

ON FROM CHUNGKAI

Christmas was the high point. From that time on, conditions in the camp went steadily downhill. Since the railway had been finished well ahead of schedule, the camps up-country were being emptied, and the prisoners who still lived were returning to Chungkai. Some still had the spark of life in their eyes, but many were expressionless. Their inner spark had been suffocated. Although they had no identifiable disease, they had come back to die. Despair had destroyed the self and the will to live. Aimlessly, they shuffled along in a grey, twilight existence, waiting for death.

Chungkai had become a transit camp to hold survivors until another project could be found in which to use their failing bodies. They came in such numbers and there was so little we could do to help those who were defeated that at first we were overwhelmed. We tried every means to reach them, but their faces betrayed no flicker to tell us we were succeeding. They seemed to have no centre left with which to hear and respond. Food meant nothing to them. The tinned milk and other luxuries which we obtained for them on the black market could not tempt them. Their appetites were gone.

They were isolated from life. Talking to them of home evoked no memories, for memory had been obliterated by fear and deprivation. With memory had vanished their identity as human beings. They had been killed in a way more fiendish than physical torture. They were dead before they stopped breathing.

Yet we did not give up. We visited all new groups as they came in to see what we could do. Sometimes we found that we could ease the lot of a comrade who still retained a hold on reality. But, in general, it was a haunting experience, for we never knew when we would encounter a missing friend or an old service companion.

Once as I passed down the sleeping platforms in a hut filled with fresh arrivals, a hand came out and gripped me. A voice said, 'Excuse me, sir, aren't you Ernie Gordon who used to be in the Gourock Boy Scouts with me?'

I recognized Ian Carruthers, a friend of my boyhood on the Firth of Clyde, whom I had not seen since those far-off days. He had an ugly jungle ulcer on his leg, but, apart from that, he was not so badly off as some. We had many a blether about old times while he was with us in the camp.

In another group I met an old service companion of mine, Sergeant MacKay, who had been captured in the jungle after the Battle of Slim River in the Malayan campaign. He had a present for me. At one point he had been sent on a work party to Port Dickson, where most of our personal luggage remained before we went into action. The Japanese had taken our belongings, with the exception of one garment of which they couldn't make head nor tail – that was the kilt. They allowed the POWs to take their pick and Sergeant MacKay recognized mine by its unusual panel design; it had been given to me by a friend who had had it from the First World War. He had carried that kilt of mine from camp to camp until at last he was able to restore it to me.

At the end of February the Japanese disclosed that Chungkai was to be disbanded and its able-bodied occupants sent to work in Japan. Parties were formed, equipped with warm clothing and despatched to Singapore for embarkation.

Afterwards, at our liberation, we heard what had happened to them. They were transported in old hulks, bought by the

Japanese in the depression years. Ships that had been built on the Clyde and sailed with pride on the seven seas became the tombs of the sons of the fathers that had built them. Prisoners of war were packed into the holds, not like cattle but like coal. There was almost no ventilation, no food, very little water and no sanitation. They were stacked on sleeping platforms built three feet above one another, the space allowed being six feet by six feet for each fifteen men. Thus confined, they had to sit cross-legged for the duration of the voyage. Once at sea, the hatches were closed and they were left to stew in their own juice.

The ships displayed no red crosses to show that they were carrying POWs. In consequence, a number of them were torpedoed by American submarines. In this way died many of our friends, including Ian Carruthers.

Thus died Dinty (Dennis Joseph) Moore, my good friend, the cheerful Good Samaritan who had cheered me and cared for me when I was in the valley of the shadow.

Chungkai, too, was dying. It was almost half-empty when I was ordered to join a party being sent to a camp for convalescents at Nakawm Paton. This was supposed to be a model camp built according to Red Cross specifications, but we looked forward to it with little enthusiasm, since we'd already had ample experience of 'model camps'.

While we were waiting to leave Chungkai, Ginger Ross came running into our hut in a high state of excitement.

'Guess what!' he said breathlessly. 'Mail is being given out tomorrow. I got it straight from the horse's mouth. Right from the lads at HQ. There's a ruddy great pile of it.'

Mail! It was not possible. In all the interminable months since I had made my escape from Singapore I had received only one communication from the world outside. This was a cablegram from a friend of mine in Chungking, China, who was Far Eastern representative for US Steel. How or why it got through

I will never know. But as to what was happening at home I'd not had a word.

I had difficulty in falling asleep that night. When I slept I dreamed of the letters that had come for me. I could see so clearly the blue envelopes addressed in my father's distinctively bold handwriting. There would be letters from my mother telling me about life at home, about what my brother, my sister and my friends were doing. At the end of each letter would be added a cheerful note from my dad, expressing his characteristic optimism. These letters were so real in my dreams that I never questioned whether I would receive them or not. I knew that I would.

We waited impatiently all through the next day. Then, a little before supper-time, there was a triumphant shout of 'Mail up!' It was the first such shout we had ever heard. Ginger had been right. At the entrance to the hut were the boys from HQ with bags of mail. Everyone rushed to the doorway. Everyone, that is, except me. I walked over calmly with the assurance that the letters awaited only my coming.

Standing at the back of the crowd, I listened to the names being called out one by one. It pleased me to see the joy on the faces of my hut-mates as they went away, clutching their letters. The mail was being handed out in alphabetical order. The G's had been called. I did not hear my name. Then came the H's, the I's, the J's, the K's, the L's and the M's. The mail stack was dwindling now. Still I waited, certain that mine had been misplaced. The S's were called, the T's and the W's. Only a few still remained; and only a letter or two was left. Then there was none.

The officer who was making the distribution looked up as he gathered together the empty mail-sacks and saw me standing alone. 'Sorry, Ernie, old boy,' he said sympathetically. 'Now that this load has got through we're sure to have another one soon. There'll be some for you then.'

'Why, certainly,' I replied as cheerfully as I could.

I walked back to my bed space as slowly as I had come.

When the time came for us to leave Chungkai in the autumn the camp was becoming noticeably thinner and our church services less well attended. In a matter of a year the jungle would take over. The clearing we had so laboriously made would be choked with undergrowth and there would be nothing left to show that here men had suffered, hoped, worshipped and died.

One morning a trainload of empty trucks stopped on its way back from Bangkok to Burma. With surprisingly little fuss we were paraded and entrained. Though Nakawm Paton was no great distance away, it took us a day and a night to reach it. At a leisurely pace we made our way along the route we had helped to build and across the infamous bridge over the River Kwai.

The five-to-six-year project that was to have taken eighteen months had been accomplished in twelve. The cost had been fantastic in terms of suffering endured and lives lost – the lives not only of Britons, Australians, New Zealanders and Dutch, but also of Tamils, Malays and Chinese. A prick of conscience must have been felt somewhere, for the appalling conditions under which we were forced to work were officially reported to Tojo. The only action taken was that one camp commander was selected as a scapegoat and court-martialled for the sins of all his colleagues. At the Tokyo Tribunal held after the war it was said that this condoned rather than punished the crime.

The railway itself was later sold to the Thais by the British Government for two million pounds. In time the rails were torn up. The jungle did the rest.

Our first sight of Nakawm Paton was a pleasant surprise. The long huts had been well constructed and laid out in blocks. There were even some buildings made of brick and

cement. These were the cook-houses. Our sleeping platforms, stretching along the sides of the huts as in Chungkai, were of planking, not of split bamboo.

We were seeking our billets, elated with what we had seen, when nearby we heard a deafening roar. A flight of Japanese fighter planes was streaking into the air from a concrete strip alongside the camp. It circled overhead, climbed into the clouds, and was lost to sight. Then we knew: the camp had been laid out in this way so that it would be clearly recognizable from the air for what it was. Quite rightly, the Japanese assumed that our fliers would not drop bombs on their own people. This would give the Jap fighters a chance to take to the air unmolested. Again, in contravention of international agreement, they had found a way to make our bodies of value to them. We took this as an indication, however, that the Japanese were getting edgy and going on the defensive, which gave us some comfort.

Nakawm Paton was essentially a camp for the sick, filled with those who had been crushed by too much work, by disease, by too little food and too many unkindnesses, the flotsam and jetsam from all the camps along the railway. So many were sick that they were segregated according to illness. One hut was reserved exclusively for tropical ulcer cases; another for those with beriberi; still another for victims of amoebic dysentery.

One hut surrounded by a high wire fence contained the men who had broken utterly and gone insane. They roamed about in their cage, twisting their hands and making strange guttural noises and staring out at us with frightened eyes. The Japanese were afraid to go near them, and had appointed special orderlies from among the other prisoners to administer to their needs. These were the first men I had encountered whom captivity had driven mad. I marvelled that there were so few.

Farther away, behind a similar barricade, was another,

smaller colony. These were the lepers. Food and other necessities were dropped to them over the wire by means of long bamboo poles.

The atmosphere at Nakawm Paton was one of general listlessness. The men had been taken from their regimental groups, from the companionship of their friends, to be sent there; hence there was an almost total lack of community. As we walked through the huts, blank eyes stared out at us from mask-like faces. It was a depressing contrast to Chungkai, where many had recovered their spirits. Here there were scarcely enough healthy men, or even comparatively healthy ones, to make a start at improving the lot of the sick.

In some ways, however, conditions were better than those at Chungkai. There was no back-breaking toil; the only work to be done was that of running the camp. The rations were slightly improved. The administration of the camp was under the direction of a British medical officer. There was also on the staff a gifted Australian brain surgeon, Lt-Col. A. E. Coates, who had passed through our escape route on the Indragiri and was taken prisoner at Padang.

Colonel Coates performed wonders of surgery every day. He had discovered among the POWs a maker of scientific instruments, who, under his guidance, fashioned an array of scalpels for special operations. For the most part, Colonel Coates had to operate without anaesthetics, although from time to time he was able to coax some from the visiting Japanese staff doctor when the latter stopped to admire his work.

At the camp we had no such reservoir of talent as we had had at Chungkai. But there were some things we could do – or at least try to do. We could make an effort to put some of these bed-ridden, hopeless men back on their feet and arouse in them a desire to live.

Here, as at Chungkai, Ginger Ross and the Mighty Atom

organized a blood-transfusion service. Those who could do so gave blood regularly. I was among the volunteers until the medical officer told me that I had reached the limit of spare blood.

Next, we formed a team of masseurs and went to work. But we found that our patients at Nakawm Paton did not want to walk. Our first job, therefore, became that of helping them to find a reason for living. This involved the stirring of memories which they had sealed off in their subconscious in order to make existence endurable. As we rubbed their muscles we talked of home and friends. This must have been as painful for them as it was for them to walk again on their match-stick legs.

One difficult case was a farmer from Norfolk. I found him lying on his rack, dirty, paralysed, weak, without hope. I affected a hearty, confident manner and introduced myself. 'Hello,' I said. 'I've come to help you walk again.'

Slowly, very slowly, he looked up at me with lack-lustre eyes. He spoke in a dialect so thick that I could barely understand him.

'Tain't any use. I can't walk. I'll never be able to walk.'

'Why not?'

'Cause I can't, that's why. And 'tain't much good you tryin' to help any.'

His tone suggested annoyance.

'What do you want me to do, then?' I asked somewhat sharply. 'Leave you alone to rot in your misery?'

'Might as well. 'Tain't any point in walkin'. 'Tain't any point in livin'.'

He turned his face away from me.

'Come on,' I said with a lightness I did not feel. 'There must be something worth remembering. Haven't you anything – a mother, a father, a sweetheart?'

I looked down at him. He was not a pretty sight.

'I'll bet a good-looking chap like you must have been a riot with the lassies.'

No response, not even a wan smile.

'I'll bet you're even married.'

'Aye, that I am. And I've a nipper I've never even seen. But 'tain't any good. There's too much sufferin' and too much trouble for anythin' good to survive. We're licked. We're all licked. The Japs will kill us all. It's all finished.'

He stared up at me in misery.

'The Jerries will have bombed my wife and baby by this time.'

I had to dispel this fear. I told him I heard the war in Europe wasn't going as badly as all that.

'Let's get started,' I urged. 'The massage certainly can't harm you and it might do you some good. There isn't too much wrong with you. You've had beriberi, but not too badly. Now you're getting better. You've lost the ability to walk. But all we've got to do is to get it back.'

Grudgingly, he permitted me to massage him. Day by day, as I worked on his useless legs, I kept up much the same kind of conversation, reminding him how lucky he was to have a wife and son to go back to.

But he stubbornly persisted, 'How do I know I've got a home left? The Jerries might have blown it up. There's been no word to say they ain't.'

'And there's been no word to say they have,' I replied. 'Is that what you're afraid of? Or are you worried that your wife is running around with someone else? One of those damn' Yanks, for instance; or a Pole?'

'No, I ain't scared of that. My wife's a good woman. She's a teacher, a primary teacher, and she's savin' her pay so that I can buy into my brother-in-law's business. He's a grain merchant.'

'Sounds pretty good to me,' I said. 'But while she's working

hard building a future for you, you're rejecting it. You don't want it. You want to die. Doesn't seem quite fair to me, from what you've told me.'

He made no reply.

'Are you scared to go back in case you don't like her any more? You've forgotten what she looks like, I bet.'

'No! No! 'Tain't it!' he burst out. 'She's right pretty, that's what she is. If I'd been able to keep my picture wallet I'd show you how pretty she is. But the Japs took it off me.'

'Can you see her?' I asked.

'Course I can see her. It's as if she was standin' here before me.'

'Isn't it as I said – you are luckier than most of us!'

A faint smile appeared on his face. He began to be interested.

'Now you're feelin' sorry for yourself instead of me,' he said with a certain amount of satisfaction.

'Indeed I am. And why not? There's no lass saving up her pay for me. Any girl friends I had will have been married by this time. With all the foreign troops stationed in Britain there won't be a girl left for any of us by the time this war is over.'

He smiled a little and I continued, 'Besides, you've got a son waiting for you. You'll be a proper hero to him.'

He raised himself on one elbow to listen more carefully.

'Dads are always heroes to their sons,' I said, 'but *he*'ll have the satisfaction of knowing that you're one. Quite a romantic figure you're going to cut when you come marching home again. You'll be slim all right – thanks to the Japs – and handsome, and you'll have plenty of ribbons to decorate your manly chest.'

I went on, giving him a portrait of himself that he could see and like.

'You won't be so bad off yourself,' he said. 'A gentleman like you should do very well after the war.'

'I'm not a gentleman,' I said. 'To be a gentleman you need

an income of at least a thousand quid a year. No, I don't qualify. I'll have to find a job.'

'What will you do, then?'

'Well . . . ' I hesitated. 'I thought I might buy a fishing boat with my gratuity and go into the smuggling business, running brandy and scent from France to England. Or,' I mused, 'I might get a job with the Scottish Nationalist Party, become Commander-in-Chief of the Scottish Army, fight the Battle of Bannockburn over again, give you English the thrashing of your lives, and move the King back into Holyrood.'

'We'd outnumber you ten to one,' he answered.

'Why, that leaves the odds in our favour.'

'How do you figure that?'

'It's all a matter of diet, Scottish oatmeal porridge – the Shorter Catechism and Gumption Pie. Try it when you get back. You'll be head of the grain business in no time.'

'And I'll be waitin' to pull your leg just as you're pullin' mine now,' he said with a wide grin.

At last he had come round to a more optimistic outlook. We looked forward to our massage and conversation sessions, but the time came when I had to encourage him to do a little bit more. One day I said to him, 'Well, I think I've done about everything I can for you. I can stop your massage and go on to someone else.'

'Why?' he asked in bewilderment.

'What's the use? You'll never be able to walk again.'

'Who said I wouldn't?'

'You did yourself. Lying right there. Don't you remember?'

'Well, I've changed my mind. Mebbe I *will* be able to walk – if you'll help me.'

'Do you still think we're licked?' I asked. 'That trouble and suffering and death have the last word?'

'No, I don't think I do any more. Mebbe there are things that can survive even this camp – and the war.'

'Like what?'

'That I can't rightly say. I can't exactly put it into words. I have a feelin' about it, you might say.'

'Things like – faith, hope and love, maybe?'

'Yes – that's the sort of thing I mean. Faith, and hope, and love, and things like them. I should've thought of them before, but I never did. Can't make out why.'

'Then you must think there's something to live for.'

'I reckon I do. I see that mebbe there is.'

'Now you're getting somewhere,' I said. 'The message of Easter is that God isn't defeated and neither are the riches of His Spirit. You can't chuck things like love, heroism, loyalty, love of beauty and other things like that out on the rubbish-heap. They endure – when everything else is gone.'

Slowly he answered, 'That sounds pretty good to me. Why did nobody never tell me that before?'

'Perhaps they did, but perhaps you weren't listening. Sometimes we hear only what we want to hear. One of the good things about this mess is that it's opening our eyes and our ears. When God speaks to us He doesn't do so from the storm or the whirlwind, but from the silence with a still, small voice. But that's enough to keep you thinking for a while.'

I gave his legs a final slap.

'Now get up on your feet!'

He gave me a startled look.

'What's that you say?'

'You heard me!' I replied. 'Up on your feet with you.'

He did not move.

'You want to walk, don't you? Well, that's something you can't do lying on your back. Get up!'

He saw that I meant business. Without any further fuss, he did his best to obey my command. Guiding his legs with his hands, he put his feet over the edge of the sleeping rack and placed them on the ground. Then he tried to raise himself with

his hands. His legs wobbled under him like macaroni. He sank back.

'It's hopeless,' he said in a dispirited voice.

I had to admit to myself that it looked that way. But I did not let him know how I felt. 'No, it isn't,' I reassured him. 'Here, let me give you a hand.'

Taking his arm and putting it across my shoulder, I raised him to his feet. Most of his weight was borne by me. But for the first time in months he was standing – even if just barely. He lurched forward. Had he moved one leg? I couldn't tell. But I pretended that he had.

'You've taken a step!' I exclaimed.

He did not reply.

'There's an old Chinese proverb,' I went on, 'that says, "The longest journey begins with but a single step". That's what you've done. You've begun a journey.'

I held him upright for a while and eased a little more of his weight on to himself. After a time he gasped, 'I've had enough. Let me down.'

His face was contorted. He gazed at me with eyes that were almost pleading.

'Do you think – that I'll ever – be able – to stand on my own?'

'Of course you will,' I said. 'And you'll walk on your own, too. It'll be a painful business at times. You've got to make up your mind to that. But we'll have you walking in a month. I'll lay you odds on that.'

He was still sceptical.

'Tell you what,' I said. 'I'll bring you a walking-stick tomorrow. Then you'll be able to help yourself a little more.'

My estimate of a month proved optimistic. But not for want of trying. Every day I spent at least two hours with him. More often than not he was so depressed that he wanted to give in. His reviving leg muscles pained him acutely. He complained

that they would not let him sleep at night. I reassured him by explaining that this was a healthy sign – a sign of returning life. But he remained dubious.

At last we reached a stage where he was ready to make an attempt at walking by himself with the support of a cane. He set out, moving rigidly, like an automaton. I followed behind, prepared to catch him. With his thigh muscles he would raise the lower leg so that he could take a step. Then he let it fall and threw his weight forward so that he would be in a position to do the same with his other leg.

As he made his precarious journey down the hut, all eyes were on him. Others lying on their sleeping platforms were identifying themselves with him. He was a symbol of their hopes. If he could do this, why not they?

One day, after he had made it for about two hundred yards, I said to him, 'Now you're on your own. I'm taking your cane. Keep walking.'

Without any protest, he handed me his staff.

Alone, he took a faltering step – another step – then another. He was walking. From that ragged crowd of watching men a cheer went up.

I saw that he was near to collapse, and ran to catch him. But at that precise moment he heard the cheer. He recovered his balance, threw back his shoulders and stepped forward, walking with stiff, yet confident precision until I told him to stop. He sat down. Sweat poured from his face, but he was grinning.

'I've done it, by gum!' he said happily. 'I've done it!'

The recovery of the Norfolk farmer was not an isolated incident, nor was my work with him by any means the only kind of service that was being rendered in the camp. Again and again the massage team encouraged men who had all but lost hope to try again, and in many cases their efforts were crowned with a similar success. Such men who did make the attempt to rejoin the world of the hopeful living encouraged

others. The Norfolk man's struggle had a particular effect on his hut mates who had followed every stage in his recovery. They had listened, too, to my talks with him and from time to time had joined in.

Gradually I noticed that a few of them had started coming to our church services – one or two at first, then more. I could pick them out, sitting together as a block. When I remarked that I was happy to see them at church one of them replied, 'We weren't too sure about it at first – seeing that we weren't the church-going type. But it seemed the right thing to do. Now it's becoming a habit or something, for we like it.' With an affirmative bob of his head, he added, 'Yes, sir, we wouldn't miss it for nothing now – me and me mates.'

The hut improved remarkably in appearance. When I had first visited it, it had been squalid. Although recently built, it had degenerated into a slum, redolent of the stench of corruption, unwashed bodies and open sores. Now I noticed a change. The planks that served as sleeping platforms were regularly taken out, washed down and left in the sun to get rid of the vermin. The hut itself was swept. Perhaps this persistent fight against dirt and the bed-bugs was the most significant indication of a reviving spirit.

Some attempts were made at decoration. There were few pictures of pin-up girls; the starvation diet had taken care of the sex urge. Instead there were pictures of apple pies, roast beef and potatoes, boxes of sweets, steak-and-kidney pies, or chocolate cakes, all clipped from pre-war magazines that had come our way. I shared with others a cutting I had found in an old American newspaper containing a recipe for angel-food cake. It began with these choice words: 'Take the whites of twelve eggs . . .' We took pleasure in reading it aloud.

More and more, the men began to help one another. The less sick cared for the more sick. The few who could walk fetched water in bamboo buckets from the well and with good-natured

banter began to wash those who were unable to wash themselves.

I realized that I was witnessing the same saving grace at work here that had redeemed many of us at Chungkai. In some ways the change taking place at Nakawm Paton was even more wonderful. Since this was a hospital camp, the hopelessness had been acute. Indeed, it had been so complete that men did not trouble to steal from each other. So many wanted to do nothing but die. Now there was a stirring of hope, and, with hope, a feeling among many that life was worth living.

Those who were dying – or thought they were – failed more rapidly because they no longer wanted to eat. We made every effort, therefore, to tempt their lost appetites with something out of the ordinary.

For instance, a metalworker had devised a crude egg-beater out of a tin can and a perforated lid attached to a wooden plunger. One of our cooks had invented a confection of mashed bananas, duck eggs and lime juice. Whipped to a creamy froth with the home-made egg-beater and poured over a bowl of rice, the mixture was a tasty dish.

When it was first offered, patients usually rejected it. Then we'd say, 'Oh, come on. Old Jim got this up especially for you. You wouldn't want to disappoint him, would you?'

The thought that someone had gone to so much trouble for them was often more of a turning-point than the dish itself.

Men's minds, too, yearned to be fed. We were handicapped by a lack of the variety of talent we had enjoyed at Chungkai. But since, in view of the need, we concluded that anything would be better than nothing, we initiated a programme of 'make-do' diversion.

Debating teams were organized with two on a side. They made the rounds of the huts, disputing on assigned topics. A favourite was 'Has twentieth-century man lost the ability to entertain himself?' Another: 'Resolved: That old-age pensions

should begin at twenty-one.' When the debaters grew bored they changed sides and presented the opposite point of view with equal gusto.

On one of the teams was a debonair Londoner already giving promise of his successful future as a barrister. He had an electric personality and a gift of eloquence. One night he came to me with an idea; why not tell stories of famous trials? He gave a sample performance and proved to be a hit. So great was his skill, that as he stood before us in his loincloth we could see him in our mind's eye in wig and gown, addressing the bench.

Any semblance of talent was put to use. One prisoner gave popular lectures on 'The scientific approach to golf'. An architect conducted a course on 'How to design a house'. The kitchen and the bathroom were the two rooms in which everyone showed the greatest interest.

The sea held a great fascination for many. Some designed yachts which they could never hope to own, or attended classes on how to build and sail a small boat. Once I recounted my adventures on the *Setia Berganti* to a group in my hut. The word got around and I was asked to tell it over and over to others.

The men also enjoyed listening to selections read from books. They liked especially simple tales that evoked nostalgic pictures of living in other times. Among the most popular were the tales of Washington Irving, such as *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. The more the men heard of the problems, foibles, quirks, eccentricities, humours and virtues of other people, the more they regained interest in the human race and in themselves. The evening reading sessions became increasingly popular. As I read, I sat on the edge of a sleeping platform, holding my book close to the flickering little flame and giving as much feeling to the words as I could muster. The words conveyed pictures – of home, of families gathered around the parlour fire.

When I had finished my story for the night, I was aware of a

sense of kinship. We were human beings with the same problems and the same hopes. We were being drawn towards a centre that was beyond ourselves, a centre that was good, that gave us cause to hope, that promised the fulfilment of life – a life that was joyously sweet.

One evening I said to one of the men to whom I'd been reading, 'A lot of the lads seem to be much happier these days.'

'Yes, they are,' he agreed. He was a small slip of a man. In years he could have been no more than twenty-eight, yet illness and suffering had given him a grey, aged look.

He reflected a moment and then said, 'Do you know what I've come to think? There's a harmony about life. When you put yourself in tune with that harmony you sense a kind of rightness about things. You know a peace in your heart.'

'Do you think you've found that peace?'

'Yes, I reckon I have. I used to gripe and complain about everything – about the Nips, the Government, my mates, myself.'

'Most of us have felt that way,' I acknowledged.

'Maybe. But I bet I was one of the worst.'

'How do you think that change came about?' I asked.

'It came gradually,' he answered. 'I learned to accept things – to accept the Nips and their awfulness – to accept my mates – to accept myself. Then I stopped griping so much and tried to do what I could to help others. Every little bit I gave made me seem more at ease with myself. I decided that, no matter what happens, I've got to do what I believe to be right.'

'And what do you mean by "right"?''

He looked puzzled.

'I don't know exactly. It means – er – not thinking so much about yourself and – er – taking time to think about what you ought to do. I've never been much of a one to pray – but that's what I'm doing. I'm praying. Prayer makes me feel stronger, see – and then I'm ready for whatever's coming next.'

'Is that what you mean by the harmony of life?'

'Yes, it is, I suppose. It's a power. When you get in line with it, you know it and you know it's right.'

'Isn't that the same thing as doing God's will?'

'I suppose it is,' he agreed. 'I never went to services before. When I joined the Army I put down my religion as Church of England. But I never went – except on church parades. Now what seems to me important about a church is that we all come together as one when we open ourselves to God's will. You carry some of the harmony away with you when you leave the church.'

'You've got something there,' I said.

'Well, I must be going now,' he smiled at me. 'I'll see you in church.'

We shook hands and he left me.

An attempt was made to start the university again, but we lacked the trained scholars we had had at Chungkai. I had smuggled in the scraps of paper that made up the Greek grammar I had compiled. We had sessions in Greek and also in ethics and philosophy.

Not many members of the Chungkai church were in this camp, but a few of us started services again in the open air. At one of these services a guard walked up to me as I was preaching, shouted, '*Curra, bagero!*' and struck me on the face. I politely told him to go away. Strangely enough, he did. Then he thought better of it, and came back to administer another slap before leaving us to finish the service in peace.

It was interesting to note that during this period, the men were unmoved by the outward observances of the Church. We realized this after we had invited a Chaplain to give a course of addresses on this subject. The first meeting, held in a corner of one of the huts, was well attended. The chaplain talked about the need to subscribe to the outward forms used by the Church, without explaining sufficiently their meaning. Most of

the men went away dissatisfied. There seemed nothing for them to do; the professional would take care of everything. When the third meeting was held, hardly anybody came at all.

Not long after, some of the men asked me to give a series of talks on the Christian faith that would be closer to the interests of the majority. Once more I found myself discussing the basic issues of existence with a group that grew steadily. As I did this every night, I became limp with exhaustion. But the intense interest and sympathy of my listeners kept me going.

In our nocturnal sessions by the bamboo grove at Chungkai we had grown to know Jesus. We had confined our explorations to a study of his life and teachings. Now, those of us who had moved to Nakawm Paton were ready to proceed to an evaluation of what we had learned – both from our discussions and from our experience.

Some contemporary writers – Kafka, Sartre, Beckett and Camus among them – have been credited with reminding theologians of the sinfulness of man. This was something of which we needed no reminder. We knew all about sin. We had seen for ourselves how low man can fall.

We wanted to learn now what Christianity had to say about our redemption. Before we could do, we had to be. It was not only our minds but also our wills that had to be changed. We had to be called into being by love. That lonely figure on the Cross had redeemed mankind by His love and sacrifice. Yet while that redemption was a once-for-all event, it was also a fact that we had to be redeemed daily to be in a state of being redeemed.

As guilty men, we wanted to understand how the Christian life shared in the fate and condition of the world. Because we were men we were involved in the world with all its imperfections. We were victims of the Japanese, but we also shared their blood guilt. Like them, we had killed in battle and lived by the law of a life for a life, a hand for a hand, an eye for an

eye, a wound for a wound, a stripe for a stripe. We were also involved because of our uncertainties. Not only our captors threatened us, but life itself. The props of Western civilization had been swept from under us, and with them our faith in man and the things of man – his technology, his belief in progress, his utopianism, his rationalism, his pride. With others of the twentieth century, we hung suspended over the big hole, the abyss of meaninglessness, and the outlook was bleak.

We were involved, too, because of our doubts. Some of us had turned to Christianity from unbelief and still carried with us our fear of faith. We could say with Dostoevski: 'It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My "hosanna" is born of a furnace of doubt.' Our doubts were our inheritance as children of our times.

We had two alternatives: we could choose the way of men, based on the sovereignty of the natural order, closed, sealed and impersonal; or we could choose the way of Jesus Christ, free and personal, based on the sovereignty of God the Father.

The wind of the spirit had blown upon us; we could not prove how or whence it had come. But our experience pointed to a source beyond ourselves. We knew personal fulfilment, love, joy, peace, wholeness, as we committed ourselves to the One who had called us. Only as we responded to this Word did we receive the power to progress towards true humanity. Our life on the horizontal plane was made meaningful at the point where it was met by the vertical. At the point marked by the Cross we found ourselves.

Christmas was coming round again. Our third year in captivity, the year 1944, was drawing to a close. But we were no nearer freedom than the year before. The only news we had came to us from our captors, who told us that their armies had taken India and were about to join forces with Rommel in North Africa. Soon the war would be over, with the Axis

triumphant. We knew this was not true. We were convinced that the conflict would end in our favour. But what interested us was whether we would live long enough to see that end. How many more Christmases could we survive?

We were determined, all the same, to make Christmas a day to be remembered, like the last one. We planned a special church service for the morning and recreation for the afternoon. A feature of the latter was to be a Derby, with the healthiest men as horses and the skinniest as jockeys. The cooks were preparing to tempt our palates with a holiday menu.

We were working hard to get things ready, when a train pulled in on the siding. We saw bloody stretchers being lifted carefully out of the railway cars. We were summoned to help carry the wounded men to the operating hut. They had been brought there from the nearby camp of Nong Pladuk. From their lips we heard the story of how, as they were lining up for their evening ration, a squadron of our bombers had appeared without warning and dumped their load on the camp. Since Nong Pladuk was located beside a marshalling yard, our fliers had apparently mistaken it for a military base. One hundred and twenty-five men were killed outright and over four hundred injured.

The surgeons made ready to operate and the blood transfusion teams stood by. For the present we forgot our Christmas plans in caring for the avalanche of wounded men. This development cast a pall over our spirits. But we were determined not to be subdued by it, and as soon as we were able, we resumed our preparations.

Christmas Day dawned warm, but not oppressive. Again I went early to church. But this time I was to be the preacher. The hut was filling up when I arrived, and soon it was packed from wall to wall and overflowing through the doors. Before me were many nationalities – English, Welsh, Scots, Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, Dutch, Eurasians.

My heart swelled at the sight of them. Their faces were gaunt, hollow-cheeked, skin drawn tight over the bones. But determination was reflected in their eyes – and courage, faith, hope and love. Gone was that empty look which revealed listlessness, fatalism, or despair. They had the fibre of men who would not be defeated whatever ordeals they faced.

Without benefit of instrumental accompaniment, we all sang together with great gusto the traditional hymns. I spoke briefly, as Padre Webb had done last year, of the hope that Christmas brings. I pronounced the benediction and the men streamed out into the warm tropic sunlight.

Once more we had our Christmas dinner, topped off with the traditional Christmas pudding. This time the performance in the cook-house impressed the Japanese. If these cooks could accomplish so much with so little, they reasoned, what couldn't they do if given a free hand? One of the officers decided to throw a party; he ordered the best cook to be sent to him for instructions. He made it clear that he wanted a super-feast, Christmas style, for his guests, and he instructed the chef to spare no pains.

The dinner that night was the last word. The *pièce de résistance* was a work of art, a large bird shinily glazed and beautifully decorated. The chef described it as the kind of holiday turkey Americans ate at their family dinners. The Japanese guests gorged themselves, picking the bird to the bone. That night a number of them became violently ill. The officer called the cook and demanded an explanation. In the Western world, the cook declared, the ceremonial fowl is viewed as a rich delicacy, to be eaten only in small quantities. His answer seemed to satisfy the officer. Afterwards we learned that the turkey was not a turkey at all but a vulture. The cook had set a snare and caught it in the camp.

Two chaplains, one Australian and one English, reached the camp about this time. Between them they built up the church,

and, with it, the morale of many in the camp. At the same time a growing uneasiness gripped the Japanese. They ordered sudden roll-calls in the middle of the night, making us tumble out, then keeping us standing on parade, often well into the next day. They raided our huts without warning, seizing any books or papers they could discover.

In one of these raids I lost my diary, my Greek grammars and my Bible. I went to headquarters and demanded their return. The interpreter to whom I spoke surrendered my Bible, stamping his 'chop', or identifying mark, on the flyleaf. But he refused to give back my diary and laboriously compiled texts.

The Australian chaplain, Padre Hugh Cunningham, did not fare so well. The Japanese surprised him in the act of thumbing through a school atlas. For two days they confined him in a bamboo cell so low that he could not stand up in it, and so narrow that he could not sit down. To make doubly certain of his discomfort, a guard came by at intervals and prodded him with his bayonet.

Abruptly, our captors issued an order forbidding religious services, of which they had become increasingly suspicious. They had sworn to bring us to complete subjection; they had not done so. We were bent but not broken. Out of a condition of no purpose had appeared men with purpose. If this improvement continued, the guards reasoned, our gatherings could become a potential focus for revolt. They also reinforced the ban against singing, which they had relaxed after completion of the bridge.

We had no intention of complying. On information passed from mouth to mouth, small knots of men assembled in different parts of the camp at irregular intervals. Services were conducted somewhat in the manner of a Quaker meeting, with a lesson followed by questions and comment in the place of a formal sermon.

After a time, in response to our petition, the authorities

permitted us to resume our services. They stipulated, however, that a Japanese interpreter be present to make sure no one preached subversion.

Good Friday came, and most of us, regardless of denomination, decided to attend at noon the Roman Catholic service of the Stations of the Cross. We wanted to bow our heads and bend our knees before the Lord who had died for all of us.

In my contemplation I recognized that it was no easy thing to call that figure on the Cross 'Lord'. I heard again His words, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. This He had said for His enemies; but what was I to say for mine? I could not say what He had said, for He was innocent, whereas I was not. Humbly, I had to ask, 'Forgive me *and* my enemies, for we know not what we do.'

I said to myself, 'By His death He gave to men the responsibility of caring for one another and doing His Father's will; to sons and mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers He assigned the task of caring for all other sons and mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers. No small commission.

'To call Him "Lord" meant there was no other way but His. Yet how could I follow Him? I knew the Sermon on the Mount, but I lived by the laws and conventions of society – a society that condemned criminals to isolation or death, whereas He led them to Paradise. I called Him "Lord", but with my fellow men worshipped Mammon in our temples of business. I had read that He was the Way, the Truth and the Life. But we still clung to the belief that man was master of his fate, capable of building the equivalent of God's Kingdom through his own knowledge, his skills and his technology.

'He asked us to believe in Him. But it was much easier for us to believe in a president or a dictator, a scientist, scholar, news commentator, cinema actress or football player. Any of

these was more acceptable than a Jewish carpenter, condemned as a criminal, hanging on a bloody Cross.'

I confessed, 'It is hard to be a disciple, Lord.'

At dawn on Easter Sunday some of us slipped out of our huts to make our communion in the open at the edge of the camp. There we received the elements in token of our Lord's sacrifice, that we might be strengthened to follow 'the Comrade-God who on the cross was slain, to rise again'.

When we finished the sun was up. To the east, there were shadows; to the west, light.