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THE DEATH HOUSE

I was dreaming, and I was happy with my dreams. Within myself I heard the raucous cry of sea-gulls circling above the fishing-boats as the fishermen sorted their catch. I felt the touch of a salt-laden wind upon my face; I smelled the clean freshness of old-fashioned carbolic soap; I tasted the sweet bitterness of heavy Scottish ale.

I sensed the many things that were calling me to remembered life. Voluptuously, in my dreams, I was savouring the cosy luxury of freshly ironed sheets on my bed at home, and the friendly flicker of warm shadows that my bedroom fire cast upon the wall.

In the bewildering no-man's-land between the *was* and the *is* the pictures began to fade; the snug comfort evaporated; the crisp, clean smells of wholesomeness were engulfed. My waking senses, dragged reluctantly from their drowsing rest, experienced anew the smells of my existence as a prisoner of war of the Japanese in the jungles of Thailand. These were the corrupt smells of dying things – of decaying flesh, of rotting men.

Turning my head in the direction of the sound that had plucked me back to consciousness, I saw a small light lurching and staggering as if carried over uneven ground. I heard strained breathing and the irregular thud of bare feet on bare earth. Two British medical orderlies reached my end of the Death House with a body on a crude stretcher swaying between them in unsteady rhythm.

'Here you are, chum,' said the first orderly, as they dropped their load upon the ground. 'Another one to keep you company.'

The yellow flicker of the makeshift lamp gave just enough light for me to make out my comrades of the night. They were ten dead men wrapped in shrouds of straw rice-sacks. It was hard to tell that they were corpses. They might have been sacks of old rags or bones. The uncertain light and the prone position from which I was looking at them made them seem longer and heavier and more important than they were at other times to me. Even had they been plainly discernible as human carcasses – forms emptied of their humanity – I would not have minded. Corpses were as common amongst us as empty bellies.

I was lying at the morgue end of the Death House. Being on slightly higher and therefore less muddy terrain, this end was the most desirable section of the long, slummy bamboo hut which was supposed to be a hospital but had long since given up any pretence of being a place to shelter the sick. It was a place where men came to die.

'I hope no more shuffle off tonight,' I whispered.

'Don't worry,' said the orderly. 'This is probably the last. There are a couple of RCs on the edge, but like as not they'll hang on till morning. The priest gave them absolution last night, so they're all right. You know what they call that priest?'

I shook my head.

'The Angel of Death. Every time they see him come in the RCs wonder which of 'em is due to go. Some of the chaps don't mind knowing, but the others can't take it. "Nothing much you can do about it," I tells 'em. "The padre's got his job to do, and I dare say he doesn't like it any more than you do." Cor, I bet he was never half so busy in Blighty. If he was paid a quid for every one he sees off he'd be a bleedin' millionaire.'

As he talked, he and his companion rolled the corpse on to the ground and began to fit two rice-sacks over it.

'How old was he?' I asked.

'Oh, about twenty-one,' the first orderly replied. 'A Service Corps bloke with the 18th Division. Only came to Chungkai about five days ago.'

They performed their task with the deftness of old hands, pulling one sack over the head and the other over the feet. While they were pulling up the lower sack, the left hand flopped over on the ground. As it lay there, uselessly, helplessly, it seemed the most significant dead thing about the body. Curious how dead it looked. It was good for nothing. It would never work again, nor be raised in protest, nor point to something exciting, nor touch another gently. Its stillness seemed to shout, 'This is death!'

The hand was stuffed into the top sack, both sacks were tied together with pieces of atap grass, and the body was stacked with others about two feet from where I lay.

'Might as well take a breather,' said the first orderly.

'It's been a long night,' observed the other. They sat down beside me. For a few moments there was silence.

'The only ambition I've got,' said the first one, reflectively, 'is to die of old age. Cor, it would be great to have a family – a couple of sons, say. Watch them grow up; then, when you've had your life, see them come round to keep you company. That'd be a bit of all right, that would.'

He sighed.

'All this here death is so pointless – because it's at the wrong time. It's so bloody stupid – death for nothing. The time's been mucked up. A man ought to have a bit of dignity for himself, even when he's dead. But that's just what we haven't got.'

'Our trouble is,' said his mate, 'we were born at the wrong time and in the wrong country.'

They were silent again for a moment, then rose and picked up the stretcher, ready once more to play their part as hosts in the House of the Dead. As their lamp receded down the hut, darkness shrouded me again. I was now so thoroughly awake that I couldn't get back to sleep. I resented this, for sleep was the most precious thing I could experience. It wasn't that I minded lying on the ground, for my body had practically no feeling left in it. Since nature had anaesthetized it, why couldn't it have done the same thing with my mind and granted me peace?

I could not say, as Odysseus did, 'Be strong, my heart; ere now worse fate was thine' – it was hard to imagine a worse fate. However, I could say, as Achilles did to Odysseus in Hades, 'Don't say a word in favour of death; rather would I be a slave in a pauper's home and be above ground than be a king of kings among the dead.'

To all intents the advantage was still mine. I was alive. I could think. I existed.

The dawn came suddenly and harshly, bringing with it stifling heat, stark light and sharp shadows. The hut looked more like a Death House than ever – filthy, squalid and desolate. Through the gaps in the atap walls I could see open latrines, and beyond them bamboos touching bamboos in an infinite pattern that stretched out for a thousand miles to where freedom lay – and also reached in to hold us fast in a green prison.

Yes, I knew where I was; I was in a prison camp by the River Kwai. I knew who I was; I was a company commander in the 93rd Highlanders. And yet I wasn't. I was a prisoner of war, a man lying with the dead, waiting for them to be carried away so that I might have more room.

Ruffling my black beard, I wondered why I had had to end up in such a place. What a contrast this was to the way in which my ill-starred odyssey had begun – a beginning

know it'll be all over by Christmas? You're just wasting your own time and the taxpayers' money.'

His remark came as something of a shock. But it was to take many shocks to shake us from our complacent belief that all would soon be back to normal.

In early November I was given a week's embarkation leave, my first and last in what was to be a long war. This was a disappointing experience. It rained all the time. I went around to say goodbye, but the men I knew were already scattered. I had hoped to receive a hero's farewell from my girl friends. But they, too, had gone to serve king and country in one or other of the services. I slept for the last time in the comfort of my own bed, bade a sad farewell to my parents, my sister Grace and my brother Pete, and caught the train for regimental headquarters at Stirling Castle.

To the north of Glasgow, half-way between the Rivers Clyde and Forth, the castle stands with its turrets thrust aggressively skyward, as though conscious of its role as sentinel on the route to the Highlands. On a misty grey Saturday afternoon in the late autumn of 1939 I paraded on the square with a small detachment of first-line reinforcements. At the far end stood a knot of newly arrived recruits, eyeing us with awe. They were very conscious that we were soldiers – already on our way to war.

The orderly sergeant of the day took the roll-call of my men, and handed them over to me as 'all present and correct'. Hurriedly I inspected them and gave the order to slope arms. With a 'right turn' and a 'quick march', we were off. The sentry at the main gate came to attention, and presented arms in salute as we marched from that high, stark fastness.

There is only one way out of Stirling Castle, and that is down. Downhill we marched, down the steep brae, past the Castle Inn where the 'other ranks' drank their beer, down past the Red Lion where the officers sipped their whisky, down the main cobbled street that led to the railway station.

to recruit were so independent that at first they refused to accept the king's shilling. They came round eventually when they were allowed to serve under fellow Highlanders rather than English officers and to take their own kirk to war with them as part of the regiment.

After the Battle of Balaclava the battalion became known as the 'Thin Red Line', because it had halted the Russian cavalry charge. In the reign of Queen Victoria it was united with the 91st or Argyllshire Highlanders to form the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The 93rd made up the 2nd Battalion, and at the outbreak of the First World War the regiment was the first to land in France and the first to see action.

Although we were a Highland regiment, most of the officers came from south of the Highland Fault Line or south of the border. Our Jocks came from the industrial belt stretching between the Forth and Clyde rivers; from Edinburgh, Falkirk, Motherwell, Hamilton, Clydebank, Greenock, Gourock, Port Glasgow and Stirling.

They were in the Army for a variety of reasons: because they had imbibed tales of martial glory with their mothers' milk and so soldiering was in their blood; because the glamour of a soldier's uniform offered a cheerful contrast to the squalor of the slums from which they had come; because it was a way of earning a living; or simply because they were running away from a past.

After I was mobilized I visited St Andrews to retrieve some books and see friends. I went straight to the bar of the Imperial Hotel, a popular students' haunt, to show off my fine new uniform with its bright Glengarry bonnet, its badger's-head sporran and its green-and-blue kilt. The bar was almost deserted except for a travelling salesman and a fellow student, of pronounced Marxist views. The student lounging against the bar, looked me up and down.

'What the hell are you doing in that rig-out? Don't you

to battle I went to the university to read history and philosophy, more for my own enjoyment than for anything else.

My disablement had gained me a pleasant respite from the profession of arms. The future was so uncertain that I did not worry much about preparing for any other career. In my own leisurely fashion I was bent on savouring the delight of living. Today was mine; tomorrow could wait.

Fair winds and stately yachts, good companions and bonnie lassies, laughing days and carefree nights, seldom last as long as we would like. So busy had I been pursuing my favourite sport that I had paid no attention to what was happening on the international scene.

On 23 August, while I was taking part in an inter-varsity regatta, Germany signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. I did not learn this until I returned to my lodgings in Clynder, at the close of the day's racing, to find a telegram for me lying on the hall table. It was from my parents, telling me that my brother had been called up in the Royal Engineers and suggesting that it was time I returned home. The halcyon days were over. A long, fearsome struggle confronted us all.

I had made up my mind that I wouldn't spend the war 'flying a desk'. If I couldn't fight in the air I would fight on the ground. On my return home, I telephoned the secretary of our local Territorial Association in Dunoon to ask if there were any vacancies for commissions in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. I was told that there were and if I rushed over I could have one fairly quickly.

I lost no time, and was posted first to one of the Territorial battalions and then, after a month or so, to the 2nd Battalion – the 93rd Highlanders. This battalion, a proud body with a noble tradition, originated during the Napoleonic Wars when Major General Wemyss raised a regiment in the county of Sutherland in the north-east corner of Scotland. Those he tried

associated in my mind with summer in a civilized, or comparatively civilized world.

It was a good summer, that one of 1939. I had hastened back from the University of St Andrews to my home on the Firth of Clyde in time to take part in an ocean race to the south of Ireland and back on the old Clyde Forty *Vagrant*. The summer had had a stormy beginning, for a nor'-easter dispersed the fleet on the homeward leg and we had to limp into Dublin for repairs, although we finished third out of a large fleet. But from then on the season was a series of gay regattas and long, happy cruises. Skies were blue; winds were fair and warm. The Firth was saturated with beauty. Each day, each event, each incident, seemed more delightful than the one before. I had very little money, but I lived like a millionaire on what small skill I had as a yachtsman.

In July I skippered a yacht on a cruise up the west coast of Scotland, seeking harbour by night in lochs protected by hills ancient with wisdom and offering a rare serenity to those ready to accept it. That cruise over, I sailed from Sandbank to Cowes in my favourite yacht, the *Dione*. It was a 'couthy' sail, the whole seven hundred miles of it. My crew mates had a hearty lust for life; the four of us were on a spree, conscious perhaps, with war looming up, that we had to make the most of all that was joyous, clean and open-hearted. Although I sailed so continuously, there was always time for a girl in most ports. The more interesting the girl, the more favoured the port.

There was an ominous undertone, however, to the gaiety of that summer. Possibly my foreboding came from a feeling that I was living on borrowed time. I'd had a spell of duty in the Royal Air Force, which ended with an accident that left me with a fractured skull and spine. While recovering, I sensed that the drums of war were already sounding, so before going

The scene in Stirling was like that on any other Saturday. Housewives dragged reluctant husbands along – or left them standing while they paused to gossip with passing friends – standing and thinking wistfully of the soccer games they might have been following on the wireless. They paid no attention to us as we marched by. This was not yet the day of the soldier.

Downward our way continued – all the way down the world; down through England; down through France by stages; down through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean by troopship; down through the dripping jungle of Malaya on foot; down through the mud and the blood in the heart-breaking retreat to the last stand in Singapore; until all that was left of our thousand-strong battalion was a battered remnant of one hundred and twenty.

In keeping with the regimental tradition of being first in action and last out, the Argylls were the last troops to cross from the Malayan mainland to Singapore Island. We sauntered over the Causeway while our last two pipers played 'Highland Laddie', the regimental march. Also in line with our tradition, the battalion commanding officer, Lt Colonel Iain Stewart, his batman and myself as rear company commander were the last across. No sooner had we set foot on the island than the Causeway was blown up behind us to seal in Singapore's inhabitants on 30 December 1941.

On down through the island our remnant fought – until only thirty were left – until the defending forces ran out of drinking water, ammunition, land and hope. And even after that my own way continued, down across the Straits to Sumatra, by commandeered ferry. It came to a halt in a coastal city called Padang.

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SOLDIERS AT SEA

The last British warship taking off refugees had sailed from Padang a few days before I got there. The whole of Sumatra was about to fall. I knew that I must plan a way of escape, and that I'd have to do it at once if I was to do it at all, for the enemy was already closing in on the city. Australia, India and Ceylon were the nearest countries free from Japanese domination. But they were all a long way from Sumatra.

I was walking down the main street one morning, pondering ways and means, when a familiar voice hailed me. I turned to encounter a colonel of the India Army Service Corps whom I recognized at once. He was one of those whom two fellow officers and I had passed through the escape route we had been operating from Tambilihan on the Indragiri River on Sumatra's east coast.

'I thought you'd be on your way to India by this time,' I said as we shook hands, 'on board one of those cruisers that picked up the last loads.'

He shrugged fatalistically.

'No such luck. I followed your example and stayed to organize a transit camp a little upriver from you. I got into Padang two days before you did. I heard you were here and I've been hunting for you ever since. May I have a word with you?'

'Certainly,' I said, curious to know what he had on his mind.

He led the way to a coffee-house with a few iron tables set out on the street under a canopy. Two Malays in black sunkas