymous. I shall not press you on that matter. You have rendered a great service to me today. I ask you for your number and name."

He told me and I lodged it in my memory.

"Now tell me anything else you know which will help me. For instance, how many Communists are there in the quarry? Their armament and so on?"

I leaned back in my chair and revelled in my calmness.

"I cannot say how many men, tuan. It is known that some of their weapons are automatic firing and that they have one bren gun. Always two sentries are reported at the quarry entrance."

"How do they get their supplies?"

"From Arakuda at night, tuan, by threats and violence. That is where Ching Moi Chai was recognised by my friend. As also was the man Ah Cham. Ching Moi Chai was very boastful recently. He had drunk too much rice wine. He told the kampong people that the police were powerless against him. They were afraid and could do him no harm, not even with the help of the running-dog soldiers. Then he lectured the people that the police jungle squad from Sungei Lembu had been running in circles looking for him, and they reminded him of lost dogs chasing their own tails. That is all I know, tuan."

"It is enough," I said warmly. "You must now return to Berapit, but before you leave you must promise not to discuss what you have told me with the other constables. If you do, you may undermine my plans. I want you to understand that."

He faced me levelly across the table. "I promise, tuan. The secret is safe with me," he replied.

"Good. There is one more thing I have just thought of. Are Ching Moi Chai's future movements known?"

"There is rumour that he and his men will leave the quarry

tonight. At the full height of the moon. That is why I hurried to you when my friend told me this morning."

"Was anyone else present when your friend told you?"

"No, tuan. I met him on my way into Mengkuang to buy food."

"Then your meeting was not prearranged?"

He shook his head.

"No, tuan. We often meet on the road. It is true that this morning my friend was looking for me, but it was not arranged so between us."

I nodded my head in approval.

"Thank you very much," I said. "It is best you leave now."

We rose together. He stretched out his hand and I gripped it in mine.

"Good-bye, tuan," he whispered.

"Good-bye."

I sank back into my chair and lit a cigarette. My hands trembled slightly, and I closed my eyes briefly to shut out the pain in my head.

"Would you believe it?" I muttered to myself. "We spend weeks searching, trying all the tricks we know, and we don't find Ching Moi Chai. Now he is presented to us on a golden plate. Just like that."

I snapped my thumb and forefinger together to emphasise what I had said. I looked up at Ming. He was silent and appeared very thoughtful. I felt he had something on his mind.

"Come and stand beside me," I said to him. He moved slowly round the desk. I drew a three-quarter circle on a piece of paper. I marked two crosses at the open entrance and a square about half-way inside.

"Now that's roughly the shape of the quarry," I began. "The crosses are the sentries and the square here is the shed. At a rough estimate the quarry face is about two hundred feet high all round, except at the entrance where it tapers gradually to ground level. The track leading to the entrance is narrow and densely overgrown either side. That is the only way in and

likewise the only way out, except in an emergency. What I propose to do is this. The squad will split into two sections at the track mouth. It's a good half-mile to the quarry from there. I want you to take No. 2 Section round to the rear of the quarry. You will have to be careful and use all your skill regarding noiseless movement. When you reach your objective, spread the men out along the quarry top. Don't come too far down the sides, and ensure that the bren is positioned in the centre of the line of men. Meanwhile I'll wait at the track mouth with No. 1 Section. I'll give you exactly one hour to get into position, so we must check our watches before we leave base tonight. Exactly one hour from the time you set off, I shall move down the track with my section. Do you follow so far?" I looked up at Ming. He nodded his head slowly. "Good. Now we come to two important points," I went on. "First, the hour of attack. The Special said it is rumoured that Ching Moi Chai will withdraw from the quarry at the height of the moon, so we'll work on that assumption. I would say two o'clock at the latest for the withdrawal, which means you must be in position by twelve-thirty so that I am able to move down the track not later than that time."

The piece of paper began to dance before my eyes. I rubbed them with my hand and lit another cigarette. The pains in my head increased and the paper danced faster. I gripped the edge of the desk to stop myself falling. Slowly the paper steadied itself and stopped wavering.

"What is the matter, tuan?" Ming's voice drifted through the haze. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes again.

"Nothing," I replied. "It will pass. Not enough sleep, I suppose. Now, where was I?"

"I must be in position by twelve-thirty and you move down the track at the same time."

"Ah yes. Now, half an hour will be ample time for me to get down the track and be near the quarry entrance. So the hour of attack will be one o'clock and it will be sprung by my section. Second, the method of attack. You will issue three

Very-light pistols among your section, taking one yourself. At exactly one o'clock I want those pistols fired above the quarry. I shall then move in with my section. You must drill your section that they are not to fire a shot unless any of the Communists try to escape up the quarry face. It is possible for a desperate man to attempt it. Once the Very lights have burned out, the moon will still help both sides. I hope it shines big and bright tonight. Now, that's the briefing completed. Do you want me to run over anything again?"

I looked up at him. He was still silent and thoughtful. There was a pause.

"All is clear, tuan. But I would like to make a suggestion. I know Ching Moi Chai and his tactics very well. The quarry entrance is narrow, and I think it would be dangerous for your section to move in alone. I suggest that before the Very pistols are fired, my section throw grenades into the quarry and in the confusion which will follow your section moves in with the help of the Very lights."

I admit there was some reason in his suggestion. I gripped the edge of the desk as my eyes blurred briefly.

"No," I said harshly, "I must do this my way. I must for many reasons. Try to understand that, Ming."

"I understand many things. I understand most that you are a very sick man," he stated softly. It was then I knew what he had on his mind.

"For many weeks I have yearned to hit back at Ching Moi Chai," I rambled on. "You and I and the squad have worked as one man to achieve that. Now at last I feel success is in my hands. Maybe for that reason I wish to make this my personal conclusion. I must go through with it on that basis. I must! I want nothing from your section but the lights and vigilance to ensure that no one escapes up the quarry face."

"And if you fail, tuan?" he said gently. The haze over my eyes cleared. I stared hard at him.

"I have not overlooked that point. Before I attack, I shall brief my section that if anything happens to me they must

immediately withdraw from the quarry and take up positions at the entrance. And hold it, to block escape that way. Then your section can put all they have into the quarry. Spare nothing. Give them hell, Ming. You will know if and when that course of action is necessary. My section will blow whistles as a sign of their withdrawal. That also will be the signal to you."

"It will be as you wish," he breathed heavily.

He walked away quietly. He turned in the doorway and looked back at me.

"Tuan?"

"Yes?"

"I think it wise if you sleep now. I will attend to everything."

"I will try to sleep now, Ming. Thank you."

Then he was gone.

I did not sleep. I was afraid of what it would bring to me in its blackness. I had seen it too often, too vividly. The long unending stretch of road and the Land Rover racing down it, never reaching the end. The tree lying across the road. The tree made white and ghostly in the glare of the headlamps. The piercing, ear-shattering roar of gunfire and, rising even above that, the demands to surrender emanating from the cliffs towering above me. The hiss of grenades coming through the blackness, the smell of cordite and warm blood, the feeling of pain and suffocation and the hazy memory of a little man's last sacrifice.

I sat for a long time alone in my room. I smoked more cigarettes than were good for me. I did not eat the food Goo Ling brought and placed on the desk. Frequently I glanced at my watch, and became restless as the hours ticked slowly by. The night seemed a long way away. The sun had shed its warmth when I went down to the river for a bath. I had spent many happy hours there watching the fish and talking to Ming and the men, but that evening I derived no comfort in being there. My mind was too occupied with Ching Moi Chai and the hour which must surely come. I went back to the billets and mixed with the men. I wanted someone to talk to, to wrest myself

from my thoughts and my moodiness. I disregarded Ming's reproachful glances and hints that I should still be resting. I stayed with the men until long after darkness, and in so doing I found sustenance.

It was nine-thirty when I started to prepare my equipment for the attack on the quarry. An hour and a half before the vehicles would roll out of the main gate and speed us near to our objective. I primed my grenades with four-second fuses. I emptied my carbine magazines and reloaded them to ensure that the springs were working properly. I examined my Browning pistol and worked over the mechanism. I withdrew my hunting-knife and tested the blade for keenness. I returned it to its sheath and closed the thong over the hilt. I changed into a clean suit of jungle green and laced the thick rubber-soled boots as far as my calves. I lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of my bed. I buried my head in my hands in an effort to shut out the pain which had returned. The cigarette dropped on to the floor and lay burning between my feet.

I rose from the edge of the bed and the room began to spin. The pain in my head increased until it felt as if a thousand hammers were battering my skull. I felt the muscles around my mouth twitching and I started to sway. I lurched over to the window and clawed desperately at the wooden blackout frame. It resisted my attempts to remove it, and my hands dropped listlessly to my sides. I staggered backwards and collided with the desk. I turned in a daze and gripped it for support. The room spun faster and the sweat broke out on my forehead and rolled down my face. I felt myself falling, and was unable to find the power to stop myself.

"No, God, no. Not now. . . ."

I breathed the prayer and the sweat rolled into my mouth and salted my tongue. The pressure of suffocation increased as I went down for the count.

I made one last desperate attempt to reach the door, but in the jumbled mirage of spinning objects I could not find it. Then the merciless blackness closed in on me again.

I VISITED Penang General Hospital for the last time. To say good-bye to the medical specialist who had set me on the path to recovery. I rapped my knuckles on the batwing doors, and went through them when his voice called from inside the consulting-room. He was reading a sheaf of papers set out before him. The ceiling fan above revolved slowly, gently rustling the papers on the desk. I coughed discreetly, and he looked up with a hint of annoyance. His manner changed abruptly when he recognised the intruder.

"Hallo, Moran. So pleased to see you again. Take a chair."

I sank into the comfortable leather-backed chair beside the desk. He arranged the papers in a neat pile and placed them in an open wire-framed tray. He leaned back in his swivel chair. He took off his glasses and held them in his hands across the desk top. He looked straight at me with his clear blue eyes.

"Is this a professional visit?" he queried.

"Not this time, doctor. I've come to say good-bye."

"So they have fixed you a passage at last?"

"Yes. The *Chusan*. It sails from Penang on the ninth. Three days' time."

"I expect you will be glad to get away. To rid yourself of the uncertainty which hanging around brings."

"In some ways I shall be glad. In others I shall not."

"It's the best thing for you. You realise that now, don't you?" he said kindly.

"Yes, in a sort of muddled roundabout way. I know I'm beaten physically, but it's a bitter pill to swallow," I said slowly.

"It is always difficult for a man of strong character and will-power to admit defeat, but it comes to most of us some time during our lives."

He was doing his best to make things easier.

"Can we speak frankly now, doctor? Straight from the shoulder?"

"If you want to, by all means."

I paused for a second or two to choose my words.

"Is there any hope that I shall completely recover? Or am I to spend the rest of my life subject to giddiness, headaches, sleeplessness and what have you? I make myself sound an awful mess, don't I?"

He replaced the glasses on his nose. He watched his fingers drumming on the desk top.

"It is difficult to advise you adequately. That crack you had on your head, coupled with your spine injury, are the two main factors which started the ball rolling. As a doctor I would say your chief trouble is psychological and that is where medical science depends a lot on you to help win the fight. I would also say that once you get back home and secure a suitable occupation, you will have a fifty-fifty chance of pulling through. On the other hand, you could have relapses and slip backwards. We have to face the possibility. But at this immediate stage it is almost impossible for any doctor to give a precise answer. A considerable period of supervision under whichever doctor you choose in England. That is most important in your case."

I ran my finger along the bevelled desk edge.

"I see. Thank you for what you have told me."

"What are your plans for the next three days?"

"I am going to Kuala Lumpur, with a brief halt in Ipoh on the way."

"Are you going by car?"

"Yes. I've hired one."

"It's a long journey there and back. Don't overdo it. Why all the rush to K.L. at the last moment?"

"It's something a chap named Lovie asked me to do. That won't enlighten you much, but it's too involved to go into. The Commissioner of Police has personally helped me a lot

over it."

"Let's see, there is a new Commissioner now, isn't there? I cannot keep pace with events."

"Yes. Mr Carbonnel. Started in the Force as an inspector, I believe. I hope I haven't misquoted him there. He's a great fellow and very popular. Tough, too, and that's just what the Force needs."

"I recollect the name now you mention it. I believe I met him soon after the Liberation. What are your plans when you reach England? Back to poultry farming?"

"I can't say at the moment. I doubt if it will be poultry farming. Too much capital required. At the moment my future is in the lap of the gods."

"Whatever you choose, you have my best wishes for your success."

"I know that, doctor, and I am grateful."

I glanced at my watch and got up out of the chair.

"I'll have to go now, doctor. Time marches on and I shall be late for my appointment in Ipoh."

"Is it a special appointment?" His blue eyes twinkled.

"A young lady I met in Penang," I grunted.

"Then you mustn't be late. Good-bye, Moran, and once more the very best of luck."

I gripped his outstretched hand.

"The same to you, doctor, and thanks again for everything you have done. Good-bye."

Lois was waiting for me outside Ipoh Railway Station. She hopped in the car when I braked at the kerb. Time had not changed her; she was as lovely as the last time I had seen her.

"Sorry I'm late," I apologised. "Only twenty minutes, though. Am I forgiven?"

"Of course. Your letter only just arrived in time."

"Must have got delayed. I posted it with ample time allowance."

She sidled nearer and studied me closely. I read the concern

in her eyes.

"Anything wrong?" I asked.

"You look so thin. I barely recognised you," she said.

"Guilty conscience," I grunted. "Wears one down. Now, where to?"

"I thought we could go to my flat. Do you mind?"

"No, of course not. It'll be more comfortable there. I don't know, for the life of me, why I didn't suggest it in my letter. You'll have to direct me, though."

She started to do so and I nosed the car away from the kerb. Presently I came to a pleasant-looking thoroughfare on the outskirts of the town. I entered a driveway, and pulled up in front of an imposing brick-built house standing in its own grounds. I admired the spacious lawns and beautifully coloured flowerbeds. The setting made one feel good to be alive. I followed Lois into the hallway and waited while she unlocked the door of her flat.

The room we entered was furnished with exquisitely artistic taste. The atmosphere was Oriental, but everything blended and matched perfectly. I stood in the middle of the room and drank in every detail of the ornately carved furniture and the rich lushness of the carpet and curtains. I was still deeply immersed in my contemplation of the room when I was whisked away to inspect the bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. We eventually returned to the living-room and sat beside each other on a large fully upholstered settee.

"Drink?" Lois asked, penetrating my thoughts.

"Only orange juice, please. I'm so full of pills that I rattle, and I mustn't drink intoxicants because that and the pills will not agree."

She brought me the glass of juice and a Martini for herself.

"You have a lovely place." I voiced my thoughts at last.

"I rent it furnished. Only a few of the things are mine. The flat upstairs is larger than this one. It's occupied by an Army officer and his family."

"Do you see much of them?"

"Not very often. They keep to themselves. Sometimes they ask me up for a drink. Then I help to put the children to bed. That's great fun."

"You like children?"

"Yes, very much," she answered dreamily.

"Now let's talk about you. Are you happy?"

She took a sip of her Martini. Her face brimmed over with happiness.

"Yes, I am. Very happy. So much so that I cannot express myself too well."

"Don't try. So long as you are settled at last, that's all that really matters."

I drank up and emptied my glass. I rolled a small piece of ice around in my mouth.

"Now let us talk about you. That's more important. I want to know why you have lost so much weight and the real reason you are leaving Malaya."

"I told you the real reason in my letter."

"There are one or two things I still do not understand. Why you went so long without medical attention."

"That was a bad slip on the part of the doctor who examined me first. It wasn't until months later when I was X-rayed again in Penang that they discovered part of my spine, the lumbar, or some queer name like that, was cracked. I had been going around for a long time like that."

"And what happened after you collapsed that night at Sungei Lembu?"

"Ming and Peter found me on the floor of my room. Ming reported by signal and then he decided to attack the quarry. It was too late, in any case. Ching Moi Chai and his men had withdrawn just after nine o'clock. That's it briefly. Satisfied now?"

"Yes, up to a point. Now tell me the rest." She was determined to have her own way.

I leaned my head back against the cushions. I told her all I could think of. I left out a few unimportant matters, but on the

whole I told all there was to tell.

"You have changed. Ever so much," she said when I had finished.

"In what way?"

"In lots of ways."

"For instance?"

"The way you talk about Sungei Lembu and your squad, to mention only two things."

"You mean the squad I had. You should apply the past tense," I said bitterly.

"You hate losing them, don't you?"

"Yes. I can talk to you about it because I know you'll understand. It was a great wrench when I was taken away. The bottom seemed to drop out of my life. I never thought I would be capable of feeling like that. You once asked me about their loyalty. I couldn't answer you truthfully then, but I can now. They proved their loyalty. That is why I am here alive today. The test came, and they never let me down, never wavered an instant. I bullied them and most times made their lives hell, and in return they gave me everything I did not deserve. I shall never forget those boys."

I felt her soft, warm hand close over mine. I turned my head towards her, and I left unchecked the tears which rolled down my cheek.

"I understand, Bill," she said gently. It was the first time she had used my nickname.

"I knew you would," I said.

"So much seems uncertain these days. When one thinks of things it clouds over any happiness one feels," she said seriously.

"What disturbing things do you think about?"

"Malaya and her future mostly."

"Malaya's future is already carved. The constitution has been drawn up, and some time in the not-too-distant future her independence date will be published. When that day arrives her greatest battles will begin because then she will be alone. She

must make herself strong to combat the internal subversive elements which will still exist when she gains her freedom. The seeds are already being sown in anticipation of that day. Malays are being elected into office because it is obvious that if any other national body is in power then, independence will not be forthcoming. Whether those Malays will be in power after independence remains to be seen. For the sake of everyone in this country and the generations to come, I hope they are. Thousands of lives have been sacrificed and millions of pounds spent to defend this country and its rubber. If Malaya fails, all those lives and money will have been wasted. I've often wondered why those men had to die, what they died for. I know the answer now. They died to preserve an archaic system of colonial government. The old whip has been wielded too heavily. I was undecided about that once, but not now. We have held them down so long that they can barely draw breath to squeak. Their ignorance was our greatest asset. We exploited it over the centuries, and now it's flung right back in our faces."

"And what will be England's reaction if Malaya fails?"

"The same as it has always been. Complete indifference. Nothing has happened to England since the war. That is all the people can sit back and talk about because they have not troubled to interest themselves in world affairs. They accept no part of Indo-China, Malaya, Korea or Kenya into their lives. All they want today is soft living, television sets, football pools. They look upon Communism as something confined to the East, and with smug complacency all they can say is, 'It will never affect us.' If they carry on with that attitude they will wake up one day and find it has swamped them overnight. Then it will be too late."

Lois got up and poured herself another drink. She came back to the settee and ran her finger round the rim of the glass.

"Can we talk about something else?" she asked quietly. "You are very interesting in what you say but also terrifying, and I do not want to spoil the little time we have together."

"I'm sorry," I said. "It was getting a bit morbid. I'll start off

with a character I met in the Metropole."

She sipped her drink and smiled at me. "Who's that?"

"Joe Woodford. He's the manager there. Quite tickled pink because there's a town in Essex with the same name. He always kids me it was named after him. Well, Joe's got a heart of gold. He spends hours and a lot of money in Penang cemetery looking after the graves of policemen and soldiers. He buys flowers quite often for them, and really takes an interest. Writes quite often to the relatives, too. He's got stacks of letters in his drawer neatly tied in piles with blue ribbon."

"It's nice to know there are people like him. That everyone is not out for their own individual gain."

"Yes, it makes one think a bit," I said seriously.

There was a pause while Lois finished her drink. She glanced at her watch.

"Are you still going on to Kuala Lumpur tonight?"

"Yes. I must."

"It will be very late when you arrive."

"Never mind. I'll stick it," I grinned.

I lit a cigarette and handed one to her. I noticed she did not use her long holder any more.

"Will you ever come back to Malaya?"

"I can't honestly say at this moment. Maybe. One never knows."

"Will you let me know if you do?"

"That's a definite promise."

"Thank you. I'm glad you said that."

I looked across at her and I saw the mist in her eyes.

"What will you do in England?" she went on.

I stretched my arms above my head and yawned.

"Write a book about Malaya," I said suddenly.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. You will be mentioned in it."

Her face blanched a little. Her eyes met mine and lingered unwaveringly.

"You mustn't do that."

"I won't use your real name."

"I wasn't thinking of that. I meant that you mustn't because I couldn't possibly have anything to do with it," she said quickly.

"You are part of it. The same as everyone else who will be mentioned."

"I feel flattered. Will it be published?"

"I can't cross bridges by saying it will. I doubt if I'll find a publisher game enough to risk money on it."

"I hope you do."

"So do I."

"You must send me a copy if you are lucky."

"And reveal all my secrets to you?" I laughed.

She blushed and looked embarrassed.

"Okay," I said. "I'll let you have a copy. Personally autographed by the author. How's that?"

"Fine."

I glanced out of the large spacious window. The sun was setting in the distance beyond the house-tops. I got up and walked over to the window.

"I must go now, Lois," I said slowly, keeping my back to her.

"But you must have something to eat before you leave," she said in a way which made me think she wanted to say something else.

I turned round and walked back to the settee. I leaned on the back and looked down at her.

"I think it best if I go now," I said softly. "But I would like to ask you something personal before I go."

"All right."

"Were you ever in love with Fisher?"

Her face paled and she trembled.

"I was never in love with anyone until——"

Her voice faltered.

"Until what?"

She trembled again.

"It doesn't matter, really. It was stupid of me." I went round

to the front of the settee and clutched both her hands in mine.
"I hate saying good-bye, Lois. But more often than not it has to come."

"I hate it, too," she murmured.

I released her hands and they fell limply on to her knees.

"Good-bye then, Lois, and may God bless you."

I turned towards the door and I heard her rise from the settee behind me.

"Bill." Her voice was very low. I could sense her nearness. I wheeled and faced her. The mist had crept back into her eyes again.

"Yes?"

"Would you kiss me before you go?"

The mist was deeper. I drew her into my arms. I kissed her long and tenderly.

"God bless you, too, Bill," she whispered.

I left her and closed the door behind me. I heard her sobbing as I went down the hallway.

[23]

I FOLLOWED the civilian clerk down the warren-like corridors of Federal Police Headquarters, Kuala Lumpur. He stopped at a door marked 'Private', knocked and went in. He reappeared a few seconds later and beckoned me. I went inside and the clerk closed the door behind me. I listened to his footsteps receding down the corridor outside. The room was small and its white-washed walls reflected a dazzling brightness from the sun flooding through the large window. The room was barely furnished. Two tables and three chairs. I glanced at the man sitting at the table in the centre of the room, and then at the stenographer perched behind the small table in front of the window. I drew back the vacant chair and sat down at the table in the centre. I opened my brief-case and arranged a wad of papers before me. I looked at the man sitting opposite. He was young

and good-looking. The hollowness which once must have disfigured his face had gone.

"It has been explained to you who I am and why I am here?" I asked him.

"Yes."

I lit a cigarette and offered one to him. He shook his head and smiled at me.

"I am going to ask you a few questions before I get down to the real reason for my visit. Only answer them if you wish to do so. I want you fully to understand that. And I personally wish to assure you that your identity will not be disclosed by me."

"I understand. Thank you."

"You are a Surrendered Enemy Personnel. Why did you surrender to the police?"

He hesitated briefly.

"Because I lost faith in the cause I was following."

"Why did you lose faith?"

He hesitated again.

"My former Party made several promises to myself and my comrades. None of those promises were fulfilled. Our life in the jungle became unbearable. We were on short rations for many months and our discipline became more brutal. Several of my comrades were shot because they dared to ask for more food. Several more died of emaciation and beri-beri. We were not allowed to have any women to satisfy our passions. They were kept only for the officers until it was discovered that some of them had pox. Then they were offered to us. Then the Political Commissioner would come and lecture us. He told us that we were beating the Imperialists and soon Malaya would be free. If we had patience and waited and remained loyal to the cause, we would receive our reward. But the promises were empty ones, and as time went on many of us deserted and surrendered because we had lost faith."

"Have you been well treated since your surrender?"

"Yes. Everyone has been very kind. For the first time for many years I have been treated like a normal human being."

"You do not regret leaving the Communist Party?"

"That I shall never regret."

I sifted through the papers.

"Before your surrender you were an active member of the Fourth Independent Company of the Malayan Races Liberation Army?"

"That is true."

"You were a uniformed soldier of that company?"

"Yes."

"You were also a member of it when it launched its attack on Bukit Kepong Police-station on the twenty-third day of February, 1950?"

"Yes."

"And you took part in that attack?"

"Yes."

I flicked ash into the ash-tray.

"Why did your company choose to attack Bukit Kepong?"

"There were several reasons. It was isolated, and we knew it was not in wireless contact with any other police establishment. Also we wanted to strengthen our prestige in that area and to deliver another blow for the liberation of the oppressed peoples. Those were the main reasons."

"What was the strength of your company?"

"Two hundred uniformed and heavily armed men. There were also some women and children followers."

"Did your Leader know that the total police strength at Bukit Kepong was no more than twenty men and that there were no European officers there? Only Malays and a small force of Auxiliary Police in the village near by?"

"That is true."

"So your Leader was aware that he outnumbered those policemen ten to one?"

"Yes."

"And at the time you called the attack delivering another blow to liberate the oppressed peoples?"

He did not answer.

"Now I want you to tell me of the attack on Bukit Kepong. I shall interrupt from time to time to ask questions. Apart from that, tell the story in your own words."

I stubbed my cigarette and settled myself comfortably in the chair. The stenographer was ready, pen poised over his pad.

The man began his story.

"We encircled the police-station at four o'clock in the morning. We had chosen that hour because we thought the sentries would be asleep. As it happened, they were not and that was the first setback to our plans. At exactly four-thirty our bugle was sounded and the attack was under way, firing into the police-station from all sides. We immediately received a heavy barrage of return gunfire. I was in the party attacking the front of the station, and I could see the policemen taking up defence positions. They had apparently divided into two sections. One section manned defences under the station, using two bren guns, and the other section manned defence posts in the Charge Room above. A few men, I do not know how many, defended the married quarters at the rear of the station. Most of our armament was automatic weapons, but some of us had rifles and hand grenades. The greatest resistance to our attack was coming from under the police-station because the brens were there. We concentrated our frontal attack on that position, and after about one hour it was silenced. We then received orders to charge the front of the police-station. This we did with fixed bayonets, but the gunfire from the Charge Room was so intense that we withdrew to reform for another attack."

"Did you lose any men in that first charge?"

"Two killed and several wounded. We managed to go forward under fire and bring away the dead in gunny sacks, but we had to leave most of the wounded. Some of the women and children followers helped us."

"Did the police fire upon the women and children?"

"No. Only at the men."

I scribbled on a piece of paper.

"Right. Go on."

"Our next move was to call on the defenders to surrender, promising them that they would suffer no harm if they did so. They refused stubbornly and increased their resistance. Meanwhile some of my comrades had been attempting to break in at the rear of the police-station compound, but they had been subjected to a determined action from the married quarters. They charged the quarters many times, but each time they had been driven back and suffered several casualties."

"So your plans were not materialising as your Leader envisaged?"

"No. As I have said, we counted on the sentries being asleep. In addition, we had not contemplated such a determined defence."

"I see. Go on."

"When daylight came we were able to assess the situation much better. I could see the dead policemen lying underneath the station. The one in charge, Sergeant Jamil, was slumped over one of the bren guns. We received orders to charge and we did so time after time, but we were still unsuccessful in driving a wedge into the defences, so we withdrew. We called out again to the men in the Charge Room to surrender, but again they refused. Our Leader was becoming impatient, and he ordered a heavily concentrated attack on the married quarters which was the weakest defence position. They could not repel our final attack in that sector and we were successful in breaking through. One of the police wives tried to run to the station, but my comrades caught her. They asked her to walk to the station and call on the men to surrender. She refused and when threatened at pistol point she still refused. She told my comrades that there were only two people left alive in the married quarters. A policeman's wife and daughter. Then my comrades shot the wife they had caught and called upon the one in the married quarters to surrender. She refused and

shouted that both she and her daughter preferred to die. So my comrades set fire to the married quarters and burnt both of them alive. Then they threw the body of the other wife into the blazing building."

He paused to wipe the sweat which had broken out on his forehead. I lit another cigarette and glanced at the stenographer. His face had hardened like granite. I turned back to the man at the table. His face was pale and sickly.

"There was a boat moored to the river bank at the rear of the police-station. Do you know anything about that?" I asked.

"Yes. At the time of the attack a Marine policeman was on duty there. He defended the boat until he was killed."

"He could have escaped in the boat?"

"Yes."

I glanced at my papers.

"The police wife your comrades caught and shot was his wife?"

"Yes."

"Now continue with your story," I said slowly.

"We had obtained a foothold in the compound and the only resistance left to overcome was the Charge Room defence. We received orders and we charged in from front and rear. We got into grenade range and threw several into the Charge Room. Then my comrades set fire to the station at the rear, and as the policemen were forced to come out of the front because of the flames we shot them down."

"The policemen were still defiant and shooting at you as they came out?"

"Yes. Some of them had their uniforms on fire also."

"You could have captured some of them alive?"

"Yes, that was possible."

"But your comrades chose instead to shoot them?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"And as the policemen were either killed or wounded, their

wives picked up their guns and fired back at you during the attack?"

"That is true."

"And your comrades threw the body of Sergeant Jamil into the burning police-station?"

"Yes. And some of the other policemen also."

"Were they all dead? I am not clear on that point."

"Not all."

"Underneath the police-station your comrades found a small terrified boy, the son of one of the policemen. Is it correct that your comrades also threw that boy into the fire alive?"

"It is correct."

I smashed my cigarette into the ash-tray. The man watched the anger I fought to control.

"And the attack lasted five hours. It took five hours for two hundred heavily armed, well-trained men to overwhelm a mere handful of twenty?"

"That is so."

"Now we'll go back to the attack once more. While it was being launched, the Auxiliary Police from the village tried to break through your lines and reach the police-station?"

"Yes, but they were very few in numbers and we were able to keep them at bay."

"Some of them were Chinese and they died?"

"Yes."

I scribbled some more notes.

"Now to return to your company. It was multi-racial, I believe. By that I mean it consisted of Chinese, Malays and Indians."

"That is so."

"And your Leader was a Malay?"

"Yes."

I lit another cigarette and blew the smoke across the room. I removed a piece of tobacco from my lip.

"What is your own personal opinion of the Bukit Kepong defenders?"

"I think they were very brave. No one could have fought better," he answered without hesitation.

"Did you think that at the time?"

"Yes. I admired them then."

"I have a high opinion of them, too. What they did will one day go down in history. More than that, I believe that their heroic defence exemplifies the spirit of this country, and of every country where man's freedom and his pursuit of happiness is threatened. Bukit Kepong did not really die in that attack. It still lives today, and its memory is rich and I believe that as time passes that memory will grow richer."

He faced me unflinchingly across the table. His face was not pale any more. It was flushed and his eyes were bright, too.

"I begin to understand what you mean," he said very slowly and very softly.

I leaned across the table. The smoke from my cigarette curled upwards. I watched it as I spoke.

"I would like to say a few last words for Bukit Kepong. For its men, women and children who defended it a long time ago. So I say this. So died the heroic defenders of Bukit Kepong; policemen who, until a short while before, had never visualised that they would some day have to fight like soldiers; wives whose only wish was to live in simple, peaceful harmony with their families on that lonely outpost of freedom; children who never thought they had been born to resist the Communist cause; but they died and they were sacrificed like gold cast into a raging furnace, and as the thick black column of smoke rose high above Bukit Kepong, it formed their funeral pyre."

The cigarette smoke continued to curl upwards and its ash fell on to the table.

I COVERED the return journey to Penang in one hop. I returned the car to the hire firm and went on to the Metropole. Joe Woodford was sitting behind the reception counter sorting his neat piles of letters. His moon-face beamed and glistened under the strong electric light. I lodged my brief-case on the counter and folded my arms across it.

"Still at it, Joe?" I grinned.

"Yes. It's part of my everyday life," he answered.

"By the way, I had a peep at the cemetery the other day. The flowers looked fine on the graves. You exceeded yourself, Joe," I complimented him warmly.

"Only too pleased to do it for the police and soldier boys. You know that, don't you, Bill?"

"Sure, I know, Joe," I said.

His face turned serious.

"Fit for tomorrow? The *Chusan* berthed today."

"I'm ready now."

"Any of your men from Sungei Lembu coming to see you off?"

I felt a tug at my heart as he asked the question.

"They won't be able to, I'm afraid. A combined operation was launched this morning against the stronghold of the 1st, 5th and 8th Platoons of the Communist Eighth Regiment in the Bongsu Forest Reserve. Looks as if they'll corner the 5th Platoon at last, and my boys are in the big push. I picked up the gen in K.L. this morning. Operation Sword is the code name."

"I bet you wish you were with your boys, eh?"

"More than anything else in the world, Joe," I said seriously. I ran one hand over the counter.

I watched Woodford tie the last bundle of letters and stack them away in a drawer. He turned the key in the lock.

"Will you want dinner tonight?" he queried.

"No, thanks, I'm pushing off to Batu Lanchang Lane shortly. Going to see a chap named Lindsay I met in Penang Headquarters. His 999 Emergency Call Service operates next week. Maybe you know him."

Woodford's eyebrows furrowed in thought.

"Yes, I do. Comes in here occasionally for a drink. His wife's a blonde."

"Don't know about his wife being a blonde, but I guess you and I mean the same fellow." I stretched and yawned lazily.

Joe Woodford produced his meals book.

"Shall I book you for breakfast tomorrow?" he asked.

"No, thanks. Just morning tea in the room. I start my travels best on an empty stomach," I grinned.

I half turned as a European couple came in and sat at the bar. The man was a weed compared to the woman. She was built on battleship lines and her large backside oozed over the edge of the stool like lumps of soft dough. Her thin dress was almost yielding to the strain. Her hair was a mixture of henna and blue tints, and her face, sagging loosely into triple chins, bore more make-up than a dozen film-stars put together. When she spoke, it sounded like a saw running on to a nail.

"I think the way that Malay constable addressed you was simply outrageous," she boomed at the companion beside her.

"He was only doing his job," he said plaintively.

"Nonsense. I absolutely shudder to think what will happen when the ignorant wretches get independence. They'll murder us in our beds, you mark my words. Doing his job? His attitude was perfectly disgusting!" she snorted.

I winked at Woodford and he grinned. I pushed my brief-case towards him.

"Ask Ali to put that in my room for me, please."

"Sure, Bill. Did you get all you wanted in K.L.?"

"Everything. Commissioner Carbonnel and Assistant Commissioner Tilbrook could not do enough for me."

"I'm glad to hear it."

I glanced at my watch.

"It's time to push off to Batu Lanchang," I said.

"Okay, Bill. Have a good time."

"I will. Good night, Joe."

"Good night, Bill."

I walked to the end of the drive. Briefly I thought of Operation Sword. I sighed and flagged a tri-shaw.

The Chinese rider braked alongside me.

"Where to, sir?"

"Batu Lanchang Lane."

I climbed in and the rider pedalled off.

"Nice night, sir," he said.

"Yes, it is."

He pedalled on and turned left at the roundabout.

"Are you on holiday, sir?" he chirped.

"Kind of. I go back to England tomorrow," I said absently.

"On the *Chusan*, I bet. She is a lovely ship, sir. I saw her in the docks an hour ago. Some passengers were my fares into town."

"You're quite right. On the *Chusan*. You speak very good English."

I heard him laugh behind me.

"Yes, sir. I was standard eight in English at school."

"That's very high. You should better yourself. Be something more than a tri-shaw rider."

"Sometimes I think I will, but I never get round to it. Always my wife puts a spoke in my wheel. She lacks ambition," he said seriously.

"How much do you make on this job?"

"In the season it is very good. I pay five dollars a day for the hire of the tri-shaw. The rest is mine. I fleece a lot of the tourists. They come off the ships, and throw their money around because they like to look important. So I fleece them."

"You're quite a boy," I grinned.

"You are not a tourist, sir. I would say you are a police officer."

"You're quite right. How did you guess?"

"It's just instinct. I cannot explain it. But I can tell, sir."

He reached the crossroads and halted at the halt sign. He released the brakes and pedalled across.

"Are you leaving the police, sir?"

"Yes, medical discharge."

"I am sorry, sir."

"Thank you. I expect you'll be pleased to see the back of all of us when you get independence," I kidded him.

"No, sir. I do not want to see the British go. None of the working class do. Only the towkais and the big business-men! And the politicians, of course. It will give them the opportunity to feather their own nests. It will be a bad day for Malaya when the British go. Like India and Burma. One bloody hell of a bad day," he said seriously.

"It won't be all that bad," I assured him.

"It will, sir. The Chinese towkais hold all the money and will pull all the strings. Then the Malays will be helpless. The bloody bastard Chinese towkais."

I lit a cigarette and flicked the match into the road.

"But you're Chinese," I said.

"Maybe I am, but I am not a bloody hypocrite, sir. Like the towkais."

He lapsed into silence, and I thought of what he had said.

He pedalled on down the road, and soon the lights of Batu Lanchang winked in the distance. The wheels of the tri-shaw hummed and sped me on towards them. They came nearer and I sat back and relaxed.

I had my last meal in Malaya with Jim and Madge Lindsay and their daughter, Jennifer.

The powerful screws churned the sea into a foaming mass of white. With a derisive hoot on its siren the huge liner eased

away from the jetty. The pompous little tugs milled around like busy ants, straining to pull their charge out into deep water. The decks were lined with passengers waving and shouting to friends on the quayside, throwing gaily coloured streamers downwards in a final spurt of enthusiasm. Sometimes the streamers were caught by willing hands, and thrown back again amid a roar of unrestrained laughter. The tugs, having played their part in the struggle against the elements, cast off the steel hawsers and rose and fell on the crest of the swell as the ship steamed out to sea.

I leaned on the deck-rail at the stern, alone in my chosen solitude. I watched the screws churn the water and relished the soothing rhythm of the tiny waves lapping against the ship's steel sides. Occasionally the white foam would change to muddy brown, then become resplendently laced with twinkling, darting patches of shimmering phosphorescence. I averted my attention to the grandeur of Bukit Mertajam towering high and majestic above the mainland. The low flimsy grey clouds hung gracefully at the summit, shrouding it in a protective mist. My eyes softened, and the hard lines on my face gently relaxed as I stared wistfully, yearningly at that hill of memory. The chill ocean wind fanned my cheeks and whipped through my thin tropical shirt as I remained immobile in my vigil. Each turn of the screws took me and the ship farther away, and gradually the hill diminished and then abruptly vanished for ever from my view. As the sun sank like a flaming ball of fire below the horizon, and clear, bright day turned into black, mysterious night, I was still there staring across the wide, turbulent ocean.

EPILOGUE

I WOULD like to bring you, the reader, up to date regarding some of the events and characters you have read about in this book. My old squad played its last decisive role in the Bongsu Forest Reserve, along with combined police and military units. The result of Operation Sword was the complete rout of the Communist Eighth Regiment, the 1st, 5th and 8th Platoons and, of course, the North Kedah Committee of the Malayan Communist Party. Shortly afterwards, the Sungei Lembu Jungle Squad was absorbed into the newly formed Area Security Units of the Federation Police—the little brothers of the highly specialised combatant Royal Federation Police Field Force Companies. There are twenty-two of these Field Force Companies operating today in Malaya from jungle forts. Their operational strength is two European officers and approximately four hundred Asian other ranks. One Field Force Company is entirely Gurkhas, recruited under special agreement with the King of Nepal and his government. The Royal Federation of Malaya Police Force has today spread its young wings and through devotion to duty has found its true footing, but in passing let us not forget the old jungle squads who were the forerunners of the present-day police might.

An insight now into some of the main characters. The first thought which crosses my mind strangely enough is whether Goo Ling has murdered any more tinned puddings! Madill, Sheldrick and Lovie are still in the police, no doubt burning up the tracks somewhere. Hugh Nield returned to the Malayan Police after the termination of his original contract and a short spell in the Coventry City Police. Paddy Regan is back home in Northern Ireland—at least, he was the last I heard of him—and I can only add that his wife kept her word. Forgive me, Paddy! Peter has transferred at last to the regular police and is

climbing the promotion ladder. The last I heard of 'Norman' Rodway, one of the best friends I ever had, he was moved on promotion to Deputy Superintendent. Ah Cham surrendered to the police at Bukit Mertajam a few months after I left Malaya. Shortly after his surrender, he hung himself in a cell in Contingent Police Headquarters on Penang Island. And Ching Moi Chai? He is still free, and somewhere he still upholds his belief in Communism. Maybe some day we shall eventually meet. Who knows? I do not want to appear sentimental, but some day I shall return to Malaya. I still miss many things. The soft thud of a rubber-soled jungle boot; the click of a carbine bolt and the pleasant Technicolored panorama of Malaya. I even miss the smell of the jungle. Or the muttered curse of a man streaked in perspiration. You have to live it all really to appreciate it. Thank you for reading my book, and I do hope you enjoyed it.

J. W. G. M.