

## MIRACLE ON THE RIVER KWAI

**M**y good friend Tom Rigden, who had operated the escape service with me on the Indragiri River, had been captured at Padang and had recently been brought to Chungkai to work on the railway. One evening he came to see me in the Death House. He wanted to tell me that he had organized the building of a tiny hut which I was to have all to myself. My fate was a matter of concern only to some of my fellow POWs. The Japanese had already written me off. All that I needed, therefore, was permission from the British medical officer to be moved.

When the MO was making his morning rounds, I whispered to him.

‘Doc . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘How about letting me out of this hole? Some friends of mine have built a little shack for me. There’s not much more you can do for me, is there?’

‘No, Ernie, there isn’t,’ he said. ‘I only wish there were . . .’

He looked up and down the Death House, then back at me, lying on the ground in the morgue.

‘The only reason for keeping you here is to isolate you from some of the healthier lads. A hut of your own would do that as well and be a lot more comfortable for you. Tell you what – I’ll ask the senior medical officer when he comes around. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ I said.

I watched him continue on his rounds, pausing to chat with each of his wretched patients and encourage them all with his gentle smile.

Within an hour he was back with the SMO. They stood beside me while the MO presented my case. The SMO hesitated.

‘I could look in on him every day,’ said the MO. ‘He’s a friend of mine, anyway, and I always like to have a word with him. What do you think?’

They moved away a little beyond what they thought was my listening range. But I could still hear them.

‘Had a pretty rugged time of it, has he?’ said the SMO in a low voice.

‘He’s had the works,’ the MO answered. ‘Malaria, dysentery, beriberi, plus some queer kind of blood infection we can’t identify. Oh yes, and he’s had an appendicectomy. And on top of that a bad case of “dip” which left him without the use of his legs.’

‘What’s his present condition?’

‘His blood count is way down. And his pulse is very weak.’

‘Too bad.’ The SMO shook his head. ‘The only thing left is to let him have a decent end.’

He looked questioningly at the MO.

‘How’s he going to look after himself? He can’t walk, can he?’

‘No, he can’t. But I’m sure his friends will help him. It won’t be for long, in any case.’

The SMO nodded decisively. The MO came back to my side.

‘It’s all right. You’re free to go whenever you can be picked up.’

I thanked him and the two men moved on. The death sentence had just been pronounced on me by two experts. I had faced death before: once in my early pilot-training days when I had crashed in a disabled plane; once when I had

looked into the angry eye of a machine-gun sending its bullets thudding into my shoulder; again at the time of our capture when we were all told that we would be treated as spies and shot. There had been other occasions, too, familiar to most men who have been in action. Death, after all, is part and parcel of the soldier's trade.

This time, however, the business of dying seemed so much more matter-of-fact. Here in the prison camp it was 'the done thing'. The only variable, as far as I could see, was the time – when? Then I found myself resisting the whole idea. 'When?' for me was not now. I was not going to die on my back like an old man.

I recalled the long faces and solemn words of the doctors. Going to die, was I? With a grin, I answered myself in the words of Eliza Doolittle, 'Not bloody likely!'

I tried to support my determination with argument.

'Doctors are naturally pessimistic,' I thought; 'they have to be. But they've made mistakes before and they'll make them again. This time I'll be the one to prove them wrong. I am *not* going to die.'

Reason, however, had a voice of its own. It made itself heard now: 'Why should you be so different? I'll bet others before you have said the same thing, and yet they have died. The doctors have seen a lot of men go out. They know what they're about, don't they? What makes you think they're wrong this time? Why not face up to the facts and bow out as gracefully as you can?'

I wasn't giving in. But to please my troublesome friend, Reason, and to quiet his nagging voice, I conceded, 'Okay. In case I should kick the bucket, I'll try to leave my affairs as tidy as possible.'

In my pack, which I used as a pillow, I had a pencil stub and some scraps of paper. Propping myself up on one elbow, I wrote a letter to my parents:

*Dear Mum and Dad,*

If one of my friends passes this on to you it will mean that I've guessed wrongly and that I'm not coming back. I'm sorry. I'd have made it if I could. When I made the break, first from Singapore and then from Sumatra, I thought I was bound to return to you safely.

Don't have any regrets. I suppose it just couldn't have been otherwise. I've enjoyed life. I'm glad I was brought up in the country with the sea at the front of the house and the hills at the back. I'm glad I had you as parents. If I seldom showed any sign of appreciation for all the love and kindness you've given me, it was because I took it too much for granted that this is the way life is. I know it isn't always that way, now. Accept a 'Thank you' from me to you, please!

I've enjoyed all the things I've ever done. Even those things I should have done better.

That summer before the war was absolutely wizard. I should have spent more time with you and less time sailing. But you'll forgive me for that, I know, because you liked sailing, too.

I think there's over a hundred pounds in the bank at Innellan, another forty or so in the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank of Singapore, and maybe the Army will chip in what pay I have coming to me.

Take it and have a good holiday in the South of England. Stay at a hotel where your breakfast will be served in bed. You'll make me happy if you do this.

There's a great deal of good about life that will never die. There's a goodness at the heart of it, I believe.

Pass on my love to my friends, and be assured of mine for you, always. Kiss Grace and Pete for me.

Bless you!

Aye yours,  
*Ernest*

I folded the letter to give to Tom Rigden, then I lay back on my bed of earth and looked at the scene around me. Light falling through the holes in the roof made strange patterns on the rows of bodies lying so stiffly and so quietly. It was hard to tell which were dead and which still lived. The whole atmosphere of the Death House was anti-life; over it all was the miasma of decay, the promise of nothingness.

'You too are part of this,' whispered Reason. 'There is no escape.' Yet my memory recalled me to the sanity I had known. 'The battle between life and death goes on all the time,' I said to myself. 'Life has to be cherished, not thrown away. I've made up my mind. I'm not going to surrender.'

'All right, but what do I do about it?' I asked myself.

It was a voice other than Reason that replied, 'You could live. You could be. You could do. There's a purpose you have to fulfil. You'd become more conscious of it every day you keep on living. There's a task for you; a responsibility that is yours and only yours.'

'Good enough,' I said. 'I'll get on with it.'

That afternoon I sent word to Tom that I could leave the Death House. Shortly before roll-call he came for me with two friends and a borrowed stretcher.

'Don't get ideas that from now on you're going to be the Queen of Sheba,' said Tom, as he jogged along. 'Last time we're going to do anything like this for you. You've got to get so ruddy well that you can carry *us* when your turn comes. Right, chaps?'

'Too right it is!' answered the others. 'This is his last time in the jungle limousine. From now on it's shanks's mare for Ernie!'

In contrast to the Death House, my new home was clean and neatly swept, fresh with the tangy smells of newly cut bamboo and atap palm. My friends had made excursions to the piles by the river-bank, 'liberating' an armful at a time until they had

enough to build my shack. It had been added on to the wall of the hut where my friends slept, and sloped down from a height of about six feet at its peak. I was not shut off by myself. Through a door at the side, about four feet high, I could look out on to the life of the camp.

My bed was neatly made from bamboo split into narrow strips. Two rough, clean rice-sacks served as covering. Tom looked it over admiringly.

‘Why, this place is so posh,’ he said, ‘you’ll soon have chaps coming here from all over the camp to see how a bloated capitalist lives!’

I thought I detected a forced note of cheerfulness in his voice and wondered if he had been talking to the doctors.

The stretcher-bearers picked up my wasted frame, and, while one of them supported my useless legs, laid me tenderly on the clean bed. I tried to thank them. This seemed to embarrass Tom. He was not one for sentiment.

He had knocked around a bit. A Londoner born, he had been troubled with asthma as a young man, and as the doctor had prescribed a life at sea, he had taken up an apprenticeship with the P & O Steamship Company. He had stayed with them until he qualified as a master mariner. Then he had started a new career ashore with the Malayan Government, serving in his spare time with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.

He sat down on the side of my bed. ‘Quite all right, chum, quite all right,’ he said. ‘You ought to find this a bit better than that stinking Death House. We thought you could use a little comfort – for a while, anyway.’

Then he seemed to realize that he’d made a gaffe, for he added hastily, ‘By the way, I scrounged an old bucket you can have for a head. I’ve got it outside.’

‘My own private bathroom and everything! This is as good as a suite at the Ritz!’

'More than the Nips'll ever do for you, that's for sure.' Tom jumped up. 'Look here, old boy. It's getting close to roll-call time. I'd better be running along.'

At the door he said casually, 'I ran into one of your Argyll lads this morning.'

'Oh yes?'

'I said you could do with a bit of help until you got on your feet properly again. Hope you don't mind.'

'That's very decent of you, Tom. I expect I could use an extra hand for a bit.'

'I should jolly well think so. Don't worry. There'll be someone along to see that you get your rice and a wash.'

He went out, then poked his head through the doorway.

'By the way, roll-call is on your side of the hut, so you'll hear everything that goes on. What I mean is, you'll hear those bloody little bastards screaming their bloody heads off. It may amuse you.'

I was alone in the silence once more, a silence broken presently by the sounds of bare feet thudding dully on the ground, wooden sandals clattering and clobbering, the screaming voices of the guards and the monosyllabic answers of the prisoners. Then it was over and I heard the pleasing hum of many voices raised in conversation as men straggled back to their huts.

These were the sounds of life. I stretched back gratefully on my rice-sacks.

I don't know how long I had been lying there in that twilight state half-way between dozing and waking when I heard a polite cough. A man was standing in the doorway. He had to stoop down to look in. He was naked save for a clean loin-cloth. I could see a head of fair, thick, curly hair just under the top of the door. What impressed me most was his easy, friendly manner.

'Good evening, sir,' he said in a soft North of England voice.

'I've heard you needed a hand and I wondered if you'd care to let me help you.'

I could hear myself saying faintly, 'Thank you. I would. Come in.'

I motioned him to sit down beside me, explaining, 'My voice isn't as strong as it used to be.'

As he came over, I had a better look at him. Emaciated though he was, he had the fresh complexion of a countryman. I saw that he had a fine face, with kindness in it and a gentle strength.

'You don't know me,' he said with a smile, 'but I was posted to your company.'

I racked my brain. 'That's funny. I can't remember you.'

'I'm not surprised. I was with the reinforcements that arrived when the battalion was in training up at Seremban.'

'Did you join us there?'

'No, I didn't, sir. That's when the Corps of Military Police got their hands on me, and I was removed from battalion strength. Officially, I'm a military policeman, but I still look upon myself as an Argyll. I did my best to get permission to join the battalion when it was in action. But it wasn't any use. I wasn't allowed to change.'

'That's the Red Caps for you,' I replied. 'They've never been friends of the Argylls. No wonder they wanted to hang on to you. What's your name?'

'Miller, sir.'

'"Dusty", eh? That's what all the Millers are called, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir – the Dusty Millers – that's us.'

'Well then, I'll call you Dusty.'

'Certainly, sir.'

I studied him for a moment.

'Dusty, are you quite sure you want to help me?' I asked the question not knowing what to expect. His offer had surprised me, for it was so different from the attitude we had come to



accept as normal. It seemed centuries since I had heard anyone volunteer to tend a sick man. 'I'm still pretty weak,' I warned him. 'There's hardly anything I can do for myself.' I was providing him with a way to withdraw his offer.

'Of course I want to help you,' he replied, with such warmth that there was no doubting his sincerity. 'I'm recovering from a bout of diphtheria and—'

'The old "dip", eh?' I broke in. 'Nasty stuff. Mine wasn't diagnosed until too late. That's one reason why I'm lying here like this.'

Dusty's eyes reflected his sympathy. 'Guess I was lucky,' he said. 'I got off easily. I'm still on light work, though. I've a night job in the kitchens, so I can be with you most of the day.'

'That's awfully kind of you. I'll try not to be too difficult.'

'I'm sure you won't. Here, let me get you settled for the night. I'll fetch some hot water from the cook-house and give you a proper wash.'

He soon returned, bearing a steaming bamboo bucket, a basin and some rags. He then proceeded to refresh me with the first decent wash I'd had in six weeks. It felt good to be clean again! He came to my legs and we both looked down at them. They were not a pretty sight. Skin ulcers had laced them with an ugly pattern of open sores, half-formed scabs and dried blood.

'Mm, quite a mess, aren't they?' said Dusty. 'I think I'd better wash them first. Then I'll clean out the pus.'

He gave them a proper soaking with hot water. After this, he took a piece of wet rag and began pressing gently against either side of the sores. He kept looking at me as he did so, expecting me to protest.

'Go ahead,' I said. 'Press as hard as you like. I can't feel a thing.'

This distressed him more than if I had complained, for the absence of pain told him how advanced my condition was.

'You have a deft touch,' I said. 'What did you do back on Civvy Street?'

'I worked with my father just outside Newcastle. He was a landscape gardener.'

'Did you like it.'

'Oh yes, I was one of the lucky ones.'

'What's lucky about it?'

'To do what you like and be paid for it. That's something these days, isn't it?'

'I like gardens,' I said, watching, fascinated at the gentle skill with which he worked. 'But only after someone else has done the hard work.'

'Most people feel as you do,' he replied. 'Actually, plants and flowers are much more interesting than you'd think if you don't know them. Each has its own character. Every one is unique. But they all need the gardener's care to help them make the most of themselves and to fight off the things that would destroy them. Yes, I enjoy growing things and I like trying to understand how and why they grow.'

With one knee on the ground, he was bent over, intent on making me comfortable. He considered carefully before he spoke. He was a man who thought what he was going to say. The clearly enunciated syllables blending with his soft voice made pleasing music. There was an air of natural innocence or goodness about him. I did not know quite what to make of him; I was accustomed to companions who were quick of tongue and temper. 'Why the devil,' I thought, 'is he so pleased to be alive?'

'Weeds,' I prompted to keep him talking. 'To me gardening has always meant weeding when I'd much rather be doing something else.'

'When people are down on their knees weeding,' Dusty laughed gently, 'they think only of the weeds and never of the flowers. I like to grow flowers, not weeds. But if I'm to grow

flowers I must deal with the weeds. So I don't mind doing that.'

He paused to wring out his rag into the basin.

'I'm looking forward to getting back to my work when all this is over. Dad isn't growing any younger and one day I'll be taking over from him. There'll be a great need for gardens after the war – especially in the cities. That's something I'd like very much to do – bring gardens into the heart of towns – see greenery and flowers grow in brick and stone.'

He smiled happily at the prospect.

'That's fine,' I said with a touch of irony. 'You make your gardens and I'll come to enjoy them.'

'Fair enough,' he said placidly. 'I'll be looking forward to that.'

Dusty finished treating my sores. He produced two lengths of cloth and wound them around my legs, pulled the rice-sacks smooth beneath me, and picked up his bucket, basin and rags.

'I've a bit more to do in the kitchens, so I'll say good-night. I'll be back in the morning with your breakfast. I'll try to bring some salt to make a saline dressing for your legs. Have a good night's sleep.'

It was a gentle command.

He bent his back and disappeared through the doorway into the gathering darkness.

True to his promise he was back in the morning with a steaming bowl of 'pap rice' – rice that had been ground with a stone and boiled as a porridge. He also brought salt and set about preparing the saline dressings. As he worked we talked.

'Do you really think I'm going to get better?' I asked the question bluntly. I wanted to see what he would say.

'Of course you will, sir,' he said confidently. 'The lads have told me how fit you were when you were with the battalion. They said you didn't wear out easily. By the time you get back to Blighty you'll be strong. And there'll be lots to do.'

I turned the conversation back to him.

‘And what do you have in mind apart from gardening?’

‘Oh, I’ve plenty. I used to help out with youth work in my local church. I want to do more of that. There’s something satisfying about working with people – especially young people.’

‘What makes you think you’ll be able to do any good?’ I asked.

Dusty looked up with raised eyebrows.

‘Why, when you work with people there’s always good to be given and good to be received. At least I’ve always found it so, haven’t you, sir?’

‘I’m not sure that I have,’ I challenged him. ‘In fact, I haven’t thought much about it. Perhaps you’re right – but then again perhaps you aren’t.’

‘Believe me, the good is there,’ Dusty replied feelingly.

He had finished me and was tidying up the shack. He first sprinkled water on the dirt floor, then swept it with a broom he had made from the leafy tips of branches.

‘Why don’t you go off for a snooze?’ I remarked. ‘You must be tired after your night’s work. When do you sleep, anyway?’

He shrugged.

‘Don’t worry about me. I manage all right.’

Dusty went on with his chores, and I was drowsing on my rice-sacks when I heard a strange voice boom out, ‘Good morning, sir. Nice billet you’ve got. I heard you were here, so I thought I’d drop around to say “Hello!”’

It was Dennis Moore of the Royal Corps of Signals. We had met when we were both at school in Greenock, but I had not seen him again until a short time before my present illness. Dennis – better known as ‘Dinty’ – was lounging with one arm against the bamboo wall just inside the doorway, as though reluctant to come in until formally invited. His hazel eyes were merry in a wide, good-natured face. When a man is wearing

nothing more than a loincloth he can hardly be described as well groomed. Yet that was the impression Dinty conveyed, perhaps only through the neatness of his hairline moustache and his carefully brushed hair.

‘A friend of mine in the Argylls happened to mention that you weren’t exactly at your brightest,’ Dinty said lightly, ‘so I thought I’d drop by and see if I could do anything for you.’

‘That’s awfully good of you,’ I replied. ‘Meet Dusty Miller. Dusty’s my nurse – since last night.’

Dusty smiled in greeting. Dinty squatting on his haunches, feet flat on the ground, native-fashion, in the middle of the floor, made himself at home.

‘Maybe there’s something I can do to help you get the captain back on his feet again,’ he said to Dusty. ‘Is there any particular time you’d like me to look in?’

‘I work at night in the kitchen,’ Dusty replied. ‘If you could lend a hand then, that’d be fine.’

‘Sure thing. I’m busy in the day on a work detail on the railway. Actually I’m supposed to be on the job right now. But the Nips sent me for a spanner and I’m taking my time about it.’

‘How are you making out?’ I asked.

Dinty ran his thumb along the neat line of his moustache; then he replied, ‘Remember what the old lady said when she sat down on her false teeth? She said, “Oh well, things could always be worse. It might have been my real ones.”’

He grimaced at the bad joke, and went on, ‘I may be getting a posh job soon. I was a sorting clerk in the post office back home. I hear a mountain of mail’s arrived, and they’ll want to use my rare talents as a sorter once the Nips give the go-ahead.’

He stood up, and said cheerfully, ‘Must be nipping back with that spanner. Chin, chin, Skipper. Be seeing you tonight.’

I expected Dinty to drop in now and then, but I had no idea from his offhand manner that he intended to make me his full-time charge. Thus began, however, a close association. No two

men could have been more different than Dusty and Dinty – the former quiet, serene and gentle, the latter impulsive, full of fun, with a harum-scarum love of life. Dusty was a Methodist, Dinty a Roman Catholic; in their separate ways both men of faith. Their care and patience were successful substitutes for the medicines that were beyond my reach. No man could have asked for better nurses or for better friends. They guided me along the road to recovery.

31 May 1943 dawned like any other day. It was only after Dusty had given me a wash, and I was lying there thinking, that I remembered that it was my twenty-sixth birthday. I decided not to mention it. There was no place for birthday observances here.

That evening I was surprised to see Dusty and Dinty entering together. They were singing 'Happy Birthday' somewhat off-key but with great spirit. Wearing a grin like a proud Cheshire cat, Dinty brought his hand slowly from behind his back and held out a birthday cake. It was made from boiled rice, limes, bananas and palm sugar. I have had tastier birthday cakes in my life, but none which meant as much to me.

'Let's have a party!' I exclaimed, entering into their mood.

'It's all laid on!' cried Dinty gaily.

He ducked out and returned almost at once with a soot-blackened can.

'Coffee – hot and sweet!' He handed mugs around. 'Coffee that some carping critics might say was nothing but burnt rice. But I say this is coffee and I'll stand by it.'

They both raised their mugs in salutation and Dinty gave the toast: 'Here's to your happy birthday – and to far happier ones to come!'

I did not know what to say. Their kind and spontaneous gesture of goodwill moved me deeply. For a while I was unable to respond to the toast. Finally I whispered, 'Thanks, both of you. In Blighty we'll have the biggest and fanciest birthday

party anyone has ever seen. You, Dinty, can provide the dancing girls.'

'Oh, I can do that all right.'

'And you, Dusty, can provide the flowers.'

'That'll be right in my line.'

'You can count on me for the rest.'

Both answered simultaneously, 'That's a date. We'll be there.'

We shook hands. We would all be there – if human wills could make it possible.

They were two rare characters – so different, yet so alike – the one, Nature's gentleman; the other, a gay cavalier – both motivated by a deep faith and genuine human kindness.

I couldn't say how or when, because it happened so slowly, but gradually sensation returned to my limbs. I started a strict regime. While I was still so weak that I could do it for only a few minutes at a time, I would sit up on the edge of my bed with my legs hanging over. I first picked up one leg and let it fall, then the other. I could encircle each thigh with my hands. By this time Dusty's care had cleaned up the worst of my tropical ulcers. His massage and my exercises helped the blood to circulate. The muscle tone returned and before long I could swing my legs from the knee.

The time came when I was able to stand on my feet by holding on to Dusty. One morning I found that with the help of a bamboo staff I could propel myself in a clumsy, halting way as far as the door. In a matter of days I ventured outside. As I staggered along between the huts, gaunt and bony, I must have looked like a prophet of doom. My long black beard and loincloth might well have been the mark of an eremite returning from a long fast in the desert. Like Jeremiah, I might have been crying, 'My grief is beyond my healing, my heart is sick within me . . . The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and

we are not saved . . . Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician here?’

Now I had further problems to face. The amoebae thrived on my general weakness and played havoc with my insides. I never had more than half an hour’s undisturbed rest without having a trot – if one could call it that – to the latrine. I was determined, however, to do everything as though I were at the top of my strength. My skin ulcers and the beriberi were almost cured. I was certain that in a short time I’d have the dysentery cured as well.

What I had experienced – the turning to life away from death – was happening to the camp in general. We were coming out of the valley. There was a movement, a stirring in our midst, a presence. Stories began to circulate around the camp, stories of self-sacrifice, heroism, faith and love.

‘Do you remember Angus McGillivray?’ Dusty Miller asked me late one afternoon as he prepared me for my wash.

‘Indeed I do,’ I replied. ‘He was in my company. A darned good soldier, too. I know him well. As a matter of fact, I defended him at a court martial on the charge of refusing to obey an order given him by his platoon sergeant. In my opinion he had every right to do so. It was a stupid order. But when Angus queried it he was immediately put under arrest.’

Dusty waited with interest as I continued my recollections.

‘At the trial I put everything I had into the defence. Pulled out every stop in the organ. Backed every fact with reams of law: I’d studied law while I was in the Army. I was doing so well that at the end of the first day Angus Macdonald, the adjutant who was prosecuting, said to me, “You’ve won hands down. I’m on McGillivray’s side now.”’

‘Did you get an acquittal?’

‘No. The court acquitted him of the charge of disobeying an order, but got him on the nebulous charge of “Conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline.”’



'I've always thought it was damned bad law to have a charge as general as that on the books. Every soldier worth his salt could be convicted of it at some time or another. The adjutant admitted that it was the sergeant who should have been convicted and not Angus McGillivray. Aye, Angus was a good soldier all right. He came from Lochgilphead at the top of Loch Fyne. Fine stock in his family.'

'Was he with the battalion long?' Dusty asked.

'For the length of his service, which must be over eight years. He was on the north-west frontier of India most of the time the battalion was fighting there. But why were you asking me if I knew him?'

'He's dead.'

'Dead? How?'

For a moment Dusty could not speak. I could see that he was deeply moved. I wondered why, for he could scarcely have known McGillivray.

'It's hard to say. He was strong. In fact, he was one of those you'd expect would be the last to die. But then I suppose he needn't have died.'

'Then why did he?'

Dusty sat down on my bed.

'It has to do with Angus's mucker,' he began, 'who became very ill.'

It was the custom among the Argylls for every man to have a 'mucker' – that is, a pal or friend with whom he shared or 'mucked in' everything he had.

'It seemed pretty certain to everyone,' Dusty continued, 'that the mucker was going to die. Certain, that is, to everyone but Angus. He made up his mind that his mucker would live. Someone had stolen his mucker's blanket. Angus gave him his own. Every meal-time Angus would show up to draw his ration. But he didn't eat it. He would bring it round to give to his friend. Stood over him, he did, and made him eat it. Going

hungry was hard on Angus, mind you, because he was a big man, with a big frame.'

As Dusty talked on, I could see it all happening – Angus drawing on his strength through his will and depleting his own body to make his friend live.

'His mates noticed that Angus had taken to slipping out of the camp at night,' Dusty went on. 'These excursions could have only one purpose. He was visiting the Thai villages. It was taken for granted that he had joined the black-marketeers! Angus, of all people! This shocked the others, for he was known as a man of high principles.'

As men died in the camp, it became possible for others to come into possession of objects of some value – watches, shirts, shorts, knives and so on. These were highly prized by the Thais, who would gladly pay for them in their paper money known as 'bahts', worth about one-and-sixpence each. Or they would barter for the goods, offering medicine or duck eggs.

'Although Angus's mates thought that he was trying to make a bit of money for himself, they didn't begrudge it to him,' said Dusty. 'Perhaps you can guess the end of the story. The mucker got better. Then Angus collapsed. Just pitched on his face and died.'

'And what did the docs say caused it?' I asked.

'Starvation,' answered Dusty, 'complicated by exhaustion.'

'And all for his friend?'

Dusty sat in stillness.

After a while, I said, 'Do you remember that verse from St John that used to be read at memorial services for those who died in the First World War? It went like this: "Greater love hath no man . . ."'

'Yes, I remember it,' said Dusty, nodding. 'I've always thought it one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament. "This is my commandment, that ye love one

another as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”’

Dusty stood without moving. Then he said, ‘That’s for Angus all right.’

‘By some ways of reckoning,’ I said, ‘what he did might seem foolish.’

‘But in other ways,’ Dusty returned, ‘it makes an awful lot of sense.’

He bent over my legs and began cleaning my ulcers.

During the next few days, on my visits to the latrine, I heard other prisoners discussing Angus’s sacrifice. The story of what he had done was spreading through the camp. It had evidently fired the imagination of everyone. He had given us a shining example of the way we ought to live, even if we did not.

Yet, noble as Angus’s sacrifice was, it was not the only one. Other incidents were now spoken of that, showed that death no longer had the last word at Chungkai. One that went the rounds soon after concerned another Argyll, who was in a work detail on the railway.

The day’s work had ended; the tools were being counted, as usual. As the party was about to be dismissed, the Japanese guard shouted that a shovel was missing. He insisted that someone had stolen it to sell to the Thais. Striding up and down before the men, he ranted and denounced them for their wickedness, and most unforgivable of all their ingratitude to the Emperor. As he raved, he worked himself up into a paranoid fury. Screaming in broken English, he demanded that the guilty one step forward to take his punishment. No one moved; the guard’s rage reached new heights of violence.

‘All die! All die!’ he shrieked.

To show that he meant what he said, he cocked his rifle, put it to his shoulder and looked down the sights, ready to fire at the first man at the end of them.

At that moment the Argyll stepped forward, stood stiffly to attention, and said calmly, 'I did it'.

The guard unleashed all his whipped-up hate; he kicked the helpless prisoner and beat him with his fists. Still the Argyll stood rigidly to attention, with the blood streaming down his face. His silence goaded the guard to an excess of rage. Seizing his rifle by the barrel, he lifted it high over his head and, with a final howl, brought it down on the skull of the Argyll, who sank limply to the ground and did not move. Although it was perfectly clear that he was dead, the guard continued to beat him and stopped only when exhausted.

The men of the work detail picked up their comrade's body, shouldered their tools and marched back to camp. When the tools were counted again at the guard-house no shovel was missing.

As this story was told, remarkably enough, admiration for the Argyll transcended hatred for the Japanese guard.

News of similar happenings began to reach our ears from other camps. One incident concerned an Aussie private who had been caught outside the fence while trying to obtain medicine from the Thais for his sick friends. He was summarily tried and sentenced to death.

On the morning set for his execution he marched cheerfully between his guards to the parade-ground. The Japanese were out in full force to observe the scene. The Aussie was permitted to have his commanding officer and a chaplain in attendance as witnesses. The party came to a halt. The CO and the chaplain were waved to one side, and the Aussie was left standing alone. Calmly, he surveyed his executioners. He knelt down and drew a small copy of the New Testament from a pocket of his ragged shorts. Unhurriedly, his lips moving but no sound coming from them, he read a passage to himself.

What that passage was, no one will ever know. I cannot

help wondering, however, if it were not those words addressed by Jesus to his disciples in the Upper Room:

*Let not your heart be troubled;  
Ye believe in God, believe also in me.  
In my Father's house there are many mansions:  
If it were not so, I would have told you.  
I go to prepare a place for you.  
And if I go and prepare a place for you  
I will come again and receive you unto myself:  
That where I am ye may be also.*

*. . . Peace I leave unto you,  
My peace I give unto you:  
Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.  
Let not your heart be troubled;  
Neither let it be afraid.*

He finished reading, returned his New Testament to his pocket, looked up, and saw the distressed face of his chaplain. He smiled, waved to him, and called out, 'Cheer up, Padre, it isn't as bad as all that. I'll be all right.'

He nodded to his executioner as a sign that he was ready. He knelt down, and bent his head forward to expose his neck.

The Samurai sword flashed in the sunlight.

The examples set by such men shone like beacons.

Our regeneration, sparked by conspicuous acts of self-sacrifice, had begun while 'Operation Speedo' was at its height, when work on the railway was in its most exhausting phase and we were at the very bottom of the abyss. At first I became aware of the change in the atmosphere in the camp only at second-hand through what I picked up on my visits to the latrine, for I was still on an invalid regime. The changes in attitude were most in evidence among the sick, for the

able-bodied – or comparatively able-bodied – still went out every day to toil on the railway.

But after the bridge was completed, and the railway neared its final stages, the atmosphere changed. The Japanese grew less jittery. At Chungkai, those of us who were left alive enjoyed a brief respite from brutal pressure, lasting over Christmas when the camp was engulfed again by a flood of men coming back from up-country. This respite, brief as it was, created a climate in which our efforts to help one another and to improve our situation were able to grow and flourish.

It might be thought that, since this change in atmosphere coincided with my own slow return to health, it was a purely subjective thing, that in my earlier state of depression and weakness I had projected a jaundiced view of reality and that as this state receded I became aware of attitudes that had, in fact, been there all the time. Of course, my physical recovery did lead to my having an enhanced appreciation of the personalities of my comrades. But the transformation in the camp was no subjective matter; it was a concrete reality, showing itself not only in the heroic acts of self-sacrifice I have described, but also in many other new and significant ways.

One of these concerns pay. Pay from the Japanese had come late and was meagre, since they managed to deduct most of it for room and board, but at least it gave us a little something of our own. A fellow officer I scarcely knew stopped by my shack one evening to tell me that the senior British officer in charge of camp administration had called a conference of other administrative officers in his hut to try to effect a drastic change in camp policy. Some of the officers had realized that the pay offered opportunities for replacing selfishness with a more creative way of living.

It was first proposed that the officers agree to use part of their allowance to buy food from the canteen to give to the sick. This met with a mixed reception; some grumbled; others

openly opposed it. The objections still echoed the old ways of looking at things:

'My pay's my own, isn't it? I can do what I please with it.'

'We're all in a tough spot; but I need everything I can get for myself.'

'When the chips are down it's a case of "to hell with everyone else." Too bad, but that's the way life is.'

The rejoinder was, 'We sink or swim together. We ought to realize that an officer's first responsibility is to his men, and ours are in a bad way. We've got to share what we have with them.' The opposition began to crumble. For the most part consciences had been touched. Some were not too happy about the decision, but the ruling was accepted.

Generosity proved to be contagious. Once begun, this charity soon extended beyond regimental loyalties to include any man in need. Men started thinking less of themselves, of their own discomforts and plans, and more of their responsibilities to others. Although the pay which the other ranks had to share was even less than that of the officers, they, too, found ways to give expression to their generous impulses. A couple of duck eggs could be bought through the canteen for one baht, and a duck egg might well save a life. Sometimes a detachment arriving from another camp after a forced march would have gifts of food pressed upon them.

It was dawning on us all – officers and other ranks alike – that the law of the jungle is not the law for man. We had seen for ourselves how quickly it could strip most of us of our humanity and reduce us to levels lower than the beasts.

Death was still with us – no doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip. We were seeing for ourselves the sharp contrast between the forces that made for life and those that made for death. Selfishness, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, self-indulgence, laziness and pride were all anti-life. Love, heroism, self-sacrifice, sympathy, mercy,

integrity and creative faith, on the other hand, were the essence of life, turning mere existence into living in its truest sense. These were the gifts of God to men.

With these principles beginning to manifest themselves to us, we began to notice such forces at work around us. On occasions when we marched into the countryside on labour details we saw them in the actions of Christian natives, in the differences between the Christian way of life and the Oriental one.

Usually as we marched through the villages, we were treated with indifference and contempt. Thai maidens held their noses as we passed – although perhaps they were only being practical. Sometimes we encountered yellow-robed Buddhist priests going along the road with their silver begging-bowls. Our plight meant nothing to them – why should it? They were on their way to salvation by non-attachment. Humanity, with its suffering, was secondary. A man dying by the side of the road was left to die. There was no place for mercy in their philosophy.

But once we came to a village where we received a treatment so different that it astonished us. There was mercy in the eyes of those who rushed to the roadside to watch us go by. Before we had reached the end of their settlement they were back laden with cakes, bananas, eggs, medicines and money which they thrust into our hands. Later we learned that this village had been converted to Christianity by missionaries. The Japanese, who found out about their friendly behaviour to us, severely punished them for it.

A key figure in carrying Christianity to these jungle outposts had been an elderly missionary woman who managed to continue her work during the Japanese occupation. When she was finally forced to take to the jungle she was handed from one group of Christians to another. The Japanese knew of her existence and were never far behind. But, although they put a



high price on her head, she eluded them. What her end was, I do not know.

These brief contacts with the outside world were helpful reminders that a saner, more human way of life still existed. No word had been said. But the message had been given.

Within the camp there was also daily inspiration. The strong and simple faith of Dusty Miller was one of them; it suggested that he had found the answer so many of us sought.

One evening, before he went off to his work in the kitchens, we were having a discussion about the horrifying waste of life at Chungkai. It seemed to me a good time to test him with the kind of disputation that had become familiar to me as a university student. As he was putting fresh bandages on my tropical ulcers, I said to him, 'Dusty – do you realize that more than twenty men are dying every day, here, and most of them are young?'

I dragged myself up into a sitting position the better to argue with him. 'Well, then, doesn't it make it all the more certain that there's no meaning of any kind to be found in a situation as hopeless as this one? When you look at the facts, isn't it hard to see any point in living?'

Dusty got up from the ground where he had been kneeling, moved his basin into a corner out of the way, and looked at me with hurt surprise. 'I'm not sure I follow you,' he said. 'I see a lot of point in living.'

I thought, 'He's taking this much too calmly. He must have his doubts as I do.' I pursued my argument.

'It's quite simple. All I'm saying is that when you examine the problem of our existence, the only thing you can honestly do is to admit, as Matthew Arnold did, that we are on earth "as on a darkling plain", doomed by the processes of nature to begin to die as soon as we are born. Isn't that what we have to face?'

'There's more to face than that, surely,' Dusty said gently, wringing out his rag, 'because there's more to life than that.'

'We may dream about love, truth, beauty and aspiration for

our own amusement,' I continued, 'to dull the ache of existence. In fact, that's about all we can do. Actually, we're nothing but froth on the wave.'

I was warming to the thrust of my logic.

'Religion and the arts are like a gramophone record we play to drown out the cries of pain from the people of the world. Admittedly, they help to numb the senses, but drugs can do that so much better.'

Dusty looked puzzled.

'No, sir, I can't believe that,' he replied with spirit. 'I don't think there *is* anything accidental about our creation. God knows us. He knows about the sparrow and each hair of our heads. He has a purpose for us.'

'Do you really believe that?' I said, studying him.

'Yes, I do!' he replied with conviction.

'Then why doesn't He do something, instead of sitting quiescently on a great big white throne in the no-place called heaven?'

Dusty considered for a moment. Then he said, 'Maybe He does . . . maybe He does . . . but we can't see everything He is doing now. Maybe our vision isn't very good at this point, "for here we see as in a glass darkly". I suppose eventually we shall see and when we see we shall understand.'

He seemed to be groping in his memory for some elusive thought. Then his face brightened and he said, 'Here's a verse I've always found to be of help. It makes us realize that God is closer than we think:

*No one could tell me where my soul might be;  
I sought for God, but God eluded me;  
I sought my brother out and found all three –  
My soul, my God, and all humanity.*

'That's about all I can say,' he concluded.

As Dusty was picking up his things, Dinty Moore came in. I remarked to him, 'Dusty and I have been having a little argument. He claims that God has a purpose for all of us and that we can learn something about that purpose by loving God and man. Is that right, Dusty?'

'That's right,' Dusty smiled pleasantly. My attack on his beliefs hadn't upset him. Dinty now contributed his own piece of wisdom:

'Remember that old saying at home? "We are a' Jock Tamson's bairns and we've a' got to hang together."'

'And what's it supposed to mean?' I asked.

Dinty laughed, cocked his head and screwed up his face as if asking himself the question.

'Well, you might say it means – wait a minute – hmm – you might say it means – that we're all God's children and we've all got to stick together. How's that?'

'Pretty good, I should think.'

Dusty nodded his agreement.

'Rabbie Burns must have had that at the back of his mind,' Dinty went on, 'when he wrote, "For a' that, and a' that, It's comin' yet for a' that, That man to man, the world o'er, Shall brothers be for a' that."'

'I remember it well,' said Dusty. 'Dad was for ever quoting it.'

He bade us good night; Dinty set about making me comfortable.

Next day when Dusty returned, he said jubilantly, 'I've found it!'

'Found what?' I asked.

'A passage I was looking for – one that sums up what we were talking about last night. Here – I'll read it to you.'

He opened his Bible at the New Testament and read aloud from the letter of St John:

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear;

because fear hath torment. He that fears is not made perfect in love. We love him because he first loved us. If a man say I love God and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God, love his brother also.'

I lay back on my sleeping platform and let my mind dwell on these words. There was truth in them. Both Dusty and Dinty exemplified it.

For the first time I understood. Dusty was a Methodist – Dinty a Roman Catholic. Yet in each it was his faith that lent a special grace to his personality; through them both faith expressed a power, a presence, greater than themselves. I was beginning to see that life was infinitely more complex, and at the same time more wonderful, than I had ever imagined. True, there was hatred. But there was also love. There was death. But there was also life. God had not left us. He was with us, calling us to live the divine life in fellowship.

I was beginning to be aware of the miracle that God was working in the Death Camp by the River Kwai.