# THE DOOR MARKED MALAYA

# The Door Marked Malaya

OLIVER CRAWFORD



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ALL successful men have agreed in one thing—they were causationists. They believed that things went not by luck, but by law; that there was not a weak or a cracked link in the chain that joins the first and last of things. A belief in causality, or strict connection between every pulse-beat and the principle of being, and, in consequence, belief in compensation, or that nothing is got for nothing—characterises all valuable minds, and must control every effort that is made by an industrious one. The most valuable men are the best believers in the tensions of the laws. 'All the great captains', said Bonaparte, 'have performed vast achievements by conforming with the rules of the art, by adjusting efforts to obstacles'.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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# FOREWORD

THIS book is an account of my experiences in Malaya and Singapore in 1954–55, when I had the privilege of serving as a Second Lieutenant with the First Battalion of the Somerset Light Infantry (Prince Albert's). It is a personal account. To the best of my recollection everything in it is true. However, as it was written from memory three years later, I may have made mistakes of detail and I must ask the indulgence of the reader.

My characters are drawn from life, but not exactly so. They are composite caricatures, and not to be taken too seriously. With the exception of Untam and Besi, the names are fictitious. The extracts from my diary are authentic, and are the actual words I wrote at the time. The entries have been slightly shortened for personal reasons, and to make easier reading.

Finally, I am very much aware that many people were in Malaya and Singapore much longer than I was, and saw much more. But I suppose space and time can perhaps be thought of just as durations of consciousness, so I have written just as I remembered. This book makes no pretence of being authoritative in any way—it is merely a personal record.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I WOULD like first of all to thank my mother, before anyone else, for all she has done for me (and certainly not least for having taken the trouble to bring me up as a child on so strong, so splendid a diet of the English classics). I would like to thank *all* who helped and encouraged me at Wellington College, Berkshire; Worcester College, Oxford; and the College of Europe, Bruges—among them Mr John Bowle, Mr Bryan Magee, Mr Vidia Naipaul, Mr Zbigniew Rozycki, and Mr Peter Unwin. I have particular reason to acknowledge with gratitude the help of my grandfather, the late Mr John Telford Dinsmore. I also have particular reason to thank Mr and Mrs Tim Stride, whose kindness to me in Berlin enabled this book to be written.

OLIVER CRAWFORD

PART ONE

# INTRODUCTION


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# CHAPTER ONE

Journey over all the universe in a map, without expense and fatigue, without suffering inconvenience.

MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

IN England things had been different. First we had stamped and shivered our way through battle-school on Dartmoor, and then we had waved good-bye to Southampton in a drizzle of snow. In those days we had been used to the military system. We were its very incarnation. But just as our memories of snow in England melted under Mediterranean sun, so did our memories of the system. We were only civilian conscripts, after all, even if we were newly-commissioned. We could still lie all day long in a sleepy sun-soaked daze, unaware of the system or indeed anything much else. In those days "Malaya" was still only a blurred word at the back of our minds.

Under half-closed eyelids we used to watch whatever panorama chose to appear—the Algerian coast, perhaps, green and purple; or the quay in Port Said, where we spent a morning idly watching a girl hanging out washing on a nearby roof-top, piece by glistening white piece. We spent hours eating huge P. and O. meals, and then more hours after them recovering in deck-chairs, watching waves sliding past the ship, endlessly, without pause, without ourselves realising that days were sliding past too. Soon they were not days, but weeks. And soon we were in the Indian Ocean, slowly opening our eyes and much surprised to find the system again appearing among us.

There were many signs. Staff officers began to chew pencils. Bunches of paper began to blossom whitely on notice-boards. In the Straits of Malacca anti-malaria pills began to appear on our plates at breakfast. Malaya was real now. We could almost

see it, and at night we could certainly feel it. It was over there, in the darkness, where lighthouses were probing on the horizon, where flashes of lightning pulsed and flickered.

When we docked in Singapore, the men who came aboard were ruthless. They were the system. They shattered our make-believe happiness of the voyage and we stood aside, panting in the heat, nervous, silent, awed by their green uniforms starched stiff as cardboard, by their Sam Browne belts flashing in the sun, clearly not worn for ceremony. This obviously wasn't peace—yet it didn't quite seem war. This was neither Kenya nor Indo-China. The system, as usual, told us nothing.

Yet, after all, the system had at least decreed that a troopship should arrive in Singapore every week, and that this week it should be the *Empire Fowey*—our troopship. It was the system which had decreed we should now be waiting to land. A group of us sat in the lounge on chintz-covered chairs, drinking ginger-ale and brandy, sweating, deafened by loudspeakers and not understanding them. The lounge became more crowded, waiters brought more drinks, uniforms manœuvred round us, wives and husbands kissed, children shrieked—it might have been Babel in a Turkish bath, but we could say or do nothing, remembering the system, and helpless in its grasp. For nearly two hours we sat there, clutching our glasses in moist fingers, waiting to wake up.

Two hours later I was standing bewildered outside the Officers' Club in Singapore, trying to pay a Chinese taxi-driver. It is always bewildering to arrive in a place one has dreamed about as long as one can remember. Singapore had always been on my private list of Places-I-Shall-One-Day-Visit, together with Table Bay and San Francisco and Istanbul. I had been aware of Singapore ever since as a small boy I had watched my teacher draw a map of it on the black-board. He left a clear impression in my mind of a town like Portsmouth, divided between the Royal Navy and a million

Chinese. A few days later he had to explain why the red-chalk shadings of the Japanese advance were engulfing the island. The fall of Singapore had meant more to me than the fall of France. Now its pavement was under my feet, its noise in my ears, its smells fighting for individual attention. And I was free for the afternoon.

I had very nearly not been free. When I had reached the railway station after leaving the ship I had been so tired after struggling with red-faced Disembarkation Officers, jabbering Chinese porters, sweating Baggage Officers, blinding sunshine and rumours I had already missed my train, that I was ready to give up.

I had no idea where I was, or what was happening. The system had abandoned me, just when I was too hot and tired to profit. Finally I discovered I had to wait for the night train to Kuala Lumpur, and turned in desperation to a Military Police Corporal outside the station gate. He was the last hope standing between me and four desolate hours in the station bar.

He took charge firmly, heroically repressing a grin at my long trousers and crumpled fatigue uniform, whistling up a taxi, bullying the driver into an agreed price, and telling me he would take me to the Officers' Club.

"It's right in the middle of Singapore, sir. Hope you have a good time, sir."

The taxi-driver was a wrinkled little Chinese, wearing shorts and a greasy white singlet. He seemed to be driving remarkably fast—but at least when I opened the window a blast of slightly cooler air buffeted my head and shoulders, slowly reviving me for my first look at Singapore.

I spoke to him, but he just drove faster, dodging in and out of lorries, all placarded with names of rubber companies. I felt I was mad—driving blindly into the unknown heart of Singapore, at the mercy of this greasy little man, when I should have been calmly having a meal at the station and making sure of my train. Suppose he took me to the wrong place and demanded more

money in Chinese? Suppose my money was stolen? Suppose I missed the night train, had to spend the night in Singapore, was late joining my regiment, was posted absent, was . . ?

My worries vanished when I woke up to what was all round me. We were driving down long straight streets, crammed with strange traffic, choked with harsh tangled noises, garish with colour—with white walls and dark shutters, with pavements always arcaded under an upper story, vanishing behind pillars, getting lost in shop-fronts and kitchens.

Street after street followed, all the same, full of moving figures, wild traffic, and these strange shop-fronts, as artificial-looking and tawdry as theatre-sets. Yet the streets lacked any sharp edge to guide the eye. All was confusion—shouting men, cavernous gutters full of garbage, black-eyed Chinese children, faces watching from upper windows. The streets had so many dimensions—their life continued sideways through open shop-fronts into kitchens with flickering orange fires, into bedrooms and storehouses; it continued out through alleyways where confused groups could be glimpsed between cracked walls and pavements where children and dogs crawled in the litter; it continued upwards, by staircases to second and third floors where wooden shutters were thrown back in the forlorn hope of letting coolness into dark cluttered rooms. From a taxi window one could see only the ceilings of these rooms, hung across with clothes-lines and poles, lanterns and bird-cages and bundles, and always, peering down, half-revealed where sunlight and darkness met, an astonishing variety of Chinese faces, all watching the street—the street through which my taxi fought its way, with me sitting in its back seat, my mind a confused bauble tossed upon many-coloured waves of sensation, trying so hard to retain within itself some awareness of each split-second picture that flashed past, second after second, as these roaring, reeling, colour-splashed, noise-torn streets unrolled their length.

No wonder I was bewildered when we reached the Officers' Club. There it was so quiet inside that even the purring of the fans seemed tactless. There were casual English voices, waiters

in white coats, easy-chairs full of uniformed figures. It was like being back on the *Empire Fowey.*

"Well, it's Oliver. What'll you have—brandy-ginger, Tiger beer?"

I joined the group, all just off the *Fowey*, all listening to an R.A.S.C. Captain full of brandy-ginger and gossip of the Emergency.

"You know what those bloody bandits do? When they get tired they come to J'ore-B'ru, change into civvies, and ask for a job in our Ordnance Depots. They eat lots, have a good time with the girls, and then guess what? You're right—back into the bloody jungle—full of fight for their next little bit of beastliness. And if I was Templer—you know what I'd do?"

I listened for half an hour. At the end I was muddled with warm beer and even more muddled by the talk. I knew the Emergency mattered. I knew it had already lasted seven years. But I hadn't thought it would dominate all conversation, right in the middle of Singapore, undeterred even by brandy-ginger. If I was going to have to lead jungle-patrols in what seemed a strangely hypnotising kind of half-war, then it looked as if I would have to start learning all over again, from the beginning.

"You all right, old boy? I know, it's the heat. Hits everyone like that at first. If you want to be cool, you go to a cinema. Try the Cathay, just up the road—coolest place I know."

So I tried it. Outside, the heat was savage. Not so much hot, as sickly warm—the air muggy and heavy in my lungs, washing warmly over my arms as I walked. I was sweating as I had never sweated before, mopping my face continually, my uniform already sodden and clinging.

The people who passed all seemed to be dressed in sheets or towels or pyjamas. Most were Malay or Chinese, I knew, but which were which? I knew the Indians: smooth Madrassi faces bending over cottons and silks in little rabbit-hutches of shops, and dignified Punjabi faces with white beard below, and carefully coiled puggaree above. And everywhere children, running in rags, waddling brown and naked, spilling out from under

tables, kicking lustily between mother's broad hip and wrinkled arm. And everywhere bicycles, pedalled by wiry figures in shorts and singlets with heads hidden under much-too-large trilbies. And everywhere women—Indian women in delicately beautiful saris of rippling green or cascading crimson; Malay women in flamboyant sarongs and embroidered jackets; Chinese women in black-satin trousers, or skin-tight European-style dresses, slit to show the thigh.

The first two I saw were the most simply dressed of all—yet because they were the first they startled me. They were just two young Chinese girls, with tightly curled black hair above laughing wide-mouthed faces, but they were wearing nothing except pyjama trousers and sleeveless jackets of thin flowered cotton which clung closely to their bodies. They were standing in the middle of the pavement looking as if they had just got out of bed. As I clumped past in my ammunition boots, gaitered, belted, sweltering, I knew quite well which of us looked ridiculously out of place.

A few paces further on I was surrounded by French soldiers from Indo-China, with kepis and great blocks of square-cut medal-ribbons, all trying to ask the way. The meeting was a defeat for both sides, and as I turned away the two Chinese girls were grinning broadly.

I found sanctuary in the Cathay. It was more than a cinema —it was a baby skyscraper, containing among other things two restaurants, a hotel, and the American Club. The cinema was blessedly cool. Fans hung from the ceiling, their blades the size of aeroplane propellers, sweeping majestically round. A prim Chinese girl showed me to my seat, and for the first time since I had come ashore I began to relax.

Of all the films in the world, they were showing my favourite —*Roman Holiday*. And I was no longer hot, sweating, dazzled with sunlight, and lost. I was sitting in cool darkness, responding violently to delicate evocative music, to the startling bareness of trees against sky, to the Italian splendour of carved and painted staterooms, to the apoplectic noises of Italian scooters in the

streets. Now that I saw it from outside, Europe was suddenly real to me. How strange to see men in the streets wearing jackets! How astonishing were the white-faced European crowds! I already knew the film backwards, and now every scene, every joke or inflection of voice was a remembered joy, all over again, sweeping me back into that already strange world I had left three weeks earlier.

At the railway station I met Bill Ramsden again. Bill and I had been cadets together at Eaton Hall, and close friends on the boat. He was the sort of person who always wins lotteries. His success was phenomenal, both with women and games. At Eaton Hall he had been an Under-Officer, and with his square face and new moustache looked older than nineteen. He seemed just the type to succeed in the Army, particularly in Malaya—even if, just at that moment, he was almost as nervous as I was.

It was dark and pouring with rain. We were issued with rifles and ammunition, and then stood around with them in our hands feeling foolish. We watched Malay and Chinese and Indian families in their crowded carriages. We watched an unhappy subaltern go pale when told he was to command the train—he also had only just landed.

We talked for a long time as the train rumbled through the hot darkness. Bill laughed when I placed my rifle by the door, and then tried to reach out unobtrusively to see if I could clutch it in a hurry from where I slept. But, after all, this was the railway which British officers fighting against the Japanese, and then later Chinese Communist terrorists fighting against us, seemed to have found quite easy to blow up. We both knew this—even if we knew little more. So we talked because we could not sleep—about our ship, and families on it, and where they all were now, and about the jungle and what it would be like. Particularly about the jungle. It was just a few feet from us as we travelled through the night, but we could see little of it. We could only

feel the unchanging heat, and try altering the direction of our one fan, and then wonder for the hundredth time what we would see in the daylight, and what the next few weeks would bring to us both.

Next morning I stood looking out of the train window, trying to shave, and thinking to myself: "You're in Malaya. This is the jungle. Go on—*look* at it. Wake up, and *look* at it. Because you're going to have to live in it."

There wasn't much to see, except that everything was wet. It had rained heavily, and now glistening pools lay everywhere, swelling into small shining swamps, spreading away on either side of the track. The vegetation was lush, rich, exaggerated. It seemed more than life-size. The smallest plants seemed to have plate-sized leaves. It wasn't so unfamiliar, but just that everything was *bigger*.

As a man-eating jungle it was a disappointment. It seemed mostly tangled grey-green scrub, with a bewildering succession of different bushes and shrubs. There were green plantain-like leaves, shaped like Zulu shields, and among them I saw my first wild bananas. And there were forests of slender rubber-trees with delicate foliage, planted in rows, leading away in silvery avenues like silver birches.

Then we were looking down again on scrub, with leaping sprays of bamboo, and towering masses of green foliage. Little brown wooden houses appeared in clearings, with tiny brown toddlers running out to look at our train. It seemed a messy, dripping kind of jungle—with behind it what looked like rows of low hills, their skylines fuzzy with tree-tops.

The track bent and curved, scrub and swamp and jungle came and went, always changing, always the same, and after only a few minutes I gave up trying to be surprised. But I couldn't help thinking that if it was often as wet as this, then living in jungle might be more uncomfortable than I thought. Especially since it never seemed to get any cooler, either by night or day.

This was dawn, and even now the air rushing past was as warm and clammy as ever.

We began to pass stations—just a long deserted platform with some offices, and perhaps some roof-tops showing behind. There were large notice-boards—KLUANG, SEREMBAN, KAJANG. We sheepishly unloaded our rifles, and then suddenly we were in a much larger station with a roof overhead, and crowds shuffling past the windows. There were soldiers everywhere, Malay as well as British, and Military Policemen with revolvers, and the unchanging babble of all railway stations. Bill was whisked away by two officers of his regiment and I found myself alone, marooned on Kuala Lumpur railway platform.

The Railway Transport Officer was having his breakfast, and his Corporal was not expecting me.

"Well, never mind, sir, we'll ring up your unit. Somersets? That's Wardieburn Camp. . . . Hullo, Wardieburn? This is the R.T.O.'s office in K.L. We've got one of your new officers here, from Singapore. Yes . . . *Now!* . . . That's all right, sir, they're sending a truck for you."

So I waited, wandering up and down outside the station, under a high arcade filled with the screeching of swifts, all busily bringing up families under its ceilings. Among military vehicles and Asian faces, divisional signs on bumpers and caste-marks painted on foreheads, flapping white trousers and the fairy-tale minarets of the railway station, only the black scything crescents of the swifts were familiar. Even they swooped and flickered against a sky of strangely brilliant blue. For a long time I watched them, feeling very much alone, until a clatter of boots and a broad Somerset voice interrupted me.

"Ah, there you are, zurr. Cor—been looking for you everywhere, zurr. That idiot of a Corporal Grimes 'ee said you were on the platform, see, so I never did think of lookin' in 'ere. I suppose you'll want the Officers' Mess, won't you, zurr . . . ?"

Yes, I supposed I did. By the time I had sorted myself out beside the driver, complete with my rifle, bandolier, cane, peaked hat, and suitcase bulging with runaway pyjamas, we

were out of Kuala Lumpur. We came to a roundabout, and then drove for several miles through what seemed one long village.

"This is S'tapa, zurr—we reckons this is where the bandits gets their food from. Them taxi-drivers must tell 'em a tidy bit about us, I'll bet."

But it didn't really look all that sinister—just a thinning belt of poverty, sucking its life from the road. Then the houses faded into a hummocky, scrub-covered area where ramshackle structures of wood raised their heads like scaffolding, here and there showing a strange brilliance as if streams of water were running along their roofs.

"Them's tin-mines, zurr. Give us a load of trouble, they do. Mr Hudson, 'ee shot two bandits over by that mine there a week or two back—only they weren't bandits, they were tin-miners, out after dark. . . . And 'ere we are, zurr—Wardieburn."

As we turned off the road I realised we had driven into the Battalion Camp without my even noticing. It wasn't exactly private. The main road ran right through it, and, yes—there were the taxi-drivers with their taxi-rank right in the centre. All round were long, low-roofed huts, thatched, backed by the tin-mines in a jumble of scaffolding, lakes, and scrub, with beyond them a ring of gently curving hills.

The Officers' Mess was a collection of huts joined end to end about fifty yards long. In front was a drive, with newly-planted trees and a flamboyant bed of scarlet cannas. I walked in through the doorway—there was no door—into a room full of armchairs with regimental pictures on the walls. I was facing a group of officers, clustered round a Major who was shouting down a telephone. They all wore shirts and slacks of brilliant green, tucked into heavy gymshoes with supple green leggings that laced up the calf. And they all seemed very hot, particularly the Major—his face was thin and tense, dripping with sweat.

"Look here, old chap—you *are* the Adjutant. You tell the C.O. it's no good. It can't be done without helicopters. We're all going out on Recce now, and if the C.O. wasn't kept so

damn busy at Circle Ops he could come with us. He'd *see* it's no use going in by foot. I know the helicopters are busy, but on this information . . . O.K.—see you tonight. Goodbye."

He put the receiver down. "Not a hope in hell," he said "We'll walk in, you wait and see."

Then he turned to me and shook hands. "Hallo, you come to join us? I'm Major Steele—I'd welcome you properly, but we've all got to rush off. Ring that bell, and Sergeant Knight'll look after you. Sorry, *must* go—see you tonight."

And with that the whole group piled into a waiting jeep, which shot off down the road.

After a moment or two, I pressed the bell gingerly—and then stood waiting, looking out through the doorway at buses on a road, taxi-drivers, a dwindling jeep, and a circle of hills already shimmering quietly in the heat, a hazy blue-green. For the second time that day I felt very much alone.

The next few days were a series of pleasant surprises. One was to find a personal letter of welcome waiting for me from the Colonel of the Regiment, Field-Marshal Sir John Harding, then C.I.G.S. Another was the presentation to the Commanding Officer, when I was ushered in by a stamping and saluting Adjutant, and then found myself answering quiet, thoughtful questions.

"You'd better go to Able Company, I think. That's Major Blackett, at Ampang. I think you'll learn most there in a short time. We'll try and get you a vacancy at the Jungle Warfare School near Singapore. I'm afraid we can't let you lead patrols until you've passed the course there, you know. In fact, we're not allowed to."

And there were the other officers—all extraordinarily friendly, introducing themselves in a whirl of names and ranks. They were always either very official in starched shorts, uniforms gay with medal ribbons and insignia of rank, with Sam

Browne and peaked hat and cane—or else they slouched in jungle-boots, crumpled slacks, anonymous fatigue shirts, and floppy jungle-hats. They all seemed very wrapped up in the affairs of their individual Companies, which all seemed to be many miles away. They were forever arriving and departing in jeeps and clouds of dust, and when they talked it was in a strange family jargon:

"At the tenth milestone, where the lallang is easier."

"I'd say it wasn't more than knee-deep for the first mile, but you can't tell—not even under the stereoscope."

"Why no curry-makan?"

"What do you think? At the tenth hole I *sliced*."

"If I send an airdrop demand for boots, you'd think they'd drop boots. Not boats."

"Peter always carries a rubber mattress in the jungle. And a bicycle pump."

"Oh Gawd, not the bloody swamp again."

"Nothing like shot-guns for night-work."

"When your father was Adjutant."

"He had amoebic dysentry *and* ulcers."

"Roll on Demob—no more bloody jungle-bashing."

"Leptospirosis is *much* worse."

"What we need in the Compo is potted nasi-goreng."

"But *I* invited Julia—you can't possibly."

"The State Committee wouldn't have it, so then the Brigadier lost his temper and all was well."

"Well, if you prefer sexy Malay taxi-girls."

"But they're tortoises. How would *you* eat a live tortoise? And how can you eat a tortoise without curry-powder?"

"Corporal James saw one on ambush, quite near here. He said he didn't think it fair to shoot a tiger with a Bren-gun."

The camp sweltered in its circle of hills. The troops whenever possible worked naked to the waist, their skins a deep burnt brown. They all walked with a slow rhythmic stride, listless in the heat. Early every morning they drilled in quick strutting

lines at 140 to the minute, and the Light Infantry pace seemed faster than ever now.

I was given a pile of extraordinary equipment, and a large empty room with a concrete floor, walls and roof of dried palm, and many little wall-lizards—they wriggled across its ceiling like cream-coloured newts, upside-down, restless, squeaking and clucking. My bed had no bedding—just a sheet, and above it an iron framework over which hung a mosquito net. At night I lay sleepless and sweating, surrounded by its billowing walls of milky-white gauze, listening to popular music on Radio Malaya from the batmen's quarters and the cloying wail of Malay music from a coffee-shop fifty yards away on the road, watching the swinging glare of headlights flare and fade as traffic passed.

I saw no jungle, and no war. My nearest approach to the jungle was in a cinema. My first evening a group of subalterns took me with them—we rocketed warmly down the road in one of the taxis, driven by a villainous-looking Sikh. He drove like a madman—"Yes, sah, I go slow. Cannot afford crash, sah, I lose job."—finally slowing to not more than 40 m.p.h. in traffic.

"Can't miss this film," said one of the subalterns. He was tall and thin, and after a year leading patrols in the jungle was now training new drafts of recruits as they arrived. He was due to leave Malaya in a fortnight, at the end of his National Service.

"Can't miss seeing what they've made of the jungle. The good old ulu—how we all love it! It'll give you a good idea of what you're in for—they filmed it just near here."

The film seemed very exaggerated—heavily-laden troops always up to their necks in swamp, and then rushing round having emergencies. Far more interesting was the white expanse of the multi-racial audience, all sitting in shirt-sleeves, watching Chinese sub-titles on the screen in wriggling yellow characters.

Next evening I went to a charity dance, given for Lady Templer's Anti-Tuberculosis Fund. It was advertised in the *Malay Mail*, and apparently I could go. So I put on my dinner-jacket, crossed my fingers, and went—driven by the same

Sikh. By then I knew better than to protest as we swept through Kuala Lumpur—he was safest at sixty, a speed he knew. The streets were eerie in the warm darkness. Their white walls with deep black shadows seemed more than ever like a stage-set—the Nightmare scene, perhaps, brooding and violent.

We stopped outside a large amphitheatre, high on a hill overlooking the lights of Kuala Lumpur. Fifteen minutes later I had quietly discarded my jacket and bow-tie, and was sitting at a table drinking Tiger beer with a planter, a young man from the Malayan railways, a startlingly attractive Eurasian girl, and a young Malay politician. I did not know what to say to any of them.

The ballroom crowd was a well-dressed replica of the Singapore crowds, except that here they were wearing normal tropical evening dress, which for women meant the coolest of dresses and for men clean shirts—anything else was too hot, and even the cleanest shirt was soaking in sweat within an hour.

It was a confused, muddled evening. The Chinese girls with whom I danced felt astonishingly light and slim, and afterwards returned with great speed to their own family-tables. There was a display of ballroom waltzes, games, competition-dances, but by the time I became used to the crazy chaos of races the heat and beer and noise had defeated me.

The planter drove me home—after we had driven nearly two miles along a deserted highway with the jungle thickening steadily he became restive, and turned back. He no longer depended on me to find my own camp, but asked the way. When he left me at Wardieburn it was two in the morning, and as I climbed under my mosquito net I was still wondering stupidly what would have happened if I had directed him into a terrorist ambush.

Next day I could neither pause to disentangle my impressions of the dance, nor nurse my hangover. Instead I had to dress it up, and march it away to the Battalion Church Service. I felt like an overdressed Boy Scout in my shorts and stockings, and

ridiculously military with my Sam Browne and medal ribbon. The medal was the General Service Medal (Malaya), with a purple-and-green ribbon, and I had apparently won it by landing safely in Singapore.

The service was Church of England, in a great marquee, with everybody else dressed like Boy Scouts too, and at a humid ninety in the shade. It was being broadcast by Radio Malaya. When I looked in front of me at the officers' wives in charming summer dresses and picture hats, and at the clergy in their vestments moving softly round the altar and the microphones, it might have been a service held in a cricket tent in England. When I looked behind me at rows of stolidly singing troops in uniform, it might have been a scene from any tropical war—from the North-West Frontier to Burma or New Guinea. When I looked at myself I was aware of little except inexperience, a bad-tempered headache, and drops of sweat trickling on to my Prayer-Book.

At last the Service ended, but worse was to come—a cocktail-party in the Officers' Mess followed by an enormous curry-lunch. I tried to make polite conversation to my seniors, but my head was splitting open. Finally I hid behind a plate of olives in a corner, only to find someone with a round and cheerful face shouting at me through the noise.

"There you are! Jolly good show! I'm Tom Wainwright from Able Company. Major Blackett says you're to come over to Ampang *At once!* The whole Company's going into the jungle for ten days, and he wants you to come with us. Have you only just come off the boat? Took me months before I could cope with the jungle, though don't let that disturb you. Have another drink before we go."

Ampang was just on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The Officers' Mess of Able Company was a three-roomed bungalow —the Major had one room, the second was a sitting-room with chairs and magazines, and the subalterns shared the third. We

had our meals in a tent erected over the back door, and our cook was Chin, a bow-legged and very silent Chinese.

The bungalow was typically Malayan—raised on columns above the ground to keep dry, with broad eaves to carry away rain and give shade, and surrounded by a wide lawn with cannas and flowering shrubs. Its windows were enormous, with thick shutters and no glass, so that when they were open whatever draught there was could blow through every room. I was introduced to my batman Watson; to Brandy, Tom Wainwright's dog; and to the Major's delight—a tumbling family of kittens, each of whom, like all Malayan cats, lacked half its tail. Then, in a savage temper and with my head hurting more than ever, I began to unpack. Tom watched, and had pity.

"Look, why don't you let Watson unpack? He'll get all your equipment ready for tomorrow. We can wander across to the Company—the Major's briefing us in half an hour. You'll want to hear that even if you are coming tomorrow only for the experience."

The Company was ten minutes away. It was a pleasant walk, under arching trees and over carpets of an ankle-high plant that spread everywhere.

"That's Sensitive Grass," said Tom. "Look—touch a bit with your finger."

I did, and watched astonished as the stalk and leaves instantly shivered, darkened, and collapsed—every joint turning to water so that they hung limp and shrivelling. As we walked our footsteps were marked behind us in purple patches of visibly crumpling grass.

"When we come back it'll be as strong as ever," said Tom. "Can't think why it takes all that trouble after we've trodden on it. Now if it folded up *before* we trod on it."

Able Company was a cluster of tents and huts, perched on a hillside in between a rubber plantation, a road and low scrub-jungle. The camp-atmosphere was informal, to say the least, and quite unlike Wardieburn. I met Alan Beesley, another subaltern. He was just finishing off an inspection of his platoon,

and was wandering round wearing nothing except gym shoes and P.T. shorts. He took me off to speak to Alice, a tame orang-utan living on the end of a chain in a dog-kennel nailed to the top of a tree. She was in disgrace, after narrowly escaping being shot by the Colour-Sergeant, who found her climbing all over his stores clutching an open bottle of red ink.

"You mean the Major's really insisted on your coming with us tomorrow?" asked Alan. "Perhaps he's not as mad as he seems—you might as well get the worst over quickly. Look at Alice—she loves the jungle, so it can't be too bad, can it?"

The briefing was held in the Company office—a small hut, looking down over the tents to where lorries were being overhauled and busy figures in shorts and jungle-hats carried boxes of stores to and fro.

The Major was thin and gaunt, with a hawkish face and an air of exasperated tiredness. All round him were great maps on boards, covered with transparent sheets of talc, and the talc covered with dotted crayon lines and dates and queer squiggling signs. The room was packed. Besides the Major and Tom and Alan, were three Platoon Sergeants, a Signals Corporal, the Colour-Sergeant, the Corporal in charge of transport, and the Cook-Corporal. We sat clustered round the Major, taking notes and sweating heavily, while he gestured at the maps.

"Next point—Information. Now we know from Intelligence and the Special Branch that there must be camps in this area, here. Somewhere round Bukit Chenuang and The Boot, you see—that gives them easy access to the villages and a splendid place to hide. Those hills are hell, as we know. On the other hand, you all see why these camps *must* be found."

I looked out of the window, and watched Alice scratching for fleas. Beyond her a soldier knocked over a bucket of steaming tea, and curses echoed through the evening air. The Major talked and talked—giving a relentlessly exact succession of grid-references, bearings, times, routes, objectives, mixed up with

Malay place-names and references to the local gossip of the last two years.

"You were up there recently, weren't you, Sergeant MacBride? What's it like?"

"Terrible, sir. There are so many streams you don't know where you are. The radio hardly ever gets through. The hills are like roof-tops—so steep you can't march on compass bearings. I don't think it's any use having fixed timing, sir, really I don't. Far better to give us our heads and let us look round by ourselves."

For nearly an hour it went on, most of it double-Dutch to me. What was clear was the size of the operation. Practically the whole Battalion was involved. Areas were to be bombarded by twenty-five-pounders and mortars. The R.A.F. were to bomb another area—"That can be heard for miles—you can feel the earth shake—so perhaps any bandits to the east of the ridge will think twice about moving further down." With luck the artillery and air support might shut off the area we were to search, and the routes leading out of it were to be ambushed by Malay police units. There was to be air-supply of stores and food by R.A.F. Valettas. Our entire Signals Platoon would set up temporary transmitting stations, tracker-dogs were to be used, and Iban trackers from Sarawak.

When I looked at the maps they didn't help. "The Boot" just looked a jumble of mountains, covered with a tangled spider's web of rising and falling contours, all marked the deep green that meant jungle. What I didn't understand was that it all seemed to have been searched only a few months before. This row of orange dots, for instance, marked "3 Platoon, 18–23 Oct 53" had apparently wandered absent-mindedly over most of it. And these red lines here . . .

I woke up to find the conference ending. ". . . Mr Crawford will be coming with us to get some experience. It's his first time out, so perhaps, Corporal Murphy, perhaps *you'd* like to keep an eye on him, and give him a hand—that is, just in case he needs it. . . . Right, well if that's all, we'll finish now, and be ready to move from here at 0530 hours."

I wandered outside in a daze, wishing vaguely I was Alice and accustomed to tropical rain-forest.

"Don't look so *glum*," said Tom. "Look, what you need is a drink. We'll all get changed, and have a swim at the Golf Club, and go to the Harlequin, and by then you'll have forgotten all about the bloody jungle. You wait and see."

## CHAPTER TWO

"It's as well to be provided for everything. That's the reason the horse has anklets round his feet."

"But what are they for?" Alice asked in a tone of great curiosity.

"To guard against the bites of sharks," the Knight replied. "It's an invention of my own."

LEWIS CARROLL

WATSON woke us at four in the morning. A few hours earlier we had been drifting round the midnight streets of Kuala Lumpur—white-shirted and civilian, replete after seeing a Hollywood extravaganza and eating *wiener schnitzel* at the Harlequin. Now it was four in the morning, with lights in the bungalow blazing, lighting up the vivid green lawn and orange cannas, with beyond them the still strange Malayan night, enclosing us as if we were in a black humid oven, sibilant with strange sounds.

I wandered round sleepily, while everyone else prepared for war. Chin cooked a huge breakfast—it spluttered greasily while he padded about in bare feet and filthy shorts, searching for plates, stepping carefully over the kittens. Tom was muttering over shiny, crinkly maps; the Major was telephoning to the Company and shouting about escorts; insects shrilled in the darkness; Brandy prowled nervously about, blinking at the lights. Everyone was absorbed, technical, going through a well-known routine. I found myself looking stupidly at the cover of a *Tatler*, standing there in pyjamas, getting more and more frightened.

At breakfast the Major was cheerful. "If the Water-Works Home Guard do shoot us by mistake I suppose they'll have the bloody nerve to blame *Me!* Never mind."

Tom was calmly eating a colossal plateful of greasy rice and bacon. "Well, no, Oliver, I haven't actually been up the Boot myself. It doesn't matter because on the other side all the tracks stop. That might take us a couple of days extra. But if one doesn't eat all one's rations straight away it doesn't matter, does it?"

After breakfast I faced my equipment, packed the day before by Watson, and now dumped at the foot of my bed. It looked an appropriate load for a mule. If Bunyan could have seen it he would surely have used it for Christian's Burden—instead of which it was I who would have to carry it, down into my own most real, most imminent Slough of Despond.

There was so much of it. First a pack for my back, green and square, full of tins of food, its side pockets crammed with iron mess-tins, festooned with straps that hung below it grasping a rolled poncho—struggling to keep its green mackintosh bulk under control.

The jungle-belt was worse. Hooked on to it were a museum collection of objects, all heavy. They would have done honour to the White Knight: aluminium water-bottle full of salted water; leather apron with pockets for carbine magazines; a two-foot iron broadsword in a leather sheath of stone-age design; a pouch with two grenades; a pouch full of jungle all-sorts—morphine with syringe, one A-Ration breakfast, a bottle of yellow curry-powder, a phosphorous grenade.

Watson had asked me if I would be needing a parachute. Even as a joke that had alarmed me. It alarmed me more to find that the last pouch of all was bulging inexplicably with yellow, un-funny, parachute silk.

Yet I had to thank Watson. My equipment might be chaos but it was well-packed, professional chaos. It was an uncanny combination of modern technology and the primeval viciousness of the jungle-fighter. It was clear I would have to conform to my equipment, and not the other way round.

And how many before me had thought the same? Not just the hundreds of thousands who had fought in Malaya, but

Frederick's grenadiers bracing themselves to meet the armies of all Europe, or Roman legionaries starting the cold march north to Gaul and Britain—how many of them had stood like this, looking at their equipment, and knowing everything about it to be professional except themselves?

Engines roared outside. Headlights split the darkness. "All right, let's go," shouted the Major. Tom and Alan strode across the lawn, buckling their equipment.

I was still struggling among the *Tatlers*. I heaved my belt clanking off the floor and anchored it round my waist. I leaned on my carbine, remembered sickly it was loaded for killing terrorists, reached with one hand for pack and poncho, and found I couldn't even lift them off the ground.

The Major was shouting for me. This was no time for panic. I put my carbine carefully down, and seized the straps of the pack in both hands. I lifted. I swung. A panting, swaying struggle ended with one pack-strap biting into my shoulder. That would have to do. I clutched my carbine, assumed the look appropriate for an officer and a gentleman going to war for the first time, eclipsed it with the green decaying mess that was my jungle-hat, and waddled fiercely towards the door—leaving a delicate trail of curry-powder behind me.

Then the world turned smartly upside-down—the lawn sailed out of the sky, cartwheeling greenly into my face. I had missed the step. A series of greater and then lesser blows announced that my pack, poncho, water-bottle, ammunition, pouches, grenades, and parachute had come to rest. I was lying in the cold glare of the headlights. Everyone was waiting. Even Brandy was there, looking down the steps in a puzzled sort of way and sniffing suspiciously at the curry-powder.

At the Company all was darkness, except where headlights silhouetted a long line of trucks, the turrets of scout-cars, and groups of bulky misshapen figures standing round them. Light splashed over their jungle-boots, spilling in white circles across

the road. Through the throbbing chorus of engines came confused noises—the crash of Bren-guns being loaded and cocked, the thump of packs being thrown into lorries, the harsh shouts of Sergeant-Major Yates.

Out of the gloom came a monstrous figure. "You're travelling in the Armoured Bastard," it said. "Follow me."

All round us mountains of equipment were moving and talking in the darkness. I tried to dodge through them as I felt my way along the sides of the trucks, my feet slipping on sharp stones, the night air warm on my bare arms and chest, the first warm drops of sweat sliding down inside my shirt. I arrived panting, to find Frankenstein waiting beside the Armoured Bastard—a great armoured truck.

"Up you go," roared Frankenstein. Strange hands in the darkness seized my pack and gun, put my foot on the step, pushed from behind and pulled from above, until I was gasping in the seat beside the driver. The Armoured Bastard felt like a steel coffin on wheels, intolerably hot, with an entire platoon massed inside.

I watched Frankenstein in the light of the headlights. He carried his appalling weight of weapons and equipment with deceptive swaying ease as he shouted orders and walked up and down. He was a living picture of menace and authority. Then he turned his head, and I saw Tom's mild grin.

A torch flashed at the head of the column. The driver revved his engine. The steel shutter over his driving-window opened upwards and outwards, and he pushed at it to enlarge his tiny square of visible road.

Three feet above him the rosy glow of a cigarette suddenly flared, revealing a sweat-trickling face hanging in darkness. It was Dyke, our Bren-gunner, sitting on his high revolving chair with his gun pointing through a slit-window and resting on the cab above us. As the Armoured Bastard rolled ponderously forward, he tested his magazine and safety-catch. As we gathered speed his cigarette glowed for the last time. When its ruby light faded, condemning us to hot shuddering blackness, the last thing I saw was his right hand closing firmly round the butt of his gun.

Soon we were thundering through Ampang, floodlighting houses with our headlights, our engines crescendoing round corners. Droves of cyclists wobbled wildly as we missed them by inches. Startled figures in white on the pavements turned to watch us, as truck after truck passed, bulging with heavily-armed troops.

Then the last house vanished and the monsoon-ditches shrank to ruts that soon gave way to banana-trees and lallang—the tall jungle-grass. Our road turned and climbed, and then lost heart as it dwindled into a mere stony track, still climbing dismally higher and higher. We were in the jungle itself now, a black mass pressing in on both sides, building up in black walls above us, their tops fretted with the outlines of enormous trees just beginning to show against a pale dawn-sky.

The convoy halted by the placid waters of the Reservoir. A dark mass of troops swarmed clumsily down from the trucks, spreading across the clipped lawns and concrete paths of the Water-Works. On all sides men were tightening straps, suspending Bren-guns from their shoulders with thick well-worn slings, sorting themselves out into long lines that trailed away for a hundred yards up and down the road until they faded from view in the grey light.

A hush had fallen. Rubber jungle-boots padding on the concrete had suddenly become loud. The clang of a gun-barrel against a lorry struck the line sharply, and men turned to look. I started to speak to Corporal Murphy, and found myself whispering.

The black wall of jungle towering up in front was solid and grim. The leading men were now walking slowly forward, tiny grey figures with long intervals between them, stepping forward towards the blackness and then disappearing one by one as if they had stepped through a door.

The man in front of me hitched up his trousers, picked up his Sten-gun, and trudged mournfully away after the others. I followed, watching his pack sway gently from side to side with each step, and feeling the strangely moving weight of my own. I

heard Corporal Murphy spit, and then the soft pad-pad of his jungle-boots began behind me. The concrete path ended, and then the grass. Our feet were sinking in rotten leaves and sliding in mud. We ducked as branches swayed at our faces, and then it was suddenly darker and we were peering through a gloomy, confused half-light. There was a mouldy dank smell, and the trickling sound of little unseen streams. Soon we were sinking up to our ankles in drifts of leaf-mould. Then we were splashing knee-deep through the first stream, and a moment later through the second.

I was sweating in earnest now, and gasping. My shoulder-straps were hurting at each step. It was already all I could do to keep up with the man in front, and sometimes I lost sight of him. We were going very slowly uphill, on hands and knees, leaning forward to clutch tree-trunks and saplings as we pulled ourselves up. Our feet slipped in the mud, straining and squelching. My chest heaved like a bellows, and I gasped through lips salty with trickling sweat. One hand held my carbine—with the other I hauled at roots, wiped the sweat from my eyes in a shower of drops, pressed deep in the mud as I staggered.

Soon I was desperate. I knew only that I was full of an absolute determination just to keep going. I knew only that my world had contracted to a hillside of reddish clay, tangled with roots like rhododendrons, deluged with water that dripped off every leaf and soaked my clothes and ran down my sweating filthy body in rivulets, a hillside up which I now had to struggle, up and up and up.

A long time later I bumped into the man in front, and realised we were stopping. Our hill had flattened. We were spaced along a stream. I was standing forlornly in the middle of it, dead to the world. Someone turned and waved a hand with the fingers spread—five minutes rest. I splashed to the bank and slumped down against my pack, my legs still in the stream, too tired to take them out.

One thing I had to have, and I knew it. Salt and water. My fingers fought with my water-bottle fastenings, and tore them

apart. Watson had salted the water heavily. I drank and drank.

Almost at once I felt better. My brain cleared, and I began to look round. Corporal Murphy was crouching over his first cigarette—he caught my eye and grinned. Ten yards upstream a statuesque group of dripping black figures were bending over Tom's tiny scrap of map. I looked at Tom particularly, trying to take him as my model, to learn my part from him. They were all quite still, talking in low voices, and the water was white as it churned over their ankles, chuckling softly. They might have been in a grotto, or an underwater world, standing talking on the bottom of the sea, with dim green light filtering down through thirty fathoms of water. Yet they seemed quite unconcerned.

I took another drink of salt water, counting my mouthfuls carefully, limiting myself to five. I peered at my watch—we had been climbing for over an hour, and yet we seemed to have covered only three or four hundred yards. Surely something was wrong?

Tom slipped his map into his knee-pocket, and waved us up on to our feet. "You want to head more west, Corporal Jackson, don't you?" he said. "Well, we're lost now, so why not try it and see how far you get?"

Hours later I realised why we were seldom *not* lost. The jungle was a tangle of steep hills, torn and criss-crossed by big and little streams, by tracks and the remains of tracks. Its stillness resembled a film stopped in mid-rush, with one motionless green-and-brown heavily-shadowed photograph filling the screen. If the film had started to turn, and we had seen the true procession of years spring into motion, then we would have seen a different jungle—leaping up from the earth in stark fear of extinction, clawing its way to the sky for light, writing, weaving, climbing ever upwards over its own dead, its roots twisting in dark soil, its branches threshing the air, choking for breath. But we saw only the still photograph—only the motionless patterns

of murder where branch gently throttled branch and roots snaked subtly in and out of each other, half-hidden under soft rotting layers of flat brown leaves—the silt of centuries.

Tom had so little to help him. Sometimes he could see his leading-scout five yards in front, more often not. His patrol was a unity only in his own mind. Each man walked alone, following a dim figure in front, unaware of where he was going or why. His patrol was nothing but a loosely linked follow-my-leader, a straggling procession of tired men endlessly queueing through the jungle. And he himself might be walking north very fast, along the crest of one hill, while the tail of his patrol was still moving painfully south-west along the bottom slopes of a quite different hill, crawling blasphemously across a thirty-yard stretch of fallen tree-trunks.

So of course we were nearly always lost. The Major had started at dawn with his Company in one vast queue on a good track, but it was only a matter of time before the line broke into four or five little lines, each burrowing blindly into the jungle by itself. I had nothing to do except follow the man in front, so I hardly noticed the difference. But what about Tom? He moved in a maze of drab shadows, pressing at him from all sides and down at him from above. He had to see his way, but what could he see? Only the sickening sameness of what he always saw—fantastic heaps of foliage, piled higher and higher on each other, building up into the outlines of bushes and trees; spreading along the ground in green billowing masses fifty feet high; joining overhead in green veils and curtains; sometimes filling the very air itself with leaves so that he walked through a green mist, formless, yet plucking at his face. The details of acrobatic creeper, of plate-sized leaf, changed at every pace, and yet the jungle did not change at all. The combinations of shadow and perspective moved as he moved, and then, when he stopped, all was impassive, eluding his mind so that he stared and stared through the heat and found nothing to look at—just blank, faceless foliage—its myriad details merging always into anonymous masses, and the masses piling up on each other all round him

and pressing so close, so *very* close into the eye, deep into the nerve-wracked busy brain.

The pressure on the eye was so violent that soon the brain tired. Then we saw even the jungle no longer. Like big-game hunters in Africa, we no longer looked at what we could see. Instead we kept visual stereotypes in our mind—the picture of a head with a jungle-hat on it, the thatched roof of a hut, the pattern of tracks in mud. If the vague unfocused mass of jungle happened to contain a head with a jungle-hat on it, then the stereotype clicked, the nerve jumped, the shock brought the rifle *snap* into the shoulder, and the legs slowing to a halt—even before one realised one had seen something.

So how could Tom possibly see his way? He had to reach a precise point three miles away. At the end he could afford an error of perhaps fifty yards. It was like trying to reach one particular cellar in one particular house three miles away in a bombed, blasted city, where every road was piled with rubble and every house a ruin. It was like trying to do this in darkness, in stifling heat, carrying heavy baggage, leading thirty men, without a road-map and without ever having been there before —with only a compass to help, and a ten-year-old sketch-map that showed the entire city as exactly three inches across.

Tom had no hope unless he pared his problem to the bone, unless he adopted the frightening simplicity of a ten-year-old. He knew he must go east. But how far? As long as he was going uphill, he was all right—but as soon as the slope tilted he would be over the watershed, beyond the backbone of the chain of hills. If he followed the backbone north, and it went uphill, then sooner or later he must reach Bukit Chenuang, picked because it *was* the highest point. But if the backbone went downhill he must stop, turn round, and start going back uphill, again until he reached the Bukit. Then he would have arrived—perhaps a day before, or after, everyone else. It didn't really matter. If he got lost that didn't really matter either. He had only to go west for a day or two and he must come out somewhere on the main road.

I learnt a lot from Tom—which was strange, because he made mistake after mistake. "Sorry, Sergeant," he would say, "I'm afraid we're on the *other* ridge now." Sometimes he would have as many as four little circles drawn on his map, several miles apart—each showing a possible alternative for where we were, depending on which of his decisions had been right.

"*If* we turned off that river early enough," he would muse, "then we're *here*, almost home. If not, of course, I'm afraid we're probably *here*. Unless we walked further than we thought. . . . Then we'd be more east, say *here*. One can't really tell, can one, Sergeant? I think if we go in a sort of general easterly direction tomorrow, and then turn north, or south, depending on whether we meet more swamp or less, that ought to do the trick. Of course, if we don't hit any swamp *at all* I suppose I shall have to think again."

Tom was blasé. He never worried openly. Nor did he ever really know where he was. He could stand in a wilderness of rotting fallen trees, the sky purple with thunder, rain dripping off his hat on to his nose, wiping sweat off his face and puzzling vaguely over his map, apparently not noticing the nightmare round him, or that he was lost, or that it would be dark in one hour. It was strangely calming to watch him. His men followed with remarkable docility.

Later I realised the intelligence behind his vagueness. He deliberately relied on as few assumptions as possible. He was often far more successful than patrol-commanders who tried to know where they were all the time. Tom taught me that impossible problems in the jungle must first be simplified, and then not taken too seriously. His kind of vagueness was infectious.

But on my first day in the jungle I only found it frightening. Our main track had seemed so clear on the maps in the Operations Room. Yet we had seen it only twice—and lost it each time. Of course I was alarmed when his best efforts led us only into a fast-narrowing gorge. It had almost sheer slopes, and for twenty dragging minutes we inched our way straight up, panting to rest while our leading-scouts chopped and hacked a path above

us, and dodging the showers of red earth that came scattering down on our heads as they stamped out their footholds.

When I stepped groggily over the top I found myself looking straight into the face of the Major. He was sitting there quite calmly, watching us each appear, one by one. His Company Headquarters had been following a veritable autobahn of a track, three feet wide, that circled the rim of the valley. They could hardly ignore the elephantine crashing and crackling that came from twenty yards below, so they had paused to have a smoke and wait for us. They didn't even ask why we preferred travelling the hard way, up precipices.

It was quarter of an hour before the last man reached the path. They moved as if in a slow-motion film, stepping hazily through the heat, with desperate deliberation in each single step. Their faces were caricatures of humid trickling exhaustion. When they saw us watching they did not react, except perhaps with a faint ghost of a smile. They appeared one by one, at long intervals, yet each behaved just the same. When they sat down they did not speak. They merely reached for cigarette and water-bottle, mopping their shiny faces with green sweat-rags and towels knotted round their necks. Then they wrung the sweat-rags out, and the sweat ran over their hands and down on to the path like water from a dripping-wet dish-cloth.

I was trembling with exhaustion and nerves. My body felt at furnace-heat. I wanted very much to be sick. I thought I was going to faint.

I lay on the track, thinking of what had happened an hour earlier when a man *had* collapsed. The patrol had come slowly to a halt. It hadn't even been dramatic. Tom had clambered back along the hillside, and found Corporal Murphy stooping over Melluish, one of the Bren-gunners. He was slumped on the ground, breathing heavily. His face was white, beaded with springing sweat, his eyes shut. Tom spoke to him sharply. He took a long time to reply, and his voice was slurred and thick.

"Heat exhaustion," said Tom. He made Melluish swallow a large white salt tablet, and then take a long drink.

"He's *got* to drink," said Tom. "If he doesn't he may rupture his inside after taking so much salt."

We waited. It was a strange scene—the exhausted man lying crumpled on the ground, the group standing solemnly round, saying nothing, the rest of the patrol spaced across the hillside like mountaineers, sitting on their packs, smoking, silent, surrounded by the green dripping darkness of the jungle. As we watched Melluish, his eyes fluttered. He looked up wearily, and tried again to speak.

"You've had it," said Tom. "Corporal Jackson—I want you to take him back. Follow any stream, and you'll come out on the road. Ring up from the Water-Works for a truck. You'll be in camp for lunch. Make him take more salt when you start, but don't start till he feels better. We're going straight on."

Melluish's face was blank as the long line of men climbed slowly past. Corporal Jackson busied himself tactfully with a cigarette, saying nothing—it was no small thing to get ten lazy days in camp, right out of the blue like that.

"Lucky bastard," muttered Corporal Murphy, now carrying Melluish's Bren-gun. "Come to think of it, don't feel any too good myself."

From then on I put salt in my water religiously. Every time we refilled our water-bottles at a stream, and dropped in the required two sterilising tablets, I also dropped in two salt tablets. The result was horrible—a muddy brine, tasting of chlorine and rotting leaves and pond life. But it was my salvation.

I might well be no more than a walking sponge, scarcely conscious, absorbing huge quantities of moisture and then expelling it almost instantly in rivers of salt sweat, but at least I was still walking. And as I walked, I wondered what was to stop me being the next to collapse. It could happen to anyone, suddenly. I had heard soldiers saying so. It could especially happen to me.

Just ahead were five men from a cavalry regiment. Like us,

they were carrying five full days' rations, but they had been lent as porters and were due out of the jungle next day. As the track steepened yet again they began to flag. They hesitated, stopped in a group, and took off their packs. They blocked the path, so we had to stop. I was the only officer in sight, and I had five seconds to decide what to do.

"Well, what's the trouble?" I asked brightly. Not for nothing had Eaton Hall spent four months teaching me Leadership and Man-Management.

I waited. The five drooped stubbornly over their packs. One of them looked up.

"We're done in," he said. "*That's* what. . . . Can't you bloody SEE?"

He didn't know my rank. How should he? We were all jungle scarecrows together, and no-one wore badges of rank in the jungle. I stared at him groggily, with all at stake. Then inspiration came. He thought I was a private soldier, did he? Very well.

"You're sticking your neck out, chum, you are. You've stopped the whole bloody line. The moment it stops that officer'll come back to sort it out, double-quick—and he's a *bastard*. You'd better get up that hill while there's time—or you won't know what hit you."

Again I waited. Slowly he got up. So very, very slowly. As I watched him I hated him. His collapse was contemptible. And I hated him for showing me so clearly how contemptible it was, because I knew very well that his collapse was only a hair's breadth from my own.

He struggled up the muddy, slippery track, the others sullenly following, and then he turned, gasping, with a last retort.

"Keep your hair on, mate. We're not used to the bloody jungle like you chaps. It's our first patrol."

"Yes," I said, suddenly full of cheap blazing triumph. "*And it's mine too.*"

Now they had no option but to get to the top. But threats couldn't keep them moving for long, and at the top of the hill

the slowest of the five fell, lying on his face across the track, trembling.

I could do no more. I certainly couldn't do anything for just one man. I stepped over him—he would be picked up by those behind.

The other four were beginning to stagger as they walked. As I watched them mistily I slowly realised I was staggering in just the same way. And it was several seconds before I realised there were groups of men all round us, sitting by the side of the track, quietly watching us arrive. We were walking through the middle of the base-camp.

The four realised it together. They swayed together off the track, and dropped. I kept going for nearly another twenty yards round the bend to prevent them seeing me do the same.

After a while I felt a little better, and even began to watch miserably while the camp was created round me—feeling very stupid and helpless and cut off.

Ground had to be cleared, so crouching shuffling figures chopped savagely with their broadswords, called matchets or parangs, while bushes swayed and fell, their stems showing white. We had to build bashas, or huts, so tall mast-like trees also swayed and fell, to be instantly chopped into ridge-poles and struts. Ten-foot feathery palm-leaves trembled, hesitating and shivering, before they too swayed and fell—to be gathered up in rustling armfuls and thrown down under ponchos for bedding.

We had to have water—so there were shadowy green figures digging in some hopefully wet mud. We had to have perimeter-wires and hand-rails for the night, so others were hauling like sailors on halyards at rope-like lianas hanging from trees—pulling until forty feet of brown stem came tearing loose high over our heads, falling, ripping, hitting the ground with a mighty thump. Ponchos for roofing our bashas had to have their gaping neck-holes closed against rain, so deft hands were splitting bamboo into splints like gigantic clothes-pegs. On all sides, and away deep into the forest, sounded the deep plunk-plunk of trees

being felled, the snickering crack of branches being chopped, the tearing protest of undergrowth being cut.

What could I do, except sit ashamed and open-mouthed, watching the others? Every moment showed their gypsy familiarity with the jungle. It was a technique, a skill. I had never seen anything like it.

Tom was a master at it. His parang flashed in one hand, while the other manœuvred stakes and strings and yards of rebellious green poncho. He cleared and softened the ground with short jabbing strokes, lashed our ridge-pole between two trees, flung my poncho over it, and tied its four corners to stakes. As soon as a tent-roof existed, he moved our guns and packs under it—rain might come in torrents at any time. With string he spliced bamboo rods along the edges of his own poncho, laid out as a ground-sheet, thus raising a six-inch flap towards the edges of our sloping roof. He dug a furrow all round to carry away the rain. He plaited palm-leaves into shiny curtains, filling the gaps between the two ponchos where rain would drip down or splash up. He piled leathery banana-leaves bigger than himself against the ridge-pole, until the basha became a child's delight—a romantic banana-leaf hut.

Soon he had created from nothing a tight little green sleeping-bag of a tent. It was just high enough for us to sit up. Tom grinned, and walked away to inspect the muddy water-point. I had just enough energy to crawl into the basha and hide as soon as he had gone.

I lay inside on my back, still panting, trying to pull myself together. Like all bashas, its door faced outwards from the camp, towards the jungle. For a long time I gazed into the shadows—they were dark and still, and I began to relax.

Then suddenly I was up on my elbow, clutching my gun. Something out there had moved. My heart pounded. Then it moved again, and the head and shoulders of a man flicked into focus less than fifteen yards away. He was sitting with his back to me. He moved his head, and I saw our orange recognition band, circling his hat. He was our sentry, sitting beside the path in

full view with his rifle across his knees, merging into the baffling sameness of brown and green and grey. He was just a shadow among shadows, except that he was there to kill. And I had been looking at him for minutes, without even knowing he was there. Would I *ever* learn?

I could lie still no longer, and jumped up to find Tom. I knew jungle camps were always laid out in a circle, and so I could find him easily. But when I faced the camp there was no circle to see. There was just the normal green wilderness of scrub, with here and there figures half-showing, and everywhere the noise of cutting. The undergrowth had been cleared only round each basha. All I could see were parts of the nearest two or three bashas, all tight to the ground, almost invisible even at five yards behind sprays of bamboo and creeper.

As I listened and looked, the order came for all cutting to stop. The noise caught its breath—stopping in mid-stride. The silence beat on my ears. All round me were the hundred men of the Company, lying and sitting by their bashas, smoking, cooking, cleaning weapons, and yet I could see and hear nothing. There was only the green scrub, out of which rose tall forest-trees, merging away as always into a mist of brown tree-trunks. There was nothing for me to do. I went back into my basha and lay down, flicking at the flies, watching the sentry, listening to the silence.

Corporal Murphy had already taught me something about silence. He had told me never to talk, always to whisper. He had showed me how the deep belly-notes of a man's conversation, however low and however dense the jungle, could still carry over a hundred yards. So we all whispered from our lips, with a stage-intensity that served our purpose and yet was muffled by the leaves. He had even shown me how to shout in a whisper, so that one could be heard clearly at twenty yards, and not at all at fifty. I used to wonder sometimes just how many thousands of men were scattered all over Malaya, solemnly whispering to each other.

Silence also meant an instant reaction to any noise that *was*

made. Twice I had heard the crashing sound of people pushing through jungle and had stopped, imagining platoons of Chinese coming straight at me—only for Corporal Murphy to grin, and tell me they were monkeys.

Then a roaring, rushing sound like an express-train really did frighten me. It had ended in an appalling crash. It couldn't possibly be monkeys. In the dead quiet that followed I looked cautiously round for Corporal Murphy. "Only a falling tree, sir," he said. "Happens all the time."

Even on this, my first day, silence was already becoming a habit. It had been known to become such a habit that long after men came out of the jungle they went on whispering to everyone they met—jungle-hush, it was called. Silence in the jungle meant that a complete language of signs and glances and signals quickly developed. And, as I already knew, silence also meant an increasing solitude for each individual. And it meant power to listen. A close attention to little sounds meant power to shoot the other man before he shot you. Silence was obviously going to be my way of life, whether I liked it or not.

"Do you want to come and see Ostrich?" asked Tom next morning, lacing up his jungle-boots.

"First the R.A.F. poured weed-killer over it from the air," he went on. "Then we ambushed it from the ground for three weeks. Then we blew up trees so that they fell on it. Then we put down twenty pounds of plastic explosive in booby-traps. We've had no joy at all. I don't know why tapioca should *like* weed-killer, but it seems to. Finally we decided that pigs were more destructive than either weed-killer or the R.A.F. So we broke down the pig-fence, but the pigs don't trust our bourgeois capitalist intentions, and won't come back—not even for tapioca. Of course, we haven't seen a terrorist from first to last."

I said nothing. The night had been miserable. My skin was purple from mosquito and sand-fly bites, and I ached from the hard ground. Most of all I wanted my breakfast.

"We don't normally bother about breakfast," said Tom. "Takes too long, you know. A brew of tea, that's all you need. If you insist I *suppose* you could try an oatmeal block."

I tried it. I could have tried ten. A few minutes later I was following the Major along the ridge-track in a very muddled state of mind. What sort of war *was* this? Why should the international situation require me to be slinking through tropical jungle, furtively scratching myself, on my way to see a highly-explosive something called "Ostrich"—and yet fortified by only *one* oatmeal block?

In ten minutes we were there—a quick turn off the track, a slithering, sliding descent down a steep, steep slope, and the jungle ended. From its cool dark fringe we looked out into yellow sunlight. Below us was a valley, suddenly naked, cut in terraces, with rows of dark green tapioca saplings stretching away downhill for fifty yards, and then up the other side again.

"Tom, cover us as we cross—someone *might* just be watching," said the Major. I stepped out with him into the sun.

Round the tapioca-stems the earth was baked and brown and cracking. It crumbled under our feet into cream-coloured dust. I half-closed my eyes against the glare, grateful for the floppy shade of my hat, feeling the sun already drying my moist shirt and then beginning to burn through to my skin just as we reached the jungle-edge on the other side.

We were facing the bandit bashas. They really were grouped most picturesquely in the shade. Others before me had obviously felt tired after sliding down one hot sunny slope and then climbing another, for they had conveniently built a little platform and sentry-post by the path. I went to sit down.

"*Don't!*" snapped the Major. "You'll be blown to pieces."

Ostrich was a large terrorist cultivation. When food-control tactics cut them off from villages, the terrorists often turned to large-scale farming deep in the jungle. Ostrich was a hundred yards across by a hundred and fifty, with a stream running down the middle, its slopes cleared of jungle and crammed with crops. The valley was neat, delightfully agricultural, and typically

Chinese with not a yard wasted. The mind that designed Ostrich could have been thinking only in terms of years—nor was Ostrich its only creation, for not far away, said the Major, were also Peacock and Pheasant. And Ostrich was obviously much lived-in, with three bashas complete with bamboo sleeping-platforms and thatched roofs, burnt sticks and pieces of pottery still lying around, bamboo water-pipes, steps cut in the hillside, and a much-used water-point.

Ostrich had been most carefully sited. The jungle in these hills was so dense that patrols could approach quietly only along the ridge-track above, or up the stream, splashing in full view. And to come down the hill from the ridge they must cut their way, slowly, yard by crashing yard.

Ostrich had first achieved recognition—and its name—in an Army hut in H.Q. Malaya; less than five miles away in K.L. There, day after day, yard after square yard of shiny aerial photograph was scrutinised under magnifying glass and three-dimensional stereoscope by the Intelligence Corps. Ostrich had showed as a tiny white patch in the middle of an unchanging grey fuzz of jungle. While its terrorists hoed diligently in the sun, in Kuala Lumpur men worked just as hard with ruler and protracter, with contours, rivers and cross-bearings, with intelligence reports and earlier photographs and operations orders and demands for air liaison, working out what the white patch was, why it was there and what should be done about it.

Alan Beesley had then been sent to find it. He had stared at the photographs under the stereoscope until he was dizzy. He knew within a hundred yards where Ostrich was. He had a powerful radio, an Auster spotting-plane circling overhead to direct him and smoke grenades to signal his position. As he had to cut every yard of his way, his progress was slow. It was also understandably tense—any moment might bring the sharp crack of a sentry's rifle, killing his leading-scout.

It took Alan three days to search the valley, struggling everlastingly up and down its slopes. When he finally peered cautiously into the cultivation, blinking in the sudden sunlight,

looking for the movement that would betray a sentry, there was nothing to see. The terrorists had left, three days earlier.

Ostrich was the nearest I came to seeing terrorists during all those ten days. Tom was told to take his platoon away by himself and look at some other suspicious places, also spotted from air-photographs. "One of them really looks as if it might be a camp," said the Major. Twice I went to sleep at night in agonies of nerves at the prospect of storming a Communist strong-point next day, and twice we discovered nothing but great circles of splintered bamboo, trampled so flat by elephants that on the photographs they had showed white like camps.

When we finally did find a camp it was after we had spent half an hour clambering down a steep water-course, tangled with impeding jungle, littered with slabs of stone lying askew under the water and tilting as we trod on them. I was so tired that when I found myself staring down stupidly at a yellowing pile of rotten palm leaves I didn't react. It wasn't very exciting—even when one tried to remember that Chinese Communist terrorists had actually been living there, not more than six months earlier.

I was much more startled by my first tropical thunderstorm at night. We woke to hear the thunder roaring and rumbling overhead, and then becoming real with purple flashes that lit the whole hillside. I lay on my back, feeling the ground hard under my shoulders and hips, waiting for the rain.

First there was a whispering in the distance, and then a swishing rush of wind overhead. As the trees swayed and tossed the rain came, a shouting, battering storm of noise that beat on the poncho just above our faces. Already we could hear trickling, rippling noises as everywhere trickles turned into searching swelling rivulets, and rivulets turned into rolling threads of water, churning downhill through leaves and debris.

The rain was hitting the hard earth so savagely that it splashed up again in a fine spray nearly a foot high, penetrating the smallest gaps in our basha. Tom and I pulled the corners of our bottom poncho over our faces, with our loaded guns under us to keep dry. We would have been quite comfortable, if we hadn't

forgotten to dig a rain-trench the night before. Water flowed fast on the hard sloping ground, and even the first trickles went straight through our basha. For a long time we never noticed as we lay huddled up in our poncho, while the trickles ran under it on each side. Then the storm settled down in earnest, the trickles ran faster, widening, joining, until Tom and I were lying in a stream just about as wide as our basha.

We began to feel cold. Then, like a fool, I turned over, and the water ran happily over the poncho and under me. The rain was still slashing endlessly down in a solid wall a few inches from us. We couldn't move our basha, so we tried to divert our stream. For nearly an hour we groped muddily and ridiculously in pitch blackness, lying on our stomachs in running water, trying to dig channels with our parangs, trying to lead the water along them with our fingers, solemnly trying to deceive the downpour with our little earthworks.

When we gave up there was nothing to do but drape our dripping poncho round us and wait. For a long time I lay thinking that people at home would never believe this. We listened to the thunder, the rain, the wind, chewed sweets, gazed into the blackness, shivered as the water rippled round us, blinked at the lightning with its flashes printing vivid pictures of the jungle in our minds. It rained for five hours. In the end we even slept.

The two Bren-gunners in the next basha did not sleep. Their basha collapsed under the weight of rain, and they spent the night sitting against a large tree, a poncho round their shoulders, their hats keeping the water out of their eyes. For them it was like sitting under a showerbath in darkness for hour after hour. Next morning, stiff, tired, sleepless, they said hardly anything. The storm had shattered me, yet they behaved as if this sort of thing was normal. I would have been more alarmed if I had realised how ordinary it was.

Yet I was really too tired to be alarmed. Even after Ostrich I had felt the change in myself. Before Ostrich I had been

tense, highly-strung, always trying to learn fifty things at once, terrified of being a failure. After Ostrich—walking thoughtfully back to base-camp—I found the shock of novelty had gone. Tiredness was dulling the edge of sensation. I knew now what it was like to be actually in the jungle. I knew we would probably never see a terrorist. I knew that given luck I could stand the physical strain. I knew I was tired, and that I no longer cared.

For eight more days I didn't care. I followed in Tom's footsteps as he took his platoon up over a chain of hills and down the other side. He used logging tracks and led us beside thundering angry streams that turned into little plump streams, beginning to curve lazily across wider, flatter valleys. Together we built our basha and cooked our food. Together we walked day after day through the heat, stooping always under our packs, peering out from under our jungle-hats, grasping our carbines, hardly speaking, alone in our thoughts, geared to a routine—a routine that was carrying the platoon through each day, enabling each man to work his body to exhaustion in spite of steaming, drugging heat.

I was seeing the jungle from the rifleman's point of view. And from the novice's. When blind leeches stood up on their tails in the mud like little green rubber matchsticks, and then reached quiveringly for us, I felt sick. When Tom met a six-inch millepede trundling along our path, its hundreds of legs flickering busily while waves of movement travelled slowly back along their ranks, propelling its shiny black cylinder of a body forward, I was fascinated and stopped to watch. Tom said they were poisonous. His parang was already in his hand, and as he spoke he chopped the millepede swiftly into slices. I stood on the hard path, the sun beating up from it into my eyes, a little dizzy with heat, watching the slices of millepede lying in little pools of moisture, their legs still flickering busily. I felt a quite different kind of nausea as I wondered just how soon I would be as jungle-hardened as Tom, as casually cruel.

The rifleman's point of view had advantages. No need to

think, for instance. No need to think of the others, or to think ahead, or to wonder where we were, or what was round the next corner. In that heat it was a relief—I could plod along, thinking what I liked or not at all, needing only to keep up with the man in front, only to do what I was told. Life was reduced to physical details—the softly tigerish padding of jungle-boots, the pain of hands ripped by thorns and of shoulders aching under heavy weights, the warm pleasure of a bellyful of rice and meat in the evening, the tedious heat of blind sweating hours at night before one could sleep.

What mattered was to keep going—just to keep going. I knew there had once been a time when I had not lived in jungle, but it didn't seem very real. At first I had looked forward desperately to a time when again I wouldn't live in jungle, but that also didn't seem real. As I grew more tired it became easier to relax, to accept the hot primitive earthiness of this new life. After all, as a rifleman I had only to adapt myself to this environment. As a leader, Tom had to dominate it and this I was spared.

The Major had been right to order me into the jungle as I was—unfit, frightened, knowing nothing, plunged into a full-scale ten-day operation. By the third or fourth day I was soaked in jungle, mentally and physically, no longer conscious of anything else. After that, every day added a little to my self-respect. I began to find it really *was* easier when one became used to it. I learned how to cook a little, to help Tom build our basha, to use my equipment, to walk with a long casual stride, to balance my carbine in the crook of my arm all day long without effort. And I was beginning to be proud of having been in the jungle.

So for eight more days I didn't care. As the jungle flattened out into villages and patches of cultivation, I just watched odd details with sleepy curiosity. It was all still very strange—butterflies of monstrous saucer-sized beauty; black water-buffaloes squelching massively in marshes, their hides dark and rubbery as they moved over their hips, their horns long, low, sweeping back over their necks; Chinese peasant-farmers in

wide conical hats, hoeing neat vegetable plots, looking up as we passed in our slow ominous procession, sometimes even smiling. Then—*strange* sight—a grey ribbon of road, black spidery telegraph-poles; the forgotten feeling of asphalt underfoot, the forgotten noise and smell of cars moving deliriously fast and full of people dressed most astonishingly in white shirts and cotton frocks.

I didn't wake up till we reached a police-post. While Tom telephoned for transport I looked at my face in a mirror. The Malay Police Corporal beamed in anticipation as he handed it to me. Then he roared with laughter when my expression changed just as sharply as he had hoped.

I saw what he meant. My eyes stared back at me hollowly, full of reproach. My face shone with a thin oily film of sweat, in which streaks of mud and filth hung half-dissolved. Sweat clung in droplets round mouth and chin, oozing slowly down through a prickly stubble of beard, and dripping on to my chest, also shiny with sweat. Beneath that slimy dirty stubble was my face, most astonishingly gaunt and drawn. It peered at me suspiciously, looking out under the brim of a sodden stinking cap and a mess of matted hair. It obviously didn't like what it saw.

We were all just the same, of course, but it is one thing to imagine what one looks like and quite another to see the revelation of truth in a mirror. All round me were the Malay police, trim and smiling, with polished leather belts and white lanyards. I looked at their Corporal, now bellowing in Malay down the telephone to K.L., at his constables outside in the sun and swinging open their roadblock for a lorry full of chattering Chinese women, at a squat armoured-car fluttering its jaunty yellow pennant and rolling to a halt behind the lorry. As I looked I knew this was a world which for ten days had not existed for me. We had all been somewhere else—in that past world that now looked back at me out of the Malay Corporal's mirror. What had been achieved by our being there I didn't know.

We drove back towards K.L. with our tyres grinding on dry dusty roads, the troops calling out jubilantly, suddenly finding their individuality again. I tried to think what it had all been

about, but it was difficult in a swaying vehicle with the jungle already a fading dream. The wind whipped past our heads in a warm torrent, tumbling our hair. Naked brown children stood in gutters, rolling black eyes, saluting smartly with both hands. The jungle jerked past in a blur, and then began to be dotted with tumbledown houses which drew closer together, thickening into strings of shops and then into streets as we entered K.L. But I saw them only vaguely, for I was beginning to fumble in my mind for the right questions, trying to puzzle it all out.

Was I pleased with myself? Well, of course I was. I had been into the densest jungle in the world. I had been into the fabulous Malayan jungle, the green hell. Spencer Chapman had written that the jungle was neutral. I knew at least one person for whom it wasn't neutral in the slightest, but at least I had kept up with the others. I had survived the trial. It is always exhilarating to survive.

Had I liked the jungle? No. I could not pretend even to myself that I had liked it. I had hated every minute. I had had to fight depression, and black misery. It was clear to me now, so very, very clear, that a jungle patrol held no glamour. It was drudgery. It was a slow and grinding torture, with a half-deadened mind always having to force the body forward. It was torment without hope of reward. It was a slow succession of exhausting days and wretched nights. All over Malaya men were enduring this in literal silence, month after month, even year after year. And I should have to endure it too, and so many, many others after me.

But to what purpose? And at what cost? We had gone into the jungle with a hundred men for ten days, and what had we achieved? Had we killed a terrorist? No. Had we found a terrorist camp? No. It was scarcely surprising that when we reached Ampang and unloaded, when at last I peeled off my sticky clinging clothes, when I stood wearily under a shower watching ten days' filth swirling away down the gutter in a soapy torrent, that I was aware only of disillusion. And I had been in Malaya exactly a fortnight.

## CHAPTER THREE

He who knows most grieves most for wasted time.

DANTE

"YOU'LL do it with baked beans. You'll do it with bacon. You'll do it with mixed fruit pudding."

The speaker was Captain Graham, of the Royal Australian Infantry. We waited nervously to hear what we would do. The answer came in a mocking roar.

"You'll THROW 'EM AWAY."

On a table in front of him were rows of the tins to be thrown away, laid out for demonstration. We shuffled past, a silent, sweating, unresponsive class. Behind the table was the manna that would replace the tins—a sackful of dirty rice. So far it meant little to us, beyond being unexpected. This was the Far East Land Forces Jungle Warfare School, and we were still only at the beginning of our three-weeks' course. The rice, however, had not been the first of our surprises.

My first surprise had been to find Bill there. We were not only back at school again, but with surprising companions. In my group were a very senior and blasé Major fresh from Palestine and Kenya, a Fijian officer, a Filipino serving as an officer in the Federation Regiment, and subalterns from the Gurkhas, the Nigerian Regiment, and the R.A.F. Regiment. We had only one thing in common—we all knew nothing about jungle-warfare in Malaya.

It was a strange mixture—jungle and school. "If they think they're going to make me take notes in this heat", said Bill, "they've got another think coming." And the Filipino was always asking questions. "Please, sir, if fired on in an ambush why do you not teach us just to *charge*?" The blasé Major said

very little, except when tactfully asked by the instructor to explain something for the class.

We started with lectures—on the history of the Emergency, on Police and Army organisation, on Living in Jungle, on Getting Lost, Navigation, Air Supply, and many more. No pains were spared to start at the beginning, and to cram as much detail into us as possible.

"We can't teach you how to live or fight in the jungle—you'll have to find out for yourselves, *by* yourselves. But we can teach you what the book says, so when you go in alone at least you'll know *that*."

And there were always demonstrations—class-room demonstrations with models and maps and sand-tables, each complete to the last detail. In the Air Supply lesson there were even real little parachutes, dropping magically from the ceiling—one of them always falling into a green baize jungle to allow the lecturer a dissertation on the Importance of Always Taking Bearings.

There were outdoor demonstrations. We sat on hillsides under palm-leaf shelters, looking over valleys in which surprising things happened. Sometimes we just sat and listened—trying to detect weapons by ear, while invisible Gurkhas made the valley ring with rifle, Sten, and Bren-gun fire. We heard the Owen-gun for the first time, and other sounds as well.

"*That's* a shotgun—hear the difference? And that thumping, cracking sound—those are Bren-gun bullets going over our heads, about five feet above us. *That's* what it sounds like when you've been ambushed. You've got to be able to tell from that where the bloody gun *is*. . . . Let's hear it again, shall we?"

Sometimes the valley held a road, and we watched a convoy of vehicles pass backwards and forwards below us, each time ambushed in a different way—lorries and armoured cars grinding to a halt or accelerating through billowing smoke and clattering machine-gun fire, while figures ran in and out of the smoke, and other figures lay crumpled on the red dust of the road. Sometimes we were in deep jungle, while Gurkhas appeared like shadows and built a complete camp before us without a sound.

Sometimes, as we walked wearily down a jungle-track, we would be halted, taken back up it, and shown where we had unknowingly passed more grinning little Gurkhas, hidden every two or three yards and each close enough to touch us. A whistle would blow, and when they broke cover and came running down the track there would be twenty or thirty of them. Sometimes we watched from the enemy's point of view while the Gurkhas were ambushed, and shot down in heaps. Sometimes we watched, again from the enemy's point of view, only to see the Gurkhas vanish at the first shot, and then a few minutes later sweep howling through our position in a charge.

It was a strange war that was built up before us on blackboards and in heat-filled valleys. On blackboards it was a matter of diagrams and circles and arrows, analysing tactics as if on a football field. In the valleys tactics vanished in heat and glare and sudden silences and equally sudden thunderclaps of noise, with rushings and shouting and screaming orders. It was a mixture of catch-as-catch-can and beggar-your-neighbour, of stone-age stealth and modern fire-and-movement—the individual always being sacrificed for the group, and yet the group always consisting of individuals who must all act together without orders.

"Remember—men caught on the track in the first burst of terrorist fire are probably dead. If they are still alive they must take their chance. What must be kept from the enemy at all costs are their weapons, so the troops round the corner *must* make certain the dead and wounded are covered by our own fire. Then the bloody bandits can't pinch their guns. And, of course, at the first shot, the men at the tail of the patrol should automatically be moving in a semi-circle to get the bandits from the rear. Right, now let's *try* it."

The basic problem was always elementary, always the same—one small group of armed men in the jungle meets another small group of armed men, perhaps fleetingly, or in an ambush, or head-on. But the permutations that might follow from this were remarkable, so demonstration after demonstration taught the responses that for each man must become instinctive.

"You are walking along this track. You can't see more than five yards in any direction. Suddenly you hear Bren-gun fire, rapid, twenty yards ahead. It stops. You can't hear a damn thing. Which Immediate-Action do you carry out?"

So it went on—day after day. Gradually we picked up the Regular Army slang. The jungle was the Ulu. The bandits were C.T.s—Communist Terrorists. I.A. Drills were the Immediate-Actions, or what one did before one had time to think—as soon as one could think it usually meant the battle was over. The Hard Core were the known terrorist leaders, the few hundreds of fanatical Communists in the deepest jungle.

"If we could kill *them*, the war would end in six months. If we can't, it may go on for years. It's not so easy—how would *you* set about finding five hundred desperate men scattered over an equatorial jungle the size of England? There's only one way, and that's the way we're teaching you—endless patrolling and ambushing, endless *hard work*. Don't try and search country. Try and kill *men*."

Our instructors were superb. Many were Australian, some veterans of New Guinea and the Pacific, all experts in Malaya. And there were rumours that the Australians would be coming in force to fight in Malaya beside us. It seemed strange they should come, but Captain Graham thought differently.

"You think Malaya's important because of its rubber and tin, don't you? Have you ever thought that Malaya's the last foothold we have on the Asian continent? If Indo-China goes Communist, and we get pushed out of Malaya, we'll have one hell of a job to get back if we ever have to. Once they hold the mainland it's not so difficult for them to start swallowing up the islands, but it's bloody difficult for us to do the reverse, as we found with the Japs. Malaya could be our war, just as much as yours. Don't you forget it."

With his Sydney accent bellowing in our ears it was difficult to forget it. Soon we were taking part in the demonstrations ourselves—taking our first stumbling steps in this new map-reading where the compass was truth and the map only sugges-

tion; blundering bloodily through thorn-bushes in futile attempts to charge the enemy uphill; travelling in circles through pitch darkness full of anthills and potholes until convinced that the jungle at night really was as difficult as our instructors said.

Then we graduated to I.A. Circuits—murderous sequences of carefully devised traps, where the Gurkhas ambushed us again and again. A different member of each class took command each time, while we toiled through the required manœuvres. The Gurkhas must have enjoyed our grotesque fumbling. After a few days we even learnt how to charge the right places and sometimes we even saw them, mischievous brown figures, squatting in fox-holes, firing Bren-guns interminably into the ground to make the noise of battle, their faces lighting up with grins through the blue smoke as we charged past them, puffing and panting. Then, while we discussed our mistakes, streaming with sweat, they would pick up their guns and vanish, preparing to make fools of us all over again.

We were back at school with a vengeance—a school even complete with holidays in the form of week-ends in Singapore, and an end-of-term examination that was hardly theoretical.

"Enjoy yourselves in Singapore," said Captain Graham. "We've got a very special exam for you: an amphibious operation on the east coast of Johore, against a crack terrorist gang, in deep jungle where security forces have never been before. Don't say I told you. Just take my tip—enjoy yourselves while you can. . . ."

Twenty-four hours later I was looking out from the Cathay Hotel over a new Singapore, that sparkled and glittered and roared in the dark. It was eight o'clock, an hour after dusk, and below me stretched a staircase of several hundred steps, the top steps clearly lit, and the rest lost in darkness until they emerged into light far below beside the cinema entrance and its swirling crowds.

I paused to look, wondering what to do. It was Saturday

evening. Singapore was at its craziest and noisiest. While I paused to watch the flickering neon lights and yellow headlights of cars forming luminous whirlpools, Singapore did not pause—it was pulsing, laughing, dancing, arguing, spread out in black sweating heat, in hundreds of thousands of fantastically different minds and bodies, offering a multitude of opportunities. I hesitated no longer, and ran down the cracked stone stairs, down into the darkness.

A little later I was wandering open-mouthed in a cosmopolitan fantasia—the New World, an open-air carnival fairground. There was asphalt underfoot, stretching away in a maze of lights, booths, fences, faces, noises, and shadows. Everywhere there were children—their feet pattering, skirmishing Chinese brats swooping on me, four or five years old—"Ten cents, give me ten cents," in shrill voices, urgent fingers reaching up. And when refused, a scornful screech of laughter as they ran away.

People. Everywhere people, walking through the blare of gramophones playing "The River of No Return", the clatter of roundabouts, the cries of salesmen. There were so many people that I was quickly muddled, quickly tired, easily distracted—by the sarong of this Malay woman now passing, for instance, with its orange, purple, and white design of curving colours, with her children clinging on to it, their black eyes popeyed at the fairy-tale brilliance of lights.

Occasional Europeans walked past, white-skinned, self-reliant, the target of all eyes. Among them were French sailors, red pom-poms on their white hats, laughing, eloquent, uproarious on the bumper-cars, full of mock-gallantry for every pretty girl that passed. The Malay girls had shy eyes that slid softly round to look back at them, but the Chinese girls were prim, with narrow eyes that stared ahead, darkly, and then flicked round at the last moment for a quick glance.

The Chinese astonished me. Even their babies were strange—often slung behind in squares of cloth with the corners knotted round mother's waist and neck, so that their legs stuck out on

either side of her, their heads lolling back like an apple on a stalk, rolling as she walked. They were comatose, their wrinkled yellow faces swaying, a thin down of dark hair standing out stiffly from their skulls, oblivious of the fantastic jamboree through which they were being carried.

The Chinese toddlers were different—determined, squirming with life, pushing people's legs firmly aside, climbing and struggling. The small girls were doll-like, with deep fringes over their eyes, delightful in trousers and blouse, and with sudden little laughs that showed their teeth. This was their age of privilege—their parents smiled, indulging them to the limit. The older girls wore European-style dresses, walking often in pairs, often in identical frocks, slim, lithe, holding hands. Their pudding-basin haircuts had turned into tight round blobs of black curls—their eyes narrowing now, and observant. The boys also were becoming aware, moving in jostling gangs, with deep laughs and flashing grins—still pushing just as they did when babies.

The Chinese women varied so—the poorest wore rough trousers and cotton jackets reaching below their hips, their hair in a tight bun, or perhaps a queue—an oiled, glistening, feminine magnificence of hair, long enough to sit on. I saw one Chinese with her queue strung with gold circlets and then wound in a bun—a black mass, shining, with the gold spiralling and sparkling through it. The rich women were superb with high-heeled court shoes and sleek clinging cheongsams—dresses tailored with an unbroken line from neck to knees and always slit at the sides, a trick that flattered even the most modestly good-looking leg.

The individuals changed. The confusion never changed. And there was so much to watch. I was weary with watching after just a short time, and yet I wanted to watch for hours. The faces, for instance—faces doubtful, faces arguing, faces flirtatious, faces bland, faces frowning, faces split by uproarious grins. And everywhere teeth—white and mottled with gold, red and stained with betel-nut. Everywhere a babble of language,

pierced with bastard English. Everywhere something new—Iban trackers from Sarawak, perhaps, long hair coiled under trilby hats, ear-lobes dangling distorted in long loops of gristle—so strange that even Egyptians in fezzes and Indonesian fishermen turned to stare. And who were *these*, so strange that even the Ibans stared—these cautious men in dirty clothes, clutching gypsy bundles, outsize trilbies planted monstrously above long hair hacked off at shoulder length. Aborigines? Who knows?—in a moment they are gone, amazed by civilisation, swallowed up in its crowds.

To see more I had to walk. Then I began to see the other half of the New World, that exists to satisfy those who come, to mesmerise them until they forget their work-a-day worlds, until they pay without noticing. "Ten cents, ten cents, give me ten cents." To see them I had to walk with the same aimless shuffle through the clammy night air, watching the gaudy shops and gambling games, the cabarets and theatres and tea-shops, the Ghost Train, the Ferris Wheel, the Dodg'em cars.

Every few yards there was a glimpse into someone else's life. Through a window I watched Chinese girls busily painting their faces before going on to the stage of the Chinese theatre next door, all studiously ignoring their admirers outside and giggling to each other. Then I watched the stage itself, catching glimpses of the girls in all their glory by looking over a cluster of little black Chinese heads, all of us sharing the same crack in the wall.

Beyond the theatre were coffee-tables round open-air kitchens. At the tables were groups of idle, gaudy, willing girls, and in the kitchen very often an older woman. A nod to her was all that was needed—she would mutter sharply, and one of them would come sidling out at once. As I passed, a slim Malay girl in a vivid sarong rose to her feet. She must have been quite sixteen—she stared imperiously at me and her voice rang out, sharp and clear above the din—"You—young man—come HERE!"

Beyond her the Ghost Train was jerking and rattling into

view. A fat Malay woman got out, helpless with laughter, heaving, shaking, choking with giggles, guffawing so that her whole body wobbled, her eyes hidden by her beaming abandoned grin, her bodice rising and falling while the stays underneath creaked despairingly. Her husband got out after her. All he could do was sway hilariously to the railings, pointing a shaking hand at her, trying to speak through the shrieks of laughter doubling him up. The two of them stood cackling, pointing speechlessly at each other, until we all began to laugh and a little crowd gathered. We watched grinning, until their storm of giggles subsided and the woman wiped her eyes and the two of them walked happily away.

This was the New World and I was loving it—every shrieking uproarious cynical sweating minute. Here were hypocrisy and lust, laughter, two-year-old tears, knife-sharp avarice, and the sauntering search for pleasure. Here were experience and naivety, first steps and last steps, supply and demand, the brothel, the bank, the back row of the stalls, and the sweat of the brow, all jumbled up together in one seething shouting laboratory collection of humanity that included specimens from Nepal to New Zealand, from Japan to Cape Town, from San Francisco, Marseilles, Birmingham, and furthest away of all, dredging back thousands of years, from the headhunting and primitive tribes, from the Sea-Dyaks, from the Nagas.

Through it all, like a keynote, came the resonant, spine-tingling, vibrating B-O-O-M of the Chinese gongs in the theatres, sounding every few seconds for hour after hour, still beating in my ears long after I had left the New World, long after I had found my way to an entrance and escaped into the streets, into Chinatown, into a chaos of traffic, shuffling crowds, dazzling kerosene lamps, hungry children, overloaded foodstalls, families cooking carefully in gutters over red glowing charcoal, fortune-tellers and letter-writers, cobblers with shoes piled round them on the pavements—everywhere moving shadows, lights, noise. I walked along street after street while China shrieked and shouted round me, pedalling its bicycles, carrying its pails and

swaying baskets and flares, always poor, always competitive, always living in the crowd. I walked until I was exhausted with heat and confusion, and then I walked until I was lost, and then I took a taxi—back to my room in the Cathay.

At six next morning I woke, dazzled by sharp bars of sunlight, looking out straight into the sunrise, straight into its flaring pink and gold.

I had forgotten my room was air-conditioned. As I stepped out on to the balcony the air was suddenly heavy and the noise of the city suddenly louder. Again Singapore had changed—now it was brilliant in the early light, a sharp detailed landscape of brown roofs and tall white buildings, with beyond it the sea, dazzling in its silver shock of sunrise.

So this was Singapore—Chinese city, imperial naval base, Communist refuge, international city of merchants, spread out at my feet in tropical sun. My room seemed so high above it all, and so cut off, with its cool dry air, its modern European-style furniture, its separate bathroom, its balcony. It seemed a different world from the carnival of last night, and the shouting smelly streets. Here, if I just pressed a bell a calm Chinese would bring me breakfast on a tray—so I did press the bell, and he did bring me breakfast, and I sat back in my armchair, drinking my coffee, blinking in the sun, trying to make sense of the city below.

To my left was high ground with graceful green palms, and what looked like the circular dome of a mosque. Here and there were other domes, some white, some brilliant green. The slim white spire of the Anglican Cathedral was tallest of all, and near it rose heavy European masses of strong white stone—business blocks along the seafront, colonial administrative buildings, Law Courts, millionaire skyscrapers. There seemed to be two Singapores, one of brown-tiled roofs, with the other Singapore rising up through it where white hotels and blocks of flats showed like white mushrooms thrusting up through brown leaves. A

hundred and fifty years ago all this had been swamp. Now from the brown Singapore of Chinese streets was already rising this new Singapore of white European-style buildings while overhead were airliners, glinting in the sun, coming in low over the sea-front and its ships to Kallang Airport. And in the *next* hundred and fifty years?

As I sat in the cool luxury of the Cathay, looking down on the sweltering poverty of the streets, broken by the literally piled-up wealth of the few, I became a little more aware how many *different* worlds Singapore contained. The lift which took me downstairs to the cinema became suddenly the harshest of symbols, and the quiet security of the Bank where I went for money the most obvious of contrasts.

At the Bank, among a group of waiting subalterns, I found Bill, not surprisingly.

"At the rate we're going," he said, "it's just as well we're going back into the jungle where you can't bloody well spend. We've been looking for you—guess who we met? Major Russell, off the ship. We're staying with him and his wife. Last night they took us out to dinner and a film and drinks at Prince's. Tomorrow they're taking us to watch polo, and now we're going to meet them at the Swimming Club. Why don't you come? Hang it all, we've only got three days, and they're being bloody good to us."

He wanted me to come very much, and when I refused he was hurt. But he laughed, and gave me Major Russell's address.

"You'll be sorry," he said. "Just think of all the drinks you'll be missing."

After they had gone I began to think he was right. I waited for my money, while typewriters clattered and propeller-fans threshed the air. I was still wondering when a white-shirted Chinese gave me a splendid handful of crimson ten-dollar notes and I walked out into the street. Again I had forgotten the air-conditioning—the dry air of the Bank vanished and again I was in the wet warm air of the streets, jostled by crowds, blinking in

sunlight. But they had gone. I was too late, and as I walked away by myself along Collyer's Quay I was suddenly glad.

The three days that followed were smooth-skinned, the hours sliding easily into each other, giving the illusion that the hard bone of events underneath was missing. It was not—it was just that afterwards it was so hard to remember what had happened when. Like the New World, they were days and nights full of shadows, lights, noise, with occasionally a person or a scrap of conversation printing scenes in my mind—scenes as vivid as photographs, just as full of meaning, just as artificial.

The Tattooist, for instance. He was working on the edge of the Cathedral Close. In England there would have been railings to keep the crowd off the grass, but here, where all the world walked by, there were none. He was a Malay, his heavy dark face set in concentration. His client was a sandy-haired sailor, sitting on the ground under some trees, looking up calmly at the spectators.

The Tattooist worked fast. His design was an eagle, wings spreading across the top of the sailor's right arm, drawn in dark blue, with swift stabbing strokes. His instrument looked like an iron pencil. Every few seconds he dipped into a grooved metal block holding his inks. Very quickly he worked, fingers flickering, his heavy paw resting solidly on the sailor's skin.

The little group of onlookers was absorbed, drawn out of the passing crowd by the fascination of that jerking needle. I stood for a while beside two Chinese school-girls and an Indian. No-one laughed. No-one pointed. All just stood, watching each quick stab of the needle, and the black smear of liquid as the sailor's shoulder was swabbed and washed. When I walked away the group was as intent and absorbed as ever, and the sailor as impassive.

Later the same day, after seeing a film, I came out of the side entrance of a cinema and found myself on a concrete fire-escape, looking out over a car-park and groups of people finding

their way out through the evening sunlight. Something was strange. Then I realised. These were *groups*. This was not a homogeneous crowd, dispersing after seeing a film. This was a compressed assembly of groups, each group holding itself together and making its own individual way when the doors opened.

Those two European housewives, that Pathan with two small children, that fat Chinese with seven children, all these were groups looking inwards to themselves for strength, instead of outwards to each other. The contrasts of clothes and race, of gait and conversation, these made each group an interestingly different splash of colour. At close range the colours clashed. But when seen at a distance, when I looked away over the cars towards the road and the traffic, then the groups merged into blobs of colour, into dots forming a moving pattern. To me, looking down as a stranger, it suddenly seemed a vivid and startling pattern. I stood watching from the fire-escape, and the thought came quite clearly into my mind that if this multi-racial pattern of peoples could only find a coherence, an order, if it could do so by concentrating on something as intently as the group watching the Tattooist, it could be an example to the world.

And then, suddenly, my three days were over—just like that. When our lorry left the Union Jack Club it held a close-packed mob—I counted not less than forty-seven people. It was all suddenly nauseating: the drunken sergeants, the swaying lorry, the sudden pitchforking into military society and military conversation. The contrast was too sudden. Worst of all was knowing that our freedom had ended, had died, had been replaced by the gruesome inevitability of the Army.

It was a two-hour journey. First a long drive across Singapore Island, and then we were crossing the Causeway to Malaya, the pipeline very white beside the road and the water very black. At the far end were the spangled lights of Johore Bahru, where an armoured scout car was waiting to escort us—then the road led on through rubber plantations and sleepy kampongs, or villages, past Majeedee Barracks, where we collected our weapons and loaded them under a starry sky, through Kota Tinggi

and across the river and through the gates in the high barbed wire defending the Resettlement Village, now euphemistically re-named as a New Village. We watched over the tailboard as the road lurched away into the darkness, sometimes carrying with it a bouncing flurry of orange sparks from cigarette-ends thrown out and caught in the rush of air behind us.

A long way behind travelled the scout car. Its two headlights were surmounted by a spotlight on the turret, the three forming a triangle of lights that sometimes came close enough to dazzle us and sometimes dwindled to pinpoints. Yet it was always there, always in touch as if on the end of an invisible elastic thread.

It was a terrible drive. I was nearly sick from the exhaust and the swaying motion; we were crowded in a ridiculous tangle of hot bodies and suitcases and loaded weapons; many of us standing. Right in our midst was a Colour-Sergeant, desperately guarding a birdcage in which two worried budgerigars fluttered wildly as we swung round corners.

We were so crowded that soon we were inevitably discussing the terrorist ambush that would surely be laid on the road sooner or later.

"We're still waiting for it," said a Sergeant-Instructor.

"Just imagine if we turned over," said a Lieutenant in the Queen's, his loaded carbine pointing between my legs over the tailboard, straight at the scout car. "It'd be corned beef."

By midnight we were back at school. When next morning I was woken by Ahmad, the Malay boy who polished our boots and swore he was a real batman, it took me several seconds to remember I was back in the Army. But by lunch-time it seemed we had never been out of it. By tea-time it seemed impossible the weekend had ever happened. Only the seven little ivory Buddhas which I had bought proved otherwise.

Bill had prepared for our sea voyage up the east coast of Johore by thoughtfully buying a flask of brandy.

"For emergencies only," he said. "Someone might need a stiff drink, you know. Wounded or something."

When we saw the size of our rations I began to think Bill had been wiser than he knew.

"It's quite all right, sir," said the School Sergeant-Major, a bow-legged Gordon Highlander, waving a mug over an ominously familiar sack.

"Two days' rations each, sir, that's what Major Stringer said—and the rest in nice, wholesome, nourishing, bloody *rice*."

And rice it was—two cupfuls. Naturally I asked for more.

"When that's boiled up and swelling it'll be more than ye'll need, sir. I assure ye, sirr, ye'll not *need* more, sirrr. *Next*."

Nor was I comforted by being given a balloon to carry. It was a Signals balloon, packed in two tins, astonishingly heavy for something lighter than air.

"All our food depends on that balloon," said Major Stringer. "You mix the carbide with water and that makes gas—usually—and the gas fills the balloon, and if you get it up safely through the trees, and the wind's not too strong, and you're in the right place to start with, and you've remembered to tie a string to it, then the R.A.F. find us and we get our air-drop. The balloon's silver—the pilots say they're quite easy to see against treetops once they know where they are. Don't lose it in the surf when we hit the beach."

The balloon was obviously an emergency, so Bill gave us both a drink. Then another. Soon I could just see us Hitting The Beach. In technicolour. With one hand I would be swimming, and with the other carrying sixty pounds of equipment, one carbine, and not under any circumstances more than two cupfuls of wet rice. We would dodge gaily through the Chinese bullets as our first wave of screaming assault-troops splashed through the surf, led by an unsteady but very cheerful Bill, carrying the United Nations flag. Then, with a final cheer, we would Hit The Beach—there, where the Pacific swell met the mangrove

swamps—there, where men fought hand to hand, waving their Balloons.

Even without wounds, this optimistically amphibious exam, complete with live enemy, live ammunition, and even a big black Labrador tracker-dog, obviously qualified as a permanent emergency. As we travelled to war in our crowded lorry, Bill and I continued to take our precautions. Soon I felt a little more hopeful. After all, I was no longer a novice. And I was well-equipped for going to sea. After my patrol with Tom in Selangor I had decided that for me luxury in jungle consisted of curry-powder, coffee, onions, the baby *Bedside Esquire*, and half a mile of strong brown string. I had all these. I also had seventeen white Ulster-linen handkerchiefs.

These were Ahmad's fault. As our convoy was waiting to leave I had searched frantically for the piece of khaki dog-sheet I had promoted from cleaning shoes to being my Camouflaged Jungle Handkerchief, and had even sent to the Chinese laundry in honour of the occasion. Ahmad had forgotten to fetch it back. The Balloon and rice had been bad enough—but to go into battle without even being able to mop my sweating brow with my khaki dog-sheet was the last straw. Ahmad knew little English, but now I swore at him till his little mouth dropped open. Then he fled, close to tears.

By the time we had wedged ourselves into our lorries, with Bren-guns, ammunition-boxes, mobile cookers, radios, batteries, canvas water-buckets, and bundles of yellow life-jackets, we were not only packed together like heavily-armed sardines, but we were late. Not very late, but enough for Ahmad to fetch my laundry. As we slowed down at the Naafi to pick up two sergeants, there he was—out of breath with running uphill, bubbling over with happiness, his honour as a real batman saved. He held up seventeen Ulster-linen handkerchiefs, each blindingly white. I took them, and he stood there happily, a laughing little figure, very small beside the grim lorries and armoured vehicles roaring past above him, waving, waving, *waving* his joy until we were out of sight.

Meanwhile I was left clutching my seventeen white handkerchiefs and still on my way to Hit The Beach with my Balloon. We agreed our emergency was getting worse.

Bill's brandy came to an end just as our real emergency began. It began with a real wound. Frank LeMaitre was an enormous Canadian captain serving in my own regiment, an instructor at the School, and Signals Officer for our whole operation. As his beloved radio equipment was being carried aboard our ship in Singapore, he mothered it so carefully that he forgot himself, tripped on the gang-plank, and broke his ankle. It was childishly stupid, and yet childishly easy for any one of us to do. But because it was him, it mattered.

Without Frank there might be no radio. Without radio there might be no radio repairs, no batteries dropped, no air-supply, no bombing, no information, no helicopters to save the lives of wounded or sick men, no communication between patrols, or between land and sea and air.

Yet if Frank insisted on coming with us, if he got blood-poisoning or fever, if he was ill and could not operate or mend the radio, if we could not contact the ship or helicopter to take him out, what then?

He had fallen heavily, and lay on the deck, muttering and shaking with pain. As soon as he could talk, Major Stringer asked him what he wanted to do.

"Hell, I can't go back," he said. "If I've been a clot and smashed some flaming bloody bone, it's just too bad. I suppose I'll have to stay on this stinking barge and try and keep the Signals going from here. Hardly what I planned for you, though, is it, sir?"

Nor was it what we would have planned for him—five days, perhaps, on a restless rocking ship, his foot badly crushed, the bones setting crooked, and all this while tearing his nerves to pieces in the daily heartbreak and struggle which Signals always meant in Malaya. And, as he knew better than anyone, we

would need Signals that wooed their luck. Just as Major Stringer was the controlling intelligence of the whole expedition, and we were at different times its eyes or muscles, its claws or conditioned reflexes, so Frank controlled its entire nervous system.

At Major Stringer's briefing the operation had seemed hard-headed and foolproof. Now one broken bone had thrown all into doubt. What had Major Stringer said? "We can teach you what the book says . . . at least you'll know that." Every step of this operation was according to the book. The School drew on the accumulated experience of the whole Army. Its theory of jungle-warfare was quite possibly the most advanced in the world—particularly for Malaya, where every month of the past seven years' fighting had helped to test and refine it. We were all on trial to see if we could be trusted with command in the jungle, but in our eyes Major Stringer was also on trial, and with him the entire teaching of the School. And he knew it. As we sailed north through the night, with Frank desperately nursing his foot, everyone on board knew what that one broken bone might soon mean.

Once again I woke to find myself staring straight into the explosive silver dazzle where the sun was rising out of the sea. Only this time I was lying on the deck of our ship, now rocking gently at anchor, with the coastline a mile away—green jungle, palm trees, white gleaming beach, all very conventional, and all much the same for mile after mile.

That was the trouble. It *was* all the same. Major Stringer and the Malay captain of the ship and all our instructors looked at it hard and long, juggled with compasses, field-glasses, watches, maps, and charts, glanced doubtfully at each other, and then announced firmly we would land. So land we did, in heavily-laden boatloads, all dressed for deep jungle penetration and ludicrous in yellow Mae Wests.

We never hit the beach at all. We just sank into it, deep over

our ankles in warm yielding yellow sand. The surf was pathetic. It was only knee-deep, breaking softly along the beach as we watched the boats—black dots very difficult to see as they slowly rowed back to the ship across the rippling silver mile of water.

Then we marched—a long, long line of bowed black figures. We fried on that beach. We looked down through half-closed eyes at the white blaze of sand, our feet slipping and shuffling, our bodies burning. We marched very slowly all the way from one headland to the next, a full mile away, and then to the next again. The only happy person was our tracker-dog, who bounded splashing and frisking along the surf. When we found we were at last turning mercifully away from the beach into the dark comfort of the jungle, we were too tired to be startled even by the sight of a tiger's pugs following the jungle-edge—small, clear prints, each sinking astonishingly deep into the sand.

It was easy jungle. We travelled fast, and when we made camp that evening we must have been at least a couple of miles from the sea. Our camp was most professional, we kept a deathly silence, and at the end of that first day we felt that if we could only find the terrorists they would indeed get the shock of their lives.

Next day we sent out small patrols, probing in all directions on compass-bearings, like rays from a star. "Just to check our exact position," said Major Stringer. They proved only that we were certainly not where we thought we were.

On the third day Major Stringer took a patrol all the way back to the beach, to check our starting point. Our problem was the reverse of the problem which Tom's patrol had faced: then we had known within twenty yards where we had started and after that no more, but here our route to the beach was clear enough, yet we might have landed on that beach five miles either side of the right place, so it told us nothing. Bill went with Major Stringer's patrol—we waited for them all day, and they did not return until the next morning, the fourth day.

"You should have seen us," said Bill, "sitting on that beach

all night because we couldn't contact the ship and had to wait till dawn. No ponchos. No mosquito-repellent. And the *sand-flies*. And nothing to drink except a bloody ocean of salt water. And right on top of tiger-tracks."

We were getting hungry. We were still not sure where we were, and until we had found the terrorists or had given up we could not allow planes overhead. The rhythmic roar and fade of Valettas making their practice bombing-runs before dropping supplies would alert every terrorist within twenty miles.

So we lived on our rice, boiling a little up in water into a hot mushy plateful each evening, and then mixing into it just enough meat or curry powder or jam to give it a taste. Some people were foolish and by the fourth day had nothing left, so that those who had carefully saved had to make a forced contribution for those who had not. There was tension in that camp. The enforced silence made it worse. We were quite literally sulking in our tents, and we were watching our instructors very carefully. And they were watching us. The blasé Major became thunderously, ominously blasé. One night he persisted in talking. His low muttering went on and on—until one of the Australian sergeants spoke, slowly and clearly in the darkness, with drawling homicidal ferocity:

"I don't know who that bastard is who's talking, but if you don't bloody well *stop*, sir."

On the fifth day we still had not discovered where we were. On the sixth day Major Stringer gambled. He took a small patrol and struck away in what he thought the most likely direction, while at the base-camp the Valettas were guided in by radio for an air-drop. They did not even use my Balloon. When the Major returned his entire patrol were silent with disappointment. They had indeed found the camp. They had stalked it. They had encircled it. Then they had closed in to find themselves tip-toeing tensely through deserted bashas—bashas that had been slept in just one night before.

So on the seventh day we went home—back to the beach, to the ship, to Singapore and the Jungle Warfare School, back to

the very classroom where the blackboard still showed in red-and-white designs just how mathematically perfect our plan had been. And it *had* been almost perfect. Frank went to hospital knowing his Signals had been a triumph. It was just that if only we had landed at the right place, had not been delayed, had found the camp two days earlier. . . .

Major Stringer had been magnificent. We all knew that. Nothing had halted him. He had reached the terrorist camp. He had stalked it as the book said, gun in hand, his patrol behind him. Not until he had actually walked into it had he known which way the scales would tilt. They had wavered delicately for seconds, between complete success and complete failure, and until the silence told him the answer.

At our last gathering he faced us with a quizzical smile as he reviewed the operation—from the maps and information, the objective and the method, the decisions and the mistakes, down to the hot sand, the rice, the last trickling seconds of silence and disappointment.

"Well, there you are," he said. "It was all according to the book, wasn't it? Now it's up to you to make what you can of it. It's up to each one of you, because next time you'll each be making your own decisions."

He still had the quizzical look on his face as he watched us jostle our way out of the classroom. He saw this scene every few weeks. He knew what we were thinking. We knew the School had done its very best to teach us just one thing—how to lead a patrol in the search for terrorists. In the next few days our class would be scattered all over Malaya, some of us hundreds of miles apart. Each of us would be facing a strange and cut-throat gang of experienced jungle-troops, and one by one we would each lead them away into swamp or mountains, walking at their head for the first time, each of us nervously committed to this extraordinary task of hunting down armed Chinese in equatorial rainforest, and killing them. Each separate one of us, as the jungle closed overhead, would be suddenly and irrevocably alone. And yet Major Stringer would not even be thinking of us. He

would already be teaching our successors, perhaps at the very moment that his own successor was leaving England on board yet another troopship—yet another troopship in the relentless succession of troopships that had already been sailing to Malaya, week after week, for the last seven years.

# PART TWO
# APPRENTICESHIP

# CHAPTER FOUR

my nature is subdued, To what it workes in, like the Dyers hand.

SHAKESPEARE

MEANWHILE Able Company had moved from Kuala Lumpur to the coast. I arrived to find Major Blackett sending his first patrols into the new area—an area that had replaced hills with swamp, and into which his patrols probed gingerly, learning as they went.

The swamp was roughly square, twenty miles each way, adding up to four hundred square miles of flat swamp-jungle, ringed by hills, divided by a river and a canal, separated from the coast by a broad strip of rice-paddy. Somewhere in the swamp were fifty terrorists.

This rice-paddy formed the Kuala Selangor rice-bowl and supplied most of the State of Selangor. Everything revolved round the safe harvesting of the rice, and so each harvest was accompanied by increased extortion and terrorism. The C.T.s sallied forth, assassinating and disembowelling stray rice-harvesters, trying to terrify them away from their fields. At the same time the Army moved in troops and increased its patrols into the swamp itself. The struggle swung backwards and forwards between swamp and paddy—between the labyrinthine swamp where the C.T.s had evaded capture for years, and the open paddy where the sun beat down on white-clothed harvesters and hard-baked roads and hurrying jeeps full of troops.

The problem facing the Major was a microcosm of the problem of Malaya as a whole. The terrorists were secure in their jungle. The Army and Police and Government Administration were secure in their towns. Between was the no-man's-land of

village, road, railway, plantation, rubber, paddy. The terrorists at their strongest could paralyse the communications of all Malaya, but they could never hope to take the towns by storm. At their strongest, the security forces could confine the terrorists to deep jungle, but they could never hope to find them all in one massive offensive—the jungle was too thick.

So it was check and counter-check, the pendulum swinging, year after year. The stubbornness of Chinese and British kept it swinging. How far it swung either way depended on the civilian multi-racial population. The happiness of most of that population depended on whether it had enough cheap rice to eat. Hence the importance of Kuala Selangor, of its harvesters, its troops, its swamp. And hence the importance of the patrol taking place in the heart of the swamp when I arrived back at the Company—a patrol under Sergeant Cooper, who, with thirty men, had made contact with about the same number of terrorists.

The excitement was tremendous. It was unheard of for anyone to contact so many terrorists all at once. The Colonel, the Brigadier, the General, all came to see for themselves—though there was nothing to see except a large map of the swamp, and in the middle a small white pin representing Cooper. Each day the pin was moved a little.

The Major had been given control of all troops within fifty miles, including a Company each from the R.A.F. Regiment, the Malay Regiment, and the Gurkhas, plus Police Jungle Squads and Village Home Guards. These he had moved into position round the swamp to ambush likely escape-routes, leaving the swamp itself clear for Cooper. Apart from arranging for Cooper to get his air-supply when and how he wanted, there was little for anyone to do—except gaze at the white pin in the middle of the map and the ring of coloured pins that had blossomed round its edges. The game was in Cooper's hands, alone with his private war in the swamp.

For days we watched that pin move slowly across the map. We listened to Cooper reporting by radio at dawn and dusk. We watched R.A.F. supply-planes overhead. We listened to R.A.F.

bombers blasting the swamp in the hope of heading the C.T.s towards the ambushes. Yet we knew there was not much hope, and when he finally came out of the swamp Cooper told us why.

"We found the tracks by accident. Plain as a road they were —the Ibans swore there must be at least forty of them. So we followed. But it was no good, sir. We could never catch 'em up. Each day we found their resting-places, their camps and water-holes and such-like. Once we were only a few hours behind. But we had to stop every few days for the air-drop. That always wasted half a day. Then the tracks split up—as if they'd realised we were following."

Cooper was an outstanding Sergeant, one of our few National Servicemen to reach the rank. He was only twenty years old and yet he was worshipped by his men. He had clearly used his authority to push them to the limit. When they came out of the swamp both he and his men were finished. They were tired as they had never been tired in the hills. They were trudging wrecks of men. At first we thought it was the result of one forced march after another, or the reaction after days of strain. Later we were not so sure. Later still, I, for one, knew the answer for myself.

After Cooper's patrol, life settled back to normal, and I was able to get a look at the area.

"You'd better drive round the paddy with Tom," said the Major. "We'll get the Auster chappie to come from K.L. and we'll look at the swamp from the air."

"Right, sir," I said. "I'll do that tomorrow morning."

"It'll take you more than tomorrow morning. It'll take you all day."

"But the paddy's only five miles away, sir."

"You'd better have another look at the map. And you'd better start getting used to the distances here. There's no bridge over the river, the ferry's broken, and that means a detour to the

other bridge—there and back means a journey of a hundred miles every time we go out on patrol."

My education continued next day. We had crossed the far bridge, and were coming back in our jeep along the other side of the river, driving very fast. Every so often we slowed as the tarmac changed to wooden bridges over streams or irrigation-channels.

"If the C.T.s ever ambush this road they'll find it dead easy," said Tom.

"I don't see how," I said. "The scrub's been cut back from both sides of the road."

"Look at these little bridges. Suppose you're a C.T. and you notice jeeps like ours, bucketing across at about forty, and suppose you take out three or four planks. The next jeep either crashes, or stops short. Either way you have your sitting target."

"Yes," I said. I clutched my carbine tighter and peered ahead for missing planks. Meanwhile Tom was looking for something else.

"Slow down, driver," he said. "Just a little bit. There it is. That shack on the corner. Have a good look, but don't make it too obvious."

"Looks quite ordinary," I said, as we passed.

"It is quite ordinary. It's also been reported by the Special Branch as a suspected meeting-place for C.T. couriers. They're supposed to approach it through those palm-trees behind. We may have to ambush it—if we recce in the normal way of course we give the game away."

Hours later I realised the paddy was far bigger than it seemed on the map. It was fifteen miles long, and five broad. As we drove beside the canal separating paddy from swamp, the fields stretched away as far as we could see, flat, shimmering in the sun, with occasional figures in the distance, and here and there columns of smoke rising lazily in the air. It looked like an enormous chessboard, with the fields divided by roads and irrigation-canals. Every mile along the main canal was a lock con-

trolling the supply of water into the irrigation channels, and by standing up in our jeep we could see two and sometimes three of these locks at once—white structures beside the thinning ribbon of canal, dwindling away one behind the other into the far distance. On the other side of the canal rose the swamp-jungle, a silent wall, also dwindling into the distance.

We had been told to get to know the area, so we forced our jeep along even the smallest tracks. When we tried to come back along the canal to the Water-Works we found our track submerging under a green tide of scrub.

"I think we can make it, sir," said Jakes, our driver.

"And there are enough of us to turn her round, even if we do get stuck," said Tom.

Soon the track was invisible, the scrub waist-high. Jakes drove by touch, feeling his way along the ruts at the top of the canal bank, the jeep swaying and lurching as it smashed through undergrowth. We went slower and slower, the scrub rose higher, and we stopped.

"Perhaps we can press on by ourselves," said Tom. "We really must know whether we can reach the Water-Works from here."

We walked on in single file. The scrub was now taller than we were, and it was a relief to be out of the sun.

A red-hot pain struck the back of my neck. Another followed on my left elbow, searing, violent.

"Quick, back to the jeep," said Tom.

The pains were all over my head and arms. I slapped and tore at my clothes, dancing in agony.

"Don't *stand* there," cried Tom. "They're red ants—they're on every branch . . ."

We all ran—ploughing through the scrub, cursing, beating at our faces and arms and chests, the ants stabbing and biting as we ran. Then we were out in the sunlight, back at the jeep, frenziedly pulling them off our bodies. They were tiny, red, savage, and they continued to bite even while we tore them to pieces.

"Red ants are a terror," said Tom. "You just can't go where they are. It's useless trying."

So we extricated our jeep and set off along the canal in the other direction.

After a couple of miles the track widened noticeably where it was joined by another road at one of the locks. We spent half an hour there, having lunch in full view, spreading our maps over the bonnet of the jeep, standing up on its seats to look through field-glasses at distant villages. It seemed a splendid place to stop, and quite safe. We were not to know that this same thought would occur to others, and that only a few months later a police patrol would be ambushed, surrounded, and over-run on the very spot where we were now having lunch.

There was much to see in the paddy—houses, roads, vehicles, trudging villagers, and the fields themselves, stretching away for mile after mile in both directions along the canal. It was a colossal area to defend. How could one even begin to seal it off against the C.T.s? And how could one inspire confidence in the villagers, when from any point in the paddy they had only to lift their heads to see the swamp, its threatening silence extending in a long black line right across their horizon?

My doubts increased when we flew over both swamp and paddy in the Auster. The paddy was certainly big—we ranged to and fro across it, our shadow swooping across fields, sunlight flashing from corrugated-iron roofs as we circled over a village, the villagers' faces showing suddenly pale as they looked up, their hens running madly for shelter. This village was new and special. Its villagers were Kuomintang refugees from Nationalist China, re-settled, bitterly anti-Communist, and an excellent source of information. A moment later we were circling over another village, much older, of which nothing was certain at all —except that it had to be watched most carefully. And a few moments later we were over the swamp.

For the first time I realised what it felt like to look out over four hundred square miles of swamp-jungle. It was flat. It stretched to the horizon, where twenty miles away I could

faintly see hills. Between them and the paddy behind us rolled an uninterrupted carpet of green tree-tops.

We flew lower. The carpet enlarged into a pattern of groups, patches, and clumps of individual tree-tops. Sometimes we could suddenly see, far below them, the ground from which they soared. Often there was no ground—just water, glinting evilly as we roared overhead. *This* jungle was up to its knees in water, for mile after mile. Then I remembered Cooper, and that white pin moving with such painful slowness.

Somewhere in that gigantic morass were fifty veteran terrorists. How were they to be killed? How were they even to be found? When we returned to the Company I had another look at the maps, to find out how previous regiments had faced this problem.

There were two problems, the paddy and the swamp. The paddy had always been treated with the conventional tactics for inhabited areas threatened by terrorism—if they could not be sealed off, at least they could be made unhealthy for the enemy with patrols and ambushes. The swamp was different. It had no features, no contours. It just went on and on. . . . The maps representing it were scornfully dismissed as "green graph-paper". The only way to deal with such a monstrously anonymous slab of jungle was to pretend it *was* only green graph-paper, to divide it into squares, and then send patrols across each square looking for tracks.

Tracks were our only hope. The C.T.s could not travel without leaving tracks of some kind, and if enough patrols crossed enough squares sooner or later they must meet the tracks —as Cooper had done. The trouble had been that Cooper could not catch up with his enemy, and there was no way for other troops to enter the swamp fast enough to be of use.

Except, of course, with helicopters. Ever since Cooper's patrol the Major had been puzzling over this problem, and his answer was helicopters. But helicopters (even when available, which was only in emergencies) could not land in dense jungle. There must therefore be dropping-zones cut, every few miles across the swamp, and pin-pointed by compass so that as soon as

the C.T.s were found again troops could be deposited round them in a circle.

"And *you*, Oliver," said the Major, "can go in and make the first D.Z."

The pace of life changed as soon as I was introduced to my platoon. They were nearly all National Servicemen, drafted to us from the Durham Light Infantry, and most were from the Durham coal-pits. My Platoon Sergeant was MacBride, and he had been in Malaya six years. I had to brief them, inspect them, organise transport, rations, weapons, radio, routes, timing. Watson packed my kit; the Armourer-Sergeant gave me one of his best M2 carbines; Tom said he would come and see us off. As we drove down to the Company in the late afternoon, MacBride had the platoon standing along the road ready for my inspection. Long before we arrived we could hear him shouting:

"Na, Thomas, ye *canna* go on patrol in a white P.T. vest. Away with ye, man, and change. . . . Scott, call yourself a Bren-gunner and you with your spare barrel tied round the back of your neck with string—Corporal Brown, straighten him out at once. . . . As for *you*, Tanner, I've never seen anything like it."

The sun beat down. MacBride shouted. Vehicles roared and revved in clouds of dust. One strange face after another swam past my eyes. The platoon disintegrated into a green shambling chaos, shouting in North Country accents, dumping their packs and weapons into the trucks and clambering over them while the trucks gathered speed and everyone waved good-bye and I slumped in the leading jeep trying to remember what I had forgotten—checking my ammunition, cocking my carbine and laying it across my knees, trying to read a map that fought and struggled in my hands as the jeep gathered speed and the wind rushed past, faster and faster.

We were at the canal in what seemed a few minutes, and already I had to jump down from my jeep as the other vehicles drew up behind.

"*Right*—we've got to spend the night here in this schoolhouse, and we cross the canal at dawn. Brew-up at once. Stand-to in twenty minutes. Er . . . Carry on, please, Sergeant."

Thankfully I turned to Tom, grateful to have someone to talk to as my men filed past into the schoolhouse. But Tom had to go back with the vehicles, leaving me to pick up my pack and find my own place among the tiny chairs and desks. I was acutely conscious of every move I made, of the experienced strangers round me, of Sergeant MacBride. But MacBride was very tactful.

"There isn't much time, so it might be quicker if we brewed-up together tonight, sir. The tea's almost ready. I've checked where the men are sleeping, and organised sentries, and warned them about smoking—it can be seen here for miles—and about leaving the place tidy tomorrow. We usually Stand-to for ten minutes, sir. The only thing to decide is when we move in the morning—what do you think about 7.30, sir?"

So we moved at 7.30. I supervised the reinstatement of blackboard and desks, rescued the chalk from a corner and handed it carefully to the Malay schoolmaster who had just arrived with a horde of Malay children—all agog as we precariously crossed the canal in our Boat, Rubber, Infantry, Assault. Not until we were all across, forming up in habitual single file, hushing our voices as we slowly moved forward one by one into the green darkness, did I begin to relax into the unchangnig jungle routine, able at last to get used to the fact that I was supposed to be in *command*. Besides the shock of finding myself at the head of the patrol with only one Iban in front as my leading-scout, I had the even sharper stimulus of having to concentrate at once on my compass. Already everything depended on this compass, its needle joggling backwards and forwards, the Iban already glancing over his shoulder for directions.

For the next three hours my universe consisted of my compass, my watch, and the backward-glance of the Iban. Slowly I adjusted myself to this new world—moving my carbine over to my right arm and carrying it in the crook, the compass steady in

my right hand while my left was free to push through the jungle. Every thirty minutes we halted for ten minutes' rest. The jungle was flat, dense, wet underfoot, but scarcely a swamp. After a midday brew-up, and another three hours' travelling, we should theoretically have been far enough away from the canal. So I decided this was where we should have our D.Z. It surprised me how easy the decision was. Perhaps there were advantages in being in swamp, after all. If we had been in the hills we would have had to know where we were—here I really had not the faintest idea, and it didn't seem to matter.

Three days later we surveyed our creation—a crushed circle of jungle, seventy yards across, startlingly open to blue sky. The ground was trampled and muddy, the large tree-trunks scarred where Pioneers with explosive charges had ripped them open, causing them to shake, sway, totter, falling across and through other trees, avalanching in a spreading cataclysm of tearing wood and roaring branches. Now there was silence—we were waiting for our D.Z. to be used.

Right in the middle were our scarlet silk identification-panels, stretched across tree-trunks to help the Valetta pilot find us. I remembered how difficult it had been in the Auster to pick out even the mirror-brilliance of reflecting water. Perhaps I should have made the D.Z. much bigger? Would one more day's work have made all the difference? It would be entirely my fault if our Valetta was loaded and fuelled in Kuala Lumpur, and flown with a full supply-crew out over Kuala Selangor Swamp, only to return because my D.Z. was too small to be seen. Or perhaps I had made a stupid mistake in my radio message to the Major—the timing, perhaps. Or the code. Or the map-reference.

"There she is, sir," said MacBride.

He and Corporal Brown and myself were clustered round Thomas, the radio operator. He was lying in his basha, earphones on, restlessly twisting the dials on his set. His aerial trailed up into the trees, silhouetted against the sky, looking pathetically frail for talking to bombers so high above us.

"Keep trying, Thomas. I can *hear* something," said MacBride.

We listened. The camp was silent. The jungle hummed and buzzed with insect life. Someone coughed.

"*Shssh*," said MacBride.

Then we heard it. Lost as we were in that colossal swamp, hidden among a multitude of tree-roots, muffled round with green blankets of jungle, yet we could still hear the blessed hum and throb of an aircraft. It was to our north, coming closer.

Thomas began to intone into his microphone. "D.Z. calling Valetta. D.Z. calling Valetta. D.Z. calling Valetta."

The aircraft grew fainter. Thomas muttered on and on. Again someone coughed. I put on the spare earphones, but could hear nothing.

"D.Z. calling Valetta. D.Z. calling Valetta. There they are, sir, I've got them."

Through the earphones I could hear a distant voice, trying to pierce the atmospherics.

". . . I say again, we cannot find you . . ."

I seized Thomas's microphone.

"D.Z. calling Valetta. D.Z. calling Valetta. Come south. I say again, come *south*."

I handed the microphone back to Thomas, wondering why I hadn't left it to him in the first place. Thomas repeated the message, and got an answer. The sound of the plane strengthened. Then the roar of the engines hit us as the Valetta passed directly overhead, far above. It faded. Then a sudden thunder filled the clearing as the Valetta rocketed overhead, just above the tree-tops, so low we could see the open doorway in its side and the dispatchers looking down at us.

I blew my whistle. MacBride was already running through the trees with the rest of the platoon, taking them well away from the D.Z. Corporal Brown and two men were running into the clearing, each holding compass, pencil and paper. We stared up at the sky.

"He says he's dropping three parachutes, sir," called Thomas. "Coming now."

I blew my whistle again—the signal to MacBride to make all his men watch the sky too. Parachutes sometimes failed to open. It was not a nice death for a man to be hit by a free-falling crate just because he hadn't bothered to look up.

The Valetta made three bombing-runs over us—each time we saw the falling black dot, the blossoming parachute, and each time we all took compass bearings of where we thought they had landed. The third parachute did indeed fail to open properly. We saw it half-open, a flailing streamer of silk seen for just a second, and then we heard a crate rip through branches and smash into the ground, less than a hundred yards away.

The scene that followed was always one of the best moments during a patrol. The wooden crates were split open fiercely, and their contents distributed—gleaming tins of bacon, meat, vegetables, pudding; tubes of condensed milk and paper folders of matches; rifle-oil and radio-batteries; chocolate and biscuits and cigarettes; clothes, foot-powder, rum. The crates contained everything we had asked for. And, as always, we blessed the Air Supply organisation that brought them so infallibly to us.

We were already a filthy, sweating, stubble-faced gang, many of us stripped to the waist, but we were all happy as we found our way back to our bashas, our arms full. Particularly happy were those who had been given a section of parachute silk, which provided magnificent protection at night against mosquitoes. Orders laid down that all parachutes had to be recovered and brought back to base, except, of course, if they had been torn—the smallest tear was enough to ruin a parachute. We had been very lucky. By the time they reached *my* hands all our parachutes were torn.

Next day some of us were not so happy. The Major wanted the Pioneers back at the Company, so I had to send half the platoon back under MacBride. But the Major also wanted someone to march to the river, and return along it, exploring —and that meant I had to continue the patrol with the other

half of the platoon. Worse still, among the stores lost the day before from the damaged crate had been all our Hexamine tablets, our solid-petrol fuel for our Tommy-cookers. We were *not* exactly happy as we slowly trudged away from our D.Z. with several days' patrolling in front of us, no fuel, and the knowledge that the swamp would get worse near the river.

My leading-scout was again Untam, one of the two Ibans. He was short, bow-legged, with a knarled leathery face split by a Humpty Dumpty grin. His official Army age was fifty-six. His fellow Ibans said he was a grandfather, and in his youth had taken part in the Borneo head-hunting wars. They held him in great respect. As he stumped along in front of me, casually swinging his parang and slicing through a branch at every blow, I suddenly realised something on his pack was *alive*. I stared through the shadows until I could see clearly—a large jungle tortoise, tied on with string. During the next two days I got quite used to watching its horny yellow tummy swaying in front of me, and its legs endlessly waving for help. At night Untam would put it out to graze on the end of a piece of string, and would tenderly feed it with juicy leaves. I was very careful *not* to watch when he finally cooked and ate it.

An hour later there was a check—the men behind had stopped. I waited a couple of minutes. We often had to stop to let someone in the rear gain contact again. But the halt continued. I pushed back through thick jungle, navigating from one man to the next like a ship following a line of buoys in fog, able to see only two or three at any one time. None of the men could see what the trouble was—and they had strict orders never to move unless they could.

It was Thomas, the radio-operator. He had collapsed on the narrow path, falling forward on to his face, and the tremendous weight of the radio had held him there, spreadeagled, until the two men behind had caught up with him. This was just what had happened on Tom's patrol: heat-exhaustion. Ever since that patrol I had carried a bottle of salt-tablets in my trouser-pocket, and already they were needed.

Thomas looked ghastly, even after salt-tablets and a long drink. He could not possibly be sent back to the canal with an escort—we were much too far away. We just had to wait. The men all sat down wherever they were, took off their packs and heavily loaded belts, and smoked in silence. The leading-scout and last man automatically turned to face along the path as sentries. We waited half an hour, while Thomas lay on his back, eyes closed.

When we went on, I gave Thomas yet more salt and water while Tanner carried the radio. It was hard on Thomas. He was new to the job. A radio-operator on the move through jungle was nothing but a beast of burden. The radio plus his own equipment were so heavy that a special steel-and-canvas carrying-frame was needed, and he did not even carry a weapon —except, perhaps, a revolver. Even then it was a job which only some men could do. Thomas had been so determined to be a radio-operator that his collapse nearly broke his heart. I moved him up the patrol to follow just behind me, and every time I glanced round I could see the misery on his face.

Our difficulties continued. As we came near the river the swamp became worse. Everywhere in the swamp there was a foot or more of leaf-mould, but what really mattered was the ground underneath. Now the ground was turning to mud, with sluggish pools of water showing through. The trees were pulling themselves up out of the mud, their roots building higher in self-defence so that we were alternately floundering through black mud and then climbing over these strange structures of wood half hidden under drifts of leaf-mould, from which their grotesque elbows and knees protruded, and half-hidden in such a way that it was easy to find oneself booby-trapped, high above the ground with one foot firm on the roots and the other plunging into nothingness. The number of fallen trees increased. They lay everywhere in the mud, draped with vines, their rotten trunks sometimes useful as gang-planks and sometimes more deceptive than the tree-roots.

As soon as we found some slightly higher ground we made

camp. We had to cook on wood, and there was no wood. We sat in the jungle, trees blocking out the sky, and there was no wood. At least, there was no *dry* wood. The living wood was full of sap, the dead wood was wet—everything in that humid dripping swamp was wet. Untam saved us by finding some dry branches, dead but suspended in creeper above the mud, but even so our cooking was not a success.

Next day I tried to plot a course parallel to the river, and that meant we were everlastingly bogged down. Soon we were splashing and clambering so slowly that it was useless. So I started back into the drier jungle. There, after all our twisting and turning, I found I had lost track of even our probable position. There was nothing for it but to head back towards the river, to keep going until we hit it, to check our position most carefully, and to find out whether it would be quicker to follow the river-bank or to come back to the drier jungle, and travel blind. I began to see what the Major meant by "explore".

Wearily we returned—forcing our way back into the ominous squelching darkness of the swamp. It took us an hour to go two hundred yards. Grimly we pressed on, helping each other where it was most difficult. When we reached the jungle-edge it was only to find that the river-bank was yet another hundred yards away, on the far side of a belt of plantain-like rushes far taller than we were, interlaced by deep pools of water that were probably channels of the river. Beyond the plantains we could just see the grey branches of mangroves. And mangroves usually meant deep swamp.

I did not know what to do. We had reached the river, that was certain. But we might be anywhere along two or three miles of the river. Unless I could see its exact direction I could not fix our position. And unless I actually stood on the river-bank I could not tell whether it was firm ground.

For a long time I looked at it, standing out in the sun at the edge of the plantains, while the long line of men waited in the dark swamp behind me.

Then I sent for Corporal Brown. The Major had described

him as experienced but lazy. He was a stranger to me, but since he had been in the jungle for two years I reckoned now was the time to ask his advice.

Corporal Brown looked at it for a long time, too.

"Do you think we should go and have a look at it from the river-bank, Corporal Brown?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know, sir," he replied slowly. "I don't think I'd *bother* if I was you, sir."

He said it in such a way that he made me *want* to bother. He said it in such a way that I boiled with fury. Perhaps it was the fault of the swamp, or the sun, or Brown, or me, but those exact words at that exact time were the last straw.

"I don't agree, Corporal," I said. "You can bring the patrol up to the edge of the swamp, and you can stay with them there. I shall try to get across by myself, and you will follow with the men when I shout."

He disappeared. He knew exactly what I thought of him and his advice.

Again I did not know what to do. I had never seen these giant plantains before, growing in great lush thickets, their shiny leaves glistening in the sun. I had never seen deep swamp before, let alone mangroves.

There was no time. Brown and the men would be appearing any moment. I took off my equipment and slung my carbine on my back. I was still trembling with fury. I drew my parang, and took a savage experimental slash at the nearest plantains. The heavy blade crunched through them, and huge leaves toppled round me in disorder. Perhaps it was possible after all. I attacked the plantains, parang whirling and flashing in the sun, sweat running into my eyes and down my body, armfuls of leaves falling on either side, all my fury concentrated on these appalling plants.

I began to see they grew right up out of the water forming firm bunches with their roots, sometimes even massing into firm banks. Here and there among them were little islands of firm ground, covered with scrub. The biggest was right in the

middle. I hacked and splashed my way to it, and then cut a path up on to it through the scrub. I sat down and looked back.

The sight was remarkable. The tremendous length of the felled leaves exaggerated the effect. It looked as if a hippopotamus had churned across, leaving a devastated path as wide as itself. It was clear, even to me, that I must have been *very* angry.

I could just see the men, a little group of green figures sitting under the trees at the edge of the jungle.

"All right, Corporal," I shouted. "You can start bringing them across now—I'm going on."

Late that night I reflected on the whole incident. My clash with Corporal Brown had suddenly forced me to gamble on my own judgment for the first time. By great good luck I had succeeded. I had indeed reached the river. Even the mangroves had been overcome.

They had been an extraordinary sight—all dead, with grey spongy trunks reaching into the sky and ending abruptly in withered stumps, and great spongy rotting heaps of tangled root. It had taken us half an hour to cross thirty yards of mangrove, and often we had been waist or shoulder deep in water, hauling ourselves through and over their yielding corpses. It had reminded me irresistibly of Kipling's "great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees".

Yet the rest of the day had been stranger still. I had fixed my position, but the river-bank had been useless as a route. We had to retrace our steps, through the mangroves, the plantains, the river-swamp, back to the dry jungle. All afternoon we had marched, secure in the knowledge that we knew where we were, and not until an hour before dusk had I noticed the ground was still dry, the leaves brittle and baked, the mud hard. And nearly all our water-bottles were empty.

At first I thought we were just passing a dry patch. A quarter of an hour later I knew I was wrong. This part of the swamp

apparently became water-logged only after heavy rain. So I headed for the river again, urging Untam to increase speed. He responded valiantly, his feet hobbling nimbly over tree-roots, his parang scything at branches.

We found a sort of water-hole—a muddy patch that might reveal water after digging. But we had no time to dig. We gathered round the water-hole silently—Untam looking anxiously at me for orders, sweat trickling down his leathery cheeks, his chest heaving.

I decided I must find the river quickly myself in the half-hour of daylight left, and set off on a compass-bearing with Corporal Brown. I left the patrol digging at the mud. There was a faint chance they might find water, and it was better than nothing. Without packs we could double our speed, moving at a quick walk, almost trotting. I had to take Corporal Brown—there was no choice. After our clash that morning he would not dare cross me again, and now I needed his experience more than ever. I led the way, cutting a path, and he followed—his parang chopping at trees as we passed, blazing marks for our return journey to the mud-hole.

We found the river in twenty minutes. We paused only to drink deeply and fill our water-bottles. Then we were on our way back along our blazed trail, forcing ourselves through the jungle as fast as we could, dusk steadily falling. Soon we had to peer to see our blazed trees, and then we lost them. My compass showed the direction, but it could not pin-point a mud-hole. We stood there together in the grey dusk, listening.

"We'll have to shout, sir," said Brown.

I hesitated. To shout in the jungle was to break every law in the precious book. But he was right. We shouted, and the men at the mud-hole shouted back. They were *behind* us—somehow we had passed them. But they were only fifty yards away and within ten minutes we joined them.

It was now dark. Even after digging down three feet, the mud-hole had yielded nothing. Brown and I handed round our water-bottles, and everyone had a drink. There was a

decision to be made, and I knew very well it was not for me to make it.

"The river is exactly twenty minutes from here," I said. "We can spend the night here without water, or we can go to the river—which means carrying everything with us, and travelling in the dark. Which do you all want to do?"

There was a long silence. Travelling at night in jungle was generally considered impossible.

"I don't fancy staying *here* all night," said a voice in the darkness. "We might as well try for the river, sir."

There was a mutter of agreement. And so we had tried for the river. We had formed up in the dark, all touching each other like a line of blind men, carrying everything—packs, weapons, Bren-guns, radio. Thomas had insisted on carrying the radio again, so again I put him just behind me. Untam was again leading-scout. I navigated by compass, and every few minutes we would all halt while I concentrated on its swinging glistening globules of luminous paint.

We could never have done it if we had not all been driven by the same terrible thirst, that *demanded* water. It was like marching through jungle with one's eyes shut. I fell over tree-trunks, blundered into Untam, got tangled in vines and ripped by thorns, struck in the face by branches, always trying in spite of everything to keep close to Untam, and protect my compass. Untam had lived in jungle all his long life. He did his best to find the easiest way for us, but even he could not evade the fifty-yard belt of deep mud that bordered the river.

Brown and I had crossed the mud gaily in daylight, tripping quickly along the fallen tree-trunks that bridged it, hopping from one to another. They made real bridges, piled up on each other with often a six- or eight-foot drop on to the mud. Untam never faltered, but set off carefully along the first tree-trunk, one foot in front of the other. Then I remembered Thomas. A fall from these tree-trunks in darkness, under the weight of the radio, could hardly mean less than a broken leg. Luckily in the darkness no-one could see the drop. I took Thomas's hand to help

him balance, and slowly we inched forward. All down the line men were helping each other in the same way. Ten minutes later the entire patrol was strung out high above the mud, all swaying and balancing, holding on to each other, burdened with packs and weapons, all steadily creeping forward in the dark.

Nobody fell. As each man reached the river he went down on his knees to the water, and drank and drank. The bank here was firm and dry, and loggers had felled the trees along it—with both wood and water beside us it felt too good to be true. We had long ceased to care about security against a hypothetical enemy, and a dozen cooking-fires sprang up. The stars were brilliant overhead and their rippling reflections in the river were matched by red flames along the bank, and, further away, the dancing sparks of fireflies. I lay on my back under the shadow of a large tree-trunk, wrapped in my poncho against mosquitoes and looking up at the stars, thankfully reflecting that the worst was behind us.

At exactly the same time the following night I lay in my comfortable bed back at the Company, looking forward to a long rest and thinking what a fool I had been the night before. The worst had not been behind us at all—at least, not for me.

We had struck back into the dry jungle and travelled fast, until I thought we must be somewhere near the junction of river and canal near the Water-Works. So yet again we forced our way back towards the river, hoping that perhaps it would turn out to be the canal instead. It was not. But at least the bank was firm and the jungle had been cut back by loggers. I was fairly sure we were not more than a mile from the Water-Works, and that if only someone could reach the Water-Works he could return with a launch up the river for the rest.

Once again it looked as if I must leave my equipment and my patrol behind. This time I had to leave Corporal Brown as well, since I might be gone for hours. Instead, I took Tanner. He

had volunteered, and like Brown he had much jungle experience. He was also as strong as an ox, and about as communicative.

It was blindingly hot as we climbed over tree-trunks along the bank. After half a mile the bank became more and more difficult, and the jungle closed in to meet the river. At the same time, we could see that on the other bank the jungle was giving way to scrub and what looked like the beginning of the paddy.

Again there was nothing for it. I had no intention of wandering off into the jungle again with only one man: either we must turn back, or we must swim the river.

Never for a moment had I expected to find myself having to swim this river. I asked Tanner what he thought.

"Er . . . Well, I don't mind, sir. . . . Whatever you say. . . ."

"Have you ever swum a jungle river before?"

"No, sir."

"Do you think it's dangerous? What about snakes, or alligators?"

"Dunno, sir. Never done it before, sir."

I slung my carbine round my neck, told Tanner to watch as sentry, and groped my way into the river. The other bank was nearly thirty yards away, the water warm and black. It struck me that if we were ever going to meet terrorists, this was the place—near the canal and paddy. I tried to swim breast-stroke, but the carbine made it impossible. So I swam on my back, looking at Tanner.

"Nearly there, sir. Another ten yards."

I could feel soft mud just below me. Slowly I paddled my way to the bank, afraid to wade in case I got stuck in the mud out of reach of all help. Slowly the bank came nearer, until I could haul myself gratefully up on to a log. I shook the water out of my carbine, unloaded and checked its breech mechanism, reloaded and cocked it, hoped it would still work, and then watched while Tanner swam across.

When he reached me we both stood up, pulling our jungle-hats out of our pockets and ramming them on our heads, dripping wet. It was no idle precaution. The only way to tell a soldier

from a terrorist at first glance was by his hat—to walk towards one's own men without a hat was asking to be shot.

Then we turned round, only to find we were not on the bank at all. We had still to cross another swamp, but after swimming the river this seemed easy. We swam and splashed, jumping from log to log, across a wilderness of mud and reeds. Then suddenly the road was in front of us. We ran up on to it, looking gaily about—only to recover our senses when we remembered the two of us were exposed for all the world to see, with dripping carbines, and alone.

Solemnly we set off along the road, forming our own little patrol with me as leading-scout and Tanner as last man, and twenty yards between us. All round us the paddy was coming into view, and in the distance were the white walls of the Water-Works. We walked faster, taking off our shirts and wrapping them round our waists so as to dry ourselves quicker in the blazing sun. As we came nearer we could see MacBride waiting with trucks and a scout-car, ready for the fifty-mile drive home.

We squelched wearily up to him, grinning happily, half-naked, without equipment, the water forming puddles round our feet, covered from head to foot with black river mud.

"Well, here we are, MacBride," I said.

"Aye, sir, so I see. But your *patrol*, sir?"

I was too tired to explain. "Everything's all right, Sergeant. We want to get home as quickly as possible, so we shall need the Water-Works launch. It's just that Tanner and I decided it was quicker to swim, that's all."

"That's right," said Tanner. "And you was wrong in what you always told us about them rivers, Sergeant. There weren't no alligators, after all."

I had been just as wrong to think we would have a long rest. No sooner had we been out of the jungle for a day or so, than we had to return: this time on a routine short-range patrol, probing into the jungle bordering the canal.

On the third day we struck tracks. They were perhaps two or three weeks old, said Untam, but they showed that a large body of men had passed. Our hearts pounded—we might be following a courier-route, or we might run slap into a C.T. camp. For three hours we moved quietly through the leafy-green silences of the swamp, our feet sinking into the leaf-mould, our eyes searching from side to side, alert for the slightest movement. The jungle was easy, and there was no need for Untam to cut a path. He padded along, tense, cautious, clutching his heavy repeater-shotgun, trying to sense the presence of any sentry ahead and ready to blast him to pieces. He was back at last in his old element—the man-hunt.

We came to a clearing where the enemy had paused to rest. Carefully we looked round for every clue that might help us. How many men had there been? Were there women with them? Had they posted sentries? Had they been carrying packs? Had they been in a hurry?

Corporal Brown began to dig with his hands in the leaf-mould. He had found a buried refuse-pile, and soon he held up something shiny. It was an unmistakable British Army Compo-ration tin.

"That's torn it," he said. "These must be Sergeant Cooper's tracks."

Next morning a radio message came from the Major: "C.T. District Committee Member seen in coffee-house but escaped." The grid-reference marked a village in the paddy, and the Major said he was trying to seal the area off to prevent the man escaping back into the swamp.

It seemed ridiculous our enemies should be calmly drinking coffee while we were sweating in the swamp. I did not know what the Major wanted us to do, but it seemed obvious we would be more use strung along the canal than where we were.

We reached the canal in the afternoon and swam it, floating our packs and Bren-guns across on a hastily-made raft. It was a shock to exchange the claustrophobic jungle for the paddy now stretching all round us, still and deserted, for mile after mile.

I tried to think of the Chinese we were hunting. Was he alone? Was he in a hut, or lying in the paddy, or hurrying along a cart-track under the burning sun? Or was he looking out towards the dark sanctuary of the swamp at this very moment, watching our tiny figures in the distance? Just pairs of men, for example, patrolling up and down in full view every half-mile or so—might that not be enough to pin him down, cursing, on the wrong side of the canal?

I decided to seal off as much of the canal as we could. We based ourselves at the nearest lock, where the building gave us shade, and all afternoon Bren-gun teams patrolled in both directions to the neighbouring locks, a mile away. And by having sentries on these locks themselves we could cover perhaps a further half mile each way, making a total of three miles.

All afternoon we tried to contact the Major by radio, and failed. The paddy was absolutely still, the heat intense. Nothing moved, except the slow stride of the Bren-gun teams in the distance, patrolling hour after hour, sweat glistening on their faces, sweat-rags round their necks, their eyes screwed up against the glaring sunlight, their Bren-guns slung across their bodies and swaying rhythmically as they walked.

Dusk fell—with a colossal sunset splashed high across the sky in burning reds and pinks, silhouetting dark lines of palm-trees on the horizon of the paddy.

We could not patrol in darkness—we could only set ambushes instead. Each of the two further locks was to be ambushed for most of the night. The middle lock, where the platoon would sleep, guarded by a sentry, would in effect form a third ambush. At night the locks became key points because each marked the junction of the canal jeep-track with a road through the paddy. Each ambush would thus cover three possible routes. Corporal Brown took one ambush, and I took the other. I had four men, and placed them in two pairs low in ditches by the tracks. Nobody would be expecting them there, and they would be able to enfilade the tracks even in darkness. I took my own position in the lock building so as to control both pairs of men. As soon as I

had done so I wondered if I had not been very stupid. The building was surely the first place at which a startled enemy would shoot.

This was my first serious night-ambush. The balcony felt almost exactly like a ship's bridge. I prowled sleepily up and down, chewing sweets, nursing my carbine, feeling where I had put my grenades on the floor—peering always into the darkness and tormented by mosquitoes and midges.

At last it was 2 a.m. and time to return. I gave a low whistle. The men replied. We formed up in the usual long line, and I led the way back along the canal path, towards the central lock.

This was the most dangerous moment of all. I had no intention of being shot by a sleepy sentry. And it would be only too easy to blunder into him before we realised it. It had been difficult to find a signal effective at any distance, and yet foolproof. Finally I had decided that we would just have to break the rules again—I would light a match. It could certainly be seen for miles, but that couldn't be helped. So, after we had been walking for some time, I lit my match. It spluttered luridly, blinding me. We walked on. We seemed to have gone for miles along that path, and I was getting nervous. So I lit a second match. There was a low whisper from just a few yards ahead.

"All right, sir—you can come in."

We felt our way among sleeping figures stretched out along the canal bank. I was tired, but the night seemed hotter than ever, the mosquitoes unbearable. The moon rose. I tried sleeping beside the path, on the path, by the canal, on the lock balcony, under the balcony. Then I gave up, and walked up and down in the moonlight. Slowly I realised there seemed to be no sentry. I did not know whose turn it was to be woken up, so for a time I became the sentry myself, sleepily pacing while I wondered what to do.

At the exact stroke of three, Hoskin stumbled to his feet, crossed over to Morris, shook him, gave him the platoon watch, and told him he was now the sentry.

I had been a fool. Hoskin was an old soldier, an ex-Chindit,

and he had been awake all the time—just lying there, watching me.

But that did not help me to sleep. Half an hour later I was still pacing up and down. I went over to speak to Morris.

He was asleep. He was curled up in his poncho as protection against the mosquitoes, half-sitting, his rifle beside him, his head bowed on his knees.

I spoke to him twice. There was no answer. Then I touched him on the shoulder. He mumbled something, and then suddenly woke up.

It was no good—he knew he had been asleep, and he knew I knew. I wondered if Hoskin was still watching.

"You were asleep, Morris."

"Oh no, sir. No sir, really I wasn't."

"Yes, you were. I shall speak to you about it tomorrow. Now wake yourself up, and don't let me catch you again."

I retreated miserably to the lock balcony. The last thing I wanted to do was to put men on disciplinary charges on only my second patrol. If I did nothing Morris might keep his mouth shut, but if Hoskin had been watching, then the whole Company would know. Yet if I did put him on a charge and he was severely punished, I might turn the whole platoon against me. And, working in jungle, it was most important *not* to have a hostile platoon.

When we reached the Company next morning I asked MacBride's advice. "Oh, clap him on a charge, sir. Have done with it. He's a lazy bastard, he's always asleep. But I suppose you might just see what the Major says, sir."

I asked the Major. "Hmm. Sentry asleep on patrol, eh? That's bad. Depends just *what* charge you put him on. But I don't know the man—you'd better ask MacBride."

So I sent for Morris. "I have put you on a charge of being asleep on sentry while on patrol, Morris—so I'm telling you now. You will come up before the Major in the morning. That's all."

Next day the stiff, stamping scene in the Company Com-

mander's office was a nightmare to me—a nightmare of starched uniforms, Sam Brownes, thundering boots, and the roar of Sergeant-Major Yates as Morris was marched in. He was no longer the exhausted filthy Morris of the moonlight scene by the canal, but a scrubbed and shining Morris, sweat trickling down his face as he marked time.

The charge was read and I gave my evidence.

"Well now, Morris," said the Major. "What have you to say?"

"Well, nothing, sir. But I wasn't really asleep, sir. Not properly. And we'd been jungle-bashing all day, and I was proper beat. We all were. First that swamp, and then the canal, and then ambush all night. I reckon I must have just dropped off, sir. Just for a moment, like."

"I see. Well, you admit the charge, don't you? And it's a very *serious* charge. Asleep on sentry. On patrol. On Active Service. Now you'd better just brace your ideas up, Morris. You don't need me to tell you what might have happened if the C.T.s had come along that path while you were asleep. A lot of people might have got killed, and it would have been *your* fault. Do you understand that—*your* fault? It's no excuse at all to say you were tired. If you come up before me with any more charges like this I shall send you up to the Commanding Officer."

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Fined one week's pay."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Keep your feet still, Geordie,
Let's be happy through the night—
We may not be so happy through the day."

NORTH OF ENGLAND SONG

A FEW days later all seemed to have been forgotten—the swamp and the river; Corporal Brown and the mangroves; Sergeant Cooper and his tracks; Morris and the moonlight, all were behind us, swept into the past, gone for ever.

We were now Robinson Crusoes. We were in a paradise. We chuckled with delight, drinking beer and toasting ourselves browner than ever in the sun. We were marooned on a desert island in the Straits of Malacca—a tiny island with a tall white lighthouse on its peak, and we were living with the lighthouse-keeper and his family in a long wooden building jutting out over the sea. He was a wizened little Portuguese, with a Malay wife and two small children.

The Major used to send one platoon at a time to the island for a rest. There were really two islands, a hundred yards apart, thrusting steeply out of the sea and covered with jungle. At a former age they must surely have been the rocky peaks of mountains, but now the sea rolled over them and they barely pierced its surface. Yet their slopes revealed a wild variety of insect and plant life, as well as magnificent black-and-white pigeons that flew there all the way from the mainland just to feed on certain berries, and on the second island a pair of what looked like ospreys or sea-eagles. For the first time since I had landed at Singapore I could feel myself beginning to relax, and I even began to write in my diary.

"Tuesday: 9 p.m. This is being written in the lighthouse-keeper's office on the Island: seven miles out to sea from Kuala Selangor. The background noises so very soothing: waves splashing gently, rhythmically, through the stone pillars below the floor on to the rocks a few feet away: soldiers talking in low voices, with fragments of talk, sentences, half-sentences, mingling with the waves. It is dark, pitch dark, but still the swifts fly, attracted by the huge revolving wheel of light that is the lighthouse beam, far above us, and as they fly they screech and chitter. The soldiers have a 62 Set, they turn it to Radio Malaya, the soft blare of a dance-band mingles with the waves, the voices, the swifts.

"There are closer noises: the perceptible scratch of this pen, the hurried ticking of the really rather handsome clock on the wall to my left. The table is covered with minute black ants, who compensate for their smallness by rushing everywhere much too fast. There are telescopes on the table, brass bound with scarred brown leather. There is a radio telephone. . . . It is late at night and dark, and I am quite content to sit here writing about these surroundings, and listening to the waves slapping on to the rocks. I finish my apple, and throw the core over the verandah into the sea. I wonder whether to start on my second bottle of orange crush. Life is very simple.

"This evening I went to the top of the hill to see the lighthouse set going. When that was over I sat down on the ground and watched the sunset. It seemed such a privilege to watch a sunset in peace, and to be able to watch it from the top of this tiny little island, so very small, so very high. Most of the time we are unaware of the sea, heedless of the sky, but tonight there was nothing else. The sea was so far below, the horizon so far away, the expanse of sea, moving, living, reflecting, so real a thing. But greater than the sea was the sky, where beautiful white met beautiful blue, mocking the sea, where the casually scattered clouds to the west were purple lined with brightest flecks of liquid crimson fire, and where a

tattered trail of higher clouds, a mere handful of fragile grey feathers in the sky, suddenly pulsed with pink and then darkened as the sun sank.

"And it sank so fast. The earth swung up to meet it, the horizon lipped with a low line of cloud like far distant hills, through which the sun glowed with the red of a furnace fire. As the sun sank the shapeless ruddy glow contracted, brightened, till the shape of the globe itself was visible, in lurid pulsing yellow, the edges burning so bright in the retina of my eye that it could not hold them steady and sometimes one edge showed black and sometimes the other, as I shifted my attention from one side of the globe to the other, from one group of blinded nerves to another group, only half blinded. And as the shape of the sun emerged, fiery yet veiled in cloud, cushioned like a jewel in the purple shadows, a burning presence so real in my brain, so far away in fact, so huge that it was beyond the compass of my imagination to grasp, so small that the retina of my eye engulfed it, then, for a moment, I felt the wonder, the fear, the deep strange emotion that made men worship the sun.

"I remember the sun moved so fast that I seemed to feel the huge ponderous bulk of the earth turning to meet it. I remember trying to comprehend that without the sun there would be no life on this earth, no eyes to see the sun, no leaves closely clustering on top of a rocky island in the Malacca Straits, absorbing its warmth. I looked at the moon, a crescent of delicate silver, exquisite in the sky above me, silver against the deep clear blue of early sunset, trying to form the moon and sun, the globes I could see, and the earth, the globe on which I so insignificantly sat, into a system, a pattern, to set in my mind as a measuring-rod against the fantastic immensities of the astronomers' universe. Aristotle, I think, Heraclitus, Galileo and Copernicus, Jeans and that strange fat man from Birmingham, Hoyle, they had wrestled with these mysteries, had evolved their systems of Spheres and Elements, Space and Matter, the celestial universe and the expanding

universe, and they knew that they did not understand. So there was nothing left for me to do except watch the sun vanish, the sky darken, to think of all the others who have watched the evening sky in the past, and will watch it in the centuries to come, and then to wander down the steep path to the wooden house below, set on stilts and looking over the sea towards Malaya.

"Wednesday: 3 p.m. It really is wonderfully peaceful here: life is so uncomplicated. I feel as if I was on a ship: on my right is the verandah with the sea showing through the wire netting and the coast of Malaya on the horizon: a thin strip of green, the jungle, and a thin strip of blue, the hills. It might be England, were it not for the heat and the fact that I know the names of the places in the distance. The ships that pass are on their way from Penang to Port Swettenham. So it is not England, and England is a very long way away. And just to emphasise the fact, there is a Chinese junk, or fishing-vessel, away to the left; unmistakeable with its heavy sharp-cut black sails.

"It is peaceful now: it was even more peaceful last night. There were lights all along the verandah, shining down the white steps where the black waves frothed to and fro. At midnight there were still some of my men fishing there: long bamboo poles in their hands, sitting on the steps wearing only bathing trunks, quite happy in the warm night air. Every few seconds the long beam from the light whirled silently round from left to right, for an instant lighting up the green trees on the other island a hundred yards away. Silent, relentless, the shaft of light seemed almost alive in its purposefulness—a celestial eye, probing into the dark. The beam was parallel to the sea, aimed at the horizon, but because we were at the centre, so close below, it seemed to be pointed downwards at the sea a hundred yards out—a beam of light that flailed over our heads, bending low—a cage of moving light. I couldn't help being fascinated by it and reminded of the other lighthouses I used to watch in Dublin Bay. And I couldn't

help wondering how the ospreys on the other island endured the light, endlessly flashing in their eyes.

"5.0 p.m. I have just been trying to find some music on the radio here—Radio Australia, Manila and the Americans, a disc-jockey on Radio Malaya, all came up in turn. Radio Australia seems to consist of nothing but reports on the Petrov investigations. A few minutes ago we had Radio Ceylon, but that went on to its own home news, so a Malay from the lighthouse crew came in and switched on Malay music. Quite pleasant: plaintive, rhythmic, but no variation. Utterly boring after a while I imagine. Which reminds me of those few moments at Wardieburn when I switched on and by chance heard Mozart being played. Just for a few seconds I listened with the most enormous pleasure. And then had to go away, shocked to find I had so forgotten that real music existed.

"Everyone here seems very happy. The platoon is happy: they are being very well-behaved and relaxed. They shout a bit, swear always, swim with noisy splashings, crowd round the petrol cooker at meals and sprawl on their mattresses afterwards. Scott plays with the lighthouse-keeper's son. Untam wanders round looking venerable and rather shy. Thomas tries to make his 62 Set work (I think he will do well later: he was a fiasco on the patrol). Tanner walks heavily round, always looking rather solemn, with his jungle hat on. Even the Charwallah looks happy.

"I had a talk to him last night: 'I was with Air Force, sir, all through war. Irrawaddy, Imphal, Kohima. But the North-West is my country—Peshawar, that is where I come from. You were there? Ah, those were the good days.' He sat among his bananas and cigarettes and chocolate, a shabbily white-shirted figure on a mattress, the darkness split by a single candle in front of him, reminiscing about British India. It made me feel very sad.

"Tomorrow we must all go back . . . to the Company. I expect we shall go back to the jungle almost immediately, and

somehow I don't care. The last patrols were so horrible that it is extremely unlikely their successors will be worse.

"9.30 p.m. How strange are the thoughts that drift through one's mind, never to be recaptured! I went up the hill again this evening to watch the sunset and as I watched I thought of many things. It was far more subdued than last night, but just as hypnotic. The bank of clouds on the rim of the sea was there, and the grey feathers floating in the sky, but there was no expanse of red: only lemon-yellow shading into saffron. It was darker, for there was a rain-cloud overhead, stretching from east to west, trailing a rainbow over Malaya. Then I saw something I cannot remember seeing before—above the saffron, below the blue, the sky was white —a chalky ash-white, shading into the grey of the rain—a staring blanched white that was not cloud and yet was not sky, a broad splash of colour that a few moments later shaded into the palest blue shot with green—a trick of the light only, perhaps, but it startled me.

"I looked for a long time at the sea: a huge blank surface, made up of a myriad of moving ripples; a passive grey, made up of the sharp light where the water reflected the sky, and the blackness of the shadow in the troughs. It was nothing till one looked at the detail, and then the detail was everything. With the detail in one's mind one could look back at the whole, and see it for the fantastic complex of movement it was. There were three dark dots on it, Chinese fishing junks, and the whole—the sunset, the sea, the ships—was framed by the trees through which I looked. And I watched it, and wanted to remember it.

"It is now 11.0 and the verandah and steps are deserted. All is very quiet, except for the heavy slapping of the waves. A few minutes ago I had to send Corporal Brown and two others to bed. They were sitting in a bunch just outside, talking in thick voices, laughing too loud. I was fairly sure they had been drinking too much, so I thought a little and then sent them to bed. They made no trouble, and I think they

sounded a little ashamed. Now there is nobody up except the Chinese on duty, a serang, twenty-seven, engaged to be married in the autumn. He speaks good English, is thoughtful, and takes trouble to be helpful. And I like him as a person. He sits outside the window here in his white singlet and blue shorts, gazing out to sea, into the blackness.

"This evening the lighthouse-keeper told me what made the phosphorescence that sparkles and pulses so brightly in the water when it is dark. Small jellyfish, he says, minute particles. "They come from mud" he said; "Nature is so wonderful: we do not understand her." He had such a lively face with every feature pointed: it might have been designed for no other purpose except to flash his sudden charming elf-like smile.

"How strange it was this evening to sit having dinner with them. He was eating his curry and fish with quick satisfied movements, his wife was sitting opposite draped in shapeless Malay muslins or cotton, heavy gold ornaments in her ears and on her breast, her right hand kneading the rice she was going to eat and the left hand resting on the table, tucked in across her stomach. Her eyes are very brown, very questioning, very passive. They observe, shyly. I sat with them and with the serang, and we talked of local matters, of food, of the sea, of the coast, while the heavily salted and curried and chillied food, the Chinese watchfulness of eyes and the Portuguese drawl of voice mingled with the suddenly increased sound of waves breaking as the wake of a ship passing close by reached us—so many sensations, all gathered into one and so preserved by, of all things, the Blue Danube blaring on the radio. A very happy moment.

"The time is now 11.30—I seem to have written very little in two days. And I think I refuse to write about the worries that wait for me on shore. They really seem much too boring at the moment. I am happy tonight, and that is a wonderful thing, not to be destroyed. I shall finish this entry now, and then for a while I shall go and listen to the sea and

watch the stars and the ever-swinging beam of the lighthouse, and then I shall go to bed."

We returned to find that for our next patrol we were to be taken into the heart of the swamp by helicopter, and we would be based on the Dredge that was now engaged in widening the one river that ran through the swamp. The helicopter had no door: as I sat with my feet sticking out of where the door should have been there was a lurching view of swamp falling away between my boots, and once again I could see in the far distance the bluish-green hills.

The arms of the helicopter flailed overhead. We lurched again, banking. Desperately we clung on as the landscape underneath tilted, swivelled like a turn-table, and levelled out. For ten minutes we watched tree-tops rushing past below—we might have been driving in an enormous taxi along an invisible road, fifty feet above them. What luxury it was to be taken to work in a taxi.

The trees broke open, revealing the river, and closed. Again we banked, again the swamp swivelled, until we were following the river. The jungle for fifty yards on either side had been felled by loggers, so that now the river cut a swathe of devastation through the swamp, mile after mile, with the trees at the edge of the jungle suddenly naked, their tall trunks looking from the air like forests of matchsticks, while other matchsticks lay in white confusion along the brown banks.

The logging ended, the jungle stood up abruptly again along the banks, and we were over the Dredge—a tin-roofed toy of a boat that shot past underneath, vanished, and was replaced by the landing-circle.

We hovered. The helicopter shuddered with balanced power as the brown circle of felled trees rose up towards us. Tree-tops were sliding up past us, their branches waving in our slipstream. The landing-circle was magnified in swiftly expanding detail, as if we were a telescopic camera zooming into close-up—now I

could see Corporal Brown's face, the magazine on his carbine, the craggy bark of the tree-trunks. He flung up his arm, and the pilot hovered again, his helicopter wheels three feet above the tangled logs and branches. We jumped down. As we picked ourselves up the helicopter hoisted itself out of the clearing, and by the time we had clambered over the logs, followed Corporal Brown through the jungle to the Dredge, and edged our way up a single precarious gang-plank, it had landed at Kuala Selangor, three days' march away.

There were two schools of thought about the Dredge. Both agreed it must continue its work, deepening the river and driving a highroad through the swamp. But if the terrorists could halt the Dredge, then at one stroke they would have halted the entire future development of the rice-bowl and its irrigation programme. The problem was whether the men on the Dredge should be armed. If they were not armed the terrorists could extort supplies and information. But if they were armed it was not certain they would be able to defend the Dredge—it was not even certain they would *want* to defend it. It was also clear that the one reason why the C.T.s might attack the Dredge would be to seize its weapons and ammunition. Nevertheless, we arrived to find the Dredge littered with shotguns and rifles, equipped with radio, being supplied by launch or air-drop every few days, sitting quietly by itself in the swamp fifteen miles from anywhere, edging a little further up river each month, and with its crew well aware that the C.T.s knew all about the weapons on board.

Our first evening the Malay captain made his crew stand-to, for our benefit. He blew his whistle, tattered figures rushed up and down steel ladders, bare feet pounded on the decks, and then he invited me to inspect his men. We groped along the upper and lower deck, peering at theatrical figures pointing rifles out of port-holes. It looked like the last stand on a Beau Geste fort, and politeness demanded a professional inspection, so I asked questions about ammunition and arcs of fire, complimented the captain loudly, and then looked out at the swamp-forest thinking

I would not like to be in his place. He must have felt like cheese in a mousetrap.

For us it was like patrolling from a hotel. MacBride and I camped on the bridge, and the troops slept wherever they liked, some on open deck, others under machinery or the stairs. They behaved just as if they were still in jungle, making little individual nests in groups of two or three with ponchos and equipment, hardly seeming to notice they were lying on planks under a roof, surrounded by Tamils, Chinese and Malays.

Later that evening I held a weapon inspection. The crew all looked up eagerly to see how the real soldiers did things, and we must have appeared disgracefully informal. It looked like a weapon inspection held in hell—the lower deck was a black cavern, lit by cooking-fires whose flames flickered eerily among grotesque machinery and hobgoblin figures, while MacBride as chief devil shouted through the uproar and I held court under a single electric bulb, squinting up at it through the spiral steel tunnels, dazzlingly bright, of one gun-barrel after another.

At Eaton Hall I had endured five days' Restrictions for one smudge of non-existent rust in my rifle, and now I was most properly sensitive on the subject. Besides, here it mattered. Nearly all officers and N.C.O.s in the jungle soon developed a personal bias towards whatever they thought most important—for example, one most successful patrol commander in the Battalion believed deeply in the importance of morale and in the jungle always held camp-fire sing-songs at night. He said it was excellent for morale—and also kept the terrorists away. My own bias, combining a hatred both of unjust inspections and dirty weapons, looked like becoming splendidly complicated. So even though these were not the best conditions for an arms-inspection, I still did my best to explore barrel-locking-nuts and gas-regulators, spare Bren-barrels and carbine bolt-mechanisms. The air was full of stinging smoke and the smell of chillies, curry and fish. A gallery of grinning goggle-eyed Malays watched every move as the succession of dazzling steel circles, framed by

the cautious faces of their owners, came at me out of the darkness. Somewhere I had heard these conversations before . . .

"Er, look, Morris, I don't think *that's* quite clean, do you?"

"Oh, just a bit of stick, sir. Well, dirt, sir. . . . Well, I suppose it *does* look a bit like rust, sir, but . . ."

"I'm afraid so, Morris. Now you *must* try . . ."

MacBride broke in. "You heard what Mr Crawford said, Morris. That's not a Bren-gun, that's a heap of rusty, bloody scrap-iron. I'll give you thirty seconds to assemble it and get it out of my sight. And I'll give you one hour to clean it and then you'll bring it to me for inspection and once again we'll start with that *thing* you call a spare barrel."

"Yes, Sergeant. One hour, Sergeant. Starting with the spare barrel."

Later I overheard Morris muttering to his partner with the Bren-gun: "That was *your* bleeding fault, Scott. You know that barrel hasn't been cleaned since the G.O.C.'s inspection. I *said* we should leave it behind."

And when it was all over, and the fires smouldered red and low, and even the spare barrel was clean, what joy it was to look out from the bridge, into the dark night where rain thundered on our tin roof, gleaming in the lamplight, splashing quick and white in the black river—within arm's reach, and yet as good as a mile away. And though our short patrols in the swamp were scarcely exciting, once or twice the comfort of the Dredge gave me energy to scribble entries for my diary.

"On the Dredge, Tuesday. How we go up and down—one moment despairing in the trough of the wave while the crest threatens to overwhelm us—the next riding triumphant on the crest itself. This afternoon was the trough, this evening something approaching a crest. This afternoon at two o'clock, having covered nearly two thousand yards back towards the river and not having reached it; having stumbled and staggered at the head of my patrol for two hours on what I had thought was a dead-certain compass-bearing; having reached

that sudden precise point where the fear of being lost becomes real—then was the trough. A black and green trough, threatening to overwhelm with panic—the black of the shadows, the green of the jungle, so still, so unending, so malevolent; an overpowering atmosphere of malice in the fallen tangle of tree-trunks, the strangling webs of vine and sapling, the hanging curtains of foliage that clutched and tore.

"I was very close to panic. But we stopped and rested and I thought for minute after minute over my map and compass; checked the compass by the sun, checked distances and directions; tried and tried to remember that the compass *must* be right, that the river *must* be straight ahead. But we were tired. We could see only ten or twenty yards and it was the deadly weariness that crippled us; the deadly fear of the exhaustion which even that twenty yards would bring, the fear that, caught as we were like damned souls in this morass, the time would come when we would no longer be able to climb over the next log, or cut our way through the huge bright green clumps of lopak that stood in our way, thirty feet high, every inch lined with barbs. And all the time the horrible fear that we were going in the wrong direction, that the river was away to our left—one, even two hours' impossible march away.

"In the end, of course, we reached the river and then had to scramble for an hour along the river-bank towards the Dredge, over and through that wilderness of felled trees . . . roasting in the sun that burned so savagely after the gloom of the jungle, pausing every twenty yards to pant and rest. But at last we reached the Dredge, and then it felt so silly to look back and remember the close approach to panic of only two hours before.

"And the crest of the wave. Sitting upstairs in the Dredge over a cup of coffee. Listening to music on the radio, reading a book, while downstairs the Malays and the Tamils and the English cooked and talked and went their separate ways. Sitting in the dark of the evening, with dry clothes on, and a light

to see by. It sounds so simple, yet it is indeed the crest of the wave. A small wave perhaps, but still a wave. And when compared with the trough of the afternoon, then a big wave.

"Wednesday. This morning we had to wait for the two heavy bombers to come over and bomb. They had three targets—the nearest about four thousand yards away. We heard the first bomber coming, and then watched as the grey four-engined silhouette went slowly overhead, across the strip of sky fenced in on either side by the green walls of swamp-jungle, against which the white trunks of the trees stand out so vividly. We heard the bombers come backwards and forwards over us, leisurely plotting their position, and then heard the bombing, huge thumps, one after the other, very quickly, that made the iron frame of the Dredge shake under my hand. We heard the bombers strafing the jungle with their guns, the muffled chattering of cannon taking me back to the sound of the Battle of Britain over Wiltshire. Then one of the bombers came back over us, low and fast, the heavy body swinging suddenly into sight over the tops of the trees, the engines bellowing with the metallic thunder and roar of the heavy piston-engined plane. For a second it filled our eyes, and we looked at the bomb bays, the windows under the blunt black nose, the recognition letters on the wings that were moving much too fast for us to read. Twice more it came, and then was gone, having done its duty by signalling the end of its mission to us. The other bomber never came, so we sent a message to Kuala Selangor saying so, and at midday set out to find the clearing which an Auster thought it saw yesterday.

"It took us two hours to cover just over one thousand yards along the river—the rain has turned the jungle back to swamp, so we waded through the water, climbed over the tree-roots that rose in brown paralysed disorder higher than our heads, walked delicately along the white catwalks of the trees littering the river-edge, and finally found the clearing. My first awareness of it was when I suddenly found myself looking at a little bridge across the river: just a tree-trunk,

awash, and stakes standing in the water beside it as hand-holds. The water glistened, the stakes were black, I could just see them through a gap in the leaves, and because I was tired I found myself thinking slowly that the woodcutters must have put them there. A splash and a stumble further on, and I was looking at a heap of cut white poles, lying on the ground in front of me. I looked at Besi in front—and slowly realised he was telling me it was a camp, a bandit camp.

"It was deserted, it had been so for months. Besi showed us where green shafts of stalk had thrust up from the tree-stumps in the platforms, a foot or so each, crowned with four or five leaves, showing that no-one had been there for perhaps four months. There were the remains of three platforms, stakes from which to suspend ponchos for a roof, a few blackened and burnt logs in a heap. The big trees had been left standing as a screen from air observation, the small ones cut down for poles. The bandits had used a saw for the bigger trees, and parangs for the rest. The poles were merely laid in crotches and forks, without fastenings. We rested and looked at the details, and then I took Sergeant MacBride and Besi across the little footbridge. Sergeant MacBride fell in, splash, and floundered his way back on to the log, cursing. I laughed, and he laughed at me for laughing, and then swore again. There were no tracks, so we went back across the river (flowing very fast now, replete and purposeful after rain) and then spent a desolate hour and a half groping and splashing and climbing our way back to the Dredge.

"That's about all that happened today. I sent a long message over the radio to the Major, but we haven't had the answer yet. The rest of the day was as usual—we are so very lucky not to be in base camp in the jungle, to have a roof over us and a dry floor. I find this life so terribly depressing, so boring and deadening with its never-ending physical drudgery and endurance, that pleasures like hearing an orchestra on the radio playing Rossini seem to have a compensatory intensity. It thrilled me to listen this morning to Frenchmen on the

radio talking in Indo-China, to the bomber crews so high in the sky talking to each other as they flew overhead. I think I'm too tired to describe what life here really feels like, but on the whole it is so bloody that the few glimpses and reminders we get of the outside world make it appear paradise by comparison. It's certainly a strange life, and an unpleasant one—there's something macabre, something to do with the heavy presence of decaying sodden vegetation, something to do with the lonely brooding terror which an over-sensitive mind might find so real among these lonely brooding trees. On the other hand there are brighter, happier moments—perhaps tomorrow I shall have time to write about them."

Of course I never did have time. Next morning a radio message came from the Major. The helicopters were not available to bring us out of the swamp, so we would have to walk. Would we please start at once? And, on the way, would we please have a look at a certain grid-reference a couple of miles further up the river, and what did we think about taking our next air-drop there? I told MacBride.

"Oh *no*, sir. Oh, *no*. Not *walk* out, sir?"

"Without the helicopter what else can we do? We'll have to take our air-drop as soon as possible, and then head south till we hit the road. How long will that take?"

"God knows, sir. Several days at least, with the rain like it is now and the swamp filling up."

Together we faced the platoon. They took the bad news impassively. Too impassively. They were tired already, and the swamp did not look inviting.

"Na then, Scott, no use griping. If we've got to walk the sooner we start the sooner we'll get there. Start packing up, ready to move."

We were not cheerful as we left the Dredge. Our tiredness made us clumsy, and as we climbed over the tree-trunks the heavy loads of equipment on our backs seemed to make us sway

and stagger more than usual. And I was least cheerful of all, for I had woken that morning to find my throat-glands swollen and throbbing. That was all, but it was enough to start me thinking what would happen if I went down with fever in the middle of the swamp.

We followed our track of the day before, along the river-bank towards the old C.T. camp. Even in one night the water-level had risen. Where yesterday we had walked we now splashed, and where we had splashed we now waded. The river was swelling visibly: sheets of shining water extended away into the jungle, and we could even feel the current moving round our legs.

Half way there I heard a sudden splashing behind me—it was Corporal Brown, floundering wildly as he tried to catch up.

"I've been bitten, sir—by a snake. I fell over, and put my hand right on it. Down under the water, among the roots."

He held out his hand. In the middle of the palm I could see two punctures, and round them a spreading purple circle, perhaps half an inch across. As I took his hand I could feel him shaking all over.

*Snake-bite.* What did one do? It was clearly a snake, with those two punctures, just as the text-books said. And a water-snake at that. Poisonous? God knows. No way of knowing till too late. Razor-blade.

I was already fumbling in my medical wallet, which I always carried in the large knee-pocket of my trousers. In the wallet was a small tin, and in the lid of the tin was one razor-blade, wrapped in paper, specially for snake-bite.

MacBride had appeared beside us. He held out a tobacco-tin to Corporal Brown.

"Go on. Take it. And bite on it."

"*Bite*, Sergeant?"

He put it doubtfully in his mouth, not quite knowing what was happening. I pinned his arm under my elbow, opened his hand, and cut firmly into the snake-bite with the razor-blade. His arm jerked, and I cut into his palm again, deeply, the blood springing out as I did so and the two cuts forming a cross, with

the bite in the middle. He made no sound, but the sweat was running down his face and his jaw was clenched on the tobacco-tin. Then he took the tin out of his mouth and began to suck fiercely at the bloody palm of his hand, spitting into the water.

We waited, standing knee-deep in water—waiting to see if Brown would be all right. When after quarter of an hour he seemed to be none the worse, we could only assume the snake had not been poisonous.

As we resumed our march I suddenly remembered that the first answer to snake-bite was *always* a tourniquet. The thought stopped me in mid-stride—suppose Brown had *died* because I had forgotten the tourniquet?

We spent the night in the old C.T. camp, and realised why they had placed it where they did: it was just a foot or so higher than the swamp, and even with rain still falling their sleeping-platforms were above water.

Next day we took a short-cut across a loop in the river, and found ourselves walking through a strange clearing. At first we had suspected a C.T. camp, and had approached with desperate wariness. But it was empty—just a clearing where the trees had all been cut down, remarkably like our own D.Z. Of course. It must be an old D.Z. cut by troops years before—Gurkhas, Malays, British, who could tell? Now its scrub was taller than we were, and the old tree-trunks almost invisible under creeping mats of vegetation. In a few more years our own D.Z. would be like that. Then perhaps it in its turn would be re-discovered, by troops as astonished as we were at meeting this sudden evidence of the long years of struggle that had preceded us.

When we reached the river again, it had changed. The loggers and Dredge had not reached this point, and the jungle crowded low over it, trailing its branches far out over the water. To get a clear compass-bearing of its course in both directions I had to climb along a branch and sit there, my feet trailing in the

water. It was all suddenly very peaceful. I was alone, suspended above the glistening expanse of water that slid past under its canopy of jungle. Moments like this were rare, and I stayed as long as I could before returning to the platoon.

As we were leaving the river, on our way to cut our next D.Z., there was a shout behind me, and a rush of feet.

"Hornets, sir, hornets. *Run!*"

I ran. We all ran, scattering away from each other. The men in front ran forward, and the men behind ran back—the patrol snapping sharply in two where someone had bumped the hornets' nest. This was the drill we had already practised—a swarm of hornets fastened on a man could kill him, and hornets drove men to panic faster than anything else in the jungle. The only answer was to run at the first alarm.

We had been quick, and when we gathered together again no-one was badly injured. Scott had been stung on his arms and neck. Morris had been stung on his mouth, and his whole upper lip was already bruised and swelling. I had been stung only once —the hornet had sailed into my right eye as I ran, and stung the lower lid. Already I could hardly see from the eye, and the pain was intense, throbbing, burning, and continuing for a long time. But there was nothing we could do about our bites, and so we tried to forget them by setting furiously to work cutting our D.Z.

Next morning our air-drop brought everything we had requested, including a package marked "Worm Tablets". On the Dredge some men had reported they were suffering from worms, and somewhat doubtfully I radioed for advice. Later we learnt that the message had been relayed from the Company to the Battalion in Kuala Lumpur, telephoned to the Air Despatch Company, passed on to the British Military Hospital, and solemnly discussed by doctors who had immediately sent down to the airfield the tablets now in our hands.

But Tanner was not happy with his air-drop. He was not only looking dubiously at his worm tablets, but also at the new boots he had been given. They were four sizes too small. We had asked for a complete replacement of trousers and boots, but

no boots arrived that would fit Tanner's enormous feet. His present boots were flapping in shreds, wrapped round with string, and he felt as if he was walking in bare feet. Again I doubtfully sent a radio message, even though we were not due for another air-drop at all. Next morning the reply came: we were to start our march south across the swamp, and take a special air-drop on the way for Tanner's boots.

For several hours we travelled south, Tanner hobbling as best he could. Then we heard an Auster, purring up and down our line of march. The next time it came overhead I threw one of our precious phosphorous grenades, hurling it as far away as I could. A splendid fireworks display followed, a fountain of flaming phosphorous particles showering up in all directions, and more important, releasing a cloud of brilliant white smoke that mushroomed slowly up through the tree-tops far above us. The pilot found us, came slowly overhead, and then carefully dropped a bundle a little way away—a petrol tin, weighted with bricks, marked with fluttering red and white streamers, and even including a scribbled piece of paper telling us our position. A few minutes later we held a moving little ceremony as we presented Tanner with his new boots.

From then on we did nothing except struggle everlastingly south, south, south. We had twelve miles of swamp to cross. The idea of heading south, always south, became the single idea in our heads—an idea that held the stage by sheer persistence, defeating every rival. And it was now a grey, narrowing stage: the rain continued day and night, turning the sky and the jungle and our thoughts all to the same sweating shade of grey. The jungle was as unchanging as ever, and our thoughts became unchanging too, steadily simpler, while time became slower, stretching out interminably, hour by hour, into the greyness ahead. The routine of each hour, each day, each night, was also unchanging and with so few events bringing us into contact we each became imprisoned in our own personal world of greyness. Greyest of all was knowledge of our physical decline.

Now I discovered why MacBride had taken the Major's

radio message so hard. He had a suppurating carbuncle on his shoulder, just where the strap supporting his pack had to rest. He was prone to carbuncles, and showed me the scars of his previous ones, each an inch or more across. The last two days had brought this one to a raging head, and I had to treat and dress it for him as best I could, squeezing out volumes of pus morning and evening to reveal a deep gaping hole in the flesh, and then going through the ghastly process of sterilizing it with the only antiseptic I had—neat iodine. How MacBride bore the pain I had no idea. On the other hand, neither of us knew any better way of treating it. I began to wish I had had the sense to read a First Aid book before ever coming near this swamp.

The pain of my swollen glands seemed to have gone, but Morris worried me intensely with earache. I could not possibly pour neat iodine into his ear—there seemed to be no treatment I could give him, except codeine tablets at night. What really worried me was the thought of his pain becoming serious: something like mastoid, for instance, which would mean a full-scale casualty evacuation by helicopter and would take a whole day, perhaps two days. The fear of a casualty—fever, a broken leg, someone accidentally shot—never left me, for in this steady rain and unending swamp any radio failure, or a helicopter grounded by rain or unable to find us, would mean we would have to carry our casualty ourselves. This would be a nightmare—without the radio or aerial contact we would run out of food in three days, while the difficulties of carrying someone on a stretcher did not bear thinking about.

Nor was it an idle fear. One look at ourselves confirmed it. We never wore underclothes in jungle, merely trousers and shirt, and now we were perpetually wet to the skin with swamp water. Even our new clothes were already rotten and splitting, weakened by water, torn by jungle, while wherever straps or tight cloth pressed on our bodies the skin became first sore, then broken, and then immediately the scene of painful skin infections and rashes. We were all like this. Our hands were worst of all. The water wrinkled and puckered their skin like hands that

have been held in a hot bath, the feeling left them, and as we pushed through the jungle they became criss-crossed with a fine muslin pattern of cuts and scratches. We were used to cuts and scratches, but here the water swarmed with infection. Our resistance was dropping so low so fast that soon I found every single cut went septic in less than twelve hours. During the night my hands would recover their feeling, the cuts would begin to ooze with pus, the skin would dry and stiffen, and in the morning each hand would be a stiff curved claw. So I learnt to go to sleep with each hand curled round a log. The logs prevented my hands closing but even so they still had to be agonisingly opened and forced into movement every morning when I grasped my carbine and started pushing through vines and bamboo again. Within an hour of starting they would be sodden, wrinkled and numb—and the process would start all over again.

Nor was there any lack of logs to grasp: we were now all sleeping on log platforms raised a foot or so above the water. To build a platform meant we each had to fell two or three trees every night, which meant we had to start basing-up an hour earlier. We all had different ideas about how to build log platforms: my own solution was a very long and narrow platform, about eighteen inches wide, roofed by my poncho, and slightly curved so that I could not roll out into the water in my sleep. It felt like sleeping in a knobbly canoe.

The process of going to bed in swamp was complicated: we would all build platforms while MacBride supervised the camp and sentries, Thomas tried to get radio contact with the Company, and I tried to decide our position before writing a report to be radioed to the Major in Morse. We would all splash and grope in rain-filled gloom, hacking with parangs, felling and trimming trees, building platforms, struggling with strings and ponchos, lighting Tommy-cookers in our bashas, changing dripping clothes for others scarcely less wet, drinking mugs of tea, organising our belongings, cleaning weapons by feel, hanging out our equipment and wet clothes in the rain for the night, and finally trying to clear our platforms for sleeping.

Sleeping at night was simple: we would lie there in the dark, hot, wet, aching, weary through and through, waiting for oblivion—and wondering whether our ponchos would hold up under the pounding rain. Once Thomas and I built our platforms within a yard of each other, so I listened to a play on Radio Malaya through the spare earphones. It did more for my morale than anything else during the entire patrol. The wet knobbly logs, the jungle night, the rain splashing down into the swamp—all were forgotten as I lay on my back, gratefully aware of nothing except the world created by the actors. I was closer to their minds than I was to those of my patrol—and naturally so, for my patrol consisted only of dripping dishevelled figures that followed silently behind me, panting and splashing, for hour after hour. We were always too tired to talk. We were bound together only by the necessity of getting out of this swamp as quickly as possibly. But the actors: *they* were different. They were all round me in the darkness, talking to me, laughing, arguing out their play. I began to wonder how many other grateful soldiers were among their audience that night.

The nights were mercifully long. Twelve hours from dusk at seven to dawn at seven, followed by twelve murderous hours of daylight. We were so tired now we had to change leading-scouts every thirty minutes. "We've *got* to go faster than this, sir," said MacBride, but when I let him set the pace as leading-scout he was able to accelerate for only a short time, ploughing along, angrily cutting and slashing. Then, like the others, he slowed down. Brown was magnificent—determined, skilful, cutting a good path in the right direction at a steady speed. Scott would head relentlessly south, always going *through* things instead of round them, but forgetting to cut a path. Hoskin would cut a workmanlike path always sheering off to one side. They all varied, they all did it in turn, and always I plodded along behind each one with my compass everlastingly in my right hand.

All our faith was in the compass. There was no river and now no sun to check by, and although we had spare compasses, and although we *knew* it was correct, yet we still had the nagging

fear that drove us to check and re-check. Nor could we head directly south: the jungle was so thick that belts of bamboo, walls of lopak, unhelpful tree-trunks, patches of deep water, deceptive clearings, all forced us to make detours and travel in a zig-zag compromise between south-east and south-west. At every obstacle the leading-scout would glance back to know whether he should head left or right, and I would glance at compass, obstacle and watch, and decide. All the time I had to balance in my mind the bias left against the bias right, somehow trying to keep our actual course due south. Nor did I know my own bias: most people when walking in woods head either more left or more right, and on our twelve-mile march my own bias could make a difference of perhaps three or four extra miles—perhaps even an extra day and an extra night. I knew this. Yet all I could do was struggle for precision in the detailed answers that were now being demanded of me every two or three minutes, hour after hour.

We were not in a healthy state of mind. We had no way of knowing how far we had staggered each day, and at night MacBride and I could only guess how far south we were. On earlier short-distance patrols I had had men solemnly counting the number of paces in every half hour, and it had worked—but now we were too tired. So we did not know where we were, or when we would reach the road, and there was nothing to see—nothing except this grey rain-sodden world, our own silent faces framed in its satanic combination of swamp and jungle, our eyes betraying our grey sense of imprisonment, our obsessive need to escape. This was the beginning of claustrophobia, of cafard, of minds moving in such a relentlessly unacceptable rhythm that something had to happen. I could feel something coming—and something did.

The patrol stopped as it had done so many times before. I forced my way slowly back, wondering what the trouble was this time. A Bren-gun sling broken? Someone bogged down in mud? Someone hurt?

It was Hoskin, standing sullen and white-faced in the rain,

his Bren-gun fallen over on its side at his feet, and MacBride looming over him.

"It's Hoskin, sir. Says he can't go on. Refused to march. Threw down his gun, and refused to march. So I said if he *didn't* march I'd *thump* him, sir."

"Well, Hoskin? Are you going to march or not?"

He muttered something. He was panting, sweat trickling down his cheeks, his stubble-covered face deeply lined with exhaustion: an over-burdened man of forty, dressed in torn dripping rags, festooned with pack, bundles, and Bren magazines, his jungle hat pushed to the back of his bald head—a man clearly at the end of his tether, sick to death of wading knee-deep through this endless nightmare. It was not all Hoskin's fault. He was too old, too tired. But we could only get out of this swamp by continuing to march, all together, however slowly. And I could not possibly give way in the face of point-blank mutiny. This was a time to be hard, not soft, and that was all there was to it.

Hoskin eyed us both. He knew this was the testing-point and I knew it too, just as MacBride had obviously done. Then, sullenly, he stooped and picked up his Bren.

I splashed my way back to the head of the patrol with Hoskin behind me, and I kept him behind me from then on. He gave no further trouble.

The whole incident was a nasty shock to me. If MacBride had actually struck Hoskin I would have supported MacBride to the full, without a moment's hesitation. But for a man to mutiny, and his Sergeant to strike him, could have led to courts martial for both of them, and whose fault would that have been?

The basic mistake was that Hoskin was unfit for jungle, but then one could seldom tell a man was unfit until he cracked. No-one could say MacBride or myself had driven the platoon too hard—every single one of us, including Hoskin, wanted nothing so desperately as to get out of this swamp, and yet even so our speed was pathetic. All we had done was obey orders,

and yet here we were, with every one of us approaching breakdown.

Yet was it the Major's fault? Without the helicopter what else could he tell us to do? And how could he know what things were like when he had to make his decisions on paper in the luxury of Company Headquarters? I remembered Sergeant Cooper's patrol. I remembered what he and his men had looked like coming out of the swamp. I remembered watching that white pin creeping across the map, marking his presumed position. Presumably *we* were now nothing more than a white pin.

The end came strangely. It was our third day of the march south, and perhaps the eighth or ninth since the beginning of the patrol—I could no longer remember. We stumbled across tracks. All troops were supposed to have been withdrawn as we came south, but these tracks were fresh. The churned mud, footprints, slashed branches, all showed an entire patrol had passed. After looking at the way the branches were cut, Untam announced that it had been our own Iban platoon. Their tracks headed due west, at right angles to our line of march.

I decided to gamble. The Iban tracks might lead back into the swamp, or straight out of it. We might find the Ibans were still in the swamp, meet them head on, and get ambushed for our pains. But we could travel twice as fast along their tracks, and *perhaps* we could even escape from the swamp before night. The thought of having to spend another night and day in the swamp decided me.

We followed the Ibans, plunging along their tracks, the water knee-deep as always, the rain still steadily falling, the underwater path already gouged into pot-holes by so many passing feet. We travelled fast, suddenly full of hope for the first time since we had left the Dredge. Yet as we splashed along my mind was swaying backwards and forwards like the compass-needle, between hope and fear. I had abandoned everything all

for this one sudden chance, and if this chance should fail, or turn suddenly into bloody disaster. . . .

I held to the track, trying to visualise its course through unchanging grey jungle. Only the direction of the compass-needle changed. North had always been behind me—now it was away to my right. And now it was even beginning to edge round to my front—we were already travelling a shade north of west. I told no-one. There was no way for the platoon to know we were now heading back on our tracks. I was free to push my luck as far as I dared. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Then the needle slowly began to swing back again—we must be following a curve, a curve that must *surely* be heading for the swamp-edge.

It was wishful thinking. I realised what had happened as soon as we came out into a clearing—newly cut logs lay everywhere, we could see the sky, we looked eagerly round and there it was. A railway. A narrow-gauge logging railway, painfully laid on a foundation of logs and mud, running dead-straight into the swamp for miles. There were many logging railways, but as they all ran due north from the road and were not marked on our maps, our chances of striking one head-on would have been hopeless without the Iban tracks. Perhaps we still had a chance after all.

Again we had to gamble. We had one more hour of daylight. There was no way of knowing how far it was to the road. Even along the railway it might take us three hours to reach it—or only twenty minutes. We must either start basing-up at once and walk out leisurely next morning, or take our chance along the railway now. And our hatred of the swamp was now so violent that every one of us jumped at the slim chance which the railway offered.

We divided the platoon. Some stayed with MacBride, their speed geared to the Bren-gunners and the careful progress of Thomson with his radio. A smaller group came with me, heading down the railway as fast as we could. We agreed that if we reached the road we would fire three shots in the air as a signal, stop the first passing lorry for transport, and wait for the others

to reach us in their own good time—even if they were caught by the dark they could perhaps still press on once they were sure the road was close ahead.

But the railway was not easy going. We could not walk beside it, for there was nothing except ditch, swamp and jungle. We could not walk along the track-bed, for there was no bed: merely water flanked by the two parallel banks on which the sleepers rested. So we had to walk along the sleepers themselves, thick split logs, spaced in the way sleepers are always spaced so that one can neither walk nor run. We hopped, skipped, jumped and trotted from sleeper to sleeper, while an everlasting succession of sleepers stretched away in front as far as we could see.

After the mushy softness of swamp, their hard wood jarred our feet and ankles, and after half an hour of jumping and trotting our legs were aching and tired, and our eyes dizzy with the effort of focusing. We had no time, so we had to go fast. Yet when we went fast we fell, and we could not risk a broken ankle or leg. And yet we did risk it, and we did fall. We got quite used to the sudden curse and crash as one of us missed a sleeper and trod on nothing, falling full-length in a twisted heap of weapons and equipment, and then slowly picking himself up and continuing. Gradually we got spread out, until we were fifty yards or so apart, a strange straggling procession of bent hurrying figures, all peering down at the sleepers as we hopped along, looking up only to glance along the track and into the darkening sky.

We forced ourselves on and on, absorbed and desperate, and when we finally reached the road exactly ten minutes before darkness fell, our success seemed no stranger than anything else in this crazy, dripping world. I fired my three shots, at long intervals, not even startled by the flashes of yellow flame and the roar of the explosions. Then we crouched by the road, boiling water in our Tommy-cookers, and waiting for a lorry.

Half an hour later we saw headlights shining through the rain, and when I stepped out into their glare we found we had stopped a Chinese timber-lorry. There were two Chinese in the driver's

cab, and as we climbed up on to the lorry I wondered why they seemed so suddenly relieved. Then I realised—driving along this lonely swamp road, miles from anywhere, peering through rain and suddenly seeing in their headlights a dripping figure, standing in the road to stop them, a carbine pointing at them. Of course their first thought had been: "Terrorists!"

It was five miles to the nearest armed post—a Company of the R.A.F. Regiment. The Chinese drove fast, the wind and rain buffetted and tore, and we were suddenly *cold*—a bitter, numbing cold, freezing our wet shivering bodies, reminding me quickly that pneumonia stood strangely high among the killing diseases in Malaya. Then we were there, and some strange remnant of pride made us wait till we were properly formed up along the side of the road. When we went in past the startled Malay sentries, the noticeboard, the guardroom, the crowded tents, we were looking just as Sergeant Cooper's men had looked, but, like them, we were still in patrol-order—still at exact five-yard intervals—still with our weapons at the ready and still, in spite of everything, a fighting jungle-patrol.

The R.A.F. were swift and efficient in their welcome. My men were taken by their Sergeant-Major to the Sergeants' Mess and a moment later I found myself shivering and dripping in a huge armchair, clutching a beer, watching hot coffee put on to boil, looking up at great mocking wall-maps covered with little pins, trying hard to answer questions. I listened to myself for a while, and decided my voice sounded strangely slow and stupid. But nothing mattered now—I was out of the swamp, it was all over, it really was no effort at all to do the final things that remained. And when I took an R.A.F. lorry back along the road, I found that indeed nearly all the platoon *had* succeeded in reaching the edge of the swamp. There they were, clustered round the winking yellow flames of their Tommy-cookers, rising to their feet as we drove up.

"Untam's not here, sir," said MacBride. "Everyone else made it, except him. He was last man, and we lost sight of him."

It had already been dark for over an hour and a half, but we

waited half an hour longer. I felt very bad indeed about Untam, but there was nothing to be done.

"We'll have to leave him, Sergeant. We can't go and find him, and we can't just stay here. We'll just have to come back first thing in the morning for him."

"Right, sir. Now then, the rest of you—up in the lorry quick as you can. We're going home."

I had no idea how tired I was until I reached the Company. After a final weapon-inspection to prevent accidents, after seeing the men dismissed—to be instantly surrounded by gaping, questioning friends—after driving up to the Officers' Mess in a jeep, I came in through the door into the blinding glare of the lights. The others were having dinner, casual in white shirts, laughing. They looked up and saw me, and there was a sudden silence. I was too tired to talk, and I just turned and started up the stairs.

"Hallo, Oliver," called the Major. "But you've come out of the swamp a day early, you know. We weren't expecting you till tomorrow."

I stopped. I heard myself speaking.

"*What* was that?"

There was another long silence.

"Oh, never mind. It was nothing."

I heard myself speaking again, from a long way away. "*Just as well*," I said. There was no answer—and again I started slowly up the stairs.

Later that evening, after a shower, a drink, a meal, everything was different. The Major was charming and I gave him a long description of the swamp. His face grew longer and longer. Then I mentioned the incident with Hoskin. Captain Drake jumped up—he was a stranger to me, and had just arrived as Second-in-Command of the Company.

"Something's badly wrong there. Things should never get to that point. Things like that should just *never* happen."

"Well, we'll see that Hoskin never goes into the jungle again," replied the Major. "The Battalion's been asked to pro-

vide a Military Policeman for Singapore. Perhaps that would be better for him and his family."

I mentioned Sergeant Cooper's patrol.

"Yes," said the Major. "It looks as if you were both in for too long. It looks as if a point comes after which one's efficiency suddenly drops to rock-bottom, and after that there's just no point in staying there. I think I must speak to the Colonel."

When I inspected the platoon next day we were even able to joke about the swamp. The medical orderly had been having a field day, sending Morris to hospital with his earache, telephoning the Doctor at the Battalion, painting all faces, chests, and arms with yellow antiseptic solution, bandaging and dressing indiscriminately.

Not so pleasant was the need to apologise to Untam. MacBride asked me to speak to him—he had not understood at all why he had been deserted all night on the railway, and he was deeply upset. So I went to see him.

"Sergeant leave me," he said. "Officer leave me. All leave me. Played out. *Played out*."

In Untam's vocabulary "played out" always meant complete scorn and condemnation. He normally used it only for terrorists and younger Ibans. The trouble was that from his point of view he was quite right. We *had* been played out. But how could I explain things to him? I did my best in halting pidgin English, but he hardly seemed impressed. Afterwards I felt worse than ever.

Then I heard that Tom was already leaving the Battalion. His National Service was almost over, and there was to be a farewell dinner for him and two other subalterns that night. Tom's departure meant a lot to me. He had taught me nearly all I knew about the jungle, so I asked permission to go to his dinner and spent the afternoon driving to K.L. and Wardieburn in the ration-truck. I was still terribly tired, with occasional shivering-fits, but at dinner these were forgotten. Sparkling silver and glass, white mess-jackets, wines and medals, silent servants and roaring laughter, these and a long conversation with the Colonel

about the swamp were enough to persuade me that the last ten days were really behind me. Then I found myself talking to Alan.

"I'm told you've just come out of the swamp. Er . . . Have you heard about Bill Ramsden?"

"No. What about him?"

"He's dead."

I stared at him, the laughter and noise vanishing from my mind, aware only of his face. He was not laughing.

"He was shot by his own patrol. They were in swamp, like you, and they thought they'd found a C.T. camp. Bill went on a recce with two men. He came back a slightly different way, and hit the tail of his own patrol. His men were jumpy, and a Bren-gunner opened fire before he could see what he was shooting. The other two men were all right—but Bill was hit three times, in the chest and throat. There was only a Corporal to take charge. I think he lived for several hours, but by the time they got a helicopter out to him he was dead. He bled to death. I went to his funeral yesterday."

I could say nothing. I was thinking of Bill—Bill at Eaton Hall, Bill on the *Empire Fowey*, Bill on the train from Singapore. I could not possibly believe he was already dead. And then I looked around me and suddenly knew he *was* dead. And I was alive—alive, here and now, in the middle of this ghastly drunken farce called a dinner-night, while Bill was dead, dead, dead. I wanted to get drunk, I wanted to go down to K.L. and get blind drunk. I wanted to paint the heavens crimson in sheer blasphemous protest. Then I suddenly did not want to get drunk at all. I just went on with the dinner as if nothing had happened, and I felt as if I was dining ceremoniously in hell.

Bill's death was the final shock. I could no longer pretend to myself any more after that, and I could no longer keep up the pretence of feeling well. For days I had refused even to consider that I might be ill—and now the moment I allowed the thought to enter my head I knew that for a long time I had been, if not ill, then at least feeling very strange.

I went to the Doctor, Glyn Davies, a quiet Welshman, newly qualified, new to the Battalion. I told him about my swollen glands, the swamp, and that I didn't feel ill and yet didn't feel well. I just felt—tired.

"I'm sending you to hospital. Just for a few days. They'll fix you up—they'll just keep you under observation. You'll be out again in no time."

I almost believed him. I began to think perhaps I was not ill at all as my jeep raced through K.L. and along the flat road to the British Military Hospital at Kinrara. As I went into the hospital I caught sight of myself in a full-length mirror—a very different picture from what I had seen in the Malay Corporal's mirror—instead, the conventional picture of the young Light Infantry officer, spotless uniform, Sam Browne, peaked hat, Malacca cane. But now my reflection did not mean a thing—life seemed a dream, a muddled dream in which Bill and the swamp and the dinner went round in circles, and in which this tailor's dummy facing me made no sense at all.

I walked into the Officers' Ward, and found myself gazing down at a remarkably good-looking Sister, clinically spick and span in white cuffs and blue uniform, her dark eyes looking steadily up at me while I wondered vaguely why I was here at all.

"I. . . . Er. . . . I think I'm supposed to be coming in here. I don't know whether I'm ill, but . . ."

"Well, we needn't worry what's wrong with you. I'm sure your documents will be arriving any moment. I am Sister O'Hara. Here are pyjamas. Get into them, and I'll come and take your temperature in a moment. Your bed's in the corner, over there."

A few moments later I was lying in bed, ridiculous in blue pyjamas, gazing up at the ceiling-fan, half-hypnotised by its swishing revolutions. My dream was out of control. I was close to giving up.

A Malay orderly in a white coat appeared.

"What you have for lunch, sir? You have what you like. You just say."

I looked at him. Was this a joke? Or just part of this crazy progression of events? He could not possibly *mean* it.

"Very well," I said. "I think—I think I would like just a little cold chicken. And just a little jelly. With cream."

He vanished. Ten minutes later it all arrived: a large tray complete with chicken, and pink quivering jelly—and even a little blue jug full of cream.

# CHAPTER SIX

> Memory is only raw material. The divine gift is ever the instant life, which receives and uses and creates, and can well bury the old in the omnipotency with which Nature decomposes all her harvest for recomposition.
>
> EMERSON

My collapse was complete. I had held myself under such a taut restraint hour after hour, day after day, whether talking to Hoskin, or the Chinese lorry-driver, or the Colonel, that now I was swept away, drowning in a flood-tide of sleep. For several days I slept, waking only to mutter sleepily to strange doctors that I was not ill. When I finally woke it was to a strange world —the world of the hospital ward, where time did not matter, where responsibility was a joke, where there was nothing whatsoever to be done. I used to lie for hours gazing up at the slate-blue ceiling and the network of white strips that divided it into squares, and watching how the squares half-reflected the light. They looked like squares of frosted glass, their colours slowly altering each hour with the changing light outside. I slept, and ate, and dreamed, and watched the ceiling, lost in the even stranger world of my own moving thoughts—a world in which scene after scene slowly returned to me.

Stand-to. It is dusk. It is lunch-time in England, but all over Malaya groups of men are rising to their feet in their jungle camps, and forming a circle round each perimeter. They are turning to face outwards, their guns in their hands and their ammunition buckled carefully round their waists, and for ten minutes they stand quite silently.

Some are in deep jungle, watching the green tapestry of

shadows turn grey and then black. Some are in the open by a river or a pineapple plantation, watching the lurid fires of sunset, crimson, saffron, gold. Some are in the Swamps of Selangor. Some are in Johore, just a few miles from the Causeway.

In Singapore moving lights on the Cathay Building are jerkily advertising Marilyn Monroe. In Kuala Lumpur the Batu Road is a chaos of lamps and flares. In cinemas multi-racial crowds are sitting in white shirt-sleeves, watching Chinese, American, Malay or Indian films. In the streets the crowds thicken, their Chinese and Malay chatter rising even above the noise of taxis and traffic. Here in the military hospital hundreds of patients in blue tropical pyjamas lie watching the dusk through open windows, while fans churn the moist air. Even in the most lonely villages lamps are being lit and groups gathering to eat and talk. Only in the jungle is it different.

In the jungle each man is standing alone. Each man is motionless, silent, sure only of what he can feel in his hands or under his feet. The fires are out. His evening meal has been eaten. The shadows press closer. The pupils of his eyes dilate, accommodating themselves to this new grey world. The circles of men in their crumpled green uniforms grow dimmer. The familiar confusion of each camp, trampled undergrowth, bashas with ponchos stretched over stakes and bamboos, perimeter-wires of knotted creeper, all these become fainter. Here and there on the ground a rotting leaf begins to glow as if with luminous paint, its shape an eerie phosphorescence. Out in the blackness a red cigarette-end glows and gathers strength, tries a few dancing steps in the air—and then drifts through the leaves in a dreamy waltz to join the other fireflies.

The circles of men are standing in one simultaneous silence, although perhaps separated by hundreds of miles of hill, forest, swamp. Their eyes are all watching the same dusk, although each mind is thinking in what may be any one of ten or fifteen different languages, from English to Gurkhali or Mandarin Chinese. The ritual they all observe is the same—the old Army ritual of stand-to, the precaution against dusk attack, the re-

hearsal for emergency. Whether the soldier is Malay or Fijian, Australian or Welsh, he is still being reminded that in any emergency he must first put on his hat for identification. He must be able to put his hand on his gun and ammunition in pitch blackness without even thinking. He and his friends must be able to open rapid fire in all directions simultaneously, without killing each other. These must all become habits. Now the lesson is being repeated all over again, a hundred times across Malaya.

In Malaya stand-to is almost the only exercise in corporate self-discipline a patrol-commander can impose on himself and his men. It is felt as discipline. And as the patrol-commanders stand counting away the slow minutes on their watches and looking at the circle of still grey figures round them, some can already see the fidgeting and the furtive lighting of a cigarette, or hear the muttering and the quiet retreat to bed, of those for whom even ten minutes is too long.

Perhaps ten minutes *is* too long. Perhaps stand-to is unnecessary. Perhaps the jungle should not be taken so seriously. Yet these circles of men, and countless relays of men before them, have been taking the jungle seriously for the last seven years—swamped in the green jungle, hidden from each other in the dusk, scattered over a country the size of England. Some have died. Some are yet to die. The rest are serving their time, before thankfully moving on.

But though the actors change, the nightly script does not. Nor do the stage directions, backcloth or sound-effects. Especially the sound-effects. As tonight's performance begins, so the insect audience round each little circle is already waking. It is lunchtime in England. Here in hospital the lights are switched on. But in the jungle all is dark. As the sun touches the horizon, so the screaming cackling applause rolls across Malaya, and every evening the men are there in the darkness, standing and listening.

Afternoon at the Golf Club. During the Japanese occupation the Golf Club became first an airstrip and then a vegetable

garden. "Dig For Victory—Imperial Japanese Victory." Now, ten years after the Japanese retreat, it is again a golf club, with greens and tennis courts and swimming pool, with pots of flowering shrubs round the clubhouse entrance. It is one of the few places in K.L. where the different European circles meet—Army, Air Force, Government, Railways, Irrigation, Rubber. On Sundays it swarms with their families in a sudden confusion of white faces and English conversation. It is the refuge of the British in K.L. and when they are gone it will probably go too. If the Communists come to power it will doubtless make a very good airstrip again.

In the meantime it is as close an approach to England as is possible. This was its charm, for we could come out of the jungle, change, jump into a taxi and ten minutes later be sitting by the swimming-pool having tea—the jungle of an hour ago a mere blur in the distance. Tom would spend all Sunday there, sprawled in a chair in bathing trunks and dark glasses, with a succession of John Collinses arriving and having no effect. In the clubhouse many older residents would drink steadily till three in the afternoon, and then move to the dining-room for colossal curry-lunches.

Yet even in the Golf Club it is difficult to forget the Emergency. Everything could change so quickly, just as a single quick thunderstorm could alter the landscape. I remembered one particular storm. Before the rain there had been a view—a line of jungle-covered hills with the sun lighting up the greens and greys of Bukit Chenuang and the lower foothills of the Boot. There were sunlit banks of cotton-wool cloud, white and calm and gleaming, and then overhead the suddenly encroaching thunderclouds, purple, blotting out the view with rain, poppling the marble-green water of the pool with hissing bubbles, enclosing us in our own world of afternoon tea.

Now there was nothing to see except people sitting at tables, bathing trunks and white skins, shoulders draped with white towels, little children running round. Behind the two bars were Chinese servants, in white trousers and jackets with stiff Man-

darin collars. There was nothing to hear, except the murmur of conversation, the clink and clatter of yellow china.

Then the storm is past, the rain grows less, the outline of the hills clearer, their skylines ragged with treetops. The scene is beautifully proportioned: the concrete floor and tables, the rippling water, the tennis-courts, the wet lawns with only some golfers to be seen and some Tamils wandering across carrying bamboo-and-oilskin umbrellas from Hong-Kong. There are few other signs of Malaya in this scene—the fans hanging from the ceiling, perhaps, the warm air that seems strange at this time of year, the purple sprays of bougainvillaea, the Chinese servants walking quietly in their slippers over the grass between club-house and swimming pool, carrying plates of sandwiches and pots of tea. Again we can see the distant hills where we know the terrorists are living—hills blue with distance, with tattered banks of white cloud again lying among their crests. We can hear aeroplane-engines from the airfield not so far away, and the murmur of a helicopter. The sky is sunlit among the clouds, duck-egg blue. There is no rain, no wind. Yet there is still thunder, still the great yellow flashes of lightning so typical of Malaya.

Sunday in Ampang. It was the usual sort of parade, seen so often in Malaya—troops in stiff lines, presenting arms, marching —except that these troops were Chinese. They presented arms with shotguns for the Sultan of Selangor, and the band played "God Save The Queen" followed by the State National Anthem. It was very early Sunday morning.

The Sultan, in full Malay dress, presented Ampang Home Guard with their new Colours, made a speech in Malay, waited while it was translated into Chinese, and then took the salute at the march-past, protected from the sun by a truly ceremonial umbrella of yellow tasselled silk. A pace behind him were British advisers and Army officers: a small stiff group, hemmed in by the road with its cars and visitors, ringed by Chinese, Malay

and Tamil children sitting on the ground, dominated by the tall houses opposite, their white walls and brown roofs slashed by the black shadows of coconut palms. Beyond the ten-foot perimeter-fence with its Malay constables were the low jungle-covered hills surrounding the New Village of Ampang—foothills already a hazy blue-green in the heat, and only half a mile away.

After the parade came the opening of the Community Hall. I learnt a little more about Ampang. "Ninety-nine per cent Chinese—used to be *very* red. It's all changed now. Two villages in one really, the second a resettlement area, completely new. Pretty well organised—they subscribed most of the money for the hall here, and the Government gave the rest."

We all went out into the sun to be photographed. Chinese children ran chattering to and fro, their bare feet the colour of dust, their black thatches of hair flapping. An old Chinese woman came down the road, a baby on her hip, ignoring the cars and police, her slippers going flip-flop, flip-flop as she walked straight in front of the photographer, her lined face unmoving, her eyes on the ground.

It was nearly midday—soon the cars were gone, the crowds drifting back to coffee-shop and kitchen. All that remained were chairs under an awning, chairs that had vanished under a shouting mass of Chinese children, younger brothers and sisters wide-eyed on their knees, grateful for the shade while they extracted the last ounce of amusement from the great events going on. And that would have been the end of the day for me, and I would have gone away remembering nothing of that Sunday at Ampang except the parade, and speeches, and the observant eyes of the children—had not a lucky remark brought me an invitation to return in the evening.

When I came back it was dark. The streets were bedlam. The Community Hall was the centre of a seething white-shirted mass. The taxis crawled at walking-pace, headlights slicing the night, horns blaring through the high-pitched, staccato, explosive shouting of Chinese.

The noise inside was louder still. The Hall was now a theatre, and our seats were in the front row. To reach them we had to walk down the centre gangway, feeling so very conspicuous in coat and tie, the only Europeans in the middle of a thousand holidaying Chinese. We were introduced to the Chinese sitting beside us. We took off our coats, to be white-shirted like the rest. We sat down, trying to adjust ourselves to the heavy air, the roar of voices, the ants-nest confusion of people.

It seemed as if every member of every family in Ampang was there, from grandmother to baby-in-arms, but then I remembered the crowds outside and saw the rows of staring black eyes at the windows, and marvelled. It was as if a dress-rehearsal, a political mass-meeting, and a football crowd were all mixed up together. Two tiny little girls were having supper under my chair, absorbed with chopsticks and rice. A tall distinguished-looking Chinese told me there had just been village elections in Ampang—he had been defeated. On my left was a stout little Chinese who knew a great deal more about Shakespeare than I did. His small daughter was on his knee, but when the performance began with an appalling crash of cymbals she had to be carried out, roaring with panic.

There followed four fantastic hours. First came plays, a mixture of charade, pantomime, morality play and mime, performed by children in their teens. A few actors only, heavily made-up with white glistening powder and streaks of black and carmine, formalised, mask-like. Their garments were gorgeous, crimson and silver, glittering with tinsel and jewels, swaying in regal folds, looped and gathered with long sleeves and high collars—a dream of dressing-up come true.

There were no stage properties, except perhaps a throne or table, so all eyes were on the actors who sketched in the background with gestures. Invisible doors were elaborately opened, thresholds were ostentatiously stepped over, a tasselled wand was waved to represent riding a horse, battles were fought and lovers united, merchants robbed and justice done, all by use of

conventions. When two Manchu warlords were fighting to the death, the Shakespearean expert leaned over—"This", he said, "is the story of Robin Hood."

Sometimes there was dialogue: the villain rumbling forth his threats, the heroine lamenting in high wailing notes—facing us over footlights while the band did its best to drown her voice and the crowd did its best to drown the band. Nobody could hear anyone else, so everyone talked louder; the band played harder and the actors sang higher, stamping and gesticulating, brilliant as kingfishers, flashing their colours across the bare boards.

Stagehands went casually to and fro in singlets and slacks, between the actors or in front of them, moving screens, gossiping, looking for cups of tea. The actors waited their turn at the side, chatting nervously in full view. All the time, minute after minute and hour after hour, unceasingly, came the deafening clash of cymbals.

It grew hotter. Overhead fans throbbed. Cigarette-smoke thickened. Crowds infiltrated through door and window until they were standing five deep all round. Crates of orange crush were passed across the front of the stage and cartons of straws appeared, at which we were soon sucking gratefully. The two little girls under my chair finished their supper, and sat up to watch a gymnastic display by youths in tight black trousers, who leaped and wrestled and struck attitudes to the blast of a whistle blown by their teacher, a gaunt grey-haired Chinese.

Then came the climax—the lion-dance. First the drums began, a battery of large drums and small drums, with relays of drummers. The cymbals had never stopped, but they faded beside the drums, whose thunder throbbed in our heads, shaking the room. The dancers leaped to its beat, one youth holding the huge painted head of the lion which engulfed him to the waist, and three others behind holding the long strip of cloth that represented body and tail. Their feet kicked and stamped, they jumped in the air stretching their arms and then crumpled on the floor, hidden from sight—while the head of the lion rolled

and lolled, snarled and mouthed, its body twitching and leaping behind it. No-one could dance like that for long, so every few minutes another boy would run forward under the head or body, and dance his turn. The drummers also changed, except for one boy of about fifteen who had the key drum and set the rhythm. As five minutes became ten, and then fifteen, and then twenty, and still the drums thundered with the never-changing Two-Three beat—"Boom-Boom, *Boom-Boom-Boom*", so the face of the drummer tautened, lines round his mouth grew dark, sweat shone on his face and his eyes stared in black pinpoints at the dancers, while his hands hammered out the split-second beat that must not alter. Before I realised it I was gripped by the drums, leaning forward, staring at the lion as it came alive before our eyes. Then I looked at the Chinese round me, and every face was absorbed and staring, the children absolutely still, their eyes black pools of wonder. The entire hall was motionless, the lion leaping and stamping on the stage, the cymbals clashing in yellow sparks of sound, the drums burning their rhythm into every brain—until suddenly there was nowhere to look except at the lion, and again I was hypnotised and staring with the rest.

I came to my senses when we were out in the road, saying goodnight. I remembered Ampang as we had seen it that morning, its sunlit parade, its speeches. And I remembered Ampang as it had been not so long ago—with its Communist sympathisers and its New Village, the village which the snipers used to fire at from the hills at night, their bullets whining through darkness. At this very moment there were troops patrolling the scrub beyond the perimeter. And I remembered the Ampang I had just seen, when for a few hours I had been privileged to be in the re-created China of the Overseas Chinese, brought to life for an evening here in Malaya, in Ampang. As we drove slowly away through the crowds, the drums still echoing in our ears, I knew that I would always remember Ampang as I had seen it this Sunday evening during the lion-dance, unselfconscious, absorbed, its children hushed, with all eyes riveted on the leaping

make-believe lion, with its senses gripped by dance and drum—its heart back in China.

Too much jungle. A conversation. "You know what Nicolas did? *He* hadn't exactly enjoyed the jungle either, so when he was all packed up to go home he painted right across one side of his tin trunk, in large letters: 'GREEN HELL—*NEVER* AGAIN'. And it went all the way to Southampton like that.

"It's funny what you remember, Oliver. I suppose when I get home everyone will drive me mad asking what the jungle is like. They did that to Nicolas, and you know what he did? For days he refused to answer, and then in a restaurant they kept pressing him—so he said '*Right*—the jungle's like *this*,' and started making monkey-noises at the top of his voice—you know, the howler-monkeys—and that electrified the whole room and they never asked him again. Or you can shut them up by pretending to have jungle-nerves, so that they don't like to ask. I believe it's quite effective if you just wander everywhere with a compass in your hand, taking bearings, or say you can't sleep except on the floor, or insist on standing-to every morning at dawn.

"I might try my snake-story on them—I was lying awake at midnight, waiting to hear the sentries change over, lying on my back with my right arm flung out over the edge of the poncho among the leaves—bare from elbow to wrist. I felt something wriggle—then something sliding very slowly over my wrist. It was a touch so faint I could hardly tell whether it had stopped or not—sort of like a worm. I nearly moved—then I thought 'Careful—you never know—lie still'. There was an Iban lying beside me, and he must have woken up and felt my whole body go stiff—but he didn't move either. I just lay still, wondering if it would feel my pulse, and what it would think if it did. Then I couldn't bear it any longer, and I shouted, and flung my arm up and rolled over to my left—and as I did so the Iban hurled himself up and across me, the other way, his parang flashing in his

hand and it hit the ground just beside me with a savage '*Chop*' in the darkness. Next morning we found a deep slash through the poncho, and on either side of it the two halves of a krite—about the deadliest little snake there is.

"You want to know what it's like when you have a contact? My first contact was in swamp. We saw smoke over a clearing—I sent a Bren-gunner to act as a stop on one side and it took him four and a half minutes to go fifteen yards—when we went into the camp I was just muttering to myself 'There's no-one here, there's no-one here.' And then 'I *must* do the right thing, I *must* do the right thing.' There were cooking-pots over the fire, still smoking, and scissors on the ground, and snippets of black hair, and a mirror, and with ink still wet on the war-diary they were making an entry in.

"I had two strangers with me—an officer and a sergeant, from a technical unit who never had to go into the jungle—they'd asked to see the jungle, so they came with us just for the day. The officer wasn't enthusiastic about the contact—'You're not going on, are you?' he said—'it's 3.30, it's time to base-up.' I was *very* short with him. I left some private soldiers to ambush the camp, and I went on with all the rations and the compass as fast as we could, following the C.T. tracks. We found where one of them had crawled 300 yards through the swamp, and right under the nose of the stop-gunner too. We covered two thousand yards before dusk. The officer began to protest and go slow, saying his sergeant was done in—so I said the sergeant seemed to be concealing it jolly well, and that if the officer couldn't keep up I'd leave him behind. He kept up—though he was staggering and groaning. We based-up in the dark—just a bit of a platform round the base of a tree with a couple of ponchos draped over it, and of course we were in a dip and it rained all night and the water rose three feet.

"Next day the officer said it was hopeless, and I said 'We may *not* catch them, but on the other hand we *may*, so we *Must* keep going.' And then, of course, the C.T. track vanished, washed right out by the rain. The men I left to ambush the

camp hadn't any food, so we had to get back to them at once. But we couldn't find them—we'd been following the C.T. track for three hours and it had twisted and turned in all directions and now it was even washed out behind us. But I knew we'd been going roughly south.

"It took me two days to find my men again. And there they were—just a group of private soldiers, suddenly left all alone in a hurry with orders to ambush a C.T. camp, and they'd shared out what food they had in their pockets, and organised themselves, and built bashas and ambush-positions, and then for two days they just sat quietly over their weapons, waiting for me to come back. They were splendid. But the officer. By the time we got out of the swamp we had to carry his pack and his food for him, and I put in *such* a report—I said I'd refuse ever to take anyone out with me again who wasn't used to the jungle.

"It was all a long time ago. I was pretty fit in those days. Not like now. I suppose we all have to learn, but our new Company Commander was the last straw. He proceeded to tell us exactly what was wrong with us after he'd been with the Company ten days. He assembled us after we'd all come off patrol, and said people had told him things were different in Malaya. 'Now, I don't believe that,' he said. 'The discipline here is appalling. And the reason we're not getting bandits is obvious—we're making too much noise in the jungle. People say discipline here has to be looser—that in Malaya everything's a matter of personal contact. Well, they said that in Germany, and they said it in Africa in the desert, and it wasn't true. And it isn't true here either.'

"He changed over Ian's Platoon Sergeant and mine without even asking us, and I think they were each devoted to us. Ian was as sick as mud, and I was as sick as mud, and so were our Sergeants. And Ian had been in the jungle for four months, and I'd been in eight months longer than he had.

"And then the accidents started. Ian dropped a mortar-bomb on top of the local Home Guard post, killing two and injuring eight. We'd found a camp, and we didn't feel like writing

off the leading man each time, so we thought a little prophylactic fire would be a good thing. Ian gave the order for 200 yards low-angle fire from the two-inch mortar, and the bomb sailed high through the air for 700 yards and landed right on top of the Home Guard. That shook the Company Commander rigid.

"And then it was the falling tree. We were clearing our D.Z. and we'd set off a charge under it, and it seemed immovable. Just as we were drilling holes for a second charge, down it came like a landslide—I ran down the path, and the tree was falling down the line of the path, and when I felt it breathing down the back of my neck I flung myself sideways into a thorn-bush and the trunk just missed me.

"And then it was Corporal Grey. We were going along a track we knew well, and then it seemed to be going in the wrong direction so I called up Corporal Grey and said 'I'm sorry—I've made a nonsense. What we'll do now is split into two parties. Corporal Grey, you'll have a look up that track there, and return independently, and I'll look down the other way and have a look back at the cross-tracks again, and we'll meet at base-camp.'

"And Corporal Grey said 'Look, sir, why don't you let me go and look at the cross-tracks? That'll save you the extra thousand yards and then you'll be able to reach base-camp earlier'. And it was bloody hot. In the ordinary way I'd have said 'Well, thank you very much, Corporal Grey, that's very good of you if you feel up to it." But something must have warned me, and I said 'No, no—I'll go back and look at it myself' and we arranged to meet, and went off in opposite directions. The firing began only two or three minutes later. I ran back, and met his chaps coming back along the path, saying 'Corporal Grey's dead, sir'. And I had a look, and he was dead. His leading-scout was an Iban—he was quite convinced the enemy were the local Home Guard, firing by mistake, so we couldn't do much. Later we found they weren't at all—they were C.T.s, dressed in our jungle green and with *our* orange hat-bands. Corporal Grey went forward and they opened fire, missing the Iban and killing him.

They shot him through the head and blew out his brains all over the path and they were still there three days later.

"I had to get the body out, and then I had to undress it, and put it in a shroud for the helicopter to K.L. and go down to the funeral. It might so easily have been me—we only had to go on another hundred yards from where we had halted, and I'd have still been the leader. The worst thing of all was that I shouldn't have been in the jungle at all. I should have been on the boat home, but then they decided we'd fly home so I had to stay three more weeks in the jungle. And you know what it's like when you go on with a job after you're meant to have finished it—you feel something awful's bound to happen. It was all adding up—the tree, and Corporal Grey, and out of the people who were with me in Johore two had already been killed and these things always come in threes.

"I had leave that week-end in K.L. and asked my Company Commander if I could stay down there after the funeral. He said yes. So I stayed down, and got a message telling me to come back at once and go straight into the jungle—that was just about the end. Someone had had the idea that if I was shaky, what I needed was shock treatment, but they were wrong—if they thought that they should never have let me down to K.L. in the first place. After that I felt I *was* going a little bit to pieces. I shouldn't have been in Malaya at *all*—I should have been on the boat. And what with the accidents and everything else I *knew* I just wasn't as good as I had been, and I *knew* I was getting a little unbalanced mentally. So I formed up and went to the Company Commander and said I didn't think I was fit to go in and I really thought by now it was someone else's turn anyway—so he took it to the C.O. and the Second-in-Command and so I've been spending the last fortnight at Battalion H.Q."

The kaleidoscope. Stray images moving disconnectedly. Images forming into patterns that passed through my mind so that I looked at them as one looks at patterns in a kaleidoscope—

patterns with existence but no meaning—patterns and pictures and fragments of pictures.

A portly mud-plastered pig being led placidly along the road on a piece of string by a Chinese. Wall-lizards falling from the ceiling "plop" on to the floor and scuttling away. A washed-out blue sky, full of tired-looking white cumulus clouds all day and heavy purple masses of cloud in the evening. People, all walking so very slowly in the heat past the white houses and the traffic moving so very fast. Clothes, lovely clothes, Sikh women in billowing white trousers tied at the ankles, Malay women in sarongs, Chinese women in smooth sleek silk. The monotonous clank-clank of tin-mines working through the night under floodlights. And always the hills, always the green frame of jungle.

A particular misty dawn in Singapore, grey and pink, seen from the Water-front. A particular sunset, seen from a roof-garden, with its saffron glow fading behind the black silhouette of the Cathay Building on the skyline while the lights of Singapore slowly brightened all round—"Coca-Cola" pulsing in puce neon.

Kuala Lumpur and the Harlequin, and the shock of stepping out of the Harlequin, with its Chinese sophistication of dinner, into the Chinese gutter-life outside, late at night, with yellow flares flickering through the darkness over stalls and benches, lighting up faces, and groups of faces, and whole families having *their* dinner on the pavement—charcoal glowing red in iron stoves, slimy messes of green vegetable and mien and mee sizzling in shallow iron bowls while the taxis slide slowly past a few feet away and the white-shirted crowds drift in and out of the mid-night showing in the cinemas, wandering through the night air that hits one in the face like a warm wet cloth as one steps out of the air-conditioned restaurant.

Singapore again. An upstairs café in the Bras Basah road. I sat by the open-shuttered window behind a heap of glistening brown rice in which I delved for pieces of gristly chicken, while the juke-box roared, and in the corner a plumply-robust Chinese

waitress busied herself with an unenthusiastic Indian. I looked at the traffic passing below in the dusk, while the music throbbed and the moving headlights filled the street and my thoughts wandered, mesmerised, drifting between eye and ear, circling, moving on impulse, dreaming, caught by this strange lamp-lit world below where even the cycling food-stalls carried swaying flares. Then it was time to leave, and I looked at my plate, horrified to find the entire heap of rice, greasy and glistening, was now inside me.

Kuala Selangor. A tree by the roadside. Just a tree, but always to be remembered. A beautiful flowering tree with boughs of spreading silvery grey, half-hidden by a hanging mist of mauve and violet flowers—a jacaranda tree, as beautiful as its name, standing out against the lush extravagance of banana and lallang, its balanced branches a delicate gesture of restraint, and its colour a gesture of defiance, visible against the green for half a mile down the road.

It was always to be remembered because of the moment we first saw it, on our way into the jungle. Into the jungle—a journey always the same, and yet never accepted—a hasty packing-up, a noisy jeep-ride to the Company, the assembling of the patrol, the stench of blue-smoked exhausts, and then the old familiar roar of engines carrying us back into our filthy unshaven world of thick heavy thoughts, our nights an itching insect-ridden blackness, our days a sun-splashed, shadow-striped sequence of buccaneering sweatiness, slow agony to endure, so quickly forgotten. And when deep in this world, how we blessed those who had written to us—and even more, those who kept writing to us even when we didn't answer, sending us the flimsy air-mail pages which we always took with us into the jungle because they were always the strongest antidote *against* it.

The bookshop—just a bookshop, except that as I looked at its books I realised I was not even thinking about Europe. I was thinking about China, because China was more important. Europe had shrunk, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. Europe, so war-savaged, so pitifully disunited. Europe,

so strangely difficult to remember. But *China*. I asked for books on China, and when the Chinese bookseller saw I was serious he changed, suddenly starting to talk. "Have you seen this book? And this one is good. Here is a life of Mao Tse Tung." And outside the bookshop, a street, just a crowded Chinese street. I walked along, carrying my books, and suddenly noticed the eyes watching me. All the eyes were watching me. I couldn't understand why—then I realised. It was because my skin was white. It was because I was being watched as "another European". It was the first time I had ever felt the racial feeling, and my whole world turned a somersault and I was suddenly in sympathy with that mocking, sceptical paragraph by Spengler: "The ground of West Europe is treated as a steady pole, a unique patch chosen on the surface of the sphere for no better reason it seems, than because we live on it—and great histories of millennial duration and mighty faraway Cultures are made to revolve around this pole in all modesty. It is a quaintly conceived system of sun and planets!"

The scenes, the fragments of scenes, went round and round in my mind, the patterns of the kaleidoscope forming, merging, re-forming. They were simple scenes. They had to be—they were only what I could see, and in my ignorance only simple scenes had a form my mind could grasp. I could hear sounds, but not their meaning. I could see eyes, but not the thoughts behind them. I could see houses, but not the lives inside them. I was lost in this labyrinth, and I knew it. But what could I do? How many Malays could I say I knew well? How many Chinese? How many of the languages? How much of even the *recent* history? And how much time had I? Whenever I began to get used to a pattern, a picture, the twist of events shook the kaleidoscope and then all was gone, all over again.

But suppose. Just suppose Emerson was right—that things really did go "not by luck, but by law", that "there was not a weak or a cracked link in the chain that joins the first and last of things". It would take a bold man to say he could answer the question "Why?" about everything that was now happening

in Malaya, but suppose one assumed there really was a comprehensive order moving through it all, a linked and logical sequence of reasons? Suppose one stopped being analytical and adopted a synthetic method of thinking instead, building up from these premises? If one just took for granted the existence of order, how could one find the short-cuts to understanding it? They *must* exist—if books and talk and travel were not enough, then what remained? For me, might not the radio be in future one possible answer? Radio, that strange new dimension of the human mind, that dimension which had destroyed space, had destroyed time, and now allowed all experience to be compared, to be placed side by side, suddenly released to form startling combinations in the mind of every listener? And was this not, for me, particularly important? I had been in Malaya long enough now, and my apprenticeship had forced so many questions into my mind. Was it not high time my apprenticeship ended? Should I not now find some way of looking for answers to my questions?

Radio. It had already helped me enormously. I remembered listening to the radio on the *Empire Fowey*, at the Jungle Warfare School in Johore, on the Island, deep in the jungle, wandering past coffee-shops in K.L. and Singapore, out at sea on our way to Hit The Beach. Wherever I had gone there had always been that same mutter of voices, talking on and on, their words sinking, often unperceived, deep into my mind.

Radio. Radio Malaya, Radio Australia, Radio Ceylon, Radio Peking. The Battalion radio, the Company radio, the Platoon radio. Talking on the radio myself, from jungle base-camps to the Major twenty miles away, from the Island to the mainland, from the swamp to the R.A.F. supply-bombers. Frank LeMaitre had sworn that on his powerful sets he could sometimes hear French Army radios, direct from the fighting to our north. He had understood the French—once they had been calling desperately in clear for reinforcements, again and again. At Wardieburn I had turned the dials casually one morning, and found myself listening to the Control Tower at Saigon Airport

talking to an Australian pilot—I could hear both the clipped artificial English from Saigon and the broad Australian voice from the air, and yet they could not hear each other. On the Dredge, MacBride and I had been searching for the Company frequency and found an American news-broadcast instead—". . . a cease-fire has been arranged in Indo-China". I told the Platoon at once, and they took the news personally, excitedly—as well they might. Sometimes in the jungle all Platoons had to have their signallers tuned in carefully to the Company, listening just in case there was a message—if there was a Test Match being played, whether in England or Australia, the Company Signallers could sometimes tune their own sets to the direct commentary, and by putting their radios beside their microphones could relay it to us. It would have pleased the cricketers to know how carefully we followed their fate—and how, as the bails flew at Lord's, in Malaya the triumphant cry echoed instantly through our jungle-camps—"He's OUT!"

Radio. And a voice. A voice I particularly remembered. We had come out of the swamp, and with nothing to do I had found myself idly tuning the radio in the Company Sergeants' Mess, a little veranda overlooking the Company itself, with its rows of bleached tents and taut guy-ropes, its bronzed half-naked soldiers—and behind them a line of dust-covered vehicles loading up with a Platoon for the jungle. The voice was harsh, snarling. "When Lady Templer and I came to Malaya we promised nothing—except that we would not spare ourselves." General Templer was saying good-bye. It was difficult to believe. His name, his voice, his personality had dominated us all in Malaya—from the terrorists in the jungle to the news-editors in K.L., for whom he was a godsend. Every day they found whole pages of ready-made copy in what he said, what he did, where he went. Templer had been criticised, inevitably—it is difficult to hammer hot iron without sparks flying. What it had been like in Malaya before Templer was appointed High Commissioner I did not know—I had not been there. But when I arrived in Malaya I learnt very quickly the force of his

name. It meant different things, to different people—Chinese villagers who had been forcibly re-settled: British officials who had been sacked: troops sweating in the jungle for one green ghastly month after another, on and on: the wives of men murdered by terrorists: terrorists themselves, who came out of the jungle to surrender and then betrayed their comrades for blood-money: all must have said different things about Templer. But all would have agreed he stood for one thing in particular—he was the daily personification of an unyielding and positive determination. In the clammy drugging heat of Malaya that had been the first decisive step towards success. Without it, nothing else could ever have followed. And now he was going. I listened to his crisp sentences, crackling over the Sergeants' Mess radio, while the troops below lounged round their tents and the Platoon drove off in their trucks. The troops were certainly casual. But they were also alert. They were confident. They were determined. Above all, determined. And I remembered the sort of remark I had heard so often, particularly from people like planters who lived permanently in Malaya: "He gave us back our *morale*."

Radio. Anyone in Malaya with a powerful radio could make the Emergency come alive in his ears just by twiddling the knobs. All troops in the jungle had to communicate by radio, and it was this ceaseless radio-traffic that kept the military organism thinking coherently. All these signals could be heard on civilian receivers. Every radio—whether in a village coffee-shop in the Kuala Selangor paddy, or in a café in the back-streets of K.L.—was liable to find itself suddenly blaring forth incomprehensible messages: "One-Zero, One-Zero, One-Zero. Here *is* Sun-Ray. Verify grid-reference. I say again, verify grid-reference—we cannot take air-drops in the sea. Will continue following tracks tomorrow, but we are very tired. Hills getting much worse. Suggest immediate ambushes to the south, along line of road. I say again, suggest ambushes to the *south*, along . . ."

These messages could not be shielded, so they had to be *made*

incomprehensible by strict use of Army Signals jargon, designed to be always anonymously ambiguous to outsiders. But one could guess a lot, even so. I spent an intriguing half-hour listening to a jungle-patrol that was clearly Gurkha, arguing with its Company Commander about what it should do next. Soon I could guess fairly closely the state of mind of the patrol-commander, and the nature of his problem. Yet his conversation was still secure, for there was no way of knowing where he was and he might be anywhere within ten, twenty, thirty miles. There were so many messages like this. All through the day, starting at dawn and continuing hour by hour till dusk, an unending confusion of disembodied voices, wailing atmospherics, twittering Morse—voices shouting, voices dictating, voices protesting about supplies, voices crying out pathetically to each other and still unanswered. "I *cannot* hear you. . . . I *cannot* hear you. . . . Switch to Channel B. . . . Stand by for tuning-call. . . . One, two, three, four." And sometimes they were stammering with urgency, but not often. Usually they were merely laconic, merely repeating the routine situation-reports from each patrol in the jungle, the so-well-known Nothing-To-Report. "Two-Three, Two-Three. Sit-Rep. Nan-Tare-Roger, Nan-Tare-Roger, Nan-Tare-Roger."

Radio. These messages were for me indeed a short-cut, at least to part of the military side of the Emergency. It was like listening to a single great brain, engaged in a single enormous task and thinking hard to itself as it worked. It was a military brain, its order was clear, its purpose plain—not so clear were some of the radio-messages from other sources. Some of them did not help me at all to find answers to my questions—they merely increased the number of questions. Every day, for instance, the price of rubber was painstakingly quoted, and every cent, every decimal point, was of importance running into millions of dollars, affecting the lowest pay-packets, the highest decisions of policy. "Rubber is up to a dollar-twenty," people would say, and then stand around in reverent silence. Other sounds were quite incomprehensible, like the weekly programme

broadcast for all the Ibans in the jungle, bringing them their own language and music, and the latest gossip from their villages in Sarawak. There were other messages still, which made one ponder about those strange people on the other side of the world who decided things for us. The Secretary of State for the Colonies was omnipotent and his mind unknowable—but there were others. "A Parliamentary delegation today visited the British Military Hospital at Kinrara, inspected schools in Kuala Lumpur, and watched troops going into the jungle. Mr Robert Boothby said. . . ." Or, more startling, "Mr Attlee has just arrived in Singapore. With Dr Edith Summerskill, Mr Aneurin Bevan and Mr Morgan Phillips, he has just completed a Labour Party tour of Communist China. This is the first tour of its kind by leading politicians of any Western country since the Chinese Revolution put the Communists in power." And then—always suddenly—the programme would end, the voice stop, the pattern melt, the picture fade. The portly mud-plastered pig and the jacaranda tree, Spengler and Mao Tse Tung, Templer and the Sergeants' Mess, the Test Matches and Saigon Airport, Mr Attlee in Singapore, Nan-Tare-Roger, Rubber at a dollar-twenty—all was gone as the kaleidoscope shook, its contents jostling. All I had left were my questions.

PART THREE

# THE TEST

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Who knows not toyle can never skill of rest.
Who alwaies walks on carpet soft and gay
Knows not hard hills, nor likes the mountain way.

THOMAS CHURCHYARD

AT Ampang we had been workaday and professional, in Johore theoretical and technical, in the swamp isolated. Here, in hospital, everything was personal. And from where I lay I could watch three different worlds, three different aspects of what had brought us all to Malaya—the Emergency.

The closest world was the Ward itself: a most carefully designed building, with lemon-yellow curtains closing off each pair of beds, and crimson screens for putting round individual beds when someone was really ill. Some walls were maroon, some pale yellow-green. The outer walls had been almost eliminated by the Malayan trick of replacing the top three feet with wire lattice-work, and by making them consist almost completely of doors which were folded back night and day. Outside each veranda was a strip of lawn between us and the next Ward, so we felt as if we were lying in open air, surrounded by gardens, the breeze blowing across our beds, our eyes soothed by the flowering shrubs, the yellow curtains, blazing bowls of flowers, soft carpets. And indeed we were in the open, where we could always see the world passing by, and where the world could see us.

We were a strange mixture—among us a Captain from the Special Air Service Regiment who had been making parachute-drops direct into jungle and was now crocheting furiously to steady his nerves, a Gurkha boy of twelve under observation, a Naafi contractor with ulcers, and several Infantry officers with

plain fever—usually labelled P.U.O. for "Pyrexia of Unknown Origin".

Our world revolved round Sister O'Hara. She was from Ulster, with a long experience of Officers' Wards that stretched back from Malaya to Hamburg, and a most useful sense of humour. One morning she came up to Lieutenant Jenkins, who had returned from deep-jungle penetration with an infection that had not yet been identified, and who for weeks had done nothing except be sick, and sick, and sick.

"Ah, Mr Jenkins, I know what's wrong with you," said Sister O'Hara primly, with authority. "You are suffering from morning sickness."

"I am *what*?"

"You have morning sickness, Mr Jenkins. It means you are going to have a baby, Mr Jenkins."

She walked calmly away, leaving Jenkins gasping and the rest of the Ward roaring with laughter. He looked at us uncertainly. Then he began to laugh too. It was the first time anyone had been able to make Jenkins laugh for weeks.

Nabin, the Gurkha boy, had also been in the Ward for weeks, and found it a great strain to have no company of his own age. Sometimes he was intelligent, lively, laughing, talking about his life at the Slim School for Army children, and the great deeds of the Gurkhas. And sometimes he was sulky, proud, silent, with fits of temper. One night he fell asleep in the middle of a noisy game of Monopoly, was carried to bed, woke next morning with fever, and then for days retreated into being a small boy again, blowing soap-bubbles and playing with trains on the floor. His English was almost perfect. His life was the warrior-life of the Gurkhas, and Malaya and its war were to him the centre of the world. When the S.A.S. Captain tried to explain to Nabin about the British Isles, Nabin listened earnestly. "And in the far north, Nabin, as far away as Ipoh is from us, are the primitive aborigines, living in their bashas along the banks of the Sungei Clyde, in Kampong Glasgow."

So we lived in our family atmosphere, presided over by Sister

O'Hara, visited by processions of doctors, choosing our food from a masterpiece of assorted menus, submitting to injections, examinations, blood-lettings, dosings. Thirty per cent of all fever cases in the hospital were never diagnosed. Our blood samples were sent all over the world, particularly to London and Boston, for learned opinions. The American Army kept a full-time medical research mission observing and cataloguing our tropical diseases. The doctors did their best, combining their experience with guesswork and the new drugs like penicillin and aureomycin, battling against the varied organisms that swarmed and jostled in our bloodstreams. But for us there was nothing to see or feel, nothing to do except idle away the hours, or tease Nabin or Sister O'Hara, or play chess, or read, or sleep.

The neighbouring Ward was a parallel world of its own and with its own family atmosphere—a Ward of convalescent Gurkhas. In the morning we would wake to hear the abominable noise as fifty of them all cleared their throats massively together, hawking and spitting as they washed. During the day we would watch their small pyjama'd figures stretched out in deckchairs in the sun. In the evening we would hear the gentle wail of Gurkha or Malay music from their radio. But we could not visit them, or talk to them, and so I could do nothing except watch these nervous little hill-men, these convalescent mercenaries, these bored figures idling away the hours just as we did, and, in turn, lying on their beds watching us.

The third world, the world of the passers-by on the central pathway, was a microcosm, not of Malaya, but of the people the Emergency had brought to Malaya. In the swamp I had felt that I and my patrol were all that mattered in the Emergency. Now I was reminded of the cumbrous mechanisms of war that kept the battalions in Malaya alive and fighting, that kept the hundreds of patrols each day probing their lonely paths through the jungle. The hospital was just one small part of this complexity, and it was complex enough itself—with its doctors in khaki, always absorbed as they strode along; its Sisters in pale-blue uniform, cherry-red epaulettes and flapping white head-

dresses, not abstracted at all but always busy, hurried, possessive; its patients in an unending anonymous stream. All the patients wore the blue tropical pyjamas with short sleeves, and the heat made even pyjamas a burden, so we all wandered everywhere in just pyjamas alone—which startled visiting families. But we were beyond being startled by anything in this sickly humid heat. We differed only in the colour of our skins and the degree of our illness. Some of us were in wheelchairs, propelling themselves unhappily along, faces taut with the defensive look of the crippled man. Some had visible injuries, hobbling with crutches or with arms in stony white plaster. The rest were just walking, just patients. Never were we so anonymous as one afternoon when a Hussar band came to give a concert and all the walking patients in the hospital assembled, a mass of blue shuffling figures, all solemnly carrying chairs, all padding along the concrete paths in sandals or slippers.

There were personalities, of course, who quickly emerged from the crowd. The Commandant, for example, colossal in khaki, whose hospital was a showpiece of what a tropical military hospital should be, and whose impending inspections drove the Sisters to extremities of nervous twittering, and sometimes tears. Or the magnificent Queen's Gurkha Officer who paced slowly past every morning, leisured and enormous. Or the suave little Chinese who pushed the Naafi trolley selling cigarettes and shaving-cream, never permitting himself more than a flicker of a gold-toothed smile; or Abdulla, our Malay orderly, always laughing, always late; or Colonel Callaghan, our senior doctor, gaunt, with a knack of focusing all his charm on each one of us in turn and an even greater knack of guessing the quirks of each individual fever—as I later discovered.

Every day came visitors: officers and men from British and Gurkha, Federation, African, Fijian and Australian regiments; helicopter pilots; Sappers and Gunners, REME and Ordnance. Every day brought men who represented the moving parts of the great machine we had almost forgotten—men who loaded supply-bombers, and flew them; men who patrolled roads in

armoured cars; despatch-riders and signallers; Generals who made decisions and Brigade Majors who transmitted them; men who made lists and sorted stores and guarded ammunition; men who looked after tracker-dogs, or drove Staff cars or ambulances, or cooked the special diets for the hospital, or analysed air-photos, or directed traffic, or repaired vehicles, or trained recruits; Police Officers, District Commissioners, planters; their wives, their children. And as they passed, this unceasing stream of strangers, who gaped curiously at the long lines of beds and the blue figures stretched out on them, so we would gaze listlessly back, nodding only to the hospital staff whom we knew because they were of our own world—the world of the hospital.

It was particularly our world because we were linked, as in all hospitals, by the knowledge of pain. The horrors were there, though we tried not to think of them. When red screens were pulled round a bed we tiptoed past, not looking in. The hospital was a network of low white buildings, linked with white paths, open to air and sun, spacious, apparently cheerful—but in nearly every Ward were broken throbbing bodies, torn minds, the inevitable agonies, the deaths.

We felt it particularly when one of our nurses was accidentally run over by a hospital ambulance. She had just arrived from England, still unnaturally pale in the heat, her straw-yellow hair marking her out. Her death was so typical of Malaya, where humidity slowed reflex-action and drugged judgment, where accidents happened all the time, particularly with vehicles and weapons. But unnecessary accidents hurt most, so we mourned the nurse especially. And yet there were others to mourn. There were always others. Usually we did not ask who they were—least of all when a Sister came in one evening discreetly asking for a special kind of thread. We knew what she wanted it for, but there was nothing to say as we watched her go out of the door, on her way to sew up the lips of a corpse.

In one way the Emergency was noticeably with us. In the swamp we had hated the entire High Command, from the Major upwards, because they had deprived us of our helicopter when we

were tired and needed it. But now, when day after day I saw helicopters coming in overhead with jungle casualties, I realised how overworked they were. In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* Lawrence of Arabia wrote bitterly of the difference which just the merest handful of desert-guns would have made. Here, in Malaya, helicopters had the same disproportionate value. An extra helicopter, free to move troops, could reasonably be said to influence the war more than an extra battalion. Yet the few helicopters we did have were always busy carrying casualties, or with emergencies. My troop-lift into the swamp had been a privilege, an exception—we had been crying for the moon when we asked to be flown out again as well.

Almost every day an emergency casualty would be brought in from the jungle—sometimes several. There would be no warning, just a sudden roar above our heads as the helicopter rushed past, its blades threshing in rhythmic thunder. It would hover briefly, and sink out of sight behind the roofs. Even as it did so the duty-ambulance would be on its way to the landing-circle in front of the hospital, and the duty-doctor running past, pulling on his coat. The Commandant had been explicit about speed when casualties were landed, and the story was going round of a harmless journalist who had begged a lift to K.L. on a helicopter, had been dropped at the hospital, seized by two strong Malay orderlies with clear orders about delirious Englishmen, and had been rushed, strapped to a stretcher, straight into the emergency operating theatre.

The helicopters were dramatic evidence of the long-range nature of this war, and of the premium set on individuals—from helicopter-pilots to the casualties they carried. The value of the helicopters was also far greater than what they actually did, for their mere presence in Malaya and the knowledge of the medical resources behind them, gave every man in the jungle, on every patrol, that added confidence that made him always willing to go that little bit further, to take just that extra bit of risk. The military helicopter, pottering grotesquely through the air over jungle or town, was now part of the daily landscape of Malaya.

Those in the jungle shuddered to think what it must have been like in the early years of the Emergency, when there were no helicopters.

The helicopters were indeed the dramatic symbol of our jungle-war, but for me there were other symbols too, of other aspects of the war. The hospital itself was one huge symbol of the effort and pain the war meant, so quickly forgotten by those who had not endured it. This whole organism of buildings, administration, staff and patients, this world of hurrying ambulances, of trolleys with inert figures being wheeled along paths by hurrying orderlies, this world that was never still and at peace, not even at night—this had all been created by the Emergency. What I could see from my bed was merely one small part of one small medical section of a vast organisation—created by political decision, by civil and police and military effort, strengthened and expanded year after year, moulded by the personality of High Commissioners and Generals, and now embracing the whole sweltering land of Malaya.

I was very aware of this one night. Nabin was muttering wildly in Gurkhali, tossing about under his mosquito net, so I put on my pyjama-top and wandered through the sleeping Ward to find the Night-Sister. Then I went back to bed, watching through the muslin netting of my own mosquito net as the Sister came to see Nabin, her torch suddenly flooding his bed with yellow light. There was brilliant moonlight outside, casting great black shadows. It all looked so peaceful. Then I looked across to the Gurkha Ward opposite, and saw a similar spark of light moving erratically along, pausing to shine on mosquito nets. There was silence, except for the hurrying whispering fans; stillness, except for the moving torches of the Night-Sisters; heavy warmth, except for the slight draught of the fan that made me pull a sheet over myself rather than sleep naked to the waist. I gazed sleepily at the moving spark of light—and remembered there must be similar sparks moving along all the Wards of all the Military Hospitals in Malaya. And these quiet figures moving through the dark Wards seemed suddenly to imply just

as much about the Emergency as the daylight drama of the helicopters.

"Well, you seem all right," said Colonel Callaghan, feeling my pulse and glancing at the reports which Sister O'Hara held out. "You've had a few aches and pains, and probably slight glandular fever, or even leptospirosis—I think you can go back to your Battalion in a couple of days."

He moved away down the Ward. Then he came back, a little doubtfully.

"Of course, I don't *like* sending people with glands straight back into the jungle. One can never quite tell. I think perhaps a fortnight to convalesce in the Cameron Highlands."

So off I went to convalesce, with a long train journey from Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh, and then several hours by truck up into the Cameron Highlands to the Military Hospital. The truck travelled in a large convoy, guarded by Hussar scout-cars, and the road climbed up and up, zig-zagging in huge curves, its loops and gradients carved across hillsides so steep that on one side streamers of vine and fronds of bamboo reached far out over our heads, and on the other the ground fell so sharply that we were looking out over treetops.

At one corner were a cluster of aborigines, small, clutching their weapons, men and women naked to the waist, their eyes watching with interest but no surprise—they saw our convoy twice a week. Behind them were their ricketty bamboo houses, frail, built solely as supports for a roof to keep off the rain, with the jungle cleared back for just a few yards. Then the road curved yet again, and they were lost to view.

It was getting colder. Every so often there was a long burst of machine-gun fire from one or other of the armoured vehicles —whenever they felt like it the Hussars would fire into the jungle as they passed. The noise was audible for miles and intended to deter anyone contemplating an ambush. We became quite used to the noise—so presumably did the aborigines and the C.T.s.

The cold increased. Soon we were putting on coats and sweaters, and even beginning to shiver. Rain misted down, cold rain, strange, and then it turned into real mist—we had reached cloud-level. The air was already easier to breathe after the smothering humidity of the plains.

The hospital was not a full-scale one—merely a convalescent hospital in a building which had been in turn a Catholic Convent and then a Japanese Headquarters during the war. Whoever chose the site knew what they were doing—presumably the nuns and priests who originally built it as Pensionnat Notre-Dame. It perched on a platform of lawns and paths cut into the slope, with below it a fifty-foot drop on to a curving road—a dusty white streak that ended four hundred yards away in the brown roofs of Tanah Rata. We overlooked the valley, the road, the stream, the Chinese houses on the left, the oncoming jungle on the right. Beyond were the hills, crowding in on all sides, huge clumps of jungle sloping up to the sky, their crests marred with creeping drifting fingers of cloud. The cloud-level was now far below us, and each afternoon the rain would come in a bank of grey drab cloud, advancing in streamers of mist that slid into view over the shoulders of the hill behind us. They came fast, threatening the long lines of clothes hung out by the Chinese laundry in the valley, and each afternoon the Chinese would rush out to gather the clothes in great baskets.

It was very peaceful, as the nuns must have thought, and the Japanese, and now the troops who came to convalesce. They included patients from all over Malaya, and the story was told how two of them, an African and an Iban, had arrived to find they were the only coloured patients and no-one could speak their languages. They were both tiny little men and went everywhere together, silently and sadly, because they could not talk—not even to each other. Then one day they found a schoolroom globe, which they turned, and suddenly the African shot out a finger and said proudly: "Nyasaland." And the Iban looked, and pointed, and said equally proudly: "Borneo." And then they looked at each other and smiled.

Nearly all paths in the jungle round the hospital were out of bounds because of terrorists, but we wandered where we could, inspecting a tea-plantation and factory, a model farm with its little pink piglets and Japanese cabbages, taking taxis to the nearest hotel for a drink, having coffee in the morning in the Rest-house—complete with large slices of melon and old copies of *Country Life*. We idled, doing what we liked, never wearing uniform. It was strange to sleep under blankets, stranger still to find fires in the evening, with real flames and burning logs to re-arrange. There were firm green lawns to tread, giant tree-ferns to see, and everywhere flowers—bright convolvulus with heart-shaped leaves and deep blue blossoms fading into purple towards the stem; roses, rambler-roses of trailing thorny red; clumps of glowing gladioli, soothing the eye with their slim green stems and smooth pink and crimson petals, and arranged every day in great bunches all through the hospital. Early one morning I came on the Indian gardener who sorted out these bunches, a small ragged figure, squatting on the lawn surrounded with armfuls of flowers and wrapping them in newspaper. "Good morning, sir," he said politely, while his brown wrinkled fingers tore fiercely at the crackling newspapers, and then handled the flowers so gently.

Then I was ill, ridiculously, all over again. Not very badly at first, just a recurrence of what I had had before, just aches and pains which put me to bed for a day, and then became severe aches and pains which kept me in bed, groaning, for a week. My lymphatic glands were burning and throbbing steadily, as if someone was kicking me in the pit of the stomach with a heavy boot. The pain slid up my spine, and then settled in the small of my back, as if the other boot was kicking me there. Sometimes they kicked me both together, producing spasms of pain that sent my stomach and back muscles rigid, so that after two days they were aching and tender. There were other vague dissolute aches, moaning dismally in my pelvis and legs, so vague I did not know quite where they were. And there were headaches, coming and going, pounding like hammers. The pain slowly built up,

combining with other more horrid symptoms, until one morning the real fever began.

First came a sudden rigor, starting with shivers down the spine that spread into continuous repeated spasms of shivering, teeth chattering, body rigid with cold. I had heard so often about other people having rigors: now I was having one and I was full of curiosity. Someone sent for the Sister and she came running, her concerned face bending over me as I emerged from my cocoon of blankets and stammered that I was very sorry, but I was having a "sh-sh-shivering fit". She snatched two blankets off the next bed, produced a hot-water-bottle out of thin air, and the Doctor—who also peered down at me, said "Ah, yes," and went away.

Later I tried to eat a little soup, and was violently sick. "Oh dear, my *precious* tin of tomato soup" said the Sister sadly. Then came the real heat of fever, swelling lazily through my veins. I had heard so often about tropical fever, and now I was having that too. I was no longer curious, just slowly beginning to feel very sorry for myself. With the heat came sloth. I could not even be bothered to push away the hot-water-bottle, and lay just holding it across my stomach, streaming with sweat, feeling as if I was floating gently in a hot bath. And with the sloth came indifference—I was not ill, just a little sleepy, just a little hot, thinking this to myself very slowly, adding one vague thought to another, convinced I was quite clear-headed, and thinking slowly about that too. I just watched idly as they gathered the tall red screens round the bed.

The Nurse said she was going to wash me. I could not understand why she should suddenly decide to wash me at three-thirty in the afternoon. "Can you wash your face yourself?" she asked. What a silly question. Of course I could wash my own face. She soaked the lint swab in water, gave it to me, and I just gazed at her and said sadly "But it's *cold*." I could not think of any reason why she should suddenly decide to give me a blanket-bath with iced water—literally iced, with the ice still floating in it. I did not understand until I suddenly found how pleasant, how soothing icy water was. Somewhere in the distance I could hear the

Sister and the Doctor talking, and people coming and going. She massaged my back and shoulders firmly, rhythmically, and I relaxed even more. She gave me pills to stop me being sick, and then produced a large hypodermic needle.

"It's penicillin. A million units. It's a large dose because it's the first, and the doctor says we're to give it to you night and day, every six hours, until you're better. Turn *over*."

And have it I did, and went on having it night and day for eight days—which was thirty-two injections.

The penicillin halted the fever almost at once, but even in a few hours my temperature had reached over 104 degrees and I wondered just how men in the jungle felt when the crisis hit them and the helicopter could not find them, and there was no doctor, no nurse, no iced water, no penicillin. And though the crisis was over, the fever remained, slumbering, held in check, marking time. I was apathetic, listless, and yet with an immense and increasing irritation, a razor-edge tautness of nerves that made every noise or footstep, every interruption or question, seem a grievous injustice, a calculated cruelty. Because my nerves were so taut I could not remonstrate quietly: if driven to speak the words burst out in savage fits of temper, with biting comments that left me shaken and ashamed, wanting only to sink back into my pillows, to lose myself in passivity and calm. I wanted nothing in the world so much as peace and quiet—yet the orderlies stamped and shouted and whistled, their boots crashing down the corridor outside, the doors jumped and slammed, the people round me came in and out a hundred times a day in a babble of stupid talk. For a time I was very miserable.

It was my own fault for being ill in what was designed only as a convalescent hospital. The Sister, the Nurse, the Doctor were very, very kind and patient. I had nothing but gratitude for them —and also for Colonel Callaghan, who had anticipated something just like this happening. But there was not even a bell in the room, no way of summoning help in an emergency, and I was not the only person who needed these things.

Opposite me was a subaltern in the King's African Rifles, with

dysentery. Bad dysentery. In the middle of one night he was again choking, vomiting, crying for the Sister and another injection to kill the pain. An orderly passed, so we sent him for the Sister. We waited fifteen minutes. Then I got up and found the orderly asleep. He said he had telephoned for the Sister and there had been no answer. So I became angry, and sent him clattering down the corridor, his rifle slung over his shoulder as regulations always required, for the Night-Nurse. The telephonist slept in a little booth nearby, so I woke him up and made him telephone again. The bell jangled derisively ten feet above our heads. The Sister called down sleepily that he should not wake up the whole house by telephoning, he should come and wake her himself. The Night-Nurse arrived, ran up the stairs, and fetched the Sister down in a hurry. She gave the injection at once, but it was already half an hour late, and did not act immediately. And after seeing the agony which just one delayed injection had meant I wondered again what happened to men in the jungle when there was no Sister to run to, and no injection to give.

In another quite different way these weeks of fever and convalescence were just what I needed. I had been alone, thinking, spending my days reading, wandering across lawns, or just sitting in a seat overlooking the valley and watching the Chinese in their gardens. For the first time since my arrival in Malaya I was able to withdraw from the Emergency and to think about it a little more impersonally.

There had been times, especially during my fever, when I had been deeply depressed. I had been conscripted for the Army, sent at great expense to Malaya, trained for jungle war, sent on ghastly patrols, reduced to a hobbling fever-stricken wreck, and what had I to show for it? Nothing. And my story was the same as hundreds, thousands of others. Some had fever or broken limbs or gunshot wounds, or nervous breakdowns or ulcers or septicaemia or polio. Others kept their health and endured

patrol after patrol, sometimes for years. This war was fought by those who led the jungle-patrols, and these were either Regular Sergeants, or National Service Second Lieutenants, almost always. It was recognised that two years was about the limit for most patrol-commanders, and the Regular subalterns were usually taken out of the jungle after two years and given other jobs. But even two years is a long time, and for the mass of those on patrol they were two years of useless slogging. And for what? I lay in bed, depressed, ill, trying to see the justification for all this, looking at myself and my friends for an answer, and finding none.

The theoretical answer was that we killed terrorists. We, who led the jungle-patrols, knew that our chances of killing a terrorist were nil. Certainly *some* people killed terrorists. Every few days another kill was announced over Radio Malaya, with names, places, full details. But if the total of kills was placed against the total number of men on patrol, then the chances of any one person actually getting a kill were seen to be small indeed. It was just like a lottery—the lucky person was always someone else.

And yet, perhaps there were other points of view. That of the High Command, for example. Their strategy was clear. We were to force the terrorist threat back from towns, villages and lines of communication; we must free the population everywhere from terrorism; we must confine the terrorists to deep jungle; and finally we must starve them till they surrendered and kill them if they didn't. On paper it was all clear enough. Our tactics were also clear enough: the whole specialised technique of jungle-warfare being perfected year after year.

Where was our strength? Surely not in Malaya at all, but in the enormous material and human resources elsewhere in the Commonwealth. A war of attrition suited us. We were quite happy to watch troopships entering and leaving Singapore every single week, to see every Battalion being relieved every three years, to see the endless turnover of conscript thousands, to brood over our steadily accumulating experience and information

—to take the long-term view. It had been relatively easy for us to take the high-level decisions, both political and military, that committed us to this slow, grinding, unspectacular war. It was in just such a war that our strength lay.

Where was our enemy's weakness? Surely not in the familiar problems of supply, weapons, camps, organisation, doctrine, recruits. These could all be revamped, replaced, renewed. The terrorists could endure almost any losses except one thing: the death of their key individuals, just a few hundreds of them, not more. Only their dead leaders could not be replaced. With their death was lost their experience, their iron-hard determination, their skill after years of jungle-war against first the Japanese and now the British. One single prisoner, one single death, might save years of work, release hundreds of square miles from terror, liberate whole communities, prevent an uncountable number of future ambushes, atrocities, murders.

Where was the link combining our strength with their weakness? Surely information. Only through information could our massive strength be brought to bear on their tiny hard core of leaders. Everything depended on the chance scrap of information, the chance jungle encounter, the chance shot in the dark that *killed*. And chance depended on laws of averages, and laws of averages could not operate without a sufficient number of opportunities, and opportunities could be created only by thousands of men working all over Malaya in a multitude of different ways, year after year. So, even if nothing happened for month after month, perhaps our patrols were indeed necessary. Their mere existence was apparently worth-while in itself. And if a patrol killed a terrorist that must be thought of not as the achievement of just that patrol, but as the achievement of the whole military organisation, as a sudden bonus, and therefore wonderful.

And how could any of this happen *without* information? The search for information was the key to the war. Information came from captured terrorists, who bought their lives with it; from spies; from informers; from every kind of civilian contact and grapevine; from photographs of the jungle; from single

footprints in the jungle; from captured documents, weapons, camps, clothes, supplies; from the reports of the jungle-patrols quartering backwards and forwards over the same huge areas. All this added up into the massive files which, accumulating, told us more and more about our enemy and how to kill him. Already we knew almost every terrorist by name, reputation, dossier, and photograph. Already we knew they were on the retreat.

What were the other factors? One was food: terrorists could not live in deep jungle without food from villages or their own cultivations. Another was the attitude of the population. And these factors—terrorism, information, food, the population, plus the armed forces on both sides, combined to produce the bewildering labyrinth of every kind of problem that was conveniently called "The Emergency".

Could any of these factors be kept separate? No, surely not. For example, since the terrorists could not live without food and information, they terrorised the population to extort it. So we replied with colossal food-denial campaigns, massive movements of unreliable or terrorised populations, with curfews and regulations, barbed wire and New Villages, the whole appallingly necessary apparatus of police and military control. If we could prevent the population, whether Malay or Chinese or Indian, from being terrorised, then we could break down the great civilian food-supply organisation which the terrorists had built up. If we could make it clear to even the most ignorant villager that we were winning, then information would begin to flow the other way—out to us, instead of back into the jungle. And once we could isolate the terrorists from their food, and learn where they were, then they must begin to weaken and we could bring our military machine to bear against them—or, in other words, send men to kill them. But we could not bring our military machine to bear without information, and we could not get information without the support of the population, and we would not get the support of the population unless they were free from terrorism, and we could not free them from terrorism

until we had sent men to kill the terrorists. So it went round and round—a most complicated combination of vicious circles. The key to breaking these vicious circles remained one thing: information.

There were other points. The terrorists could not be supplied from Communist China. It was impossible by sea or air, and north of Malaya were the buffer-states of Thailand, Burma, and Indo-China. Yet both sides in Malaya could feel the threat of China—the hot wind from the north. The terrorists drew their inspiration from Peking Radio, and the number of terrorist incidents mounted noticeably after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. In Malaya we felt the French were fighting in the same war as ourselves, and at the worst time of the Indo-China crisis, when American intervention was expected, there would have been little surprise if British battalions had suddenly found themselves sailing from Singapore to Indo-China. Like the terrorists, we felt both wars were the same war. From that, it was a small step to seeing this struggle as part of the same global struggle that had now erupted at different times in Korea and Formosa, Indo-China and Malaya, Greece and Berlin. Kennan's "Containment of Communism", as a phrase, seemed to hold particular meaning for us in Malaya.

Yet no-one could say we fought this war merely as an ideological war. Perhaps the terrorists did: their aim was to establish a Communist Government composed of themselves, as indeed they had done once before in the interval between Japanese surrender and British reoccupation. But we did not fight them just because they were Communists. There were Communists in Singapore, and there the struggle raged with different weapons—sedition, propaganda, arrests, strikes. But here, in Malaya, the Communists were *terrorists*. They carried weapons. They wore uniforms. They killed. Their policy was terror—its success demanded a monthly quota of murders, atrocities, sabotage, arson, ambush and propaganda. And there can be no argument with an armed man determined to kill.

The terrorists were certainly determined to kill. Even as I

wandered round Malaya in this, the seventh year of the Emergency, it was still necessary to go everywhere armed. One took it for granted. One had to have special permission *not* to carry a loaded weapon. Our own Commanding Officer had been furious to find he had to take off his revolver on entering Kinrara Military Hospital—it seemed a ridiculous and strange thing to demand, like being asked to take off one's shirt. At Ampang the Major had walked two hundred yards from our Company Camp, came round the corner, and found himself watching a terrorist crossing the road. Luckily the terrorist had his back turned, for the Major was a perfect target in peaked cap and Sam Browne, and had forgotten his carbine. He never forgot it again—not least because his sighting led to the discovery of a permanent C.T. camp, complete even with air-raid shelter against mortar-fire, and tucked incredibly away in dense scrub-jungle at a distance of less than six hundred yards from our own camp. On the railway I had watched planters getting off the train, and each, as he picked up his things, patted his holster to see if his revolver was there—a quite subconscious habit, years old. And because we all had to carry loaded weapons, all day long, whatever we did, we lost more men killed and wounded through accidents than through ambush. The war to us could be thought of most simply as the need to carry guns in our hands—and the enemy as a terrorist who also carried a gun, and whose aim in life was our death. It was indeed as simple as that.

Of course there were other questions, not simple at all. The racial question between Malays and Chinese, for example, or the political processes of approaching independence for Malaya and Singapore. Or the influence of China on the Overseas Chinese, of Nehru's India on the Indians, and of Indonesia on the Malays. Or the future of the rubber and tin industries, of capital investment, of replanting, of rising populations, of a suddenly widened franchise. Or so many, many others . . . all the problems, in fact, of a wildly diverse, multi-racial, polyglot, tropical population under British rule while fighting an internal war. But these were problems for experts. For us, absorbed in the

military struggle, it was difficult to come to conclusions about them. Our attention always came back to one single problem—the killing of terrorists, the man-hunt for the men who had failed to convince and were now trying to conquer, the men who had already gambled so much they must gamble more, back to this sweating war of detection and information and nerves. Indeed, the war was fought largely along the principles of police detection, and there was more than a half-truth in the much-derided fiction that this was only an emergency, with the Army fighting merely in support of the Civil Power. Detection was the search for individuals. And however much one argued in circles, we still came back to the fact that our job was killing individual terrorists—or, in other words, the primitive experiences of the man-hunt, the world of the jungle-patrol.

The world of the jungle-patrol was not far from us, even in hospital. One sleepy afternoon we woke to hear sudden running to and fro in the corridors, telephones ringing, doors slamming, orderlies running for rifles, nurses shouting for emergency supplies, and then ambulances vanishing down the drive in a hurry.

A long time later we heard the ambulances coming back, and we peered out of windows as their doors were opened and stretchers carrying blanket-muffled figures were quickly, gently, taken into the hospital.

A police jungle-squad had been well and truly ambushed. In the Cameron Highlands it was essential to gain the support of the aborigines, so permanent jungle-forts had been built as bases for their protection, and the police patrol had been coming back from one of these forts along the only jungle path available. The terrorists had marked their movements, planned their ambush, dug carefully-sited weapon-pits, waited for the police to come back, and then all opened fire together.

The policemen were Malays under a British Police Lieutenant. They had fought back, firing up the hillside at the weapon-pits. Their resistance surprised the terrorists, and when they saw

that they were achieving neither slaughter nor the capture of weapons, they broke off the battle and vanished. The Police Lieutenant had a bullet through his leg, several of the Malays were wounded—including one with a smashed knee-cap and one badly bitten by a snake during the shooting. All this had happened in the morning.

They had been still several miles from the road, so they had had to hobble towards it, carrying their wounded, before they could get help. They had sent an advance party ahead, and when they themselves crept out of the jungle they had found a complete reception-committee drawn up along the road: Lancers in armoured cars, infantry in jungle-kit waiting to take up the trail of the vanished terrorists, doctors with stretchers laid out, signallers, senior Police and Army officers, jeeps, scout-cars, ambulances. The Police Lieutenant was very tired, stumbling along on one leg and a stick, and still very much in the mood of the ambush. He had to be gently persuaded that it really was not necessary to post sentries, before he would lie down on the stretcher.

For me, the ambush was a most necessary shock, a most necessary reminder. This hospital life was an illusion—it was the jungle that would now have to be real for me if anything was to make sense. And during the weeks of fever, and relapse, and convalescence that followed, I never forgot it.

Yet, when the time came to leave the hospital, I was sorry. I had become very attached to it, perched on its hill, with its cinema sucking in soldiers and village Chinese and Malays each night, expelling them in a babbling shouting mass at ten or eleven; with its Catholic Mass dolefully chanted every Sunday morning; even with its noisy orderlies clattering up and down its corridors. I was sorry to say good-bye to the Matron who had been so considerate during the bad times, her square handsome face stooping over my bed, her hair sweeping back with a surprising chestnut curl, her progress followed everywhere by her wretched wire-haired terrier Whiskers—Whiskers, who loved us all very much, always barked at the Chinese, always

refused to be caught, always fell accidentally-on-purpose into the goldfish pond ten times a day. I was sorry to say good-bye to the Sisters, red-caped against the cold, unceasingly kind; to the Major who always kept a live bamboo-snake in a cardboard box under his bed and used to let its vivid jewelled-green length slither along the concrete paths on Sundays for exercise; to the Police Lieutenant, now beginning to walk again with a stick; and to all the others who had shared these past few weeks.

And yet, and yet—even the return to the hospital at Kuala Lumpur, even the shock of already forgotten heat, sticky sultry heat that held me gasping and sweating on my bed, even this seemed just part of the progress from the illusion of hospital to the reality of jungle. I hated this progress. I loathed the thought that reality should now mean jungle, but there was nothing to be done about it.

There followed yet more weeks of convalescence, with occasional fever, and relentless cossetting by Colonel Callaghan and Sister O'Hara; vitamin pills, malt extract, bottles of stout, special food—even fresh milk, a real concession, for in Malaya there were few cows and fresh milk for hospitals had to be flown from Australia. When I was discharged, the Colonel even invited me to stay with his family for a few days until I felt like rejoining the Battalion—days that made all the difference, and were a kindness indeed.

And then, astonishingly, the fever was behind me, forgotten, and I was back in Wardieburn, wearing uniform, looking out again at the Battalion Camp, at buses, and taxi-drivers, the circle of hills still shimmering quietly in the heat-haze as if nothing had happened. Yet for me everything had changed. The past months—Singapore, my first patrol, the course in Johore; Kuala Selangor, the paddy, the swamp; the dinner, the fever, the hospitals—these had changed it for me. The future now held nothing but an interminable sequence of jungle-patrols, but at least I no longer felt alone. The scene in front of me now made sense. I thought I understood it. And I felt that at last I was beginning to get some idea of what I had to do.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

> For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise and garments rolled in blood.
>
> ISAIAH ix, A.V.

SINCE my job now clearly consisted of nothing except leading one gang of killers through jungle in search of other gangs of killers, mere prudence dictated that my gang should be the more efficient. I was beginning to know my men, and I was full of ideas. I would practise them in ambush drills. I would teach them all to be crack shots. I would encourage them to be specialists: Bren-gunners, leading-scouts, trackers. And I would combine them into a team in which every man would always know what to do whatever happened, and would do it instantly, without orders.

It was all the easier because Able Company was now based at Wardieburn, and responsible in particular for the area round K.L., including Ampang. While I had been in hospital the entire Battalion had been at Wardieburn, re-training, resting, holding ceremonial parades and inspections, reverting to garrison life. But now the Battalion had gone. Only the Company remained, and I was free to do what I liked, and with the entire facilities of Battalion Headquarters to help me.

Best of all was when I was told to lay on ambush demonstrations with my platoon for the N.C.O.s Cadre. Through hot dusty days I tried to reproduce the demonstrations I had seen in Johore. We found a large bowl-like valley, one side of which formed a natural grandstand, and which included a clear view over a wide network of paths and scrub. We recreated every kind of situation—every permutation of events we could think of. We marched the Cadre through the empty valley up on to

the hill, let them watch fictitious terrorists approach to talk to a fictitious tapper, and then watched them suddenly start as the valley erupted with massed machine-gun fire, and the enemy figures ran like rabbits, twisting and turning between the fire-positions. We watched demonstrations where MacBride carefully placed every man in position, one by one, briefing each separately in a complex wide-area ambush covering perhaps a square half-mile. Then the enemy would appear somewhere unexpected—just coming into sight over the brow of a hill for only a few minutes perhaps, and never coming close at all. We watched to see what the men in ambush would do, and after the confusion and shouting and gunfire the Cadre would try to untangle it all and decide what ought to have happened.

We marched the Cadre through one ambush after another themselves, bunching them up in nasty narrow tracks to see what it felt like to be caught at point-blank range. And all the time I lectured to the Cadre, and made them argue back. This was a subject which they must not only understand, but on which they must have opinions. Their lives might depend on their opinions. And, together with my platoon, and always subtly coached by MacBride, I was beginning to form my own opinions. We were all beginning to understand each other—and also to think automatically in terms of men, ground, fire-power, and the unexpected. Always the unexpected. Day after day the jargon echoed through our minds: arcs-of-fire, killing-grounds, search-parties; alternative targets, briefings, follow-up parties; casualties, night ambushes, day ambushes; prepared ambushes and impromptu ambushes, ambushes under control and ambushes *not* under control.

Next I tried to make a start teaching my men to use their guns. We would set out for the jungle shooting-range at Ampang at five in the morning, stars bright overhead, frogs honking in ditches. By the time we were ready to leave camp it would be already dawn, with a grey paleness above the hills and a few small clouds already showing pink. It was a cool, fast drive, with only a few people about: Chinese girls, on their way to tin-

mines or rubber-tapping, in trousers with the inevitable head-scarf hiding their faces except for cheekbones and eyes; Tamils driving herds of black water-buffaloes; a Sikh giving us a smile and a half-military salute as we drove by. The landscape was grey, shapeless, the trunks of the rubber-trees showing white beside the road in the headlights, and then shading into black further away, silhouetted against the dawn sky. Everywhere was mist, gathering in folds along the valleys, being swept in under the tilted windscreen of my Dodge in a cold wet rush of air.

Since the road to Ampang divided foothills on one side from a tin-mining and squatter area on the other, it was a road the C.T.s must often have to cross—and might one day well ambush. Once I forgot my carbine, and felt very naked without a gun in my hand, but the men behind me looked sufficiently murderous in full jungle-kit, with two loaded Bren-guns—even though we were only one vehicle we probably looked alert enough to be safe. Terrorists usually reserved their fire for those looking half-asleep.

At the range I began with the Bren-gunners. "I don't suppose any of them have ever fired a Bren-gun wearing all their jungle kit," the Major said. I certainly hadn't ever tried to fire my carbine groping through scrub, or sliding down a slope, or wading a stream. Handling a gun in thick jungle proved difficult. If our lives were going to depend on this—as in theory they did—then it mattered. And what about learning to handle our guns in darkness? How many of us could change magazines, or clear stoppages, with our eyes shut?

I dressed the Bren-gunners up like Christmas trees, with everything they might ever possibly wear—packs, ponchos, ropes, water-bottles, grenades, Bren-magazines, repair kits, spare barrels, parangs, parachutes. I made them adjust their Brens as they would be on the march—supported by a thick strap over the shoulders, safety-catches at Safe, to be fired from the hip. Then, one by one, I took the over-burdened, blaspheming, lurching gunners round the track.

It is difficult to fire a Bren-gun from the hip accurately even on an open target-range. These men had to fire it whenever I said, at precise numbered posts in awkward places, along a track that twisted, climbed banks, ploughed through swamp, and got lost in scrub.

With 50% tracer we could follow the shooting exactly. I told them to think of only two kinds of target, the precise and the vague. They sweated. They struggled. They dropped full magazines in the mud. They got tangled up in equipment and jungle. They found themselves trying to open fire while standing on one leg, crawling on all fours, or clambering over fallen trees. It was not exactly safe to be near them. It took all my concentration just to keep *behind* each gunner as we twisted and turned, the gun raking the jungle all round.

They began to become deadly. The rapid "crack-crack-crack" of aimed shots soon contrasted sharply with snarling automatic fire, spraying twenty or thirty yards of jungle at a time. The volume, the power of the shooting startled me. It startled the gunners too—their bullets beating and smashing through bushes, their bodies braced against the jump and recoil of their guns, their ears deafened by hammering explosions, their eyes following yellow sparks of tracer.

I practised with my own carbine. It was so light that at automatic fire the muzzle jumped sky-high with recoil. So I tried to see how fast one could fire single shots—and found it easiest with both eyes open, pressing the trigger steadily as the sights jumped and fell back to the target after each shot. I found I could pepper a plate in a hurry at thirty yards quite comfortably. Thirty yards is the normal range in jungle, and after all a man was much bigger than a plate.

We spent a day practising assaults and the tactics of charging a camp. Our antics were like glorified schoolboy games, but again, they mattered. We sent ahead two or three men to be the enemy, and one after another the members of the platoon took it in turn to command during the encounter, the confusion, the detours, the charge. Then we sat down for a smoke, arguing

about what one should always try to remember, heatedly criticising each other. We were slowly becoming a team. I really began to feel that if anything *did* ever happen we would all know what to do.

The time for our return to the jungle was coming close. And we were slowly being integrated back into the pattern of patrols that had been going on while we rested and trained. We were living in Wardieburn, with the cinemas and swimming-pools of K.L. just a taxi-ride away, but we were also in touch with the terrorists. I described a typical day in my diary as follows:

"Breakfast at 8.0 and then walked across to the Company lines. Inspected the Platoon Basha, the men standing by their beds wearing boots and shorts and berets. The other two platoons are in the jungle, so they have to do all the fatigues, which they hate. The answer was to send them out of the camp to evade the Sergeant-Major, which they preferred to do by being sent on a walk-and-run. Corporal Brown was very explicit: 'You know, sir—I take them out and we run a bit, and then we walk a bit, and then perhaps we have a sit-down, like—and a smoke.'

"After they had gone I came back to my room here, and sat down to read, feeling terribly sluggish, but not daring to sleep in case I was late for Commanding Officer's Orders at twelve. At ten to twelve dressed myself up in Sam Browne and peaked hat, and stepped out into the heat, feeling awful—the light striking up into my eyes from the white steps of the roadway. Commanding Officer's Orders were very military: men rigidly at attention, their eyes staring fixedly at an imaginary point in front of them, presumably infinity. Gave my evidence about Bishop losing his ammunition, and was sent away. Walked back over the red dusty road past the parade-ground, crossed the main road with its grinding red buses full of dark faces, the glass windows replaced by a few

white bars to let the air pass through—past the low barbed wire entanglement protecting the Mess with a few futile strands, past the supremely indifferent cows, superciliously munching where they pleased, past the row of newly planted trees to the white stones of the little roundabout in front of the Mess where the light hurt my eyes again, and so back to my room, sweating, miserable, tired. Was fast asleep in my chair when Captain Drake came in thirty minutes later to ask me to bring in Alan's platoon from the jungle.

"Had lunch in a thoroughly hostile mood, and then lay on my bed feeling hostile. Wondered bitterly how I had ever imagined I could be happy in the Army. Then changed into jungle boots and slacks and walked over to the Company, finding myself a few minutes later driving down the main road to K.L. sitting in the front seat of the Dodge, with behind me a Ford semi-armoured and a fully-armoured. Looked back and was glad to see the escorts were invisible behind the armour plating, sitting down in the trucks as instructed for their anti-ambush drill. I felt better once we had started. The road from Wardieburn to K.L. always intrigues me—about three or four miles long, it rises slightly as it passes some of the nearer tin-mines, set among low scrub and flat hummocky areas of excavation. Then as it reaches Setapak, it starts going downhill till it reaches the roundabout at the top of the Batu Road. Setapak was for a long time a known source of food for the bandits coming from Ampang—a long straggling village strung along the road—long low wooden houses, the fronts open to the street and crammed full of Chinese families, kitchens, shops, garages, the children playing in the strip of beaten dust beside the road where the chickens run madly in front of the wheels of passing traffic, where bicycles and trishas and parked cars bake in the heat and drown in the rain. All very squalid, but interesting. There is a dovecot set on a pole beside the road, blue-grey pigeons pushing in and out through the little doorways. The houses are not continuous, there are stretches of road where only banana

plants flap their huge green sail-like leaves or only stray cows graze. There is one stretch of ragged garden and scattered houses where a sudden rich tang of tobacco assails the occupant of even the fastest moving car: at first I thought it was the smell of curry, but now I am told it comes from a little tobacco factory. Further on our road is joined by the Bentong road, curving in from the right on one side, with some respectable Chinese shops on the left. The cinema is the Alhambra, showing only Chinese, Malay or Indian films, its front covered with cheerful posters showing very conventionalised portraits of actors, half-hidden beneath strange scrawling scripts.

"Among the Chinese shops is the Scenic Photo Studio, where we usually take our films—the Chinese there are young and quiet, with long taut faces. There is usually a girl sitting on a low stool at a table, tinting photographs. They must do a good business: the portraits they display include all sorts, from Malay police, Chinese wedding groups, Indians in beard and puggaree, to British soldiers and a group photograph of the Setapak taxi-drivers.

"From there the road goes slightly downhill all the time till it meets the roundabout. But before we reached it we turned off up the Swettenham Road, which not only by-passes Batu Road and its traffic-block, but takes one along a winding tour of a high residential district to the west of Kuala Lumpur, where wealthy houses hide from the road among their gardens and shrubs, turning their backs to look away to the hills in the distance, blue shapes that lie in a ring round Kuala Lumpur, clear-cut and jungly in the sunlight, dim and grey in the rain, half-hidden by a low ceiling of cloud. But only for a short while do we see the hills for the Swettenham Road jumps down again and we find ourselves coming out behind the Padang, behind the low black and white timbered buildings of the Dog, with the Town Hall and Government buildings facing us beyond the green expanse of the Padang and the stream of traffic passing along Jalan Raja. Really rather im-

pressive, being open and spacious and calculated with an eye to effect, even though it does look rather artificial with its minarets and towers set on the top of red and yellow stone facades which always remind me of birthday cake.

"I took my convoy round the Padang, and then turned right at the lights, towards the railway station and Kinrara. Another right fork and we were back in a residential area, the houses perched on the sides of short steep hills, a tangle of white roads wriggling over the smooth slopes, brown roofs and green roofs appearing above and below the road. Then the road moved swiftly downhill into fairly young rubber, curving in and out through the trees. Very clean rubber, too, and a great contrast to the next estate where the trees were older and already cluttered up with undergrowth and small saplings: a sign of very bad management. We went through a Malay Kampong, and then through Tamil Labour-lines, while the road dwindled from tarmac to red dusty laterite, twisting and curving through the rubber trees, rutted and bumpy. At the end of the road was the little overseer's shed at the junction of the power-lines: as our vehicles came through the trees and stopped I saw Alan's men rise up from the ground where they had been sitting—green shadowy shapes under the green shade of the rubber trees. Very pleased they were too—they had found the food-dumps they were after and displayed the tins—large rusty kerosene tins, full of rice, calico, forceps for extracting bullets, documents in Chinese characters and another wriggling script, map-making materials, a jacket—just what we wanted to find. Alan said the S.E.P. had been very helpful indeed, and he had been talking to him for the past two hours, trying to form a picture of how the bandits lived. 'The S.E.P. showed us a place where his group had a battle with the Security Forces—it was quite thrilling: "The Security Forces came up here" he said, "And I was *here*, and my friends were over *there*, and we fired a magazine in *that* direction, and then we rushed down *this* path . . ." '

"Alan told me this as we drove back: we sat in the front

seat of the Dodge and gossiped—as we came back through K.L. the rain began, splashing up whitely from the road, streaming down the sides of the Dodge. The Major was waiting for us at Wardieburn by the Ops Room, and we were soaked again as we carried the tins and containers in, spilling rice all over the road in a shower of white grains—good rice, too, small and sweet, and such a waste to leave it in the puddles!"

A few days later our turn came, and again I was taking my platoon out on patrols. And now they really were becoming routine patrols for me, and I was becoming blasé, accustomed, unimpressed by events no longer new.

Some events, however, were certainly new. I spent one complete and humiliating afternoon lost among rubber-plantations, only a mile outside K.L., marching my patrol round and round in circles, up and down one hill after another, all looking exactly the same.

Another time we were ordered to abandon all caution and show ourselves in a certain area as a show of strength—with luck news would filter back into the jungle that the whole area was swarming with troops. So we rejoiced, and pretended we were a Brigade, and marched ostentatiously up and down railway lines, in and out of rubber-estates, pausing for brew-ups on station-platforms and in villages.

Yet another time I found myself suddenly tangled up in the Emergency Regulations: we emerged from the jungle edge into rubber just before dusk, to find a suspicious number of women and children tapping the trees long after the permitted time. So we rounded them up, and found their overseer, who said he didn't know they were breaking the Regulations and anyway they had special permission.

The whole area included such a variety of ground, including grassland and rubber, scrub and foothills, all mixed up with true jungle, that we were forever bumping into people—tappers, tin-miners, planters, cyclists, children, policemen, villagers. I was

terrified we would shoot someone by mistake, and one day I nearly did. We were walking through hilly rubber and scrub, and I heard someone rushing downhill away from us. Then I saw him—a white figure, running for his life down the hill. My carbine was already in my shoulder and I shouted. He looked round, saw the gun, and most wisely stopped. He was an old, wrinkled Chinese, a tapper, his identity card was in order, he was carrying no food or water, there was none to be found nearby, and why he had run away we had no way of knowing.

Later we had an even closer escape. We were in hilly jungle, and heard the "chop-chop-chop" of someone cutting wood. For half an hour we made a most elaborate detour and stalk. The noise was in the valley below, but it would have been suicide to approach along the stream at the bottom, so we inched our way along the side of the valley, half way up the slope. We really did inch our way, moving one foot at a time, hesitating over single twigs.

I had to lead the way, and as I had no intention of being shot by a Chinese sentry I found it easy to make our progress a masterpiece of caution. I could hear nothing, not even my own men. When I glanced back I could see Corporal Brown just behind me, moving literally on tiptoe. Then everything happened all at once. I heard Corporal Brown spring round with a curse, and at the same instant I saw a brown face looking round a tree-trunk straight at me, on the *other* side of the little valley, about thirty yards away. I was so tense that in the instant I saw it my carbine was again in my shoulder and the sights swinging up to connect with that brown face. In that split second I realised the face was wearing a battered brown trilby, the eyes staring with horror. "*Tappers!*" gasped Brown.

We had come so quietly we were right in among them. I had seen one and Brown had seen another—he had spun on his heel, his finger snapping back the safety-catch on his carbine for automatic fire from the hip, only to find himself staring straight into the face of a horrified child whom I had passed without seeing. They were a Chinese family, tapping scattered rubber-trees in

the jungle-fringe, speechless with terror at finding the jungle all around them suddenly alive with armed men. They knew just as well as we did how close we had been to opening fire.

So the weeks passed—weeks spent walking many miles, prowling through many kinds of country, gun always in hand, hoping some day to meet a terrorist. Of course we never did, but at least I was getting used to the Major and to the platoon, MacBride and I had settled down to a very happy partnership, and there were occasional breaks. These even included four days in Singapore on the dubious strength of a visit to an oculist, and when I returned I found myself facing the thought of the jungle more calmly—not least because I was coming back to what I was at last beginning to call my own platoon.

I should have learnt by then that Malaya was full of the unexpected, particularly in the Army. Platoons and Companies were frequently changing officers and N.C.O.s, new drafts of recruits were always arriving, experienced drafts always leaving just as they became experienced. It was fatal to rely on continuity, as I found. Not only had the Major been called away to a conference, leaving Captain Drake in command, but at the last moment Alan was called away to give evidence in a court-martial at the other end of Malaya. He had no N.C.O. who could replace him, so I had to hand over my platoon to MacBride, and take Alan's platoon myself. And Captain Drake then insisted on sending us for no reason at all to sit in vague ambushes for a whole week in an area I knew nothing about. I protested. He insisted. So there was nothing I could do, except drive off in a very bad temper with Alan's platoon to this strange area.

When we had to leave our vehicles we found a most convenient jeep-track, heavily overgrown but still offering a good path. It took us for more than a mile towards our destination. The only members of my patrol I knew were Untam and Besi, and I had asked specially for them. My N.C.O.s were Corporal

Cottle and Lance-Corporal Blackman, both strangers. I had had no time to make any of my normal preparations, and found we had forgotten the tracer ammunition which the Colonel had ordered all patrols to carry. The only hopeful thing was that for once we were not intended to do any walking. Our orders were merely to make a base-camp, find a good ambush position wherever we liked, man it during the day, sit in it for a week, and then come home.

It was the first time I had planned a long-term ambush. The area was pleasant, after all—rolling, undulating grassland, with a river running through it, and patches of scrub and tall jungle. Our jeep-track also ran through it, crossing the river by a small bridge, and as it was late afternoon by the time we reached the bridge it seemed a good place to stop. There was a little clump of trees beyond the bridge, where ashes and debris showed a Malay patrol had halted some days before us for a meal. The trees might do for our ambush position, but it seemed a little exposed for our full platoon base-camp, so I pushed on half a mile, until the jeep-track ran into thick jungle. There we found water, and spent our first evening building our base-camp, tucked away in jungle seventy yards from the really *very* convenient jeep-track.

Next day I explored both ways along the jeep-track. Half a mile further on again it lost itself in much thicker jungle, splitting into three very minor tracks. I explored each of them, but they just meandered on and on, leading nowhere. However, between them they formed a network covering the whole surrounding jungle, so their junction was an obvious place for an ambush. On the other hand, so was the bridge where our jeep-track crossed the river, a mile the other way, in the open grassland. Which might be the more fruitful?

I really hadn't the faintest idea, so I decided to ambush both. There was nothing else for it, except that it meant both ambushes would always be dangerously weak. Lying in ambush in silent stillness through the heat of the day was exhausting, which meant we must have morning and afternoon shifts. Providing

four shifts every day meant each ambush would never have more than four or five men—which was *not* enough to meet a strong terrorist patrol of perhaps fifteen men. But I hated the thought of not covering both ambushes, so I decided to take the chance.

The rest of the day was spent planning the two ambushes. The track-junction provided excellent ground for a proper killing-ambush, and I decided the two Corporals could take turns to command, morning and afternoon. The other ambush, by the bridge, was scarcely a killing-ambush at all. But it was a splendid observation-post, covering the track for a long way in both directions, as well as the stream and the bridge. So I planned it as an observation-post, with four positions in the spinney covering all directions. I planned it with a particular eye to comfort, since the lack of N.C.O.s meant I would have to take both shifts each day myself.

Once the positions were planned there was nothing more for me to do. We were now all condemned to spending an entire week of our lives sitting in the middle of nowhere, waiting for terrorists to choose to walk into us. It seemed a silly way of spending a week.

Every dawn we marched out along our jeep-track to our ambushes, came back at midday to brew-up and change shifts, marched back for the afternoon shift, and returned at dusk. I couldn't help thinking we made admirable subjects for an ambush ourselves as we marched along our jeep-track, day after day, with clock-work precision. A cast-iron rule in the jungle was that one must *never* use the same track twice—someone might see you the first time, and ambush you the second. But there really was no other route that would not take three times as long, so again there was nothing to be done.

There was nothing to be done except sit. For me it meant eight hours a day of sitting. I resolved I would sit comfortably. The spinney gave deep shade inside its little ring of trees, but there was nowhere comfortable for me to sit. However, there were two ready-made Bren-gun positions, one facing each way

along the path, the gunners at full length on the ground. They formed two corners of a square. The third man formed the third corner, looking out over a wide expanse of grassland. He needed a chair to be able to see, so we cut branches and built him one where he could sit comfortably for hours. The fourth corner was myself, looking out over the river, the bridge, and the jeep-track leading down to it. Finally I discovered there was a most excellent log just outside the spinney, and when I sat on that log I could see everything. I could also be seen. So I built a screen. I drove stakes into the ground, hung branches over them, festooned the branches with creeper, and then inspected it from outside. My arbour was in deep shade, with a dark background, and I reckoned at twenty yards it was invisible. It was not exactly bullet-proof, but it was comfortable and I could see.

I sat on my log for days. By dusk on the first day I knew every detail of landscape, the branches overhead, the mottled dying creeper in front of me, the midges dancing above the river, the shadows slowly moving round the tree-stump where the jeep-track came into view a hundred yards away in front. I knew the sounds: the jungle-sounds, the frog-sounds, the insect-sounds, the coughs and shuffling movements of the men with me. I knew them much too well.

It occurred to me that if someone did actually come along the path it would be difficult for me to attract the attention of the others without moving or talking. So I laid strings from my log to their three positions, arranged with helpful bunches of leaves that jerked when I pulled the strings. I spent nearly a whole morning amusing myself just by building careful supports and toggles for my ends of the strings, so that I could reach each one quickly in turn without fumbling.

Each day we brought our weapons and ammunition, water-bottles, sweets, and something to read. We all read books all the time, the only way to keep awake through long sleepy sunny hours. For day after day we read our books. We counted the days till the end of the week. Nothing moved to mark the passing

hours except the slow sun overhead. Nothing moved anywhere. Nothing happened.

By the afternoon of the last day it had struck me a considerable number of times what a ridiculous picture we made. Here I sat, perched on a log with my loaded carbine across my knees, waiting patiently for the terrorists to come into sight and reading Evelyn Waugh's *Life of Edmund Campion*. I did not expect anyone to walk into my ambush, but every time I turned the page I glanced along the track just in case. A few yards from me were three men, and it was plain they did not expect anyone either. Two of them, Briggs and Bottomley, were former Durham coal-miners—now they were sprawled on the ground beside their loaded Bren-guns, their green uniforms sodden with black patches of spreading sweat. The third man was Andrews, a butcher's boy from Yeovil. He was perched on his special wooden seat, which we had built most carefully so that he could always see in all directions, and he was asleep. Across the ground between us ran my three solemn little pieces of string. The whole thing was ridiculous.

Although it was now nearly evening on the last day, I was still interested in Campion. I wanted very much to finish the chapter on Campion's execution before dark, turned the page, and just remembered to look up. Sheer shock jerked my eyes wide open. Shock clamped my mind into a paroxysm of concentration, slid jangling down every nerve, jerked a dozen alarm-bells into crazy clanging. A dozen thoughts were fighting for life in my mind—while my body had already moved, crouching uselessly closer to the ground behind my screen of creepers, balancing behind the carbine in my left hand, guiding my right hand to the strings. I pulled, and pulled, and pulled. Three bunches of leaves jumped. Briggs and Bottomley woke from their sloth, and, a moment later, Andrews. They turned towards me, looked where I was looking, jerked together with shock and then reacted with professional instantness—their

three bodies wild with action for a second, and then slowing into shadowy stillness, the guns moving in their hands as if alive. Each had moved to his emergency position, each was crouched to fire from the hip, his finger curling on the trigger, the roaring murder of machine-gun fire only a thought away. Each was staring through the curtain of leaves, looking into the yellow glare of the setting sun, into the yellow light striking back from jungle-grass. I looked back at the track where I had seen the three figures walking briskly towards us, coming closer every second. They had gone.

There was a long, long silence. None of the men moved, waiting for my word. I looked again at the track, at the bridge, at the river, at the rustling expanses of jungle-grass, the motionless patches of scrub. Absolutely nothing to be seen. No sound. No movement. Nothing.

But I had seen them. They had been terrorists. I was sure of it. They couldn't be anything else—three of them, close together, in khaki-coloured clothes, walking quickly along the path, just visible over the top of the grass where the track came into view beside the tree-stump.

But why had they vanished? Where had they gone? Had they seen us? Were they now watching us, waiting for us to come out into the open at their mercy? Or had they just turned sharply off the path, and were they even now hurrying further and further away from us? Or were they just making a detour to avoid the bridge? Might they suddenly appear on the track behind us?

Of my three men only Briggs had seen them properly. He agreed they looked like terrorists. He had not seen them turn off the path. He was still standing tensely in his place, waiting for my orders.

I didn't know what to do. This was the chance of a lifetime, and *already* it had gone. With every second I hesitated they would be walking further away. Suppose they *had* just turned off the path for a smoke, for a rest? Suppose they really were sitting up there on that slope, somewhere among the tall waving

grass, looking down at the bridge? Then suppose they saw four men emerge into the sunlight and come slowly up along the track towards them? The situation would be reversed. They would ambush us.

I decided to wait. We went back to our positions, staring nervously out in all four directions. If they had started to make a detour to avoid the bridge—a most likely spot to suspect an ambush, after all—then they might appear anywhere within half a mile of us, anywhere in our field of view.

The minutes passed. Five minutes. Then ten. I was still struggling with indecision, knowing I was struggling with indecision, in a most real agony of mind, while every so often the men glanced quietly at me, waiting. All our lives might depend on what I now did. There was still absolute silence. Not a movement. Not a sound. We had been waiting for fifteen minutes.

It had to be faced—we really could not wait for ever. Sooner or later we would have to find out if they were still on that hill, and if they were not on that hill then we must find out where they had gone. I stepped out on to the path, into the sudden sunlight. I went forward, down to the bridge, across the bridge, up the first few yards of the path the other side. If they were sitting in that grass resting then they were now within ten or twenty yards of me. I walked one step at a time, staring at the tall yellow grass mounting up ahead of me, my mind telling me quite clearly I was a fool. My carbine was balancing lightly in my hands, my fingers delicately aware of the trigger, my eyes aware of individual leaf-blades and sprays of scrub, my ears listening to the soft padding of my feet, to the grasses swishing in loud alarm at my slightest movement. By now both Bren-gunners were out in the open behind me, strung out at thirty yard intervals, their Bren-guns braced against their hips and pointing up the hillside on either side of me. We must have all looked grotesquely dramatic—four shabby green figures in sloppy hats, sweating in the evening sun, strung out over nearly a hundred yards, creeping slowly up that hill in a deathly game of grandmother's footsteps.

But if we thought we were gingerly advancing into the jaws of death, we were wrong. There was no-one there at all. We found where the terrorists had turned off, and there was a clear trail where they had pushed away through the grass into low scrub. We went back to our ambush. I sat on my log, cursing in the sunset, savagely aware I really *had* done the wrong thing. For the first time I had seen the enemy, and I had let him walk away. I had neither opened fire nor followed up. There are no excuses in the jungle. There is either a kill or there is no kill. I had failed.

My mind was going round in circles, trying to think what I ought to do. It was no use trying to follow up now: we had only four men, no Ibans, and less than two hours of daylight. We would look very foolish if we ran straight into a defended camp just before dusk. And what else could we do, except go on sitting in our ambush till the light went? It was a long time before I realised there *was* something else—I could radio to the Company.

After all, I now had that priceless jungle possession—a piece of information. I had *seen* three terrorists, at an exact place, at an exact time, going in an exact direction. Even if I could no longer exploit this, perhaps others could. If I could radio the news all patrols in the area would know by next morning. And be relating this sighting to earlier information, much might be deduced. For example, the terrorists' destination must be somewhere within two hours' walk of where we were now. They might keep walking after dark, but only if they knew exactly where they were going or had a rendezvous. The mere fact that they had obviously found the jeep-track just as convenient as we had brought me to the shivery conclusion that perhaps *both* sides had used it the last few days, each in ignorance of the other. And they had appeared to be uniformed, bunched, moving at a fast walk, giving the impression they knew where they were going and were not taking precautions—so perhaps they really knew the jeep-track very well? Everything seemed to suggest that we had stumbled across either a courier-route or a food-

supply route, and both Police and Army might find this most suggestive.

The whole problem was so typical of the jungle: a huge complex of uncertainty revolving round one single tantalising fact. What I ought now to be doing about that fact I didn't know. Certainly, we could follow up along the track with our full-strength platoon and trackers in the morning and see where it led us, but in the meantime?

I decided to abandon our ambush. The radio-message was more important. And it was useless leaving just one or two men ambushing nervously by themselves. With things as jittery as they were now, and dusk approaching, I did not want odd groups of trigger-happy men dotted round the jungle outside my control. The last thing I wanted now was an accident.

So we went back to base-camp. I sat trying to write my radio-message, thinking morosely that if the terrorists chose now to return unharmed along their track while we were not watching, that was just too bad. Thomas struggled with the radio, searching desperately for the Company frequency. The platoon crowded round, eagerly asking for every detail. Our return had galvanised them: they were feeling the same shock of excitement we had felt an hour earlier. Their hopeful excitement merely deepened my depression even more. When Thomas said the evening atmospherics were already making communication impossible I felt worse still. Someone mentioned a night-ambush, but I was in no mood for a night-ambush. The sky was already darkening, I was tired and hungry, my mind bitter with disappointment, and anyway the terrorists had gone.

But when I started to think about it, I realised glumly that we must lay a night-ambush. That one unshakeable Fact—it mocked and gibbered in my mind, daring me to ignore it, to forget it. Nor did the Fact merely consist of three terrorists. It included also that exact twenty-yard stretch of jeep-track where they had walked, and that trail pushing away from the jeep-track into the scrub. That was the Fact—those few yards of ground. I *knew* the terrorists had actually walked over them,

and that made them immediately different from all the other square miles of grassland and jungle round us. And since the Fact had begun in my mind with three terrorists, and now seemed to have turned into just a few yards of track, I began to wonder uneasily whether it might perhaps soon turn into something else? Where terrorists had walked *once*, they might walk twice. But when? Perhaps the Fact was really best thought of as a time-period, and perhaps we were now somewhere in the middle of it?

The only way to make certain was to keep that track-junction under permanent ambush. It was our only link with the terrorist world—that strange world of which we knew so much in theory and saw so little, that world in which thousands of Chinese shared with us the same days and nights, the same jungle and tracks, the same awareness of life lived in terms of the loaded gun. And these two worlds were ruled by the same deities —luck, chance, uncertainty. But could not luck be wooed? Could it not be wooed by taking every possible opportunity of combining the events that *might* perhaps allow it to manifest? If we did not keep that track-junction under permanent ambush would we not be like a card-player who has been dealt the ace of trumps, and then cannot be bothered to go on with the game? Was not this the time of all times when we must let nothing go by default? There was about one chance in a hundred that a night-ambush would be rewarded, but if we did not now stretch every nerve to the limit, take every precaution, double and re-double the stakes, would we not lose even that *one* chance? And since for most of our time in the jungle we had no chance at all of being rewarded, to be suddenly presented with a chance that was actually *calculable* was riches indeed.

So I gave my orders. The men who had been resting all afternoon would sit up all night in ambush. The men who had been ambushing all afternoon would sleep all night to be fresh for the follow-up next morning. The ambush-party would therefore be of nine men, including the two Ibans. Corporal Cottle would be in charge. In the morning I would radio to the Company and

ask if they wanted me to continue the ambush, or follow-up, or both. I had no hesitation about giving myself a full night's sleep —if tomorrow was going to include an assault on a terrorist camp I would need all I could get.

The ambush-party gathered eagerly in the twilight, checking their weapons with real care. I told them to take all three Bren-guns: that would give them massive fire-power. I began to think how Cottle ought to place his men and then I began to have doubts. Just suppose something *did* happen during the night? If the terrorists returned and I wasn't there just because I preferred a full night's sleep, how would I ever forgive myself? Just to think about it made me uneasy—a nasty nagging feeling at the back of my mind. It pierced my tiredness. It goaded me, and I changed my mind. I would take the ambush myself. I would sit up all night, and nothing would happen, and in the morning I would be so exhausted I would be in no state to lead anyone anywhere. I knew I was being a fool, but it made no difference. I told Cottle my decision, asked Briggs to boil me a mug of tea, and started to dig some cold corned beef out of a tin in a hurry.

A few minutes later I was walking along the jeep-track for the fifth time that day, brushing cautiously through grass and overhanging branches, hurrying to get there while there was still light. The sunset was lurid, low and red and sulky, the trees already black and ominous against the sky. The jungle surrounded us with its evening chorus of millions of insects, combining in shrill roaring derision. In the base-camp dim grey figures were already lying on their ponchos, sweating, waiting for sleep—and the terrorists were probably doing the same.

It was dark when we reached the river. I left the men in our old ambush-position, and went forward with Cottle to the track-junction. The problem of how to ambush a track-junction, at night, in waist-high grass, seemed at first childishly simple, but

the more I looked at it the less I liked it. Positions in the grass would be noisy, cramped, miserable, difficult to control. But to sit in a long line in the middle of the jeep-track itself seemed a silly way of trying to hide ourselves.

Again there was nothing for it—we had to sit along the jeep-track. At least it was simple, and fool-proof, and we all knew where we were. It took me a complete hour to place the men in position, and brief them in whispers. It took longest with the Ibans, who had to be briefed in pidgin English, with pointings and gestures.

"You, Untam, *here*. With Besi. We ambush here. Savvy? I see bandit *there*. Three bandit—one, two, *three*. Perhaps they come back. Bandit come back, you *no* shoot. You wait. Sh-sh-sh, like that. Bandit come near, *I* fire—bang-bang. Me, bang-bang, then you and Besi bang-bang. Savvy?"

"No. Me *no* savvy."

So it went on, until Besi said he understood and would explain to Untam. I left them muttering together, and hoped indeed that Besi understood.

Once our vigil began the time for explanations and orders would be past, so I had to brief them in detail. We were sitting in pairs, with three feet between each pair. Cottle and I sat on the track-junction, facing the path where the terrorists had vanished. As soon as we sat down we were hidden, covered by thick rustling jungle-grass, invisible until stepped on. I discovered this for myself as I pushed through the grass, tripping over bodies and weapons, peering down into dim faces. I stood in the middle of the jeep-track gazing round, listening, and found my ambush-party had vanished into the night—it was impossible to tell that five pairs of heavily-armed men were spread out on my right and left.

We laid a piece of string to each end of the ambush, running over the knees of each man, for signalling. Each pair was to have one man listening and one man resting, and every hour I would tug the string until I got an answering tug from each end, and every pair would change over. The string was also the signal

for approaching terrorists. And since the terrorists might rejoin the jeep-track to north or south of us and return along it I had to put a Bren-gun team at each end of the ambush, facing along the track, with orders to open fire on their own initiative if approached.

However, if the terrorists did come along the jeep-track we would be badly placed—I didn't want them on the jeep-track at all, I wanted them to retrace their steps exactly, approaching the jeep-track along their own little path. That was where I chose the killing-ground—the first twenty yards of the footpath. If the terrorists walked into the killing-ground I would open fire at the last possible moment, and when I did open fire every man would automatically start the heaviest possible fire into that twenty-yard square. Everything depended on such an overwhelming volume of fire that every yard of that square would be instantly swept.

As soon as the ambush had begun, I started having doubts. Everything certainly did depend on that first shock. If any terrorists lived through it, and kept their nerve sufficiently to fire back, then they had the perfect target—ten men, sitting in a line, without protection. One single wild burst of fire could kill two or three of us without any trouble at all. We were lined along that path shoulder to shoulder like a firing-party at an execution, so it paid us to let the enemy get as close as possible. But the moment they fired back we changed from a line of executioners to a line of targets. The range was twenty yards. The thought disturbed me.

However, there was nothing to be done except sit and eat boiled sweets. I had filled my pockets with sweets and chocolate, and now I arranged them round me as I lay stretched out across the jeep-track. I started worrying again: suppose a terrorist rushed me, and my carbine jammed, and my only weapon was my parang? I would need it in a hurry, but as it always used to get tangled up when I tried to draw it quickly I now took it out of its sheath and drove the blade firmly into the ground in front of me, where I could pick it up in an instant. It was Tom's

parang: he had given it to me when he left Malaya. It looked too theatrical for words—but I left it there.

The hours passed. The moon rose. It reminded me of that earlier night-ambush by the canal, and that ridiculous signalling with matches. It reminded me of the hospital and the torches of the Night-Sisters. There was a glow in the sky over Kuala Lumpur. It was Saturday night. Just a few miles away there were couples dancing at the Dog, iced drinks at the Harlequin, raucous taxis and packed cinemas and figures squatting in the gutter along the Batu Road. If the terrorists were out anywhere under this night sky they would also see that glow, and what would it mean to them? The occupied enemy stronghold? The unattainable delights of city-life? Or the source of information and rice, bandages and ammunition, clothes and ink? The mocking glare of defeat? The glowing sunrise of victory? I really had no idea how their minds would react, and gave up wondering—just sleepily watching it myself, and wishing I was there.

We could see more clearly now, and the tall blades of grass were changing to silver in the moonlight. The stars of Orion were brilliant overhead. It was eleven o'clock and the night-life in K.L. was now at its height. I could hear traffic on the main road a mile away. The mosquitoes were bad, in spite of repeated smearings of repellent on face and hands. Their bites penetrated my shirt, and in my hurry I had forgotten to bring a thick sweater or socks for my hands. All I could do was drape a piece of camouflage netting over my hat so that it hung down over my face, but then I couldn't see and pushed it up again. I lay sweating in the hot night air, relaxed, listening to wind rustling the grass, eating my sweets, playing with the piece of string twined through my fingers.

I was still worrying. Suppose the terrorists heard us and fired first? What would Napoleon have done? All I could remember about Napoleon was the Battle of Waterloo, which didn't help. I was very sleepy. There were seven hours till dawn. Anyway, worrying didn't help either. Night-ambushes never turned out

as one expected, and the only thing one could do was make a very simple plan on the assumption that everything would go wrong anyway.

Cottle was still awake. "If they haven't come by now they won't come at all," he whispered. "Are we really going to stay here all night, sir?"

Ten minutes later I thought I heard a faint noise, away in the distance. I sat up, and poked Cottle. It came again. My heart was beginning to pound, my nerves tightening with sudden vigilance. Cottle's face was clear in the moonlight. "I *think* this is it," I whispered.

Someone was pushing through the grass towards us. Already I was kneeling on the path, clutching my carbine. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Cottle frantically shaking the Bren-gunner next to him, and jerking at the strings. I heard faint hurried rustlings as the men all along the line woke, remembered where they were, and snatched up their guns. I heard the swishing sound of people walking through grass, and then the low mutter of voices growing louder, coming nearer. Thoughts were flicking across my mind like frightened fish across a pool: the thought that events were now out of my hands; that if the people out there weren't terrorists it was too late; that I couldn't remember if I had cocked my carbine. I checked my safety-catch, twice, the metal shining silver in the moonlight. I was kneeling up on one knee, the sand of the path very hard under my feet, the butt of my carbine pressed to my hip, and then the swishing sound was coming straight at me and the head of the leading man was coming into sight over the grass and I was firing, pressing the trigger again and again and again, very fast. There was an ear-splitting roar of shots from all my men, a roar that battered my ears, that sent thought reeling, a staccato hell that didn't stop as we went on shooting and shooting into the tall grass, each man alone in his own devil's inferno of noise—an inferno pierced by cries of panic from out in front and lit by spurts of flame, lingering like yellow flowers on the muzzles of our guns and the guns leaping and jolting in our hands. The

Bren-gunner on my left had orders to shoot across our front—he cut it fine, I could feel buffetting blasts of hot gas and flame as his jagged bursts of fire beat across our faces. On my right was harsh swearing as someone's gun jammed, and all around the metal clatter of empty magazines being flung on to the ground. My own gun jammed. The moonlight glinted on brass cartridge cases as I turned it over and shook out loose bullets and went on shooting. Again my gun stopped: I flung down the empty magazine, re-loaded, and went on shooting. Then I found I had stopped shooting, and was tugging at my lanyard for my whistle and was blowing and blowing and the shrill sharp edge of sound was cutting into the solid sound of firing. The firing stopped.

I was shouting. "Stand up. Everyone stand up. If you see anything, shoot."

All my men were rising up into sight among the grass, taut, crouching over their guns. We stared out over the silver grass shining in the moonlight, at the still black shadows under the scrub. Someone was still swearing steadily.

"Yellow bastards. Yellow bloody Chinese bastards." The voice rose sharply. "There, sir. *There*. I can hear another one."

We listened. There was silence. In the far distance we could hear a car moving on the road. And there was another noise. I held my breath. It came again, and again, without restraint now —a low animal moan of agony. It crept to us in a whisper through the tall grass. It was despair. The voices broke out again: "There, sir—*there*." I shouted. The muzzles of the weapons rose. I shouted again. The line vanished in noise and flame, the shots careful and controlled and echoing, the Bren-guns firing with thunderous, impassive regularity. A bullet struck a stone and riccocheted up into the night sky, whining. When we listened again there was no sound, except the distant car still moving on the road.

I was badly shaken. Those few cries from the grass had been like a bucket of cold water in my face. I was awake, gasping with shock. This was real. This was happening. We were shooting

people. We were killing them. At first I had been living from second to second, automatically, but now I was awake. We had worked for this for months. This was raw, savage success. It was butchery. It was horror.

My mind was working with vicious numbed speed, knowing all this and a second later disregarding it, knowing it must think for us all as we stood exposed in the moonlight, knowing there was not time to examine decisions, only to make them.

We must search the killing-ground. We must leave no-one gathering strength to shoot back or escape. We could not take prisoners. Convicted terrorists are always hanged, they know this, they fight to the end. You can't take chances in moonlight. Therefore shoot. Shoot at sight. Shoot to kill.

I shouted my orders, as loud as I could, repeating them, explaining what we would do, making sure everyone understood. Then we moved forward to search the ground, a long spread-out line of men wading into the tall rustling grass in brilliant moonlight. First we moved forward three paces off the path, already waist and shoulder deep in the grass. We all stopped together, and listened. Cottle shouted, I turned, and fired down at something behind me. It was a body, half-hidden, face down in the ditch, so close at my feet I had failed even to see it. I fired again, and the whole body shuddered. Cottle and I peered down through the shadows, parting the grass with our hands. There was no need to fire again. And there was no mistake—it was a terrorist.

I shouted, and the line moved forward another three paces, leaving the body behind us. We listened for nearly a minute. Then we went forward another three paces and listened again. It was slow, it took a long time, but we had no idea how many terrorists had been on the path when we fired, or where they were now. We could afford no mistakes. So we fired at every sound, every suspicious shadow. I left one Bren-gun team to watch the jeep-track, and brought the centre Bren-gun over on my left, to cover a nasty belt of scrub. If there were bodies to find they ought to be along the line of the path, so we fired low

along the ground, raking to left and right of the path, our guns held a foot above the path and their flames stabbing luridly, bullets slashing through the grass, and the grasses swaying back into place with a gentle sighing sound that died softly away in the distance after each shot.

Again we saw something—a confused white blur, twenty feet ahead, where we had heard the moaning. We fired till we were sure. Then we came slowly nearer, step by step. The blur split into two large bundles, with between them another body, lying on its back, a loaded carbine beside it. Again I peered down in the moonlight, and then peered closer. It was the body of a Chinese girl.

Again we went forward, still in a long line, still advancing and stopping, listening and shooting. We were now thirty yards from the path. On my right was Untam, bending low over his shotgun, so eager he kept moving forward out of line, and I had to keep tapping him on the shoulder, motioning him back.

Again we saw something. Again we fired, and advanced. Again it was a bundle, lying beside the path. But there was no body—no body anywhere in sight. Somewhere near us in the darkness was a terrorist, alive, armed, possibly wounded—exactly what I had feared.

A yard further on we trod on his rifle, flung down by the path. At least he was no longer armed—unless he had grenades. But if he was wounded, if he was even now crawling away with a broken leg perhaps, and if he had a grenade, then he would throw it. We became more cautious still. We advanced until the scrub began to break up our line. But we could find nothing, and we could only search open ground in darkness, so we had to give up and return to the jeep-track, now fifty yards away.

We still had to fetch the bodies. We stood round the first one, and there was a most perceptible hesitation to touch it. "I've never touched a dead'un before," said a voice, tightly under control. I had to force myself to stoop, and seize an arm, and

heave. We dragged both bodies back to the path—they were astonishingly heavy, wet and sticky with blood. After collecting their bundles and weapons there was nothing more to do, so I sent Cottle and five men back to base-camp to try to get some sleep, and with a radio message to be sent at dawn.

I stayed to guard the bodies. With me were Untam and Besi and one soldier. Someone had to stay—the third terrorist, and others, might still be somewhere near. It was a long wait till dawn. We talked, and paced up and down, and smoked, and looked up at the moon, and down at that silent heap beside us. I was so tired I was beyond reacting very much to anything, but even so I was still conscious of a strange sensation, a strange feeling in the air when I paused to look down at the two bodies. The others felt it too. We could not sleep. I remembered what Cottle had told me about the Ibans—before anyone had realised what was happening they had unfastened their long hair, and begun to dance a war-dance, round and round the two dead Chinese lying in the moonlight.

When dawn came we were able to look at them more closely, and I had to search them. They were ghastly. They were shot to pieces. It was not just that their uniforms were smeared and soaked with blood, but that our sheer weight of bullets had so ripped, slashed, torn. Many of the details were freakish, horrible —like the one single shot that had carried away the final joint of every finger on the man's left hand, so that it was now monstrous, grasping at the air, a stiff bloody-stumped claw.

A little later Cottle appeared with the entire platoon, bringing our packs and equipment and also two long trimmed poles. We had more than a mile to go to the road, and there is no way to carry a dead body except by lashing it to a pole for two men to carry on their shoulders. We searched the whole area in the early dawn sunlight and found nothing—except the track where the third terrorist had escaped. It was clear to see: he had flung himself flat on the ground, crawled on his stomach across the end of the killing-ground, and then back *towards* our position till he reached the jeep-track about thirty yards away. Once on the

hard track he presumably ran for his life. It was lucky for him he ran north; if he had gone south he would have blundered straight into an impromptu ambush which Lance-Corporal Blackman had most sensibly laid on the jeep-track the moment he heard the firing. I took a Bren-gun team along the jeep-track with the Ibans for half a mile, but found nothing—except some links from a broken watch-strap, lying glinting in the middle of the path.

It was time to march away—away from the trampled grass, the bloodstains, the empty cartridge-cases winking in the sun. We lifted the poles and the bodies swung gently. The girl had long black hair and it trailed in the dust. We marched back along the jeep-track, back to where Captain Drake was waiting with trucks and a scout-car. At the road the bodies seemed to create a remarkable impression: a grinning Chinese Police Inspector made me dictate and sign a report as I handed them over, and grinning Malays crowded round the truck in which they were dumped. Everyone was grinning, and perhaps for different reasons. Everyone except us—we had lived with these corpses long enough, and now we never wanted to see them again.

We drove back to Wardieburn, but that was not the end. My permanent ambush, of course, was no longer needed, but the follow-up certainly was. Untam and Besi and I had to go all the way back with a fresh follow-up platoon to show them where to go, and on my way back again my truck bogged down in a rubber estate. I had to walk another mile to telephone for help, and then hitch lifts in a succession of vehicles to get home. The final vehicle was the jeep of another subaltern—he was most hurt when I didn't tell him immediately of the ambush. But I was too hungry and too tired to talk, and it was already the middle of the afternoon.

At Wardieburn I could find nothing to eat. Even though I had not slept for two days I did not think I could sleep now without eating *something*. So I made myself have a shower, stolid with tiredness, sleepily scrubbing the blood off my hands without caring very much, shaved and changed and took a taxi five miles

into the heart of K.L. to the Harlequin. There I dozed groggily over an enormous meal, served by immaculate white-coated Chinese waiters to soft dance music, and then took another taxi back to Wardieburn where I climbed on to my bed, tucked my mosquito net round me and—at last—slept.

## CHAPTER NINE

"Is Piglet organdized too?"
"We all are," said Rabbit, and off he went.

A. A. MILNE

WE had thrown our small pebble into the pond of events—the ripples spread. Radio Malaya broadcast a report of the ambush, the *Malay Mail* and *Straits Times* printed long accounts, the news agencies sent cables that in London led to a paragraph in *The Times*. The Colonel telephoned me as soon as he heard, and later spoke to all the men who had been with me. Everyone was very pleased.

There were other ripples. Troops were diverted into the area, and within hours a plane was quartering over the jungle where the third terrorist was likely to be hiding. It had a loudspeaker and addressed him in Chinese by name, patiently suggesting again and again that it might be a good thing if the harassed Comrade surrendered, and anyway what would his other Comrades think if he came back without his rifle?

The Police rejoiced—and then were considerably put out when we reported that the leading terrorist had been carrying no weapon. This they could not believe, until they checked their records and found he was known to have a disabled right arm that prevented him carrying a weapon—which, I could not help thinking, was most fortunate for me. He could hardly have missed. The Police were also disturbed to find that the carbine belonging to the girl, according to their reports, had no business to be there at all—it should have been on the other side of K.L. and belonging to someone else. This meant they now had to amend all their records.

The terrorist bundles had been full of newly-acquired root

vegetables, which interested the Army in their search for food-supply routes and the Police in their search for food-supplying villages. The Police knew who all three terrorists were. The man was a Branch Committee Member, who had been notorious for throwing bombs in K.L. some years earlier. The girl was twenty-two, and a nurse. The man who escaped was the cook.

There were still other ripples. All three probably had friends, relatives, perhaps parents living within a few miles of K.L. and news of the ambush would spread rapidly. Whoever supplied the vegetables could not be feeling very comfortable. The biggest ripples of all would be in the jungle: it was almost certain that routes would now have to be changed, camps moved, plans and dates altered, supplies re-distributed, vacancies filled, promotions made. Nor was the cook likely to forget his experience.

In fact it was remarkable how many ripples could follow from just one small pebble.

I had plenty of time to think about the ambush because only a few days later I was again in Johore, at the Jungle Warfare School. The Battalion had been told to fill a vacancy in the School's Course on Chemical Warfare, so I found myself running up and down paths, pulling my gas-mask on and off by numbers as I ran. There was also a gas-chamber, full of tear-gas. First we all walked casually through in our gas-masks, jumping up and down, flapping our gas-masks to see if they fitted. Then we went through without them, a long line of us at a quick, *quick* walk—in, round the room, out. Even a few seconds of tear-gas was far worse than I expected, smarting on neck and arms, stabbing sharply under eyelids and in nose and mouth. We emerged gasping, tears rolling down red faces, and then for a long time we just stood around in the sunshine, a large group of steel-helmeted soldiers, all sobbing into handkerchiefs.

Apart from the gas-chamber, life was now one long holiday in shaded classrooms, with week-ends in Singapore again. After

the shock of the ambush, it was just what I needed. Army procedure laid down that anyone who had a contact of any kind with terrorists must write a long report, which was labelled "Secret", added to all the other files of the Emergency, and kept in the hope it would reveal useful ideas or information. I had even been required to tabulate the range, target and effect of every single shot we had fired. But for several days after the ambush I had been unable to bring myself to write a word about it, and finally I had to sit up all night writing my report before travelling to Johore. And having thus had to relive every detail, I felt that perhaps Johore would be a welcome change, and that by leaving my report behind in K.L. I would also be leaving behind the need to think about what it had described.

So I accepted even tear-gas with gratitude, only to forget it in turn very quickly when, exactly a fortnight after the ambush, I was again on week-end leave in Singapore. This was better than sitting on jeep-tracks, and just a few minutes before going back to Johore I sat down with my diary to say so:

"Sunday: 8.15 p.m. I don't know what I shall remember of Singapore in years to come—I know that at the moment it to me means a jumble of intense emotions and experiences. To me this room is Singapore, with its sage-green walls and its floor of speckled green tiles, and its huge propeller-fans revolving overhead. The row of sandals by the door are Singapore and so are the sounds in the distance—the drifting notes of the band on the roof-garden and the half-heard words of a girl singing 'Violetta'; the unmistakably Chinese chatter of the children in the little alley-way under my window; the squeal of brakes and blare of horns rising up out of the rushing roar of traffic; the sing-song repetitive phrases of a street-seller crying his wares in a high-pitched chant; and (even here, in the heart of Singapore) the chittering whirr of cicadas—mixed with the slam of a car-door, the ringing of a telephone, the clatter of a pail, the slapping sound of clogs on pavements. This is Singapore, the heavy black night air, pierced with

lights; the hotel bills printed in English and Chinese characters; the poker face of the little Chinese (looking, like so many Chinese, as if he had just hurriedly dressed in the dark and had put on his trousers and singlet only for a moment) contrasting with his open and unashamed avidity for the tip. The jade-green tea-cups and the thick sluggish coffee; the blue-and-white scoop-spoons for the sugar; the wire-netting top to the passage wall; the white expanse of the bed covered with a single huge sheet; the blue-grey blanket folded tentatively across its foot; the hotel regulations, also printed in Chinese characters and English, which announce that 'All the beautiful furnitures and settings in this hotel are specially designed for the comforts of the visitors it is requested that good care must be taken for same. Compensation at cost would be claimed if any damage is made on these furnitures or other things'—the rooms named after different countries (mine is Mexico)—all these things are very much Singapore. They have all formed part of the background of these last three days and I am very sorry to be leaving them. How difficult it will be to remember them when I have gone."

Back in Johore I graduated to learning how to take my gas-mask to pieces, with Ahmad again as my real batman, and very little happening. I was surrounded by instructors and students and Gurkhas, the Mess noisy with jungle conversation, the School echoing with Vickers and Bren-gun fire from the small-arms range, and while everyone else reflected the tensions of the jungle I could sink back in my armchair with a drink, just watching, and not even thinking about my gas-mask. It was always interesting to watch people from so many regiments and countries, and particularly so one evening when everyone was clustered round the radio. We heard the V-Sign throbbing on a drum, with background noises from London, and then a voice—world-known, resonant with accustomed power, full of deliberate hesitations as Sir Winston Churchill replied to the presentation on his eightieth birthday. We were hearing him

direct, his voice relayed round the world to us, here in the Jungle Warfare School in Malaya, while grouped round the radio were Chinese and Australians, Indians and Malays, British and Fijians, Africans and Gurkhas, all listening intently together as Churchill's rumbling sentences reached us from Westminster Hall.

When I watched the students on the normal Jungle Warfare Course I was astonished. How nervous they seemed. How earnest. How pale and breathless in the heat, how painfully ignorant. They were all just off the boat, and some of them did not even know how to use their sterilising tablets in their water-bottles, or how to follow a compass-bearing the easy way by watching the direction of one's shadow on the ground, or the value of *always* carrying a small bag of rice for emergencies. Had *I* been like that when I arrived in Malaya?

They were particularly nervous about terrorists. They still thought they would meet terrorists along every jungle track—not only did they assume they would be fighting for their lives in just a few days, but they also had no idea how they would do so. If I mentioned casually that I had had a contact a fortnight earlier, they were open-mouthed, trying hard to imagine what it must have been like. And, of course, they failed. They found it impossible to imagine in advance, just as I had done—so I said very little. They would all have to learn in their own way in the jungle-months to come, and my own experience really would not help them very much.

Then, in spite of myself, I began to wonder—why *was* this? When I had been going through the Jungle Warfare Course surely I had learnt a great deal from what other people had told us? I had been taught the whole theory of jungle war and surely that made it possible for one to imagine what it would be like to lay an ambush, or follow a track? Major Stringer's lectures, for example—hadn't they been picturesque, vivid, building up images like a film, unrolling before our eyes one jungle sequence after another?

Perhaps that was the point—they had indeed been like films.

And a film can teach one almost anything. One sits back in one's chair, the screen becomes alive, and there one is—right in the middle of the battle. What more could one ask? Yet, when I had arrived in Malaya, I had not even known whether I could answer that question or not. I would not have known how to describe the difference between watching a battle, and living it. But now I knew. Now I knew so very well. I knew that a film could indeed portray everything that might happen outside oneself—while under no circumstances could it tell an individual what would happen *inside* him.

It could never tell him the sudden highly-individual processes that would fill his own mind in a crisis. It could never tell him the undreamed-of thoughts, the precarious balances between emotion and intellect, body and brain. Subconscious and physical mechanisms are not easily deceived—only if a man *believes* he is walking a tight-rope between life and death will his nervous system, his heart and lungs, his arteries and veins, his adrenalin and oxygen levels, his sense-perception and reflex-rates, all combine into one suddenly integrated mechanism, designed to carry him through this—the ultimate emergency. Only if he *believes* in the emergency will all the levels of mind as well as body combine to meet it. And there are so many factors, so many uncertain equations and unknown quantities, that the final result can hardly be predicted—and certainly not by someone else, or by a film.

I remembered my ambush. My own reactions had not been at all what I expected. At the first burst of firing, my actual consciousness had changed—the actual sensations of living had been instantly different. I had been *conscious* that my mind was changing, that the forces which drove it were all changing gear together, releasing quite new combinations of energy. My mind was quickening, moving faster and faster, its colour vanishing, its emotions gone, its form evolving from second to second into a living, steely, icy mechanism functioning with split-second precision.

And as it did so I had felt something quite physical snap shut in

my brain—I felt it quite consciously, quite clearly, knowing I felt it. It was as if the engineer in a vast control-room had thrown every possible emergency switch, all at once, and great banks of connections, great complexes of circuits and dials and batteries had all gone dead. Whole parts of me had vanished. Now I was thinking thoughts I had never thought before. And I was using a whole calculus of priorities which I had not known existed, and yet the moment it did exist I knew it by heart and there was nothing to learn—there was only the ice-cold imperative, the need to force these new mechanisms into action, faster and faster.

When we went forward from the path, into the tall rustling grass, I was conscious not just of my mind, but of my mind in relation to what was around me. As we crossed the path into the grass I felt I had crossed a mental boundary as well. Now I was in the forbidden land. Every sanction, every moral scruple, every scrap of conditioning built into me during all my previous life had gone. Every instinct of self-preservation was at work, self-preservation both of myself and of the group, for the group *meant* self-preservation. We were all utterly dependent on each other, and because I was the leader I felt driven, *driven* every second to think faster and faster as the brain of the group, until in my mind the group and myself were one, with every least thought in my mind instantly converted into action by the group, and every least influence on the group instantly acting on my own thought. We were all in the forbidden land together—the land where one killed. And once *in* it, once that first fatal step was taken, then we were chained to our enemy, forced to kill or be killed, unable to go back, unable even to look back, even to think about right or wrong. After that first step our self-preservation became my moral criterion, murder my aim. After that first step I would have killed and killed and killed, coldbloodedly, deliberately, with my eyes open, for as long as necessary—and without permitting myself or anyone else the smallest instant of hesitation. As I went forward, as I fired, I knew this. And it was *knowing* this that was most terrible of all.

At the Jungle Warfare School, thinking back about all this and watching the callow fumbling of men new even to the jungle, who had not killed, it was the image of the forbidden land that stayed in my mind. It was a forbidden land with a high wall round it. People outside could see only the wall, and the wall told them nothing about themselves. One could not know what was beyond it without climbing over the wall. Only then could one know what had to be done, what it felt like to do it, and what it felt like afterwards to have to remember. To say the very least, I found it sobering to have committed murder.

I was quite happy playing with my gas-mask, except that a few days later I felt a pain in my left knee. Soon, whenever I bent my leg it felt as if I was tearing my knee-joint apart inside, sinew by sinew. I felt very tired. Yet I could not relax, and I could feel my whole solar plexus bunched with strain, taut against some subconscious condition I could not identify. I no longer cared about my gas-mask. Finally I persuaded the Doctor to send me down to Singapore, to the British Military Hospital. At first I thought I would be unable to go—it was the middle of the morning and I could find no-one willing to take the responsibility of looking after my rifle and ammunition until the arms-store opened—and in Malaya this *was* a responsibility. But if I had let the ambulance go, if I had waited one more day, I would not have been able to walk. I reached hospital just in time. A week later I knew I was having rheumatic fever.

The treatment consisted of little except gargantuan doses of aspirin, to slow down my heart. I collapsed under the aspirin, went deaf in both ears, while life became grey and my heart slowed. It would go "bump", and then pause to think. A long time later it would pull itself together, and go "bump" again. I was beyond caring whether it went "bump" at all.

After three weeks the aspirin was reduced and I began to wake up a little. I spent Christmas in bed, and then by the time of the Chinese New Year I was even learning to walk again, and

being allowed out into Singapore. All was going well. I had not been very ill. My X-rays and electro-cardiagraph had been encouraging, and now there were other things to think about. I discovered the Tanglin Club, and went to a dance that suddenly seemed so European I didn't know what to do. I went to watch polo, I went swimming, I took a taxi right to the other side of Singapore Island to watch the sunset and found it a fantastic display of colour, arching up over the entire sky, just as people had described it. I went to hear Lin Yu-tang lecturing to the Friends of Singapore, and Professor Northcote Parkinson. A very kind doctor and his wife took me out to an enormous dinner at the Adelphi, talking of life before the Japanese came. I went to a meeting of the Alliance Française. And there was the Chinese New Year itself. It enthralled me, with its fire-crackers exploding all over Singapore day and night, and its Chinese holiday-crowds massing each evening in the streets, and all doors plastered over with scarlet squares of paper bearing good-fortune characters in gold. For a long time I stood beside an old man, watching him draw the characters with quick practised strokes of sticky gold paint. He hung the squares of scarlet paper on strings along the side of the wall, every two or three minutes selling one to the exuberant pavement-crowds pressing past. He was not writing—he was painting ideas. He made me wonder whether all Chinese ideas were like his characters—so elegant in form, so swift and practised in expression, handed on from person to person unchanged.

I would never know the answer, because I was suddenly helpless—caught by the system, the impersonal military system, all over again. Someone discovered a medical regulation saying that all officers with rheumatic fever must be invalided home. Someone else remembered that an R.A.M.C. general had lost his temper during a tour of inspection on discovering an officer who had not been sent home. They said there was nothing to be done. I protested. I appealed to higher authority. A full Colonel came specially to tell me he could do nothing. I was to go home at once, by air, in a hospital plane.

I woke up suddenly now, all at once, with a shock. I looked around me at all the normal details of everyday life—the hospital, the troops, the Malays, the Chinese, the helicopters, the palm-trees, the roofs of Singapore—even at the brilliant and everlasting sunshine, at the familiar tropical uniforms. Suddenly I realised I was going to lose all these. I would never go into the jungle again. My ambush-patrol had been the last patrol I was ever going to lead. I was going to have to leave with every question unanswered and with the biggest question of all staring me in the face—after I had gone what would I have left to hold on to out of all this? Surely nothing at all—nothing except my memories, my unanswered questions, and . . .? And my *diary*. So my diary became at that moment overwhelmingly important. I sat on my hospital bed, glancing hastily back through it to see just what in fact I had written, so carelessly, during the past year. The pages brought scenes back into my mind, but they were all scenes recorded at random, all arbitrarily selected by the stray impulses that had made me write on some days and not at all on others. It was no good regretting *now* that I had not written more. These pages were going to be all that would remain to me. I read them with a sudden *bitter* interest.

"Sunday 23rd May, '54: Singapore. Went to the restaurant downstairs and had meat curry and goulou Malacca. Took with me Robert Payne's *Mao Tse Tung* and glanced at it. 'Today we are faced with a threat of unimaginable potential violence; and for the first time we are presented with the possibility that our whole civilisation may perish, not because its foundations are invalid, but because we are unaware of the nature of the emerging civilisation which confronts us. Today, Mao Tse Tung could, if he desired, command an army vastly larger than anyone has ever commanded before. A new, vigorous and defiant China has emerged. For the first time in centuries China is ruled by men who are perfectly conscious of having their roots among the people who are most numerous and most representative—the peasants.

To underestimate the power of the new China would be dangerous, and there is hardly anything quite so important as the deliberate attempt to understand the new forces at work.'"

"Saturday 17th (?) July: Kuala Selangor: 10 p.m. I do so *loathe* having to move through the jungle for one hot exhausting hour after another, heaving the weight of one's body, pack, equipment and weapon over, through, and under a never-ending series of obstacles. I don't mind just *being* in the jungle at all. It's always struck me as so ridiculous that I do far more reading when I'm out on patrol than when I'm doing nothing back at the Company. Perhaps because in the jungle there's nothing else to do with spare time. I'm also worried at the danger of allowing this life to get a grip on me. It is a lonely life, so I find I am losing the ability to remember and think of others. It is a hard practical life, so I find I am losing the ability to think clearly in abstract terms. I am forgetting the vast world of stimulation and interest which for the moment is out of reach; like a dying tree my mental awareness is becoming dry, brittle, drab. The leaves fall and one is not aware of their absence, the limbs and trunk decay and one is not aware that they rot. Only the outward colour shows: grey and brown instead of green, a dull smothered sense of loss instead of a proud sense of possession."

"Wednesday 8th September '54: B.M.H. Kinrara, 3.15 p.m. All straws in the wind, pointing to the conclusion that there is *still* infection in me. Which is *damnable*. I had so hoped it was all over. But perhaps today's blood-test will help: Col. Callaghan himself took it—a very simple business of an orderly pressing my artery while I opened and closed my hand and the Colonel slid the needle into the vein inside my elbow. Just a long slow stabbing prick, and then I watched him pull the plunger out of the glass cylinder while the blood oozed in the other end through the needle. Found I could watch it and feel almost completely detached. Just for a second or so I remembered that this blood, this dark wine-red ooze, thick, sluggish—that this was *me*—and felt sick. But

not for long. So perhaps tomorrow they will count blood-cells and do experiments and prove that I'm not ill any more. And perhaps my throat won't hurt and my temperature will be down, and perhaps the day after that I shall be released into the wide, wide world again. *Perhaps!*"

"Friday 10th September '54: B.M.H. Kinrara, 8.30 p.m. In the dentist's waiting-room there was a woman sitting—Nepalese, I think. Very quiet, shy, with skin the colour of rich toffee, and slit eyes. She had delicate gold ornaments in her ears, hanging from her nose over her upper lip, and pierced into her nostrils. She wore no rings, her clothes were a combination of skirt and shawl, dotted and striped in green and white and red, in quite *excellent* taste. She was quiet, and alert, and completely impassive. But when the dentist's door opened behind her she turned right round and stared hard and long at the equipment. It made such a strange picture: the slim little Gurkha woman from the hills, laden with gold ornaments and wrapped in her coloured silks, her head turned away from me so that I saw the smooth black hair gathered at the neck, and beyond her, framed by the doorway, the equally silent mass of machinery, black and silver, chromium and tteel, sparkling and shining. I suddenly saw it as she might see it—inert, devoid of meaning—a symbol of my world, that must have seemed so strange in hers."

"Saturday 4th December '54: B.M.H. Singapore. I spend so much time listening to Radio Malaya through the head-sets provided for each bed—as I write this there is a programme of dance-music from Penang: interrupted a moment ago to announce the results of a Penang Municipal Election—polling for a Councillor in one of the wards. Three candidates, getting three and four hundred votes respectively, and the winner, a Chinese, getting over a thousand. Was amused by the *so* English manner and accent of the official reading the result, in the sort of tones he would have used in a quiet English town like Shaftesbury, but here reading out Chinese and Malay names and the long Malay name of the ward.

Elections here are a great novelty, a great innovation—they have to be sold to the public, to be introduced as a new game for the electors to play at—and I really do think that the earnest good-will of our British officials is something that we would have every right to be proud of:—if it wasn't our greater pride still that we take this attitude for granted."

"Monday 6th December '54: B.M.H. Singapore. There were all sorts of interesting things on the radio—a play by Nicholas Monsarrat—*The Ship that Died of Shame*; the news from both London and Singapore; and of course lots of music—'The Musette' by Sibelius, from his King Christian II Suite, Harry Lauder singing 'I've something in the bottle for the morning', Larry Adler playing Debussy's 'Clair de lune', Christian Fourcade singing 'Le Tapis Volant'—and many records, including 'Blue Pacific Blues' and 'Christmas Island'. There was a very good concert this evening, but I only discovered this just as it was ending.

"Woke up this morning at six o'clock, and went out into the corridor to watch the dawn—a soft blush of saffron-yellow, smoothing into the pale blue sky above and the purple blackness of the trees silhouetted below: lovely trees, each branch delicate and fragile and outlined by itself, floating gently in the air. There was a very brilliant star, all by itself in the sky, looking very large and slightly tinged with greenish-blue. All very quiet, very still, with the colours changing in the sky, and some low-lying clouds showing crimson through the trees. I went back to bed and lay dozing while the sun shone in, rising steadily above the balcony edge. If I opened my eyes the light splashed into them in overwhelming yellow brilliance, but if I only raised one eyelid a crack then the light was filtered and I could see the globe of the sun clearly, just below the blackness of the eyelid, surrounded by the wavering circles and rays of light that still succeeded in penetrating my retina.

"How long I shall be here I don't know. Today is my fourth day, and the seventh day of my illness. My leg is a

great deal better, but the pain has spread to my right leg, hips, pelvis, and lower back. This evening it has started in my left elbow. No fever, just general sweating and sometimes a cold sweat on my legs. Have had blood samples taken for tests. Am to have X-rays tomorrow. And what does worry me is that I may prove to have some kind of rheumatic condition that will prevent me going into the jungle . . ."

"Friday 24 December '54: B.M.H. Singapore. Nearly three weeks since my last entry—but it couldn't be helped. Was too drugged, and too tired. And today is Christmas Eve. I find it hard to realise! . . . most of *my* Christmas comes from Radio Malaya—together with descriptions of Christmas in other parts of the world. In England they say the gales have stopped—having lasted nearly three weeks. And there are floods. And tea is to go up from 8*d*. to 1/- a pound in the New Year. In Korea the Commonwealth Division has plenty of snow for a white Christmas. In the Federation the Air Supply planes have been dropping supplies to the flood victims and Christmas dinners to the jungle forts. In Egypt, now that the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement on evacuation has been signed, the Egyptian farmers have unbent sufficiently to sell turkeys to the troops. And behind the Iron Curtain the restrictions on Christmas have been slackened—there is some tolerance for religious teaching, and some shops are even decorated. And in Berlin the huge electric signs have again been erected on the edges of the Western zones, flashing their Christmas messages deep into the Soviet sectors. The Pope is still so ill that he will not broadcast his usual message—but he has sent a message to the Catholic Chinese in Communist China.

"Here in our hospital ward we have red hangings on the lights, and a little toy fir-tree; a winter scene made out of cotton-wool and paper houses. There are palm fronds outside the doors and in the wide verandas. The Major opposite, from the British Military Mission with the French in Saigon —still half-paralysed—has strung about twenty Christmas cards out on wires along the wall above his bed. His wife

brought in a large armful of mauve and purple gladioli, and orchids, and they are now standing in bunches all over the room. . . . There are little Chinese lanterns hanging in all the doorways, swaying gently in the breeze.

"A very welcome breeze, too—today was so very hot and sticky. The monsoon rain has stopped and so we have the sun instead—I find it *just* bearable to lie on my bed, with thin tropical pyjamas on and half a sheet draped over me—but even then I am sweating and hot and restless. So I slept all afternoon, and after tea was astounded to have a visitor—even the Sister was in a flutter of excitement and surprise, and I realised why when a very good-looking and charming girl walked in, so very sophisticated with hair expensively set and *so* English it just wasn't true! And she was a complete stranger. It was Alan's work, of course; he had said he might arrange something but I had not expected it to happen. She works as a secretary in the Foreign Office Department of the Office of the High Commissioner for South-East Asia, Malcolm MacDonald. She sat on the bed and talked for about twenty minutes, and then went off to see Robin Turner as soon as my second visitor arrived—the C.O. of the Jungle Warfare School. Very kind of him—he told me about Watkins of the Somersets who shot himself while pig-shooting —'I went in to wish him Merry Christmas', said the Colonel —'but I'm afraid he's for it when he comes out.'

"It is strange to remember that in this hospital there are Moslems and Hindus and Chinese to whom Christmas is merely one of a long series of alien religious festivals. I also find it strange to remember that at the same time Christmas is a symbol of the division of the world. I find the thought of those electric signs in Berlin a most terrible thing. The radio has just been bringing us dance-music from the Harlequin in K.L.—I can just imagine the scene—then it took us to Penang, and to Malacca (where St Francis Xavier is buried). Just for once broadcasting will continue till midnight—instead of being cut short for economy reasons."

"Saturday 8th January '55. B.M.H. Singapore. 9.30 p.m. Radio has just announced that a squadron of the Parachute Regiment is to come to Malaya. Also Canberra jet-bombers. And that a taxi-driver was ambushed by six C.T.s and killed on the Johore Bahru to Kota Tinggi road. I never really thought that a *taxi* would be ambushed—very effective, of course, to the extent that it will frighten civilian traffic off the road, what little there is. And it's only a few miles north of Singapore Island. What a ridiculous and *maddening* war this is."

"Sunday 9th January '55: B.M.H. Singapore. 8.45 p.m. Very hot—little drops of sweat gathering on my upper lip and chin, sliding down inside my shirt. A Negro thumping the piano outside the window, on the floor below, and singing 'If you were the only girl in the world' and 'I've got sixpence, jolly, jolly sixpence.' A train rumbling past in the darkness, hooting, whistling eerily—a darkness broken by the brilliant stab of lights, given depth by the cicadas, shrilling shrilling, shrilling. There are other lights—car headlights, moving along unseen roads, a little splash of light on the ground outside the little coffee-shop outside the hospital a hundred yards away. And yellow blocks of light, fading at the edges, hanging in the darkness—not the harsh outlines of windows but the gentler, larger brilliance of lights hanging in balconies, corridors, rooms open to the air.

"I spent half an hour this afternoon leaning on the iron rail at the edge of the corridor, watching the cars coming and going below during visiting-hours. There was a young Chinese girl sitting in the back of a little ricketty car with no roof, looking after two small boys. She was wearing the usual pyjamas, in dark purple-red with a crimson pattern, the trousers very loose, the jacket reaching almost to her knees, the sleeves to the elbow. Little red slippers with wooden clog soles, that grated on the gravel. Hair black, wiry, down to her shoulders. Little white earrings on the lobe of the ear, against the black hair; delicate skin, the colour of very weak

coffee, and an attractive face that curved down from a broad forehead to pouting full cheeks and a small scarlet mouth. A very low neckline, wrists hung with bracelets, hands indolent and beautiful.

"Like most Chinese she seemed to have an instinctive knack with children. She sat in the car, talking and playing with them, or she walked round carrying the smallest on her hip and an arm round him—one small leg clamped across her tummy, the other pressed to her back. When he cried she slapped him smartly on the face, and he stopped crying. Almost without thinking she kept them both amused. Then she got tired and lay on the back seat and took off her slippers. And when groups of British soldiers wandered past in their blue hospital clothes she always ignored them expertly—and then as soon as they had gone past had a good look. The interesting thing was that she was a quite ordinary working-class girl, and yet she put to shame nearly all the European women who walked past. She made their clothes seem insipid and shapeless, their bodies huge and clumsy, their faces hard and angular. She had the unashamed animal attractiveness which Asian women all seem to have until they get too fat, or too old, or too tired. For half an hour I watched the men go past her, and almost every head turned."

"Friday 14 January '55: B.M.H. Singapore. Am at least better off than the miserable flood-victims here in Singapore—the floods were awful—we've had thirty inches of rain in ten days. Many streets in Singapore waist deep. Railways and airstrips to K.L. were useless (the rain's streaming down as I write, with that typical roaring and splashing sound it has here). The Pahang River burst its banks, Kota Tinggi was deep under water. At Mersing ninety-two aborigines emerged from the jungle on bamboo rafts and asked for relief —until then no-one had even known they existed. The *Straits Times* started a flood fund and the Government supported it, so of course other newspapers attacked it. Though not for long. A new (and forcibly) re-settled village here

found itself waist-deep one morning and had a *lot* to say. Sappers worked all night laying a Bailey Bridge over a Singapore river—'the villagers are very pleased with their new bridge', said the paper, 'but are afraid it will be taken away again when the floods go down'. And, of course, the food regulations meant none of the villages had any reserve stocks.

"As far as one can tell from newspapers there was a vast amount of misery, hard work, and Voluntary Organised Muddle—all mixed up together. Organised Muddle has done surprisingly well. But the people are so pathetic—it shows in the photographs—sometimes vicious and ungrateful, but usually pathetic. Like children. Which reminds me of the Gurkha women here in the hospital. They walk very quietly, with just a gentle slap-slap sound of slippers, a huge shawl wound round and round their shoulders and sometimes over their moon-shaped faces, and much in awe of everything. They come here to have their babies in the Asian Families Ward, which I can see from my bed—while sitting in the sun on the balconies they seem quite at ease. But in the Big Corridors it's different. They peep and scuttle, and if anyone startles them they run away into the shadows with a little jingle-jangle of gold ornaments.

"I suppose by now I am deep in a fairly comfortable hospital *rut*! I do nothing except perhaps look out to the left at coconut palms and attap roofs, or to the right at Asian Families and clouds in the sky. Spend hours just listening to Radio Malaya through earphones. All sorts of interesting things—'Silent night, Holy night' for instance, in Chinese. Quite a number of Unesco programmes, as well. I must say it really is a pleasure to be able to lie on a comfortable bed for hour after hour, with the white fans churning steadily overhead, and to have nothing to do unless one wants to. Christmas Day was fantastic—everyone drunk. Tremendous noise, confusion, streams of visitors—I just sat in bed as an exhibit as the world streamed past. Gurkha women couldn't stand it, though they showed great Christmas spirit—Christmas night

saw an avalanche of babies. The girls took me down to the Sergeants' Ward in a bathchair, where a very happy party was soon in progress with the aid of drinks, a Fijian with a banjo, and an African tapping a beer-bottle with a spoon."

"Tuesday 18th January, '55: B.M.H. Singapore, 8 p.m. It happened yesterday morning. The R.A.M.C. Colonel came on his round—a quiet grey-haired man, with a tired, thoughtful face; a small slight figure in jungle-green uniform and maroon gorgets. In a few words he demolished my entire structure of hopes, so quietly built up at the back of my mind in the last two days. No, I could not be allowed back to my Battalion. Not even if I had an easy job—'If I send young officers back to their Battalions they'll soon be plunging into the jungle.' And behind his quiet words was the cast-iron barrier of the cast-iron rule that even he had no intention of breaking. The fact that my doctors had been fully prepared to send me back into the jungle last Saturday was not mentioned.

"Of course, he couldn't know what this means to me. He walked into the next ward, to see his next patient, followed by a flint-faced Sister and a slightly flushed doctor; a little group of three that walked as he walked and stopped where he stopped. They left me standing by my bed, looking at the bright sunlight, wondering why I didn't feel anything.

"I went out into the corridor, with the sounds of the procession dying away to my left, and I looked out over the rows of cars and the green lawn with its coffee-kiosk and fishless pond, over the road with its stream of traffic and its cluster of long-roofed attap houses, over the heads of the palm-trees and oil-palms and the tall spreading trees beyond, and I tried hard to realise that I had to say goodbye. And I knew that sooner or later the shock would hit me and I stared and stared at the landscape till it was a brown and green blur under a glaring sun that flashed back from the distant palms, and what to do I didn't know.

"All morning I drifted about, unable to sit still, unable

to do anything. After lunch I knew I had to drown the impending shock by plunging myself into distraction, sensation, colour, and if only I had thought back I would have realised it earlier. It was the same when I shot the bandits—the knowledge that something unbelievable has to be fitted into one's mind, and that the only way to do it is to fill one's mind with other things till the assimilation is complete. Just for a little while I felt I wanted to get drunk—the same savage feeling I had when I heard Bill Ramsden was dead. So I took my taxi and told the Sikh driver to take me to the Hong-Kong and Shanghai Bank on Collyer's Quay. I hadn't bothered to get a pass, and I didn't care. I felt miserable. A sick aching misery. We took the road past the harbour go-downs near the railway station—a flat smooth road—a glistening, shining afternoon."

There remained only a day or so. They allowed me to go back to the Battalion to fetch my belongings, and so I had a final journey back to K.L. and over the mountains to the new Battalion area at Bentong, and back again. In K.L. I missed the train and had to fly to Singapore—I was there in half an hour. Life was now moving so fast it was useless trying to fix impressions, to salvage anything from these last hours. Like Pooh, I was now so highly 'organdized' by other people that I could not catch up with what was happening. I tried to get used to the idea that there was now snow again in England, just as there had been when I had left a year earlier. And this sudden return was not what I had wanted at all. I had been caught badly by surprise, and now it was all too late. If I wanted to find any meaning in Malaya and Singapore as I had seen them, it really was no use looking at the artificial events of a sudden departure. I would have to look back into the previous months, into those months when I had searched quite casually for meanings without realising that those months were going to be my last. I was not going to be allowed a summing-up. I would have to draw my

conclusions from what I had thought at the time, from the events, the people, the places themselves. And perhaps, in spite of everything, that was not such a bad thing after all.

I wondered about this as our hospital-plane waited to take off. I sat back helplessly in my seat, oppressed even up to the last moment by the heat, the clammy air, and not consoled in the slightest by the wonderful journey in front of me, covering India and Pakistan, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, with nights in Ceylon and Mauripur, in Habbaniya and Malta, with views of Afghanistan, the Euphrates, Syria. All my thoughts were turned back, to Malaya, to Singapore. As our plane took off and climbed, heading out over Sumatra and the Indian Ocean, the humidity vanished, the air growing suddenly dry, sharper to breathe—and at the same moment Malaya also seemed to have vanished. Malaya was no longer real. Already it was only a memory. And already I knew that whatever might happen in the future there would always be one very special door in my own private hall of memories. It would be the door marked "Malaya".