

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.

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

(brimless caps), white bajus (open-necked shirts) and bright sarongs were paying their chits and getting up to leave.

The waiter brought us our coffee. When he had moved away the colonel said to me in a matter-of-fact voice, 'I'm forming an official escape party. Would you care to join it?'

I stared at him dumbfounded.

'Of course I would! What's the plan?'

He leaned closer across the table.

'One of the last messages we received from General Wavell's HQ said that if no help arrives an attempt to escape should be made by a group of officers. And it's very unlikely now that any help is going to get through to us before the Japs take over.'

I nodded. 'I agree. Worse luck.'

'As senior officer here, it's my responsibility to see that the order is carried out. I've been in touch with the Netherlands Government chaps in Padang. They say they don't want to do anything official – if the Japs found out they'd take it out on them.'

'What exactly is your scheme, then?' I said, trying to curb my impatience. But he was determined to come to the point in his own way.

'Unofficially, however, the Dutch have given me some money; they say it's none of their business what I do with it. They've also loaned me two cars, to be returned when I've finished with them – and no questions asked. I'm told there's a chance we may be able to buy a sailing-boat at a fishing village called Sasok, about a hundred miles north of here.'

It sounded too good to be true. I must have betrayed my incredulity.

'Well,' he said, 'it won't be quite what you're used to at the Royal Singapore Yacht Club. But she'd have sail – and she'd float. The south-west monsoon's due to break in May. With a bit of luck we may get the benefit of its winds a little earlier than that and make Ceylon comfortably.'

'It's possible,' I said, 'Ceylon can't be more than twelve hundred miles away.'

The colonel frowned. 'But it won't be all that easy – not with the Jap Navy and Air Force all over the Indian Ocean.'

'Who are going?' I asked.

'I've worked out a list of nine. You may know some of them. There are three navy types: Crawley – remember him? He sailed up to HQ in Tambilihan in a junk. And two from the Royal Malayan Naval Reserve. Then there's a major from the Sappers and a captain from the Signals. Including myself – and you – that'll be ten altogether.'

'Could you take two more?' I asked. 'I'd like Rigden and MacLaren to come along. They were with me on the escape boat.'

He shook his head.

'Sorry, old boy. I'm afraid it just isn't possible. Rigden has been assigned as dockmaster, you know, in case a warship should come in. And MacLaren has been put in charge of the troops as sergeant-major.'

I felt that I was letting my friends down. 'Are you sure we can't change that?' I pleaded.

'Absolutely. We've got to get cracking. Besides, we'd be doing them a pretty doubtful favour. This will be a risky business. If we're caught we'll almost certainly be executed.'

This eased my conscience somewhat.

'When do we leave for Sasok?'

'At dawn, day after tomorrow.'

'Anything I can do meanwhile?'

'Don't think so, thank you. I've got the Malayan Volunteers picking up as many tins of food as they can find. The New Zealand naval officer is out hunting up navigational instruments and a book of nautical tables. The sapper is putting together a first-aid box – and I think that's about it.' Then he

added, 'I'll tell you what, though. You might invest in some cigarettes. They'd come in handy as barter.'

'Right. Now what about clothing?'

'Take what you've got. I dare say it isn't much.'

'What I have on – plus a spare pair of shorts, a shirt and a tooth-brush. What about weapons? I know where I can put my hands on some sub-machineguns.'

'No, I don't think that would be a good idea. We'll be dealing with natives, and it might put the wind up them if they saw us armed to the teeth. Take your side-arms, that's all.'

The colonel drained his last drop of coffee, lighted a cigarette and lounged back comfortably in his chair. He was ready for chit-chat.

'Tell me,' he said, 'how did you get away from Singapore?'

'Someone at Command conceived the brilliant notion of running a ferry service between Malaya and Singapore to bring in supplies. I was to be in charge. But, of course, it never began operations because it was based on the erroneous assumption that Singapore would hold out indefinitely.'

'What happened then?'

'As you know, everything was in a state of utter-confusion after the collapse. On Friday morning – that was the Black Friday of 13 February – I was ordered to go to one of the islands off Changi that was garrisoned by the Second Dogras. I was to take them off on ferry-boats and then land them behind the Jap lines on the west sector of Singapore Island.'

'But it would have been about three days too late by then, surely?'

'It was. When I reached the Dogras' HQ I learned that the whole deal was off. The next morning I discovered that a ferry-boat had arrived the night before, commanded by Sergeant-Major MacLaren. I sent a signal to Command HQ telling them that I was on my way in the ferry. HQ replied that I was to proceed on my own. We made it back to Keppel

Harbour. As we were entering, a Jap battery shelled us, so we moved out into the Straits and lay there until Sunday.

‘All that day we kept picking up boatloads of escapees. Around midnight we came across four men in a canoe. From them we learned that the show was over – had been over since eight-thirty that evening.

‘That’s about the time the CO sent his last message, saying that, because of losses from enemy action and the lack of supplies and ammunition, he could continue to fight no longer,’ the colonel mused. ‘It was the sign-off. Too bad I didn’t bump into you then. I might have had a more comfortable trip.’

I laughed.

‘Don’t be too sure about that. I had no charts and I didn’t know where the mine-fields were. But we got the ferry through somehow and sailed up the Indragiri to Rengat. There we found everything in a bonnie mess. I’d picked up Tom Rigden on the way over. When we heard about the nurses, women and children who were left behind on the islands we decided to stay and run an escape service for the ones who were stranded after the Japs attacked the last convoy from Singapore.’

‘That was a bad business, wasn’t it? I heard the whole convoy was sunk.’

‘Yes, that’s true. We picked up quite a few of the survivors. The nurses put up a terrific show.’

‘Was there anyone at Rengat trying to organize things?’

‘Oh yes, there was an Intelligence major named Campbell who was doing his best. He suggested that I should go back to Tambilihan and run things from there. As a matter of fact, he gave me this chit. He had the idea that we could get cooperation from the Dutch and put together some kind of resistance movement.’

I produced a slip from my wallet and read from it: ‘This is to say that Captain Ernest Gordon of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders is empowered to act on behalf of His Majesty’s

Government. Any assistance given to him in the form of money, arms or equipment will be paid for at a later date. All bills incurred by him as military representative in Sumatra will be honoured.'

A gleam lit up the colonel's eyes.

'Keep that!' he exclaimed. 'It may be very useful.'

I folded the chit carefully and returned it to my wallet. It did not occur to me that, far from proving useful, it might put my life in jeopardy.

The colonel pushed back his chair and looked at his watch.

'About time I moved along,' he said. 'I'm meeting the British Acting Vice-Consul at noon.'

He lowered his voice.

'Morning after next. Be outside the school by 0500 hours. No later. Goodbye.'

The first suggestion of dawn was paling the sky behind the palm trees as shadowy figures began to materialize in the school-yard. Introductions were brief. The borrowed cars had been carefully packed the night before. With a minimum of fuss and delay we took our places.

The colours of the buildings around us were beginning to show as the wheels crunched on the gravel of the driveway, and we set off, heading north for Sasok.

'It's a long haul to freedom,' I thought to myself as I listened to the music of the wheels on the road. 'But at least we're on our way.'

At Fort De Kock we encountered the headquarters of the Dutch forces. The officers informed us that the Japanese were advancing rapidly, and that to proceed farther would mean certain capture. We chose to take that chance.

When we passed their forward positions we began to appreciate the wisdom of their advice. We crossed a bridge. A few minutes later we heard a muffled *boom*. It had just blown

up. At the first opportunity we turned off the main highway on to a single-track road that wound and twisted up into the hills. We were in the nick of time. From the top of the first rise we saw the dust of a Japanese column rising from the road we had just left.

The mountain track was breath-taking, coiling like a snake around steep hills, crossing roaring torrents on shaky bridges, and slipping through dark cavernous jungle until it left the hills behind and entered the low-lying coastal area. Before long we came upon a fair-sized village where the controller or district officer had his headquarters. He received us warmly, handed us a letter to his assistant at Sasok and sold us a welcome case of beer.

It was late afternoon when we reached Sasok, a fishing village at the mouth of a river. We were pleased to see two fairly sea-worthy-looking craft, of a Malay type called prahu, tied up along the bank. With the help of the assistant controller we opened negotiations with the natives, and finally bought a ship for two thousand dollars. From the smiles on the faces of the onlookers we judged that the Malays had had by far the best of the bargain.

Our purchase was named the *Setia Berganti*. She was about fifty feet overall and rather broad in the beam. Her deckhouse, thatched and canted like the roof of a hut, ran almost the length of the ship, leaving only a short deck space fore and aft. Her unusually long bowsprit, lending a rakish air, was her only saving grace. Her hull, however, appeared to be sound, and her bottom was copper-sheathed. She was not exactly a thing of grace and beauty, but she was our Argosy of fortune.

‘Puts you in mind of Noah’s Ark, doesn’t it?’

A well-set-up man, with fair complexion and an easy manner, was standing by my side, looking the prahu over. He was Edward Hooper, former harbour-master of Singapore and member of the Royal Malayan Naval Reserve, who was to be

our skipper. In his spotless white naval shorts and shirt, his white knee-length stockings and white shoes, he was the picture of smartness and efficiency. He seemed to have little in common with the dowdy craft.

The skipper identified a small kiosk on the port side of the fore-deck as the wood-burning galley, and a big box suspended overside from the starboard shrouds as the combined bathroom and head. The vessel had one drawback as far as comfort was concerned – she had no sleeping quarters. Her Malay crews, Hooper said, slept on the copra cargoes. I looked at her rig.

‘Queer set-up,’ I noted. ‘It’s a ketch, but I don’t like the way the main boom runs abaft the mizzen. We’ll need to top it up every time we go about. Heaven help us if we ever have an accidental jibe.’

‘Wouldn’t be the best thing to happen,’ the skipper agreed. ‘Perhaps we’d better have a closer look at the sails.’

We walked up the short gang-plank and went aboard. He fingered a fold of sail.

‘Not much better than butter muslin.’

‘A bit on the gossamer side,’ I said. ‘Think we’ll ever get to Ceylon with those?’

‘Touch and go,’ the skipper replied. ‘Perhaps you’d better scout around the shops and lay in a few bolts of cloth in case we have to make repairs. It’d be a good idea to get plenty of rope, too.’

By the time I returned with some bolts of cloth it was getting dark. The headman offered to let us spend the night in the one-room school, and we gladly accepted. But we were so excited at the prospect of escape that we had trouble in settling down for the night. We kept up a running cross-fire of conversation.

‘Golly, these floors are hard,’ moaned Limey, the British naval officer who was to be our cook. He had been badly hurt

in the shoulder by a fragment of high explosive in the naval battle on Black Friday, and was threshing about trying to make himself comfortable.

'Not so hard as the floors in a Jap prison,' retorted Anzac, the New Zealand type. 'I'll take these any time. We're still free and we've got a chance of making a getaway. I wonder how those poor jokers in Singapore are making out.'

'Hard to tell, Anzac,' the Colonel sighed. 'There's been no word. But one thing you can be sure of – they're having no picnic.'

'You can say that again,' the skipper put in. 'If we set sail as quickly as possible we've a pretty good chance of not knowing what it's like being a prisoner of war.'

'And keep going at all costs,' said Limey. 'It's me for the girls and the high times in Ceylon. I'm sure to know some girls there. I know girls everywhere.'

'Stow the girls,' the Colonel growled. 'We've a tough job ahead tomorrow. We need our sleep.'

At dawn we were awakened by a babble of voices. Outside our quarters Malays were streaming in from all directions, laden with foodstuffs. They had come in response to our request. A regular market began to take shape, with baskets of limes, eggs, pineapples, sweet potatoes, yams, paw-paws, pomelos, dried fish and bananas spread out on the ground.

Limey attended to the victualling, while the rest of us carried out our assigned tasks. All that day we worked, loading ballast, stores and water, overhauling the rigging and splicing rope. Towards evening, order began to appear. With a grateful sigh, we lugged the last of our supplies aboard.

Our water was stored in six oil-drums of fifty-five-gallon capacity each, and ninety four-gallon petrol-cans open at the top. This gave us six hundred and ninety gallons, which we

believed to be enough to last us for at least thirty days, even allowing for wastage.

Provisions, too, were reasonably adequate. We had two baskets of tinned goods and two full sacks of rice. We hard-boiled a number of duck eggs and took along all the green fruit we could buy. In our pile of green coconuts we had an emergency reserve of both food and liquid. We stowed everything in the hold and covered it with the split bamboo to serve as a kind of deck.

That afternoon the village headman gave us a farewell party. A throng of children came to the prahu to escort us back to the village centre. Mountains of fried chicken and rice and fresh fruits were provided for us by the headman. One old man waved his arms up and down and blew lustily with his mouth, thus wishing us in pantomime a successful sea voyage.

Ralph Salmon, our interpreter, made a speech of thanks and farewell to which the headman replied with courteous formality: 'We are sorry that you cannot stay to enjoy our company. We have liked you. Now that you must leave us, we salute you and wish you good fortune on your long journey. May friendly winds take you quickly to your own people, and away from your enemy, the Japanese. When the war is over, and you have defeated them, come back to see us and we shall have another feast.'

Blessings and good wishes were lavished on us all the way to the prahu. The former crew insisted on coming aboard and setting the sails for us. Then they cast off and began poling us across the bar. The four Malay sailors were a picturesque sight as they worked silhouetted against the last light of day, swinging their poles in rhythm to a weird melody of quartertones. Full ahead the sun in all its fiery glory was descending into the sea.

The skipper and I were lounging by the deckhouse, relishing the fresh evening breeze.

'This would be a bit of all right – if we didn't have the Japs breathing down our necks,' the skipper said.

I nodded.

He glanced down at the Malays.

'I'll bet you never started on an ocean race like this before.'

'I'll tell you this,' I replied. 'I never set out on one where the stakes were so high.'

The skipper's tanned face was serious.

'Yes – freedom and our lives – those are high stakes, all right.'

A little way down the deck, Limey was leaning his elbows on the rail. Suddenly he began to recite:

Sunset and evening star

And one clear call for me:

May there be no moaning at the bar

When I put out to sea.

'He's thinking of all those unpaid chits at Raffles bar in Singapore,' said Anzac with a grin.

'I'll bet he left a few of those behind,' the skipper chuckled.

There was a burst of laughter. The tension, which had been building up with our departure, eased.

We were over the bar now. The Malays lifted their poles, lashed them to the side of the deckhouse, and climbed over the rail to their dug-out canoe which the prahu had been towing behind. They cast off and stood up, bidding us farewell in an elaborate pantomime that combined good wishes with sharp sallies.

'Whoever heard of soldiers sailing their own boat?' their gestures seemed to say. 'Now you have only wind and water to fight. But since you must fight them – fight well!'

Quickly it became night. A gentle zephyr eased us out to sea. We were on our way.

At the tiller, the skipper puffed silently at his pipe and gazed contentedly over the Indian Ocean. After a time he called us together to set the shipboard routine. To Anzac, also a master mariner, he gave responsibility for the navigation. I was to be second mate. The colonel and Ralph Salmon were assigned to my watch. The skipper was to have the first watch, I the middle watch and Anzac the morning watch. Since Limey was not fit for heavier work, he was made paymaster and cook.

The skipper looked me over, taking stock of my large frame and ruddy Scottish complexion.

'You're a healthy-looking type,' he said. 'I'm going to call you Rosie.'

In the chaotic conditions that followed the fall of Singapore men from all the services, from all the nations of the Commonwealth, were thrown together for a brief time and then parted. We seldom knew a man's full name. We gave one another generic nicknames and the nicknames stuck. A Londoner was given the tag of 'Limey'; an Australian was known as 'Aussie'; and so on. Thus I became known as 'Rosie'.

Soon a singing wind came from the east, speeding us on our course. When I was called at midnight to take my watch I found that the wind had increased. We were making a good seven knots. No moon shone, but the silver brilliance of the stars lighted the white foam of the waves to a glow. The quietness around us was so different from the abrupt silence which had come sometimes in the midst of battle. It was the quietness of a pleasing symphony – a symphony of wind and waves and water gurgling in friendly fashion along the humming hull.

All went well through the next day. But the following dawn our kindly wind left us and we were at the mercy of an awkward sea. Sharp puffs came from every quarter, only to die down again.

It was my watch below, but I could not sleep. In the hold every sound from above deck was greatly amplified – the flap of the sails, the crack of booms, the rattle of the blocks. Suddenly there was a steep, heavy lurch. With it came the heart-breaking sound of canvas ripping. On deck all was chaos.

The accidental jibe I had dreaded had taken place. In the course of it the mainsail had been caught by the mizzen, and it was rent from head to foot, clew to throat, leech to luff. In place of the bellying sail that had been hurrying us along, a pitiful bundle of shreds hung lifeless from the mainmast.

No one spoke, but each one thought, 'Does this mean that we're not going to make it?' Everyone put on a good face, however, and gathered in the tatters. All was not quite lost. The jib, staysail and mizzen were still set. To these we added a spare jib which we set on the mainmast.

Throughout the day, while we sailed slowly under our sparse canvas, we sewed furiously, hard put to it to keep our balance as we wallowed in a heavy sea. With the patience of despair, we pieced together a jigsaw from the rags that remained. At last we hoisted it, hardly daring to breathe. It held together. We allowed ourselves a faint cheer.

Later that night the wind steadied and freshened enough to take us along at four knots. We were on the move again, conscious that every mile of our wake meant a mile nearer safety.

About half-way through my watch I thought I saw something. My eyes were tired, so I rubbed them to make sure. No doubt about it. Two islands were coming up fast on the starboard bow.

The presence of any islands was enough to make us uneasy. They were likely to be coral reefs, whose sharp teeth could chew into our hull. We had no charts of these waters. Our navigational aids, on a par with those of early sailing-ship

days, consisted of a compass, a school atlas in Dutch (which none of us could read) and a naval book of nautical tables. We calculated our position daily by means of our day's work. That is, we averaged our course, distance and leeway, and worked out our position with the aid of the log tables. At any given date we knew only roughly where we were.

The islands passed by to starboard. I could hear the soughing of the waves embracing them.

My watch came to an end, and, still worried about our position, I turned in. I had hardly dropped off to sleep when the thump of running feet jerked me awake. What alarmed me more than the sound of the crew was the noise of booming surf smashing against a lee shore. I rushed on deck and through the pitch dark made out a mass of frothing foam, much too near us. Then I heard two splashes. The men on watch had let go both anchors and were paying out the hawsers. I joined in. We made them fast to the bits and waited. The anchors held. We were safe for the time being.

Within an hour dawn came. Our pulses slowed at what it disclosed. On all sides of us waves were breaking into white bubbles over atolls and coral reefs. But we were afloat and in calm waters. Miraculously, we had sailed into a lagoon. As the day strengthened, a beautiful scene emerged from the darkness: a succession of green, palm-fringed islands bordered with white beaches rose from the emerald-and-sapphire sea.

We lowered over the side the eleven-foot dug-out canoe lashed to the foredeck for just such an emergency. The Colonel, Salmon and I got in, and paddled along the lagoon until we came to an inlet where we could see a cluster of palm-leaf huts. Beaching the canoe, we went ashore to meet a large family of what appeared to be fisherfolk who had come out to greet us. Through Salmon we learned that we were on an island called Pini. This was only a small settlement, however; the head village was four or five miles away. The skipper

decided that I should take Salmon and go to ask the headman's help in getting us out of the lagoon. Two of the fishermen volunteered to paddle us over.

One of them, a memorable character who was a kind of patriarch, had only one eye. We nicknamed him Nelson. He used his empty socket with devastating effect, turning it full upon us whenever he questioned our intelligence, which was often. Age, sun and sea had made his face a thing of wrinkled splendour. A permanent leering grin rounded off his character, giving him a lusty, villainous mien. While we paddled, I struck up a conversation with him through Salmon.

'Have you lived here most of your life?'

'All of my life, naturally.'

'What do you do?'

'I fish. What else would I do?'

'Do you like working at sea?'

'Oh yes. I know all about the sea. I understand it. I can get fish from it. We get on well together.'

He bobbed his head and screwed up his one good eye wisely as he said this.

'Foolish man,' he seemed to be implying. 'Can't you see I know my trade? See how I paddle this canoe! See how I can tell the ways of the water! The ocean and I are one!'

After crossing a brilliant blue bay we could see the village. The headman was already moving gracefully down the beach towards us. His white baju and sarong blended with the glistening sand, white in the sunlight, so that he seemed only face and arms and legs and feet. We shook hands without ceremony, in an act of friendship.

'Come to my hut,' he said, 'and I will refresh you.'

The hut was spacious and clean, with the few furnishings neatly in order. The headman's wife brought us clear coffee in glasses and a basket of small sweet bananas. We were describing our predicament when she returned, bearing a delicious

meal of fried chicken, fried fish, steaming rice and a tray of empty bowls.

This was an enchanting interlude. Our host and hostess treated us with friendly courtesy, anticipating our every want. We made no attempt to hurry our conversation. We told them about the war, how we were escaping from the Japanese, how we had ripped our mainsail, repaired it as best we could and how we had miraculously found our way through the reefs into the placid waters of the lagoon.

'What we need most of all at this moment is sails, rope and a pilot,' I told the headman.

'I cannot give you rope or sails,' he said, 'but I shall be delighted to pilot you to Tana Masa, another larger island about forty miles to the north-east. There you will be able to buy rope and other gear.'

'You are very kind,' I exclaimed. 'I am afraid we are causing you a great deal of trouble.'

'Not at all,' replied the headman graciously, 'your troubles are my troubles.'

When we got back to our base, at the edge of the lagoon we found it a scene of frenzied activity. A furious sewing bee was in progress. Eight fishermen were seated with our crew-mates in a circle on the sand, white and tanned arms going vigorously. They had pegged out on the ground the bolts of cloth I had bought in Sasok and were stitching them together into a sail. We dropped on the sand beside them and joined in.

Darkness fell. Someone fetched a lantern from the prahu and we worked on by its light, with stiff fingers, aching muscles and strained eyes. It was almost midnight when we finished.

We passed our cigarettes among the fishermen. 'Tailor-mades' did not often come their way and they were voluble in their thanks. We all lay down to rest on the beach. It seemed I had just dropped off when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I roused myself to see Nelson's baleful socket glaring down on me. He

had come before dawn to volunteer to go with us to Tana Masa as our sailing master.

Speedily we bent on the new mainsail and stowed the repaired one as a spare. The first light of the new day was just edging the sky when off to starboard we saw the headman's outrigger ghosting towards us in an air so light we could hardly feel it. In a moment the headman himself hailed us. 'I've come to pilot you to Tana Masa. Follow me when you are ready. Perhaps there will be wind when the sun rises.'

We set sail and weighed anchor, but we did not move. No puff of wind could we find anywhere. Finally there came a breath that nudged the prahu, just enough to permit us to follow the headman's outrigger.

I stood with Limey at the after-rail, enjoying the calm beauty around us. We looked down into the water. It was crystal-clear and sparkling blue – a bluer blue than I had seen anywhere. Turrets and minarets of every colour formed fascinating coral cities through which schools of well-fed fish patrolled at leisure.

The clamour of war seemed far away. Island after island passed our beam as we drifted gently along. Coconut palms fringing the coral shores suggested cool breezes and a life of gracious ease. It was all very tempting. The waters swarmed with fish and the islands abounded with tasty fruits of a wide variety. Why bother to struggle on? Why not bribe the natives with our remaining cigarettes to build us one of their palm-leaf huts and live on here among these kind and generous people until the war was over?

I told Limey of my thoughts.

'How about it?' he said, winking at me. 'If we do reach Ceylon you know darned well we'll be pushed into some bloody mess or other the minute we get there. Why not stay and be lords of these islands? We'll fish and hunt like gentlemen, and in our spare time we'll brew coconut brandy. Then

we'll settle back in our hammocks in our palm-leaf palaces and wait for lovely dusky princesses to come courting us!

The Colonel was listening, farther down the rail.

'Wouldn't that be the life!' he exclaimed. 'And we'd go on from island to island. Just think – we could win an empire by living, while everyone else is losing theirs – by dying!'

The skipper joined in: 'By gum, we could train monkeys to be our servants! Intelligent little buggers, they are, you know.'

Limey's fancy began to take flight.

'We could rig up a big fan. Have them pull it with their tails, as they swing to and fro. While we lie there on our soft beds with our mouths open, waiting for the ripe fruit to drop in, they'll be working like nailers to keep us cool!'

Suddenly the skipper straightened up and peered towards the horizon.

'What's that?' he exclaimed.

Squinting our eyes, we could just make out a dark speck. It might be enemy. On the other hand, it might be a friendly ship.

'It's too far off – they'll never see us,' said Limey.

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said Anzac. 'Here, I've got a mirror. Try signalling with it, Skipper.'

Kneeling on the deck, the skipper began to flash signals. We waited. The sun flashed back signals of its own on the sparkling water. Our eyes, however, were well enough trained by now to distinguish between the fancied and the real; no signal was coming from the ship.

The smudge had gone. Long after there was nothing to see, the skipper kept on signalling. At last he gave up. He leaned down and rested the mirror against the rail. When he straightened up to stretch himself he kicked it accidentally with his foot. It fell forward. He knelt to pick it up; it was broken in two.

'Now see what you've done,' wailed Limey. 'Seven years' bad luck for all of us – that's what it is! You've broken the bloody thing!'

We stared at the glittering pieces. We knew we were not superstitious. Luck was what you did with what you had. It was what you made for yourself – by yourself – for good or ill. And yet . . .

Anzac was a steady type. ‘Well, it isn’t as though it’s been smashed to smithereens, you know. It’s only broken in two,’ he said in his cool, slow voice. ‘That’s only three and a half years’ bad luck. Maybe they’re the ones we’ve just had. You wouldn’t exactly call Singapore lucky, would you?’

The tension eased. Anzac picked up the pieces and took them below.

While we were waiting for the wind to freshen, we fished. We had only bent pins for hooks and balls of rice for bait. In the clear sunlit water we could see our rice balls dangling just before the fishes’ noses. But apparently they did not find the bait tempting enough, for they looked at it indifferently, then continued haughtily on their way.

We heard Nelson laughing behind us.

‘It’s no use,’ he said, tapping Salmon on the shoulder. ‘They’ll never catch fish that way.’

‘Show us, then,’ we pleaded. Nelson only shrugged. ‘All right, will you catch some for us yourself?’

Nelson remained adamant. He considered it beneath him to share his secrets with such rank amateurs.

For two days we lazed our way through the reefs, moving in the right direction, but with infuriating slowness. On the third morning we decided to put Nelson to the test.

‘Look here – if you’re so friendly with the elements why don’t you prove it by bringing us a wind?’

‘Oh, I shall,’ said Nelson, fixing his empty socket upon us.

His method could hardly have been simpler. All that he did was to step to the rail, point his blind eye in the direction from which he wished the wind to come, draw in a great chestful of air and then roar ‘Hroosh! Hroosh!’

Aeolus, the wind god, or his south-eastern representative, must have heard Nelson and honoured the request. Very shortly, to our amazement, there were ripples on the water. Before long the sails were filling under a full-bodied breeze. We made Tana Masa by noon, averaging eight knots on the run. Our respect for Nelson and his lore went up considerably.

We sailed straight to the jetty and made fast. A group of curious islanders gathered nearby. Suddenly they all turned and ran from the beach. Presently, from a cautious distance, they seemed to convince themselves that our mission was a peaceful one, for they began moving towards us again. By that time the headman arrived and spoke to them volubly. He broke away and approached us.

'They'll be glad to help you,' he said. 'Just tell them what you need.'

We did, and soon had a supply of rope and sailcloth.

Then Sandy, our other interpreter, who had a pretty good knowledge of the island dialects, reported that he had found a carpenter in possession of some planking who was willing to build us a sleeping-deck in the hold.

The next morning, while we were busy re-rigging the ship, we saw a Malay wearing the white ducks of authority running towards us. When he could get his breath he explained that he was the controller and that he wanted our help.

'What kind of help?' we asked.

'To put down a tribal war,' was the reply.

We could hardly believe our ears, but he explained that the population of the island was divided into two tribes, between whom there was a long-established feud which every now and again broke out into active warfare. The latest conflict was two days old, and without troops or police he found himself powerless to intervene. After our own long series of defeats we were flattered by his request.

The Colonel asked if the natives were armed with rifles. The controller made it plain that the Netherlands Government did not permit natives to have firearms. They were, however, armed with parangs, thin knife-like swords about three feet long.

We held a conference.

'We've got to support the poor chap,' the Colonel said. 'Otherwise he won't have any authority after we leave. Law and order here depend upon his ability to command assistance when he needs it.'

'That's right,' said Limey. 'Just you chaps push off and settle it. Someone's got to stay behind and mind the ship. That's me.'

It didn't take us long to prepare. We donned our khaki drill and buckled on our revolvers.

'Now isn't this something?' observed Crawley, the young curly-haired gunner, as we mustered on the jetty. 'Among the handful of us here we represent six branches of the services – Navy, Artillery, Infantry, Engineers, Signals and Service Corps – all that's missing is the Air Force.'

'Find me the Air Force and I'll take off in one of their crates,' Limey called from the prahu.

The controller led the way to the battlefield. We passed a long, low hut filled with rows of pallets. Moans and cries of pain were coming from it.

'Hey, who's in there?' one of us asked.

'Oh, those are the wounded,' answered the controller, with what seemed to us to be excessive pride.

Crawley went over, put his head in, and came back to report.

'Crikey, the place is full,' he said. 'Some of them have bloody bandages on their heads, and others are cut up pretty badly. I saw one of their parangs. Nasty-looking weapons they are, too.'

We continued, not very enthusiastically, on our way.

'Hey,' Crawley asked the controller, 'how many fighting men are there on each side?'

'About three hundred, I should say.'

'Crumbs!' exclaimed Crawley. 'What if they don't like the idea of our interfering in their war and join forces against us? Six hundred to nine is heavy odds.'

We reached the front. It was only a clearing where one row of Malays with drawn parangs stood glaring unhappily at another row. With a surface briskness and confidence we were far from feeling, we marched down between the two rows of warriors, looking first to the right, then to the left, and staring them insolently in the eye, while keeping our hands on our weapons.

We could think of nothing better to do than to stand there looking fierce and warlike. To our surprise and relief, we soon saw the Malays begin by twos and threes to slip out of line and melt away into the jungle. We held our position until the last warrior had vanished.

The Colonel then suggested to the controller that if he could obtain the consent of the warring chiefs we would undertake to mediate their dispute. The delighted controller led us at once to the compound of one of the warring factions, which was a hollow square of huts. Opposite the main gate was a large council chamber of impressive splendour. Built on heavy piles, it towered to a height of one hundred and fifty feet. The peak of its atap palm roof narrowed to an elegant point made of finely carved wood. In front of the hall were several stone chairs, set up as though for a council meeting, and two stone altars. A footprint was carved on top of one of the altars suggesting an ancient Hindu origin.

The council hall itself was arranged like the interior of a medieval castle, with the common room at one end and a raised platform at the other. We were welcomed by the chief, a grand-looking, tall old man whose ears had been pierced and

the holes enlarged to hold a small coin. When we were all seated in a semi-circle he clapped his hands and ordered that green coconuts be brought for our refreshment. In our turn we passed round cigarettes. The palaver was ready to begin.

The Colonel discoursed at great length and with impressive eloquence, while Salmon interpreted, on the evils of war and on the desire of all people to live in harmony with one another. He appealed to the chief as a follower of Muhammad. Allah, he said, wanted peace for his children; and, as his children, it was up to the chief's tribe to see that peace was maintained.

At every pause the chief nodded his grizzled head sagely in profound agreement. When the Colonel had finished, he began to speak: 'Oh yes, I am of the opinion, too, that war is a very bad thing. I do not want war. My tribe does not want war. But,' he added, unconsciously echoing the shibboleth common to all mankind, 'how can we live at peace with our neighbours when they want war and are always making war?' He shook his head; the decorations flashed in his ear-lobes. A look of perplexity wrinkled his wise face.

'It is all very difficult,' he sighed. 'It is all very difficult.'

The Colonel conceded that indeed it was — then promptly presented our offer to mediate with the rival tribe. The chief readily accepted. At once we set out for the other compound, followed by his chattering entourage. We found that this compound was in striking contrast to the other. The council hall was a ruin, the huts dilapidated. There was refuse in the streets and a general air of lassitude prevailed. We also noted a marked difference between the two chiefs. Whereas the first had been vigorous, authoritative and dignified, this one was ancient, slovenly and wily.

The peace conference ritual began, and once again coconuts and cigarettes were exchanged. The Colonel, having had the benefit of a rehearsal, was at the top of his form. His eloquent arguments seemed irrefutable to us. But evidently not so to the

rival chief. He listened impassively until the Colonel had finished, and then stated his case.

‘But, of course,’ he began, ‘non-aggression has always been my unfailing policy. I am a man of the highest principles and I have always stood by them. We have been forced to defend ourselves against the aggressive acts of the other tribe. They are so wicked that there is nothing left for us but to show them the error of their ways by our superior strength.’

He looked at the Colonel shrewdly.

‘Why is it that you white men take such an interest in our war? You have a war of your own that has been going on for some time, have you not?’

The Colonel admitted that this was so.

‘Our war, you know,’ the chief continued, ‘has been going on for forty years. And since it is of such long and respectable duration, can you tell me why anyone should try to stop it now?’

‘How did it begin?’ the Colonel asked.

‘A young man from that other tribe insulted one of our young women!’

The memory of that indignity seemed to rekindle his rage. His eyes flashed with anger. But the Colonel, undeterred, reasoned with him. Ultimately, the chief calmed down enough to agree to keep the peace – for the time being, at any rate. But he would not shake hands with his enemy. Not even a present of twenty cigarettes could sway him. However, even if we had only brought about a temporary cessation of hostilities we left feeling that we had done something to save face for the controller.

We returned to the prahu, and were just about to weigh anchor when we spotted two natives paddling towards us at top speed. Speaking rapidly and gesticulating excitedly, they told us that they had sighted a Japanese gunboat steaming up between the islands in our direction. They assured us that we

need not worry, however. They would pilot us to a creek surrounded by trees where the enemy would never see us.

This was all very well, except that there was not a whiff of wind – only dead flat calm. Fortunately we had six long oars. We manned them at once and pulled like galley-slaves. The *Setia Berganti* was an inert weight. The sun blazed down on the lagoon; sweat poured from us in gallons; our lungs laboured. But the prahu began to move. Fathom by fathom, cable by cable, we moved her over the three miles until we were hidden behind the palm trees. From our safe haven we peered out and watched the Japanese vessel pass us, unaware of our presence. We were happy to see that she was on a course opposite to our own.

Two hours later the ‘all clear’ was given. Once more we manned the oars. But a breeze had arisen, the sails filled, and we pointed the bow towards open waters. When we came abeam of our former berth the headman from Pini joined us in his outrigger and sailed with us for about an hour. Then, having taken Nelson on board, he came alongside to shake our hands and wish us a safe journey. With a final wave and a cry of ‘*Salamat jalan*’, he set his course for the east, while we sailed westward. We felt a deep sense of loss as we watched his outrigger point towards the distant islands. Although we had few things in common, he had been a true friend.

Our island interlude was over. As we watched the last sight of land disappear, we spoke no more of our dreams of a life of ease in a tropical paradise. We were all anxious again to get on with it – to make our way to Ceylon and freedom. Our mainsail was sound; we had a spare one; there was plenty of coconut, and some fresh fruit, in the hold. In fact, we and the *Setia Berganti* were in better shape than we had been for a very long while.

Rather thankfully, we resumed the regularity of shipboard routine, passing the days standing our watches, mending sail and tidying ship. Our mess was not bad. We began the day with

a hot breakfast of boiled rice; followed it with a cold luncheon of left-over rice with fruit or coconut; and ended it with a hot dinner again of rice and tinned beef. When we had been in action, biscuits and corned beef were our regular ration and one I thought I'd never want to see again. But now it tasted superb, perhaps because the sea air gave me such a keen appetite. The only sad part was that the beef was in short supply. It would not last many more days.

To our dismay, we found that our water, too, was getting low. The burning heat, the unremitting glare of the sun on the sea, and the salt air drove us nearly mad with thirst. Often in my dreams I imagined myself kneeling down on the moors at home to drink from some ice-cold Highland spring. The water on the ship was unpleasantly flavoured by the oil or petrol from the tins and barrels in which it was stored. I had not known that good fresh water has a taste – a taste of clean sweetness.

Ours was diminishing faster than we were drinking it. This meant that we were sustaining losses at a dangerous rate through evaporation and leakages. We rationed ourselves to a pint a day apiece, thereby hoping the water would last either until we reached our destination or were picked up.

But once we got through the day we could enjoy the better side of life. Each evening after sundown we gathered on the deck for a pleasant social hour. I can see it yet – the sun gilding the sky with its afterglow; the slow, soothing, gentle swelling of the sea as we sat together and joked and smoked and talked. Often these conversations centred on our post-war plans.

One evening the sun had just made its dignified bow over the horizon, leaving us to the half-light and half-shadow that marks the interval between day and night on shipboard. The *Setia Berganti* glided along effortlessly on the ever-rising, ever-falling bosom of the ocean. It was a time of leisure and peace. Anzac lolled beside the tiller. Limey, having finished his galley

chores, joined us where we sat cross-legged on the afterdeck or lounged against the roof-top of the hold.

'A glorious great foaming gallon of iced beer's all I need now,' said Limey as he squatted down beside me. 'Otherwise we've just about everything.' Then, anticipating a protest, he added quickly, 'Oh, I know what you're thinking – no women. For the younger chaps, that is – for Crawley here – and Rosie.'

Since Limey talked more than any of us of the women who would be waiting for him in Colombo, we all grinned. His banter expressed what we were all feeling; life at this moment was good.

The Colonel was sitting with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. His pipe, dangling from his mouth, swung gently to and fro with the prahu.

'It's all rather pleasant, I must admit,' he said. 'Might be fun to repeat the cruise after the war. How about you, Limey? What'll you be doing then?'

Limey replied without hesitation. He had made his plans.

'Oh, I'll be in the city during the day, making me packet. Then at night you'll find me in the local, knocking it back with the old soaks. After that I'll make it home to the wife and kids – all in due time – if I have any by then.'

With a definite shake of his head, he concluded, 'No, I won't be doing any cruising. Not in these waters, anyway.'

'Skipper, what about you?'

'Afraid you'll have to count me out, too. I've got responsibilities. It's back to Singapore for me as fast as I can make it, once I've stopped by to pick up my family in South Africa. That's where I sent them when I was mobilized.'

'And you, Rosie?'

'You can count me in,' I said. 'I'll probably be wandering around, anyway.'

'Haven't you any definite plans?' the skipper enquired in surprise.

'Nearest I have to a plan is the Army,' I said. 'Just before the Japs started their attack I was nominated for an appointment to Staff College at Quetta in India. Maybe I'll be able to start with the next course. If I do I'll stay on in the Army.'

'You could do worse,' said the Colonel.

'Isn't there anything else you'd like to do?' the skipper asked.

I thought a moment.

'There is one other thing. After the occupation things are going to be in a mess around here. The Japs will have to get out of Java and Sumatra. We'll have to give Malaya and India more independence. This'll mean that the local nabobs will be looking around for military and political advisers. I might arrange to be around when the booking begins.'

'What? Not planning to become another Raffles, are you?' Anzac raised his eyebrows.

'If I should happen to follow in the footsteps of chaps like Raffles why should I mind?' I said. 'Especially if I could make a fortune doing it. I wouldn't mind having a bash at working behind the scenes, sort of, in power politics. The best place in that game is in the back room.'

'Sounds to me as if you've got it all worked out,' remarked Anzac mildly, looking up from his compass.

'Not the details. They'll come later. But a man has to give a little thought as to where he's most likely to get the butter for his bread, or the caviar to go with his champagne.'

'Now you're talking sense,' Limey chipped in. 'Maybe I'll change my mind and join your cruise after all – *if* you'll provide a ruddy great steam yacht with caviar by the bucket and gallons of champagne. That's *my* idea of cruising.'

'Not mine,' said Anzac. 'I'll be content with a fair day's wages for a fair day's work, three meals a day and a roof over my head.'

'You're crazy!' snorted Limey. 'I'm all for Rosie's idea.'

When he gets his job as Adviser-in-Chief to the Sultan of Somewhere, I'm going to join him as Chief Adviser to the Adviser-in-Chief. Between us we'll rake in the dough and live a gloriously sinful life of ease and luxury for the rest of our days.'

Anzac wagged his big head in disapproval and said, 'You two sound like a pair of ruthless rascals to me.'

I had great respect for Anzac as a man, but I thought his views on life were dull and stuffy.

'Not ruthless,' I retorted. 'Realistic. The chaps who do the leading are those who *know* that we live in a tough world and that you've got to be tough to survive.' I turned to Limey. 'Right, Limey?'

'Too right – too right – too bloody right.'

Anzac was unruffled by our loud-mouthed protestations. He replied in his usual calm, detached tone.

'Money and power, and success – they aren't everything, y'know.'

'Oh, aren't they?' I jeered.

'No, they aren't. There's such a thing as decency.'

Limey shrugged. 'Trouble with you, Anzac, is that you're too bloody good for – too bloody good for – too good for your own good.'

He seemed satisfied that he had had the last word. He got up, yawned and went below, leaving Anzac to the tiller, the stars and his thoughts.

Our spirits rose with each passing day. We talked confidently of what we would do when we reached Ceylon. The Japanese and their threat to us were almost forgotten. Every sunrise was bringing us thirty or forty miles closer to our landfall and freedom.

We were beginning to enjoy our life at sea when, without warning, fever struck us. One by one we were confined to our bunks below. It was increasingly harder to make up the

complement of a watch. At first we did not know what malady might be loose amongst us. But finally it became clear that only those had it who had gone ashore to sew sail at Pini. Also, the cases began to display common malarial symptoms.

I came on deck every day, took my place at the tiller and scorned the others' misfortunes. Then, when I was on one afternoon watch, I felt strange myself. Everything began to rotate in front of me. I looked at the compass. It rushed backwards and forwards at me. I looked up. Sky and sea cavorted in a mad dance. Nothing was stable, everything was flux and transition. When I felt myself flying through space I knew it was time to give up.

The Colonel saw me slumped by the tiller. He called for help to carry me below deck, where he took my temperature with a whistle of incredulity. It was hot, cramped and dark in the hold. The stench of former cargoes, of fried fish and coconut, unfolded me in layers of fetid, sticky air. But I was conscious of very little as I lay there on my bunk with a raging temperature.

When at last my fever abated the first thing that impressed itself on my consciousness was not the smells, not the foul air, but the fact that we were moving – moving through the water at a steady speed.

One evening about the middle of April, I was able to make my appearance on deck at the social hour. After my long period of delirium and isolation this was an occasion. My shipmates welcomed me warmly, making me feel good. I thought I noticed a new optimism among them. They laughed easily and spoke more definitely of their plans for the future. I wondered at the change. Presently the skipper said:

'Tell Rosie the good news, Anzac.'

'By my reckoning, Rosie,' said Anzac, 'we're now clear of the danger area. I'd say we're within five hundred miles of our goal. With a bit of luck,' he continued, beaming, 'a Royal Navy patrol may flag us any minute now – and we'll be quids in.'

‘Won’t we, though,’ Limey crowed. ‘Quids in and quids out. I’m going to spend all my back pay on a party. And it’ll be a whopper. I may even ask you, Rosie.’

‘Why wait to celebrate?’ said the Colonel. ‘Why not have the party now?’

‘With what?’ Limey wanted to know.

‘With a bottle of old Tokay in my kit. This is obviously the moment to use it. Wait, I’ll bring it out.’

Murmurs of incredulity followed him below. We wondered how he had come by that bottle in the first place and what had prompted him to take it along in his stripped-down gear, hoarding it for the appropriate moment to celebrate. Limey went to fetch some tin cups. The Colonel returned with a dusty bottle in his hand. Going round the circle, he poured a little wine into each outstretched receptacle.

‘Here’s to Colombo!’ He raised his own cup in a toast.

‘On to Colombo!’ we all roared in one happy voice.

Limey glanced up at the curving rails, then out at our wake.

‘Think of it! At the rate we’re going we should hit Ceylon inside of a week!’

We dared think about it now. I visualized Colombo as I had last seen it, when I had gone through there in the early months of 1940 on my way to Malaya. I remembered the thronging docks, the low white buildings along the well-ordered streets under the waving palm trees, the red rickshaws and the white policemen controlling them in their spick-and-span uniforms. I could see Colombo waiting to welcome us. The scene was so real that I could almost reach out and touch it.

The wine tasted refreshingly sweet. By the last light of fading day I could see smiles of relaxation on the faces of my ship-mates. The hour ended. We rose, shook the cramps from our legs and went below to give ourselves over to our dreams, leaving only the helmsman at his post.

* * *

The following day I had just come on deck to clear my lungs in the fresh morning air when I heard the watch cry out.

'Smoke ho!'

Over on the starboard side I could see a heavy smudge low along the horizon. By this time we were all on deck.

'That's three ships!' the skipper shouted.

'Right, I can see the funnels,' I called.

'Shall we signal?' Crawley asked.

'No! No!' said the skipper. 'As far west as we are, they still might be enemy.' He turned to the helmsman. 'Go on the opposite course,' he said hurriedly. 'Even if they are enemy they may think we're only clueless Chinese or Malays off course.'

Then he had another inspiration.

'Sapper!'

'Yes, old boy?'

'Think you can steer for a while?'

'I think so.'

'You're the shorty of the outfit. Get into that coolie coat and that big straw hat and take the tiller. The rest of you get below.'

The Sapper disappeared and came back within moments, wearing his disguise. In the wide conical straw hat and long jacket he looked so authentically Oriental as he took his position by the tiller that we all laughed in spite of our uncomfortable situation.

By now we were gathered in the smelly hold. With beating hearts and constricted stomachs we waited. All we could see through the hatchway was the Sapper's coolie hat against the vast grey expanse of the morning sky.

'What are they? Can you see yet?' the skipper called out.

'Not quite. They're three ships. That's all I can see.'

No one stirred. Only the slap of water could be heard against the sides of the ship. Then came the Sapper's voice: 'They look like tankers . . . Yes, they are tankers. I'm sure they are.'

'Tankers!' We echoed the word in consternation.

'Are they enemy?' called the Colonel.

'Can't tell yet. But they must be. Ours wouldn't be in these waters.'

Our first hope – that they might be British or American warships – faded. Now we clung hard to another – the hope that the ships would pass us by. A hum of conversation arose as we tried to reassure ourselves. What if they were Japanese? Why should they bother with an old prahu and a Malay crew?

'Where are they now?' the skipper asked.

'They're still coming in our direction.'

We held our breath. Then, 'Still coming . . . still coming . . . still coming . . . they're about a mile off . . . they're abeam . . . they're enemy all right, blast it! . . . they're drawing away from us . . . still drawing away . . . still drawing away . . . they're well past us . . .'

'With a bit of luck we may make it yet,' said Crawley.

'We just might,' we all murmured.

'Oh, my God!' the Sapper groaned. 'One of them is turning.'

I peered over the coaming and saw a tanker steaming towards us, her prow throwing up a wave of snarling white water. I could tell from the slack postures of my comrades that their hopes, like my own, had reached their nadir. My stomach felt full of ice – cold, hard, raw.

We had failed.

I saw the flash of the four-inch gun on the tanker's foredeck. I heard the sharp crack of the explosion. Then there was a *whish* overhead. About fifty yards away a column of water spurted on our beam as the shell struck.

It was all up. Hastily, we threw our log-books overside and our lead bullets after them. We readied our packs and wearily mustered on deck. We waited in utter despair and silence.

The tanker which had fired on us hove within hailing distance. The rails were lined with sailors – Japanese sailors.

'What a bloody awful sight!' said Limey.

'They're armed to the teeth,' I said, as my glance strayed upwards. A whole battery of light guns and machine-guns was trained upon us. 'You'd think we were a battleship.'

An officer in white stood on the foredeck, waving and shouting to us to come alongside. The skipper took the tiller. The rest of us trimmed the sail for the last time. Smartly we sailed up to the tanker, luffed, and brought the prahu within reach of the rope ladder that had been lowered in the meantime.

The ship's side towered above us. A multitude of silent enemy faces glared down on us.

'Make sure you take all your kit with you!' the skipper said. It was his last command.

One by one we clambered up the rope ladder. My throat tightened. Sails set, deserted and crewless, the *Setia Berganti* was skimming smoothly out over the ocean and out of our lives.

On deck two sailors grabbed me roughly. They twisted my arms behind my back. We were all searched and passed into the safe keeping of personal guards. Mine was a nervous petty officer, who kept the muzzle of his automatic pistol pressed tightly against the side of my head. He was so close to me that I couldn't see him properly. I was aware only of a blur of white uniform, a brown-yellow face and a ring of steel against my skull.

'This isn't getting us anywhere,' I thought to myself. So I said in my most persuasive voice, 'Look here, chum, relax, will you? If you'll take that thing away from my head we'll both be more comfortable.'

My well-intentioned remark drew only a mutter and a sputter: 'Curraabgeroshksshgrhh!' The automatic was pressed against me all the more tightly. Standing, my head strained as far forward as humanly possible without losing my balance, I could see the skipper being escorted to the bridge. I noticed an officer coming my way.

'Please,' I begged. 'Tell my friend here I'm not going to escape and I won't hurt him.'

The officer understood English. He barked a quick order, and the pistol was withdrawn.

'Thank you,' I said. Taking heart from his gesture, I asked the officer, 'What are you going to do with us?'

He stopped in front of me, placed his hands on his hips and grinned expansively.

'You will all be questioned one at a time,' he said in clipped artificial English, 'and then you will be shot. You are spies!'

'That's cheerful news,' I thought, as I rubbed my aching skull.

The skipper returned, looking glum. He was taken to the opposite side of the deck under guard so that he could not say anything to us. All day long our interrogation continued. In the afternoon my turn came. I was escorted to a large cabin on one of the bridges. Here I stood facing three officers seated behind a table. Spread out upon it were personal possessions – watches, wallets, cigarettes, toilet kits, a camera and pencils. Suddenly my heart flipped. I was looking at my blue leather wallet – the one my father had given me when I left Scotland. I remembered what was in it. Why hadn't I destroyed that chit? Had they read it? Did they already know that I was formally authorized to raise money and collect arms to encourage resistance among the Malays?

Keeping a poker face, I bowed as stiffly and formally as though I were being presented at Buckingham Palace.

The three officers ducked their heads without rising.

'Who are you?'

'Ernest Gordon.'

'What is your rank?'

'Captain.'

'What is your regiment?'

'The 93rd Highlanders.'

I was allowed to give this much information under army regulations. But no more. From now on I would have to play it by ear. I had difficulty in keeping my eyes away from my wallet.

‘Why were you on that boat?’

‘Because I didn’t want to stay in Sumatra.’

‘Where were you before Sumatra?’

‘Singapore.’

The officer in the middle fixed me with hard eyes. He snapped out. ‘Were you spying for the British Navy?’

‘No.’

The three officers held a whispered conference. They seemed satisfied with my answers. One of them said, ‘Pick out your own possessions.’

It was all too pat. Were they playing cat-and-mouse with me? Could it be that they had already found the chit and were letting me spring my own trap?

Assuming a nonchalance I did not feel, I stepped forward and picked up a pencil and one or two other objects. Then I reached for the wallet. I felt their eyes upon me. At any moment I expected to hear one of them bark, ‘Now!’ But the silence prevailed. I picked up the wallet. Then, opening it, I pulled out several snapshots of girl friends and flashed them before the officers with a man-of-the-world air. They nodded understandingly.

‘God bless the girl friends,’ I muttered to myself, and returned the wallet to my pocket. I then picked out my camera, from which the film had been removed, and my shaving kit.

‘You may go,’ the senior officer said.

I bowed and thankfully withdrew.

Back in my place on deck, I pantomimed to my guard that I had an urgent appointment in the head or *benjo*. He had relaxed a little now, and nodded his permission. I rushed for it like a man caught short. As soon as I entered and closed the

door, I extracted the incriminating chit from its hiding-place in the outside pocket of my wallet, and flushed it joyfully out of my life.

The interviews ended. Once more the skipper was escorted to the bridge, while the rest of us waited in uneasy silence. After what seemed hours he returned. But now he looked pleased.

Our personal guards withdrew. Only one was left, standing some distance away, so we could talk more or less freely.

'It's all right, chaps,' the skipper said. 'The Nips have changed their minds. They're not going to shoot us after all. We're to be treated as prisoners of war and taken back to Singapore for further questioning. Those are orders from Tokyo.'

From then on our treatment improved considerably. We were allowed to move about the deck with some freedom and to drink as much fresh water as we pleased. After so many weeks of our unpalatable stores the water tasted wonderful. We drank our fill and lounged against the rail of the middle deck, gazing out across the ocean. It was empty. I recalled my last glimpse of the *Setia Berganti* as it sailed forlornly away from us.

What had been her fate? I wondered. Did she sail on, crewless, until she reached her destination? Would she wash up on the beaches of Ceylon? Would she become another *Marie Celeste*, a mystery of the sea? Or a legendary ship like the *Flying Dutchman*? Would the green coconuts finally sprout so that she became a floating island somewhere in the Indian Ocean?

In spite of the tight moments she had given us, our memories of her were mainly happy ones.

Four days later we dropped anchor off Singapore. The contrast with what we had seen of it about three months ago was awesome. Then it was a city of the damned, with great flames from the burning oil-tanks billowing skyward in an angry red

along the shoreline. Now all was hushed and still; it was a city of the dead.

Before the tanker reached Singapore one of the English-speaking officers told us that we would be subjected to further interrogation when we arrived by the Kempei Tai, or military police. The prospect did not exactly raise our spirits. But it was just as well for our peace of mind that we did not know what we learned later – that the Kempei Tai delighted in the most depraved kind of tortures. This was to be affirmed by the prosecution at the War Crimes Trial of 1946 as follows: ‘The whole of this case can be epitomized by two words – “unspeakable horror”.’

The expected interrogation never took place. In fact we were treated in the most casual way possible, since liaison between the Japanese Navy and Army was practically nonexistent, owing to inter-service rivalry. After being ferried ashore we were simply dumped on a pier and left there. No one was on hand to meet us or to guard us.

We must have presented a forlorn spectacle as we stood there wondering what the next move would be. We were bearded and barefoot and wore the most bizarre assortment of uniforms. Two British naval POWs were working on a dock close by. One of them looked up from his toil and saw us. He called out, ‘Cheer up, chums! It could have been worse!’

After a while a truck rumbled up, guards jumped out and we were hustled inside. We were on our way to the prison camp of Changi, some twelve miles from the docks.

OUR HOSTS

So began my three and a half years as a 'guest' of the Japanese. Changi was only the first of a succession of camps in which we were incarcerated, first in Malaya, then in Upper Thailand. Although Changi appeared bleak enough when we first encountered it, that camp seemed a paradise in comparison with those we were to know later.

During the four years of their ascendancy the Japanese military violated every civilized code. They murdered prisoners overtly by bayoneting, shooting, drowning, beating or decapitation; they murdered them covertly by working them beyond the limit of human endurance, starving them, torturing them and denying them medical care.

They also had special refinements for those prisoners who did not comply with certain orders. Some were tortured by having their hands crushed in vices; some were filled up with water and then jumped on; some were suspended from a tree by their thumbs; some were buried alive in the ground. The statistics tell their own grim story; four per cent of prisoners held by the Germans and Italians died, as compared with twenty-seven per cent of those in the hands of the Japanese. In the prison camps along the River Kwai the percentage was much higher than this.

It is difficult to keep these atrocities in perspective. They were the result of behaviour codes fostered by the military for their own ends, codes such as Hakko Ichiu, Kodo and