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WITH WINGATE IN BURMA



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WITH WINGATE IN BURMA

BEING THE STORY OF THE ADVENTURES OF SERGEANT
TONY AUBREY OF THE KING'S (LIVERPOOL) REGIMENT
DURING THE 1943 WINGATE EXPEDITION INTO BURMA

BY

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CHAPTER I

THE heroes of adventure stories always seem to be rolling stones. I make no claim to be a hero, but the central figure of this story is bound to be me. And here you'll find no exception to the general rule. I've been rolling for a good many years now, and only the usual amount of moss has accumulated.

Before starting on the chronicle of the Wingate Expedition, I'd better tell you something about myself. But first, there is one thing to be made clear. This is not a comprehensive history of the Expedition. I doubt if even Brigadier Wingate himself could have given you that. This only pretends to be an account of the small part of it in which I took part myself, and here you will find no expositions of the inner strategy employed, or the objects or results attained. I was naturally not admitted to the councils of the mighty. All the same if you find this book half as exciting as I found the incidents it comprises, you won't need a Peter Cheyney from the library for some time to come.

My father was a doctor. He was proud of his profession. All through my childhood and youth it was made perfectly clear to me that the finest thing a man could hope to be was a healer of his fellows. That, it was always impressed on me, must be my goal in life, the *ne plus ultra* of my ambitions.

So, of course, I decided that nothing on earth would make me be a doctor. That is the nature of the beast. When I left school and sat my prelim., I came down with a resounding thud. My father and I had words. He gave

me forcibly to understand that the midnight oil must be more freely burned. I must take the first step in the direction of his chosen profession, or else. . . . I, in return, equally forcibly explained to him just what he could do with the faculty of medicine and all its works, packed my bags, and swept out. Looking back on it twenty years later, it all seems rather futile. But that's the way it was. I've never been home since.

I went to York and parked myself on my father's sister. She and her husband had no children and they welcomed me like a long lost son. I stayed there for the next twelve months, and lived the life of a fighting-cock. I never really knew what went wrong after that, but now I'm pretty sure that my father must have at length succeeded in persuading my aunt that all this coddling was spoiling me. I could see that she had something on her mind, and it was really no surprise to me when one day I was politely, regretfully, but firmly shown the door and put aboard a train for home, and father. Now was the time when I was confidently expected to register my re-entry for the stethoscope stakes. But I didn't like the prospect now any more than I had before. I was the possessor of a pound or two in my pocket and an unbounded confidence in my ability to look after myself. So I set out for Liverpool. When you were running away from home, you always went to sea. There ought to be plenty of sea in the vicinity of Liverpool.

There were certainly plenty of people there who were only too glad to help me in the task of getting rid of my cash. In three or four days I hadn't a bean left, and had sold everything of any value that I possessed. I can't have been quite the self-reliant man of the world of my own imagining, because the best way I could see out of my jam

was to appeal to the police for help. They listened to me patiently, promised to communicate with my father, and dumped me in the Belmont Road workhouse. And that would probably have been the end of my adventures, and I would long ago have been dully and respectably entrenched behind a brass plate in some salubrious suburb, had it not been that I didn't care much for the workhouse. It was clean enough, and everyone was sympathetic. But they were going to insist on taking my clothes away from me, and dressing me up in some peculiar moleskin garments which still seemed somewhat redolent of their last inhabitant. And what was worse, in the interests of health, they proposed to jab a needle into me. I saw the needle. It was an enormous one. I saw some of the types whose arms it had presumably already punctured. I didn't care for the idea at all. Workhouses went down in my estimation. I left. . . .

To date, I hadn't done anything at all about going to sea. So now I decided that the time had come to make my way to the docks, two pennies in my pocket, and in my head not the faintest idea as to what should be the next item on my programme.

I had covered a good proportion of the unsavoury way, when I realized that I was tired and thirsty. There was a Salvation Army Hostel close by and I came to the conclusion that twopence wasn't worth saving anyway.

The place was almost empty, but another youngster of about my own age was solacing himself with a cup of tea. We looked at each other, then talked. I told him how things were with me. I wanted an audience. It turned out that he was walking to the docks too. He was working in a pleasure steamer cruising from Liverpool to the Menai Straits. From his own account, he was a big noise aboard.

information that he was just off to Hong Kong to open a first-class hotel there. If I ever wanted a job, he would always have one for me there as head waiter, or perhaps even manager. So now my fancy turned to Hong Kong. I started dreaming of slant-eyed Chinese maidens, and chop suey, and what have you, packed my bags, and caught an N.Y.K. boat at Marseilles. I had no doubts about the genuineness of my American friend's invitation, because my years of knocking and being knocked about Europe, had taught me to pick out a dud or a crook at almost Bren gun range. I was certain he was the real M'Coy.

And I was wrong. No one in Hong Kong had ever heard of him, far less of his palatial new hotel. This was a bit of a facer. It wasn't so much the fact that I was stuck in a strange country without a job and with very little cash that worried me. That had happened to me before and I had survived it. It was the blow to my self-esteem that I resented. I had backed a loser. I would take care never to make that mistake again. Any gift horse offered to me in the future would be closely examined in the mouth, and its teeth thoroughly vetted.

As it turned out, I had been justified in refusing to be worried about my lack of a billet. I had made friends aboard ship with an Army Colonel, well-known in Hong Kong. Through his good offices, I was taken on as second waiter in the Cecil Hotel. The second night I was there, the owner, who was also the proprietor of the Peninsula, the Ritz of Hong Kong, came in for dinner. I served him. Next day I was transferred to the Peninsula. My well-known charm of manner had worked again!

I was head waiter in the Peninsula for almost two years, and came into contact with most of the interesting people in the East while I was there. Hong Kong is a great place

for meeting people. Then it was suggested that I should go to the company's hotel in Shanghai, "The Bund." I was always ready for a move, so I went, and stayed in Shanghai till 1937. Then another local war started to catch up with me. It was the same business as Spain over again, except that this time there was no shadow of doubt in my mind which side I was on. Like most people who know anything of the Far East, I didn't have much use for the Japs. However, it was obvious which way things were going, so once again I folded my tent and got moving. I had saved some money, and I thought it might be a good idea to come back home and have another look at England. So I made a gentle trip back, taking several months over it, and giving, I hope, a successful imitation of a gentleman of leisure.

England seemed as quiet and peaceful as ever at first sight. But it wasn't long before I discovered that even there, there was to be no escape from battle, murder, and sudden death. I volunteered on Monday, 4th September, 1939—I was a day late because the third was a Sunday—and was posted to the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. I saw service in France, and put in nine long months winning the war in Iceland. Then in July, 1942, when I was stationed in Dorset, a Sergeant who was on a draft for overseas went sick. At intervals since I came home I had felt the urge to be on my travels again, and I had a suspicion that this draft would be going in the direction which suited me, so I volunteered to take his place.

My suspicion was a shrewd one. We sailed East, and in September, 1942, I found myself in India at the British Base Reinforcement Camp, Deolali, posted as a Sergeant to the King's Liverpool Regiment.

Before I finish this introductory chapter, I want to dis-

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abuse you of an impression you may have gathered from learning that I have been a waiter.

I'm not one of your sleek-haired, pale-handed, anaemic, svelte, type of lily. I'm short and stocky, as a matter of fact, and have never won a prize in a beauty contest, though I sometimes like to think that there is about my features to which I am, not unreasonably, attached, a certain rugged grandeur. You might, upon first meeting me, take me for a boxer or a soldier or a comedian . . . or even for a reasonably successful tramp.

But you'd certainly never suspect me of being a waiter.

CHAPTER II

ALMOST every British soldier who has come out to India during the war has been in the Camp at Deolali at one time or another. Reinforcement Camps, wherever they are, don't vary much. They always have an enormous floating population, together with a sediment of permanent staff, and forgotten men, whom nobody seems to want. To hear some of them at Deolali talk, you might have thought they had been there since the news of the Norman Conquest arrived by carrier pigeon.

I was only there three days, and then left with a draft to join my new unit. This was my first experience of Indian railway travel. You can have it, for me. The compartments are comfortable enough, but I never knew there was so much dirt and dust in the world as manages to find its way in, even when the chicks are drawn. And India may be the land of Mystery and Romance. . . . I don't know about that. But it's certainly the land of Noise! The babel to be heard at any wayside Indian railway station puts the House of Commons at question time completely in the shade. The shouts of the sellers of sweetmeats for Hindus are only equalled in their raucousness by the screams of the sellers of sweetmeats for Mussulmen. Water for Hindus, water for Mohammedans, and just water (pure and simple!) are offered for sale on every note of the scale. An earnest gentleman beats persistently with a long iron bar upon a suspended length of railway line, and the station master has verbal instructions to give, at the full stretch of his lungs, to some subordinate who always

happens to be at the far end of the platform. And there are beggars. After you have been in India for some time, you get used to them. But just at first they're a bit of a shock. They appear everywhere in shoals, in every stage of deformity and decomposition, and persistently exhibit their stumps and sores, apparently under the impression that you must be an ardent collector of monstrosities. It is fatal to give them anything . . . you immediately have twice as many besieging you. But it's hard to remember that all the time.

Everything comes to an end eventually, even an Indian railway journey, and in due course we arrived at our destination. I only spent three days there, and I was too busy acclimatising myself and getting myself ready for the next move which we knew was impending, to retain in my mind any clearer impression of it than a confused jumble of mud huts and cobblestones and dingy, arid grass. We were under canvas, and all day and most of the night round our canvas walls ebbed and flowed a ceaseless tide of hopeful Indians . . . "wallahs" of every variety, ready to sell us tea, cakes, fruit, books, cigarettes, matches, and odds and ends, or to clean our shoes, wash our clothes, mend our socks, and prune our hair and toe nails, given the slightest encouragement. Most of them managed to do quite a brisk trade, and one enterprising business man, who had possessed himself of a few old copies of the juiciest English Sunday paper, found no difficulty in getting rid of his entire stock at ten annas a time.

In spite of my preoccupation, I hadn't been long with my new unit before it was made abundantly clear to me that something special was in the wind.

It seemed to be an open secret among the members of the force that we were going into the interior of Burma.

But even at this early stage of the proceedings, the *esprit-de-corps* was so high, that none of the ordinary military inhabitants of the place, in whose lives spit-and-polish still played its part, and who were known to us with indulgent contempt as "starch soldiers," had any inkling of our purpose or destination.

We started the first of our marches on 19th September, 1942, when we left for a jungle village which was to be our centre for the next period of our training. The length of the march was fifty-two miles, and we set out at first light, 5 o'clock in the morning. Breakfast at 4.15 was the first meal we had eaten in that vicinity free from the unwelcome attentions of the kites and buzzards and flics, which evidently did not rise as early as this.

This day we adopted the formation we always used thereafter, single file, every man treading on the heels of his neighbour, and unwillingly swallowing his neighbours dust, the whole long mile and a quarter of us. At first, a crowd of natives from the village skirmished on our flanks, and gangs of unsavoury pi-dogs, unwilling to sec the last of their universal providers, loped along with their own peculiarly furtive gait. At first, too, the air was cool and almost bracing, and we stepped out with a swing and sang as we went. But as hour succeeded hour and the sun climbed nearer and nearer to the perpendicular, we lost our first fine careless rapture, and a few surreptitious water-bottles were produced, strictly against orders. The dust cloud round our heads grew thicker as the day wore on, and I, for one, was not sorry when the order to halt was given at 11 o'clock. We had marched for six hours with only two short halts, and if you know anything of India you will know how I was feeling. Remember I had only been in the country a week ! It was one of the most

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pleasant sensations I have ever experienced when I relieved my aching shoulders of the weight of my pack, and my equally aching feet of the weight of my body.

We made ourselves as comfortable as we could in the shade of the scrubby jungle which is ubiquitous in this countryside, and though everyone was in much the same condition of fatigue, there was no lack of volunteers to go in search of water. A good many waterbottles had been emptied by their owners' illegal potations. The search was useless. There was no water in the vicinity, and those who had transgressed should have had to pay the penalty and go thirsty, which would no doubt have been a very good lesson in obedience to orders. But in the usual way of the army, the "haves" were generous, and everyone got a drink.

We didn't talk much at first on that halt. We were too much taken up with the pleasure of not walking. But a bit later the food waggons arrived, and we had a first-class meal of hot stew. We were all ready for it by then, and it went down well. Then we smoked and relaxed, and our tongues were loosened.

One or two grumbled, of course. The army wouldn't be the army without its grouse. But in general everyone seemed to be agreeably surprised that it hadn't turned out to be worse. And there were a couple of things that had pleased us all immensely.

I remember a certain Commanding Officer of mine at home who had the amiable habit of following his troops on a route march in his car. From the ease and comfort of this cushioned vehicle it was his pleasure to take the name of stragglers, and to mete out to them the next morning such punishment as the quality of his breakfast led him to consider warranted.

At **the** start of this day I had noticed with a **rather** sinking feeling that the officers' chargers were being brought along, one nice roomy charger and a sais for every officer. Judging by the remarks of the men at the time, I had been by no means the only one to feel critical. But up till the time of that halt, although the day was just as hot for the officers, and the road no less dusty, not one of them had shown the slightest sign of availing himself of his mount. From the Brigadier downwards, they footed it as we did, and they continued to do so for the rest of that march, and also on every other march we did thereafter.

The other thing that caused favourable comment had also to do with the officers. They were, of *course*, carrying packs and equipment as we were, with in addition the extra items an officer always has to tote, such as his revolver, field glasses, haversack, &c. But to-day they had gone a step farther, and were all armed with rifles.

This habit persisted throughout the expedition, and later on it would have puzzled a stranger to decide who was officer and who was man, if it hadn't been for the natural custom of command.

We were all in a happy frame of mind when the order to march was given at four o'clock in the afternoon. But the next two hours, till dusk began to fall, were the worst of the march. The sun had got properly warmed up to his work, and the flies were at their busiest. It was hard to tell if you were breathing dust or air, and the sweat, running down from under our topis, formed a sort of mud-pack round our eyes. Towards the end of the two hour spell, we were so weary that we hadn't the energy to brush the flies away, and we must have looked like those beggar boys you see in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria.

We halted at 6 o'clock for ten minutes, and after that

we marched till 5 o'clock the following morning, with a rest period of ten minutes every two hours. All through the night, trains of bullock carts passed us, loaded with sacks of beri-leaves, the Indian substitute for cigarette-papers, and roughly snedded tree trunks. Most of the drivers of these carts were fast asleep, confident that the bullocks knew perfectly well where they were bound for; and the rhythmic swishing of the animals' feet in the dust, and the plaintive cry of an occasional driver who had managed to keep awake, made an accompaniment to our own dogged tramp, tramp, tramp.

Naturally enough, as this march was the beginning of the toughening process for a good many of us, there were a number of stragglers. The one and only vehicle attached to our long column was an ambulance. If a man fell out because his feet were blistered, his blisters were dried and plastered, and he marched on; if he fell out because he was taken ill, he was picked up and attended to; but if he fell out because he was tired, or thought he had marched far enough, or simply because it was his nature so to do, he was left where he had fallen out, and could make his own way forward or back as he pleased. And that, as far as the Wingate Expedition was concerned, was the end of him.

Our aim was to attain an average speed of four miles an hour, and although on this occasion we came nowhere near achieving it, yet the pace kept up was so fast that, if you fell out of the column for any reason, you found it hard to catch up again and take your proper place.

It was a dark night, and I think the sky must have been cloudy, because I do not remember noticing the stars, which always seem to me to be twice as bright and twice as many out here as they are at home. Round about 3 o'clock in the morning, that dim and altogether unnecessary hour, march-

ing had become so automatic to us, and our thoughts **were** turned so much inwards, that if the man in front of us stopped for a moment to tie up his bootlace or adjust his pack, we walked straight into him with no alteration of pace. And then our vocabularies were drained to the dregs to think up some new ones!

About 4 o'clock the moon rose, and after that things didn't seem to be quite so bad, because, paradoxically, it showed us that morning wasn't far off. And surely with morning, we must be given a halt.

Now we began to meet small parties of villagers, the men in front and their women decorously in the rear; they greeted us with deep salaams, and courteous "Ram-ram, sahibs" and gave us as wide a berth as the road permitted. They seemed very shy and timid. Probably it was the first time they had ever seen the army out in force.

At last, when even the toughest of us was beginning to feel that he had definitely had enough, we got the order we had been waiting for. We fell out and found that it was here that we were due to leave the road, and take to our allotted training areas in the jungle.

But before leaving the road, breakfast was being brought up to us. And with our packs off our chafed shoulders and our boots off our steaming feet, we were good and ready **for** it.

CHAPTER III

OUR time here was not spent in the consumption of beer, nor was there much opportunity for the playing of skitdcs. The pattern of our life was modelled as far as possible on what it was likely to be after we went into action.

Such things as tents and Nissen huts were luxuries undreamed of in our philosophy. Beds and charpoys might never have been invented as far as we were concerned. When we lay down at night, the ground was our mattress, the sky our roof, and our pillow was a kitbag. Each column was divided up into four platoons, and we slept by platoons, every platoon being responsible for its own all-round defence, and thereby for the all-round defence of its own segment of the entire area. In the evening, when work was done for the day each platoon used to light its camp fire, as quantities of deadwood could be had for the collecting in a dried-up river bed nearby. We used to gather round the fire, and sing the same old songs you'll always hear wherever soldiers go, ranging from the rankly sentimental to the frankly bawdy.

We were on hard tack, of course, although at first we used to have bread twice a week, brought up to us from our base. When you've eaten army biscuit three times a day for a few weeks, you know whether the bills you've paid your dentist in the last few years have been worth while. I don't know why they ever bothered to use armour-plating on tanks. Biscuit would have done just as well. There was no attempt made at running a mess of any kind, either for officers, for sergeants, or even for corporals. We

all fed together, as we worked together and slept **together**, and by this means I think a closer relationship, and a more friendly one than usual was bred between officers and **other ranks**.

There were times when we were able to give bully the go by, and feast ourselves on fresh meat. These times came when someone had been fortunate enough to get a shot at some variety of game. No restrictions whatever were put upon the use of our rifles and ammunition, except, of course, that we were not allowed to shoot into the perimeter. We saw and shot sambhar two or three times a week, and peacock were plentiful. We used to put up a trip-wire at any well-defined drinking place we came across on the banks of the river, and attach a bell to it. When the bell rang in the night-watches, that meant that a nice fat buck was booked for our dinner pot the next day. Every now and again one or other of my platoon would come in with a goat or a kid. Always, of course, there were many protestations that these had been duly bought and paid for, though I must admit that sometimes I had my doubts. Another welcome addition to the larder was monkey. The first time it appeared on the menu we were dubious. The second time, we were almost sure we liked it, although still there were doubts as to whether we weren't bordering on the cannibalistic. The third and subsequent times, we just ate and enjoyed it. Rather like not quite first-rate pork, I thought it was.

As often as not, during this part of our training, we were out on schemes lasting three or four days, when there was no chance of the R.I.A.S.C. trucks coming to our rescue, and no hope of contacting, perhaps, a roving canteen or field kitchen! Then we did all our own cooking individually in our mess-tins, and some very savoury messes we

turned out of them. And some, I regret to say, almost equally unsavoury. Our principal instructors in the not-so-easy art of mess-tin cookery were the men of the Burma Rifles. One of them I remember particularly well, because he was frequently attached to my platoon after we went into action inside Burma. His name was Bougyi, but it wasn't quite so difficult as it looks, as it was pronounced, *tout court*, Boogee. He was a first-class cordon bleu wasted, and the things he could turn out of a mess-tin with the aid of a piece of scrag-end, a few onions, and some rice, were nobody's business. He also introduced us to the gentle art of making the invaluable chupatti, probably the dullest edible ever invented, but easy to make and sustaining.

Brigadier Wingate, by the way, was a great believer in the efficacy of the common-or-garden onion, and while we were within reach of base, sacks of them used always to be available. A dixieful was continually simmering on the fire of my platoon at night, and even if no one else happened to feel onion-minded, I used to make a pretty good hole in the contents myself before going to sleep. Most of the men joined me after a day or two, though, and I can highly recommend a pound or two of boiled onions as a sleeping draught. We ate so many of them, raw and cooked, that sometimes I used to feel sorry for anyone who didn't care for them. It must have seemed rather like living in an onion bed!

Our day, when we were not going out on a scheme, began at 6 o'clock, with half an hour of strenuous bayonet training, and a period of unarmed combat. I had done a course in this in England, and was given the job of instructing the Burmese of our column. They were excellent pupils. They were as keen as mustard, and often during the rest period in the heat of the day, they could be seen

practising my most complicated holds with great assiduity, and hurling each other to the ground with every evidence of enjoyment. However roughly you treated them in practise, and it is impossible to teach a man anything about unarmed combat without treating him roughly, they never lost their tempers, and always came back for more, with a smile on their amiable brown mugs. I liked them a lot, and used to look forward to those hours of friendly rough-and-tumble.

After breakfast, there were lectures on jungle craft and use of the compass and map reading. By the time our course of instruction was finished, most of our private soldiers could have given lessons in map reading to most of the alleged experts I have met. We had all reached the stage when we could spend five or ten minutes with a map, and have before our mind's eye a complete and accurate picture of the terrain. The results of our training in jungle craft will be made apparent at a later stage.

During the heat of the day we rested. Then from 3 till 5 we did such fatigues as were necessary, although they were few and far between owing to the complete absence of buildings, and consisted mainly in the construction of our own sanitary arrangements. During these hours, too, we completed the making of lines for the mules, which some of our Ghurkas had gone to fetch from the nearest place where there was a maidan large enough to make a good distributing centre for animal transport. To make comfortable living quarters for these charming animals, we cleared an area of jungle in the middle of the column perimeter (we were responsible for the protection of our own mule lines), drove in pegs in lines nine feet apart and attached tether chains to them, and opened four clearance paths for them through the surrounding scrub, one leading

to each point of the compass, so that from whichever direction we were attacked, there would always be a getaway for the mules.

At 5 o'clock it was growing dark and we knocked off for the day. It really sounds as though we were having quite a cushy time, doesn't it? But you must remember that these ordinary working days were to all intents and purposes days of recuperation between the more strenuous ones when we were out on schemes, blowing bridges, defending and attacking aerodromes, laying ambushes, &c.

There was one notable difference between these schemes as carried out by us, and the ordinary tactical exercise as done in the normal course of any infantry unit's training. That was, that every single man knew before the start of it exactly what it was all about. He knew as much about the strength and dispositions of his own troops and the enemy's as did the Brigadier himself. He knew just what was the objective of our whole force, and what part of it had been allotted to his own unit. And he knew precisely the sort of country in which the operation was to be carried out. Where in the ordinary unit, the Commanding Officer holds a conference of his officers and the R.S.M., then the Company Commanders a conference of their C.S.M. and platoon commanders, and so on; in our case, the whole strength of the column was put in the picture the night before the start by the Column Commander himself.

Also, our enemy was always a real enemy. If one column was carrying out an attack, another column was detailed to oppose it. There was none of this business of having to stop halfway through an advance to scratch your head and try to remember if a red flag represents a platoon or a company; or of being suddenly informed by some earnest umpire that your whole platoon is out of action, because

that yellow flag over there (which you had thought to be the Regimental Aid Post) represents a Bren gun post.

The only way in which our exercises differed from the real thing was that the ammunition we used was blank. We wanted to have a few men left alive to go into Burma! Even with this precaution, we didn't get through entirely without casualties. One member of a certain Commando (which had by this time joined us, and been distributed amongst the various columns) was demonstrating the blasting powers of gelignite to a squad not so well acquainted with them as he was supposed to be. Carried away with zeal, he attempted the hazardous feat of tamping a stick home into its appointed hole with his bayonet. The gelignite resented such cavalier treatment. The demonstrator took no further interest in the Expedition thereafter, being very dead, and one of the demonstratees had his leg blown off.

Apart from this mishap, we emerged from our training scatheless, although there was another narrow escape.

One dark and starless night, a Ghurka sentry was standing to his post, alert and keen as Ghurkas always are. The jungle here seemed to us thick enough by day, as the visibility was never more than about fifteen feet, but at night it was impenetrable. The Ghurka strained his eyes this way and that. It was coming near the hour of dawn, when the enemy is most likely to make his attack. The slightest unnatural movement would herald his arrival. At last came the sound for which he had been tensely listening, a stealthy crackle in the undergrowth, and was that a stealthy footfall, too? He crouched, ready to spring. A slinking shape materialized, blacker against the surrounding blackness. The Ghurka leaped and clutched, then,

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with a startled cry, let go his hold and departed at speed into the night.

It was a tiger he had grabbed. And the tiger, equally startled lost no time in departing at an equally high rate of speed.

I said it was a narrow escape, and it was. But now that I know Ghurkas better, I'm not so sure that it wasn't the tiger that was lucky.

When we had been here a fortnight, one officer from each column, and one N.C.O, from each platoon were selected to go on a swimming and river-craft course in a nearby lake. I was lucky enough to be chosen to go. We were all swimmers already, but our styles and speeds were open to improvement, and we were initiated into the various methods of making river crossings, most of which we made use of afterwards.

This course stands out in my memory, because it was here that I had, for the first time, a close-up of Brigadier Wingate. One day, a party of us were standing by the edge of the water, when we saw someone swimming to wards the shore. His style was not a thing of beauty, but it got results. He came out of the water and walked towards us. "Good Lord! It's the Old Man himself!" somebody said.

It isn't easy to be an impressive figure minus your clothes, and at first I was disappointed. This was the man I had heard so much about! This was the man who was going to lead us! Why I He was only a scruffy-looking devil like the rest of us.

Then he stopped and spoke. I looked him in the eye for the first time. And I knew who he reminded me of.

There was a man I fought once, away back in my boxing days. When he came into the ring, I took one look at him, and I said to myself, "Tony, this is going to be a push-

over." And it was, too, for him. He patted me, hip and thigh.

It was that man Wingate reminded me of, and I knew then that whatever order I received from him or his agents, I would obey it with confidence and gladness, because I would know that it came from someone who knew what he was doing, and what he wanted; someone who was a man, and, above all, a fighter.

It was here, too, that I renewed my acquaintance with Major Calvert, commanding one of the columns, whom I had known previously in Shanghai. It was good to see a "kent" face, and we had a long talk about old times one evening, a talk only broken up by the mosquitos, which made it hurriedly necessary for us to retire and put on long trousers and sleeves.

And here I met the mules that were to serve us so well. An unlikeable animal, the mule, but full of use. Even on training, tied up as they were, they served an important purpose. They made it quite unnecessary ever to carry a watch, for punctually every day at 7, and 12, and 4 o'clock, they made the air so hideous at the sound of their feeding whistle that you could hear them at ten miles range.

By the time I returned to our training jungle these mules had settled down in their new lines there, and the men were handling and loading them with a certain amount of acquired familiarity. But a few exhibitions of mule temperament to which they had been treated in the first day or two kept the familiarity from ever coming anywhere near the state of being contempt.

It would be very easy to write at length about the army mule. But I, for one, prefer to forget it.

Incidentally, as you shall hear, some of these mules eventually reached a very curious destination.

CHAPTER IV

ONE Sunday morning, six weeks after we had come to the jungle, I was still lying in my blankets at 8 o'clock, a disgracefully late hour to be abed, but an extra couple of hours had held more appeal than the prospect of breakfast. The column runner came up and rudely disturbed my drowsy reverie by telling me that Major Anderson, the Column Commander, wanted me immediately. Dressing didn't take long. It wasn't very complicated. Five minutes later I was receiving orders to report the following morning at map reference so-and-so, to proceed on special duty. Major Anderson told me to take all my kit with me, and instructed the Quartermaster Sergeant to give me fifty rupees. Now fifty rupees, when it's given you like that, is a lot of money. So I guessed that something big was afoot. I did my best to find out what it was all about. But the Major wouldn't play.

"You'll find out to-morrow," was all I could get out of him, together with strict orders that I must not mention to anyone even the fact that I knew as much as I did.

You can guess that the rest of that Sunday passed very slowly for me. Every hour seemed like six, and I daren't spend too much time with my friends in case I gave something away.

But at last it was 8 o'clock the following morning, and I presented myself at the place appointed in good time. I found two other B.O.R.s there before me. They were L./Cpl. Tommy Vann, and Private Allnutt. Vann was

with me all through, not only this affair we were starting out on now, but also the bigger one that came later. He was worth his weight in gold. I never heard him grumble, and whatever sort of calamity befell us, he always put it in its place with some crashing Lancashire remark. He was a fair-haired chubby little chap, who suffered from duck's disease, a broad Manchester accent, and an incurable habit of being funny.

These two naturally thought that on my added eminence of three stripes the information must be more widely disseminated, so they did their best to pump me. They got just as much out of me as I had got out of Major Anderson!

When we had been pow-wow'ing there for about ten minutes, a three-ton Bedford drove up. In it were twenty other ranks of the Burma Rifles, and two of their officers, Captain Herring, who has since won the Military Cross, and Lieutenant Bruce. We were told to hop aboard, and were driven off. By the time we got to our destination, the dust was thick in our throats and on our faces and arms, and a bath and a drink were good.

We stayed there till the next morning and were issued with various extra articles of Kit, which made us still more certain that we were booked for an adventure. Our pith helmets were exchanged for felt terais, and we were dished out mosquito ointment, water sterilising outfits, camouflage capes, mosquito veiling for our faces, hockey-boots calf-high, a Kashmir blanket, and seven ration bags, to contain tea, sugar, milk powder, rice, salt, and dried fruits (2).

This all looked very much as though we were off into the jungle, and we were glad to have the chance of going to the pictures that night. We saw a film called "Ball of Fire," and filled our eyes with Barbara Stanwyck. She was pro-

bably the last piece of bed-worthy female we would see for a long time to come!

Next morning, Captain Herring gave me a railway warrant for myself and the two other B.O.R.s, and warned me that aboard the train we must have nothing to do with himself and his Burmese, for security reasons. He also advised me not even to look at the destination on my ticket until we were aboard the train, and as a matter of fact, it was not until we were in Delhi Station that I took a peep, and discovered that we were bound for Manipur Road. None of us even knew where this was, but a European who was sharing our compartment had a railway guide which we borrowed. Then we knew the worst!

After six days in train and boat we arrived in Manipur, and from there had a hair-raising drive by lorry to Imphal. The road climbed steadily all the way, making a series of hairpin bends, and perching precariously on the edge of breath-taking drops. At intervals we saw wrecked vehicles, and I, for one, was scared stiff of sharing their fate.

• At one place the convoy in which we were travelling was called to a halt. Our truck stopped just round a sharp turn. The driver of the truck behind, which had lost some distance, apparently thought that this was a good chance to make it up, and he came round the corner full out. We were bang in his way, and he couldn't make it. His truck went straight on into space, still on a level keel as though on an invisible track, then disappeared from sight. We dashed over the khud to the rescue, quickly found ourselves knee deep in the rice that had formed the truck's cargo, and were amazed to see the driver calmly getting out of his overturned cab and walking to meet us. His mate had not been so fortunate.

We did not stop long in Imphal, and were soon on our

way again in another truck to a Post nearer the Burma frontier. This was then manned by a Battalion of the Mahratta Regiment, with whom we spent the remainder of that day and the night, eating heartily of curry and rice, and dumping there our heavy kit, such as army blankets, greatcoats, and all our spare clothing with the exception of one complete change. In the morning we set off on foot along the narrow dirt track leading to Burma. Countless gangs of coolies were working on widening this road, and we passed two or three bull-dozers at their gigantic shovelling.

Our numbers were now much smaller than the original party, as Lieutenant Bruce had left us to strike out on his own at Imphal, taking with him all the Burmese, except six. But we had been reinforced by the addition of two mules and their Punjabi Mussulmen muleteers.

Our first halt was at Tamu, seventeen miles farther up the track. This had been, in the days of peace, an elephant station belonging to the company of which Captain Herring had been an employee. He was the ideal man for the sort of job we had in hand, for he had been in Burma for a good many years, spoke the language like a native, and knew intimately the country through which we would travel. Also, he had been a Territorial Officer in the Burma Rifles, and had fought against the Japanese in the retreat. He didn't like them at all, and he did love the Burmese. He was as pleased as a child with a new toy at having been given this chance of getting a bit of his own back. I don't actually know, of course, what orders he had been given about this reconnaissance, but I imagine they had simply said to him, "Get across the Chindwin River and find out all you can. Oh, and by the way, be

back by the first of January, will you?" That date was the limit set on the duration of our trip.

An old friend of Captain Herring (known, incidentally, to the irreverent as "Fish") named Thomas, was in charge of the elephant station at Tamu. The Japs had paid him a visit but had done him no physical harm, as they used him as an intermediary between themselves and **the** Burmese. But he had had in his charge fifty of the Company's elephants, and they had made away with every one of these. However, the few mahouts (elephant drivers) and their wives who had disdained to run away on the approach of the enemy, followed them when they had gone, and succeeded in regaining possession of seventeen of their animals. These seventeen were still in the station, and when we went ahead the next day we took one of them, and his mahout, Nandaw, with us in place of the two mules, which were returned with their drivers to Imphal.

So when we left on the final stage of our march to the Chindwin our party was ten strong, Captain Herring, myself, Vann and Allnutt, and the six men of the Burmese Rifles, and with us went Nandaw and his elephant.

The path was now very narrow, and passed through jungle denser than any I had ever seen before. Visibility was sometimes practically nil, and I was lost in amazement at the silent progress of the elephant, which manoeuvred its colossal bulk through the scrub with less fuss and commotion than that made by any of us. I marvelled, too, at the speed and skill Nandaw showed in clearing overhanging branches out of his way with one sweep of his dha, and without ever checking the elephant's progress.

Every now and again, along the edges of this ill-omened path, we came on traces of the retreat from Burma. Now it would be a single corpse, or two or three **together** in a

melancholy huddle. Now it would be an old-fashioned motor bus, lonely and incongruous in its tropical surroundings; now a motor car or a lorry, overturned and defeated by the narrowness of the way, some heaps of bones around it showing that its occupants, too, had given up the unequal struggle.

The distance from Tamu to the Chindwin River is forty-seven miles as the crow flies, but we took three days to cover it. While Nandaw and his elephant kept straight ahead down the path without escort, as we had had reliable information that there were none of the enemy this side of the river, the remainder of us made continual casts in parties to north and south of us, gathering information about water for animals, and places suitable for the resting and concealment of bodies of troops. Sometimes when making these casts we came across old hutments, and then, in spite of our information, we approached them with every precaution, for the Jap is a crafty animal, and we were always on the lookout for booby traps and other pieces of devilment.

We arrived at a spot three miles from the river on the evening of the third day, and here Captain Herring decided we should camp, for straight ahead of us on the river itself lay a large village, and he did not feel inclined to let our presence be known there until he had found out how the land lay.

As darkness fell that night, I realized for the first time a fact which had been subconsciously worrying me all the time since we entered the jungle. Quite suddenly, as the surrounding trees and bushes, except those lighted up by the glow of our fire, disappeared from my sight, I heard the jungle come to life. In an instant, where before it had been silent and dead, it was now full of flurries and scurries in the undergrowth, of the stealthy cracking of branches,

and of squeaks and whimpers and cries. It was only then I realized that all through the days when we had been marching, the jungle about us had been absolutely silent, with an utter stillness you could almost have cut with a knife. Not a single bird had cried, never a tiger had roared or a hyena howled. It is always like that in the jungle. All the birds and beasts are on the night-shift. But it is eery and disconcerting till you are used to it.

Next morning we made a stealthy approach to the village, but in spite of the care we took, we were spotted before we reached it by some stray cultivators. Captain Herring spoke to one of them; they were all perfectly unalarmed and friendly, and he assured us that though the Japs had been in the village, there were none of them there now. He confirmed the fact that there were none of them this side of the Chindwin. So we took the bull by the horns and went openly into the village.

We were warmly welcomed to it by the Thoogyi, or headman. He assured us repeatedly that he was over whelmed with delight to see the British back again, although I must admit that his chief concern seemed to be how soon we could let him have some salt, which he had been completely deprived of since the coming of the Japanese. He was equally glad to see their backs, as he told us that they had cut down all his palm trees, which had taken many years to cultivate, to get the cocoanuts, too arrogant to wait till they could be gathered and brought down. When we returned to Tamu we sent him a sack of rock salt, used by the elephants, so he probably still thinks highly of the British Raj.

We stayed in the village for a short time, and the usual refreshments were produced for our delectation; cocoanut milk and betel-nut. The cocoanut milk was served to the

rest of them **in the** nut but Captain Herring and I **were** honoured with the only two glasses the village possessed, both, I noticed, "made in Japan."

My memory went back to many similar occasions when I had been entertained in China, where it is one of the most deadly of insults to refuse to eat what is offered to you. So I took a hearty dollop of betel-nut, crammed it into my mouth, and bit on it. Vann did likewise. Then we both gasped, and looked at each other in a wild surmise. It was an awkward moment. It would never have done to spit it out. So we made an heroic effort, and swallowed in concert. Then we went into our cocoanut milk as though it had been a couple of pints of Bass's best.

It was on our return to our bivouac that Captain Herring told us the plans he had made for our first crossing of the Chindwin the next day.

CHAPTER V

ALTHOUGH we had been, ever since we had crossed the frontier of Burma a day or two before, in country technically occupied by the Japanese, it would only be after reaching the further bank of the Chindwin River that we might expect to contact them. The headman had told us that Japanese troops had been seen opposite the village a few days earlier, and it was impossible to tell whether they had withdrawn or were still in the neighbourhood.

It was reasonably certain that they would have posts somewhere along the river bank, as the strategic value of the Chindwin in this area is considerable. To penetrate into Central Burma it is necessary to cross it, and there is not a single bridge over it. It is the only avenue of traffic to the south, as roads are non-existent. It therefore forms a natural barrier, and an important one, and it was obvious that there would be enemy troops somewhere in the vicinity. The question of crossing looked like being a ticklish one.

The Japanese did not provide the only obstacle to a safe and comfortable passage. The river itself did not make things any too easy for us. The banks of sunbaked mud were steeply shelving, and below water presented a treacherous surface. Four or five yards from the shore, as we found out soon enough, the depth was a good fifteen feet, and the current looked as though it were making eight to ten knots. Add to this, that even in this season, **when** the level was at its lowest, the river was at least 600 yards

wide, and you will have some idea of the problem with which we were faced.

Back in the bivouac, Captain Herring outlined his plan. The first essential, he said, was secrecy. The villagers must on no account be allowed to know that we were going to cross. Though they appeared to be perfectly friendly to us, and truthful in their information, there was no reason to believe that they would be anything but equally truthful in what they told the Japs. It was prudent to leave them in the dark as to our movements. The crossing, then, would be made by night. It would be made, if possible, in two boats belonging to the villagers which he had seen drawn up on the bank that morning. They were the ordinary Burmese river boats, made with the extreme of simplicity out of the trunk of a tree, hollowed out, and flattened on sides and bottom. They would hold three men with their kit. This meant that two journeys would have to be made. It was on the cards that we might not find these boats ready to our hands at night, however, so we would spend the rest of the day preparing alternative craft out of bamboos and groundsheets, as we had been taught on our course.

L./Cpl. Vann would stay behind on this bank of the river with the elephant boy, and would be on the look-out for our return in approximately twenty-five days from now. Tommy wasn't keen on the idea of being left alone for a month with someone who didn't speak a word of English, particularly as he received strict orders that he must on no account show himself in the village, but as usual he grinned and bore it, and contented himself with some crack about learning Burmese without a sleeping dictionary.

At midnight we left our bivouac. Each man carried his ration bags, full, and as many tins of bully as he thought he could manage. He also carried fifty rupees in "bullion

money," silver rupees and small change with which we had been issued in Imphal, as the Burmese are not at all fond of paper. With considerable regret it was decided that it was impossible for us to take with us our Kashmir blankets. Cold as it was at night, the extra weight would not be compensated for by the extra comfort.

The night was pitch black. There was no moon. Captain Herring led the way, and I brought up the rear. Every man carried a piece of one of our makeshift boats, a bamboo pole, or a ground sheet complete with its bamboo-fibre lashings. We stole along as quietly as we knew how towards the village. Through it we must pass, as we knew of no other way by which the boats might be reached. The traverse of the main (and only) street, which normally took two minutes, now held us up for twenty. But at last we made it, and made it in complete silence, too. Not even one of the dozens of mangy pi-dogs had been awakened to give the alarm.

We were justifiably pleased with ourselves, and our pleasure was still further intensified when we reached the river bank and discovered that the two boats were still there. It had been arranged beforehand that Captain Herring should go in one boat with two Burmese, and myself in the other with another two. I was to go first,

I dumped my pack in one of the boats, slung my rifle, and grabbed the bow. The two men who were to come with me seized the thwarts.

"Are you all ready?" Captain Herring asked softly.

"O.K., sir," I answered.

"Off you go, then, and good luck. I'll be close behind you."

I gave my men the word and we took the boat into the water, stern-first, at a smart run. Into the water she went,

and not only into it, but straight under it, too, and we with her. The prudent Burmese had taken the precaution of removing a large plug from the bottom before leaving it for the night.

I don't think I've ever felt anything so cold as that water. For a minute or two, I was paralyzed. By the time I was able to draw breath I had been carried ten yards downstream, and, strong swimmer as I am, it was all I could do, burdened with my clothes and rifle, to make the shore. And no sooner had I made it than I had to plunge in again, because one of the Burmese was a poor swimmer, and I had to give him a hand. After we had got him safely back on dry land, the next half-hour was spent in diving for packs and for the two rifles of my companions, which had gone down with the boat.

At last everything was retrieved without loss, except for the damage done to the rations in our packs. We three were in a pitiable state. I was shivering as uncontrollably as though I had a raging go of malaria, and Captain Herring made me strip to the skin, and presented me with his only spare garment, a pullover. Gracefully clad in nothing but this and my soaking pair of hockey-boots, I made my dreary way back in the file through the jungle. Captain Herring had decided that the attempt must be abandoned for the night. We would try again to-morrow, and this time we would make certain that whatever craft we were using didn't have a hole in the bottom of it.

We again succeeded in passing through the village without wakening any living thing to protest at our passage, but the adventures of the night were not yet done.

At one point, about a mile from the river, the path to our camp wound along the edge of a steep precipice, not very high, but quite high enough to ensure that we took

no chance of falling over it. When we were in the middle of this part of the track, there came the sudden sound of a slip, and a slithering fall, and Tommy Vann's voice out of the darkness: "Quick, quick. I'm over. I can't hold on long. I'm slipping/'

Captain Herring was carrying a torch, which he quickly turned on the *scene* of the disaster. First we saw Tommy's hands, desperately clutching at a root, and his face, pale and strained, staring equally desperately towards succour. I caught hold of his arms and started to pull him up. Then the Captain shone the ray of his torch over the edge.

"By Jove, Vann," he said gravely, "you'll never be nearer death than that. Look!"

Tommy, now safely up beside us, turned and looked down over the edge. There was a drop of fully six feet, and Tommy's lower ends, at the moment of his extremity, must have been quite five inches off the ground!

That kept even him quiet for an hour or two, and next morning he was soon able to hold his head up again, when we all joined him as objects of mirth.

As soon as it was light, Captain Herring sent Nandaw down to the village to buy what food he could and to pick up all available information. He was gone two or three hours, and when he came back his amiable face was wreathed in smiles.

"What are you finding so funny this morning?" Captain Herring asked him.

He smiled more widely than ever.

"I have a message from the headman," he said.

"What's your message?"

Now smiling wasn't enough to relieve Nandaw's emotions. He had to laugh outright.

When his laugh was over, "Headman wants to know,"

he said, "why, if you want to cross the Chindwin, you don't ask him? He will be very pleased to row you across."

The village can't have been sleeping so soundly as we thought. I expect it was shaking with silent Burmese laughter.

So our next attempt at crossing was a much more simple affair. The headman produced a sampan, and we were ferried over with no dip and worry whatever. Our abortive attempt the night before had probably been a blessing in disguise. It had taught us that we were not perhaps quite so clever as we thought. And it had also made us reasonably sure of the loyalty of the headman and the villagers. We arranged to meet Tommy Vann there again in roughly twenty-five days time, and struck off into the jungle.

This was my third, and final, experience of meeting with the jungle than which I thought there couldn't be anything denser. First, in India, I had thought that we were experiencing a foretaste of the real thing. Then, when I came to Tamu, I realized that the growth at our training centre was only scrub, a sort of young coppice by no means to be dignified by the name of jungle. Here, at Tamu, I thought, is the real thing at last. And as we made our way towards the Chindwin I fancied that we were following the same sort of difficult path that Mungo Park and Livingstone and any other explorers, whose names I could remember, had had to hack and hew for themselves.

And now I saw jungle that really was jungle, and I knew that what had gone before had been merely a pleasant saunter through vaguely wooded rural surroundings.

All day and every day as we marched on, there was an impenetrable wall of *green* on our right hand, and an equally impenetrable wall of green on our left. And over our heads stretched a thick green roof, through which we

could only occasionally catch a glimpse of the sky, and through which the sun filtered thinly, in unexpected patches of brightness. It reminded me of the green warmth of the Forest Gate swimming baths where I used to disport myself as a boy, except that there there had been always the cheerful sound of voices, while here always there was the same unreal, tangible silence.

We marched all through the hours of daylight, and rested up at night. Although the days were steamily hot and the nights bitterly cold, this was the only possible arrangement; any thought of navigating the jungle without the aid of our eyes being absolutely out of the question.

When we had been travelling eastwards for two days, Captain Herring judged we must be nearing another large village, and we redoubled our already efficient precautions against surprise. I thought his judgment had been vindicated when, some time in the afternoon, I saw some hens pecking and rooting in the ground as comfortably as though they were in an English farmyard. I gave the alarm, and told Captain Herring what I had seen. He laughed at me gently, told me they were only jungle-fowl, and explained that their presence didn't mean that there was a village within a hundred miles.

But a few minutes later we had evidence that there was one at hand. Coming into a small clearing, we saw two women coming towards us, each of them carrying a chatti on her head. When they saw us, they gave shrill cries of alarm, dropped their chattis, and rushed off the way they had come, in spite of Captain Herring's reassuring cries. We followed them as quickly as we could, and came upon a village thrown into a great state of confusion by our arrival. When we had explained that we were British,

and not yet another party of the hated Japanese, the confusion subsided, and we were hospitably received. The Japanese, we learned, had gone only the night before, taking with them not only all the food they had managed to discover, but also such of the young men as had not been quick enough in making their getaway. We spent the night there, and after dark we heard a mournful noise of wailing, which reminded me of the keening at an Irish wake. When we asked what it was all about, they told us that the women were mourning two of the young men, who had refused to leave their wives and families and homes to work for the Japanese and had been summarily shot.

In every village we visited we heard the same tale. Anyone disobeying in the slightest particular the orders of the Japanese was shot, as was also anyone who did not humour their smallest whim. All the visible food was confiscated, none whatever being left for the consumption of the unfortunate owners, and the young and able-bodied men were driven off to work for the invaders.

In spite of this, we found that our own commissariat problem while on this stage of our reconnaissance was remarkably simple. We never had any difficulty in buying the fowls and rice we required and found that in every case the villagers had had large quantities of food hidden away, and had, in fact, only left visible sufficient in their opinion to satisfy the capacity of the Japs. Water offered us no problem, either, as this part of the country is plentifully supplied with springs. I don't know whether they have any medicinal properties, but I've never tasted anything more delightfully refreshing, even at Malvern itself.

When we had marched east for fifteen days without seeing any sign of the enemy, though many of their activities, our leader decided that we had gathered all the

information required, and that we should now return. Accordingly, we turned our faces westward, and made our way back towards the Chindwin. We travelled by a different and somewhat more circuitous route, and it was not until the 24th of December, 1942, that we saw on the opposite bank the village we had left.

Tommy Vann was eagerly awaiting our arrival, and came into the village to meet us. Nobody else could get a word in edgeways on the way up to the bivouac. He had twenty-five days' silence to make up for.

We were glad to see him, too. For one thing, he had our blankets!

CHAPTER VI

WE spent the rest of that day and the following morning in our bivouac, doing some very necessary dhobi work and mending. Then we set out for Tamu. But about 4 o'clock in the afternoon it became clear that we couldn't make it that night, so Captain Herring decided to camp. There was a stream nearby, and I went of! to pluck and clean a fowl we had brought with us.

You can imagine my astonishment when a perfectly good British Major suddenly appeared out of the trees, and said to me, "Hello, are you the British Last Post?"

I gaped at him, then collected my scattered senses and explained to him who we were.

His reply staggered me still further.

"Why don't you come down and join us?" he asked quite casually. "We're on the road only about 300 yards away."

And they were, too. That was the result of the bulldozers and coolies we had seen at work when we left. In our absence they had pushed the road forward all the way to this point, and what had formerly been a narrow dirt track was now a broad thoroughfare.

So we joined them and they gave us a welcome meal, and, what was almost more welcome, transport. Mr. Thomas was still there, and we spent our Christmas evening and Boxing Day in one of his bashas, or bamboo huts. It didn't really look like being a very festive season for us, as beer was conspicuous by its absence, and we didn't care much for the "shoo" or native beer which was the only available substitute. However, Mr. Thomas, on whose

name be peace, came to the rescue, and sent us a bottle of real, live Gordon's dry gin, and a bottle of rum. The Burmese had gone off to enjoy a tamasha with some of their local friends, so Tommy, Allnutt, and myself were left alone to enjoy this manna. And enjoy it we did. The rum disappeared in one swallow each, and the gin followed it at a more civilized pace. When the Burmese returned, we were in the middle of a good old-fashioned sentimental sing-song. They joined us, and helped us to make the jungle air hideous with a spirited rendering of the only English song they knew. . . . "When this bloody war is over, Oh! How happy I shall be!"

Next day, we reached Imphal, still riding in comfort, thanks to the generosity of our hosts with their transport.

In Imphal, we found that one of the officers from our unit had started a bullock farm, and we parked ourselves there to give him a hand while Captain Herring went off to headquarters to make his report. Mr. Molesworth had come up with instructions to get together a herd of some 200 bullocks. He had been a farmer at home, and knew what he was doing. At first he had picked up the animals reasonably cheaply, but when the surrounding zemindars got wise to the fact that he had to have them, up went the price. One or two of them in their earnest desire for profit went so far as to sell their bullocks to Mr. Molesworth, have them stolen from him and artistically repainted, and then sell them back to him at an increased price, of course, to cover the outlay on paint.

We had some fun with these bullocks. We had to train them to wear harness, consisting of a sort of horse-cloth with two girths, a tail strap, and saddle bags, and they didn't like it at first. In their desire to get rid of it they went through the most extraordinary gyrations, not at all

suited to their bulk and dignity. But after a few days they settled down and gave no more trouble.

After we had been there about a week, the unit began to arrive. They marched in at the rate of one column a day, and bivouacked on the slopes of a wooded hill, which provided adequate cover from air attack.

I must admit that I have seldom seen a scruffier looking collection, but their spirits were high and they were still full of vim and vigour, in spite of the fact that they had just covered a march of eighty-two miles from Manipur.

In Imphal we enjoyed two weeks of complete rest. The officers and N.C.O.s went out on an occasional T.E.W.T., but the rank and file had no duties, and deservedly revelled in it.

My old column, number six, had been disbanded in my absence, due to wastage through sickness, &c, and I now found that I was posted to number seventeen platoon, commanded by Captain Coghlan. My new Column Commander was Major Scott.

There were some new recruits, too, whom I hadn't met before, in the shape of fifty odd dogs of various shapes and sizes. They were all mongrels, but of good breed, the cast-offs of well-known kennels. Each had his own dogman, who had gone on a course to the Dog School in India, and in the comparatively short time they had been together it was extraordinary to see how attached each dog had become to his minder. Woe betide any outsider who tried to meddle with one of them! Each one carried round his neck a little metal box with a sliding panel, for carrying messages, and they had been taught to know that death was preferable to the surrender of their precious box to unauthorized hands. The mules were still with us, too, and what with them, the dogs, and the bullocks, our

familiar sobriquet of "Wingate's Menagerie" was not undeserved.

One day towards the end of our two weeks of idleness, we were honoured by a personal visit from the Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal Wavell. We were warned the day before that he was coming, but no special preparation in the way of spit and polish was either wanted or required. We were drawn up on three sides of a hollow square in close columns of platoons to hear what the C.-in-C. had to say to us.

He was accompanied by an American officer of high rank, and a press correspondent. His remarks were brief and to the point, but he has the art of holding your attention and making you realize that what he is saying to you is worth listening to.

He complimented us on our appearance, and told us that he had never had the pleasure of seeing a fitter set of men. He was completely confident, he said, of our ability to carry out the dangerous and difficult task assigned to us, and he finished up with the words: "Good-bye. Good luck. God bless you."

The luck and the blessing we could do with. But the "Good-bye" sounded ominously final to some of us!

The Commander-in-Chief saluted us and drove away. The Commanding Officers of the Gurkhas and the Burma Rifles translated his speech to their men. Then Brigadier Wingate addressed us. He talked to us as we expected him to talk, in fighting strain, and he set our minds at rest on a point that had been worrying most of us. He told us that, although we obviously would not be able to write home ourselves, arrangements had been made whereby our next-of-kin would be informed that we were off on special

service, and would be informed **month** by month that we were safe **and** well.

Everything was now in train for our departure, and **we were** told to get a good night's sleep as we were off the following day. This was easier said than done, as everyone was excited at the prospect of starting, and excitement made us talkative . . . and reminiscent.

There was no parade or ceremony about the start. At 8 o'clock in the morning the first column took the road for the Chindwin, and points east. There was none to cheer them on their way, and the only music was provided by the voices of the column humorists, who were profuse in their "It won't be long now's" and their "See you in Tokio's."

Single file, as always, was the formation adopted, and the tall and the short, the fat and the lean, the knock-kneed and the bow-legged tramped along indiscriminately on each others' tails. But one thing they all had in common. They were all on top of the world.

The dogs trotted docilely on their leads at the heels of their minders. The mules stepped out quietly in their appointed places with each platoon, and the column gradually wound off into the trees. At the rear came the reserve mules and behind them the bullocks, each one carrying a load of 3 cwt., and quite reconciled by now to the indignity of harness.

The jungle enfolded the last of them, and we had started on our **way**.

CHAPTER VII

IT was soon discovered that if the whole of our force took the road together, a major hold-up of traffic was inevitable. So from our first stage as far as the Chindwin the leading column marched by day and rested by night, the second rested by day and marched by night, and so on. In this way there were always long stretches of road vacant.

Some of the men, and some of the officers, too, had presented strange spectacles when leaving Imphal, being bowed down with enormous packs, containing every conceivable article of clothing and equipment, and a few inconceivable ones as well. By the third day out, everyone had arrived at a pretty fair estimate of what was likely to be necessary, and wholesale jettisoning was the order of the day. One officer in particular, who had only recently joined us in Imphal, had arrayed himself like a Christmas tree in all its glory. The only two things he didn't seem to have slung around him were a camp bed and the proverbial kitchen stove. Now he could be seen shedding into the surrounding undergrowth leather jerkins and camel hair coats, thigh boots and golfing shoes, and knives and torches and other gadgets in profusion. He was seen to offer a private soldier a resplendent silver-plated shaving mirror, but the Tommy replied, with real regret, " I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid I won't be wanting that now."

Everyone without exception discarded their shaving gear and we all stripped ourselves down to the bare essentials. The scale of kit laid down to take with us was as follows: One pair slacks, two pairs shorts, two shirts, three

pairs socks, boots, hockey boots, cap-comforter, cardigan, hold-all containing knife, fork, spoon, and twelve pairs boot laces, two sets of underclothes, mosquito veil, mosquito ointment, a towel, a bar of soap, mess tin, and two Tommy cookers. Out of this list, I myself jettisoned the towel, the mosquito ointment, and the underclothes. I had found on my previous trip that you could dry yourself perfectly well on your mosquito veil, and that mosquitos didn't apparently fancy the idea of making a meal off me. In addition to all this, each man had been issued with twenty-five rupees of "bullion money" in silver, and was also carrying his ration bags full, and what bully-beef and biscuit he could manage. The "bullion money," I might mention, was not debited to our accounts, but was merely placed in our custody, as it were, in case of emergency.

To carry this load we had been issued in place of the regulation pack with "Everest" packs, fitted with a framework of aluminium, and two cross-straps which make it possible to adjust the haversack on top of the pack, thereby making it unnecessary to carry anything at the waist.

Shortly after coming to the Indo-Burma border we left the road which we had followed previously, and struck off along a narrow jungle trail. This led us gradually higher up the slopes of the Naga Hills. As we climbed, we would every now and again catch sight of an aboriginal of the Naga tribe, semi-savages wearing nothing but a loincloth and round their necks a string on which was suspended a weird collection of bric-a-brac, corks, beer stoppers, buttons, and cotton reels. The better dressed amongst them also had 'safety pins in their ears, and yards of elephant hair wrapped round their legs. They were very shy, and we never managed to persuade one to come within conversation distance. The same applies to th

with which most of the men now made their first acquaintance. They, too, were so shy that they were afraid even to exercise the usual monkey instinct for plunder.

On the evening of our first day of climbing up this devious track, we topped the Naga Hills, and found unrolled before us a magnificent spectacle. Away in front of us, over a rolling green sea of jungle, we could see the broad Chindwin River, and behind it in the far distance the vague outlines of the blue hills which were to be our stamping ground for the next few months. It all looked so quiet and peaceful that it was hard, almost impossible, to imagine that this landscape might prove to be full of hidden enemies whose one object in life would be to blot us out, or otherwise make life as difficult for us as possible.

When we reached the banks of the river, this time at another village, we found that number five column had crossed the previous day, and were now forming a bridge-head on the other bank to ensure the safe crossing of the remainder of the force.

The means provided for us to make the passage were a fleet of the same dugouts as we had attempted to use before, and rubber dinghies carrying stores were towed behind the dugouts.

With only such small craft available the crossing was a long and slow business, and in fact it took the better part of twenty-four hours for our column to achieve the other bank. All our light machine-gunners with the exception of two went over first, and set up their guns on their anti-aircraft mountings. Then the rest of us followed in penny numbers, and the whole shooting-match got safely across with only one casualty, but that a notable one.

One of our elephants was drowned. We did not have

as much trouble with the animals as might have been anticipated. One of the officers' chargers was swum over first, and all the other chargers and the mules followed him docilely enough. They were a little difficult to round up on the other side, but when we had caught two or three the remainder soon came to heel. The bullocks took to the water like ungainly ducks, and we couldn't keep the dogs out of it. One of them, Judy, attached to my platoon, swam the river no fewer than eight times that day and was visibly disappointed when her handler made her desist. The elephants were also very willing to take to the water, and went in fully loaded, their mahouts on their backs. One of them was about three-quarters of the way across, when his howdah, loaded with grenades and small-arm ammunition, slipped round, and disappeared under his belly. Unable to move his legs, he sank. An officer dashed to the rescue, and managed to cut the ropes securing the howdah. The mahout made his way safely to shore. But the last we saw of the elephant, he was being carried rapidly off downstream in the direction of Rangoon. His trunk was still up, though, and working on the analogy of tails, perhaps that was a good sign.

Safely arrived on the other side, we set to cooking ourselves a meal, with the consciousness of a good day's work well done.

CHAPTER VIII

THE country on the other bank of the Chindwin at this point was very different from what we had found when we made our previous crossing. It was flat and open, and offered little or no cover. It was, therefore, necessary for us to make a forced march in order to reach the jungle ahead, and disappear into its shelter. We had no desire that news of our arrival in their territory should reach the Japanese any sooner than was absolutely necessary.

We started off from our bivouac by the river at first light, and for thirty-six hot and sweaty miles we did not halt again. Apart from our desire to find cover, we had also another reason for haste . . . there was to be an air-dropping at a certain map reference at dusk that evening, and we had to be there to receive it. During the four days from Imphal to the Chindwin, and the fifth, that of our forced march, we had received no replenishment of our rations, and this dropping of food from the air was coming none too soon.

I should explain that after leaving the Chindwin each column had taken its own route, as, although the one and only main railway running from north to south through Burma was the first objective of the whole force, every column had been allotted its own area to make for. Number five were out in front of us, and number seven were following immediately behind.

When we had done about thirty miles this day, and were beginning to feel that even death couldn't be as bad as it was painted, our cup of misery was filled. **We heard the**

noise of aircraft passing over our heads, and knew they must be the 'planes with our precious rations. We still had a good six miles to go to the point arranged for the dropping. And six miles to men in our state was a long way. The supplies would come drifting down from the sky, and there would be no one there to receive them. However we were soon relieved of this anxiety. Word came back from the Commander of five column that he had guessed that we couldn't be up on time, and was leaving a detail to receive the dropping. This news took a weight off our minds, and we went on with renewed energy. A mile or two further on, we heard the aircraft coming back, and put up a prayer that five column had done their stuff.

When we reached our destination at last, at 7 o'clock that night after thirteen hours continuous marching, and with thirty-six non-stop miles to our credit, we were pretty well done to a turn. Even the sight of the detachment with our rations safe and sound couldn't raise us to more than a very momentary enthusiasm, and few had the energy to cook themselves a meal. Most were content to wrap themselves up in their blanket, retrieved from the mules after the usual scramble, and sleep the sort of sleep that kind of march induces. Next morning, when life presented a more rosy picture, the rations were issued, and questions were asked about that most important of all subjects, mail.

There was, alas, none.

We were naturally interested to see what sort of food had been brought to us by the R.A.F., as on this depended the kind of meals we were to subsist on for the next few months. On this occasion we were given one sealed tin container between two men. Each tin contained rations for one man for ten days, and comprised digestive biscuits,

dates, cheese, sugar, salt, tea, cigarettes and matches, and powdered milk. Sometimes there was chocolate in a tin, sometimes there was none. So it was a kind of a lucky bag. It didn't take us long to discover that with these rations and biscuit, some very superior dishes could be concocted. "Biscuit lob" we used to call them, and they were made with biscuit and raisins, dates, chocolate, a soupçon of sugar, and sometimes even a spot of cheese. "Biscuit lob extraordinaire," one of the officers christened them, and indeed they were.

With daylight on this day, came the sight of the country that lay immediately ahead of us. It was very different from that which we had just passed through. A range of steep and very heavily wooded hills confronted us, and at first glance it appeared that any attempt to go on as the crow flies would be doomed to failure. It looked as though a long detour would be necessary. But some of our Burmese knew an old, long-disused track which wound its way over the top of the range, the Chin Hills, and it was this we were to follow. We knew it as "The Secret Passage," and as far as we saw, secret it was, for we came across no signs of the enemy along its length.

Before we started off we were warned that for the next two days while we were making the ascent of these hills, we would find no water. We would have to make do with the contents of our water bottles. A regulation water bottle holds about a pint and a half, so this meant a ration of three-quarters of a pint per man per day. Under normal circumstances this is a comfortable allowance. But remember that we were marching all the time, and climbing; and that even though we were in thick jungle, the path we were following, after fifteen or twenty men had walked it, became broken up under its carpet of dead leaves, and

when the sun managed to pierce the roof of foliage, in its rays we could see floating a persistent cloud of dust.

Some of us had been in situations of this kind before, and we realized just how precious the contents of our bottles would be in twenty-four hours' time. We did our best to make everyone understand this. But there were some who never before had even fancied that there might come a time when they couldn't walk to the nearest tap and turn it on. It was no good talking to them. When they felt thirsty, up went their bottles to their mouths, and they swallowed copiously. Their bottles bore no notable resemblance to the widow's cruse, and the natural result followed. They were soon empty. Then the fun began. No one could be expected to be generous under these circumstances, and many a friendship which had lasted throughout the war was in serious danger of breaking up over a drop of water. However, all the breaches were only temporary and were soon forgotten when we sighted water at dusk the following day.

Anyone who has ever done any climbing knows how every peak that looms before you seems as though it must be the last one; and how always another more distant one appears and still has to be conquered. That was how it was with us. Each time we topped a jungle-covered summit, all we could see before us was another of the same, higher and if possible even more jungly. The succession of them seemed endless. It was like being on some nightmare Earl's Court switchback. This went on for the whole of those two waterless days, and the foolish virgins were feeling very thirsty indeed, and even the remainder of us were beginning to doubt if we would ever reach the final summit, when the miracle happened.

We topped a rise no different from half a hundred others,

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And there before our astonished eyes lay a flat and level carpet of jungle, and cleaving it like a strip of yellowish linoleum a river bed. And in the river bed ran what in more civilized lands would have caused us no astonishment at all, a river. It was a rather attenuated river, it's true, and didn't occupy more than half of its channel, but it glinted in the level rays of the evening sun, and it was indubitably water. So presumably it would be wet.

The habit of discipline kept the men together until they came within a yard or two of the banks. Then to attempt to stop them would have been like trying to dry up Victoria Falls with a pocket handkerchief. Water they wanted, and water they were going to have. They went down on their bellies and drank till they could drink no more. Then gleefully they splashed the water over themselves, and paddled like a bunch of children at the seashore. But soon we were under way again, for our stopping-place for that night was not here. For the next four or five miles our course lay actually in the river bed. But the men weren't going to be caught napping again. They filled up their water bottles, and firmly bore them along with them, full. Talk about coals and Newcastle 1

We followed the course of this river for the next two days. There was an ill-defined and narrow track, which didn't appear to have been used for years. The jungle came right up to the banks of the river bed, and in front of us went a section of Burmese, armed with their own weapon, the dha, a knife with a blade sixteen to eighteen inches long, and a foot of handle. They cleared away any overhanging or impeding trees and bushes, and by dint of marching now on this bank of the river, now on that, we managed to make comparatively rapid progress. The first two or three times we crossed over, it seemed rather good

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fun. But after we had performed the same antics no fewer than seventy-eight times in two days, they didn't seem quite so humorous.

As a matter of fact, nothing was seeming at all humorous to me just then, as I was nursing a temperature of 103, and suffering from some peculiar sort of fever no one seemed able to diagnose. In the morning, I would take my place well up to the front of the column, and all through the march I kept losing ground steadily, till by the time a halt was reached I would be somewhere near the rear. Instead of halting, I made my way gradually forward again, and so managed to avoid being left behind. No one had any sympathy to waste on sickness. If you were ill that was your bad luck, and there was nothing to be done about it. By the middle of our second day along the river I was comparatively fit again, which was just as well, as I was detailed that afternoon to go off with Mr. Rowlands and three B.O.R.s with a message for the Commander of seven column.

While we were fallen out for our midday meal, the party of Burma Riflemen who constituted what might be called our "Intelligence Section," and did duty as flankers, contacting villagers where they could and picking up all available information, reported back. We were too busy with our meal to pay any attention to their arrival, as we were busy preparing a welcome new addition to our diet sheet—fish. Our Burmese friends caught any amount of these, little things like sprats, by a very simple method.

First, they spotted a pool where a swarm of these little fish were swimming around. Then two of them entered the water at the lower end of the pool, and, splashing and churning up the water, waded up stream. A third stood at the top of the pool, and simply scooped the fish out of the

water with his mosquito veil. Then they impaled five or six of them on a bamboo splinter, stuck their splinter into the ground beside a fire, turned it round once or twice, and they were ready for eating. There was no nonsense about cleaning them, or boning them, or skinning them. Down they went as they were, and very nice, too.

We had just finished eating and were preparing for a short afternoon siesta, when a runner came and summoned me to H.Q. There I was told that Japanese had been reported ahead, and that I was to go with a party under Mr. Rowlands to warn number seven column of this fact, and to tell them to alter their course in conformity with ours. Our object at this time was to avoid coming into conflict with the enemy, as these were our orders, until our objective had been reached. It oughtn't to be a long job to contact seven, Mr. Rowlands said. A couple of hours should do it. There was no need to take our packs with us.

So off we went, back the way we had come. As Mr. Rowlands had said, it shouldn't have been a long job. After we had been on our way an hour or so, we could hear a very loud noise going on at quite a short distance. We realized that it was made by seven in the act of moving on after their midday halt. They had managed in some way or another to get away from the line of the river, and we struck out into the jungle, in the direction of the noise. It grew louder as we went, and it was soon obvious that we must be very close to the source of it. Right in front of us was a very steep nullah, with a little stream running in the bottom of it. We slithered down into it, and with difficulty scaled the other side, only to be confronted almost immediately with another of the same, slightly steeper and more forbidding. We negotiated this one, too, and then

discovered that **we had succeeded** in landing ourselves in the middle of a perfect net-work of these fissures in the ground. It looked though they must have been made by volcanic action. Instead of our joining seven in the short time we had anticipated, it wasn't until nightfall that we managed to catch up with them, and deliver our message. And it wasn't till three days later that we rejoined our own column. For those three days we subsisted without any of our own belongings, and made our meals of rations kindly given us by men of the other column. Fortunately I found myself among men who had originally been with me in the old six column, now disbanded, so I didn't feel as lost as I might have done.

When we rejoined eight, we found that they had at last left the course of the river, and had withdrawn a couple of hundred yards into the jungle to rest for two days. They were occupying the slope of the only point of vantage in the neighbourhood. Seven proceeded to take up their quarters on the other slope, and we rejoined our own column.

CHAPTER IX

DURING the next two days, while we lay there, the members of our platoon, number seventeen, got to know each other better. There was nothing to do but talk, and usually our thoughts were on one of two subjects, what lay before us in the immediate future, or what lay behind us in the not so immediate past.

Our Platoon Sergeant, Tommy Quick, was a Manchester man. He was the last sort of fellow you would ever have thought likely to get himself mixed up in a war. He had only two interests in life, his wife and his family, and only one desire, to be back with them again. Poor Tommy! The last I heard of him he was missing. I hope he's turned up safe and sound.

Then there was Corporal Walsh, who came from Manchester, too. He was a ginger-headed lad, but his nature belied the colour of his hair, for he was as cool a customer as I ever came across. Nothing ruffled him, and nothing seemed to matter to him very much. And there was Norman Lambert from Middlesbrough, and his buddy, Birch. Lambert was a great hand on the piano and the piano-accordion, and Birch was a comical little fellow, always smiling and ready with a gag. They would have made a good double turn on the halls, and they made a damned good one on a Bren gun, of which they were one and two respectively. We had another humorist in the platoon, too, one Suddery, a Londoner from Islington. He was as ready with a crack as was Birch, and the slow, placid Lancashire humour of the one made a truly laugh-

able contrast with **the** quick-fire, Cockney cross-talk of **the** other. Suddcry was number one of another of the Brcns, and nothing that we ever came across availed to separate him from his gun. Other number ones were quite glad to be relieved of their burden at times, but not so Suddcry. His gun was flesh of his flesh, and not to be trusted to the tender mercies of another. All the others were good lads, too, but the only ones besides these whom I can find space to mention here are the two dogmen, Gardiner and Atkins. They were in charge of our platoon dog, Judy, whom I have mentioned already, and they both loved her very dearly. She was a pleasant bitch, the majority of whose forbears appeared to have been Labradors, and she and her two alleged masters made an inseparable trio, who shared everything, to their last biscuit and their last drop of water. Atkins, naturally known as "Tommy," was probably the least hard-worked man in the platoon, because he was so deaf that it was always much easier and quicker to do something yourself than to try to make him understand what you wanted done. Gardiner had no outward and visible peculiarities, except that he could not swim. We were a happy family, and got along together very well.

It was now seven days since we had received our last lot of rations from the air. That, if you remember, had consisted of five days' rations for each man. We were not feeling the pinch at all yet, because, apart from the fact that all our original issue had not been exhausted before the last air-dropping, we had been lucky enough to pass through a village even more friendly than most, where the inhabitants had insisted on giving us quantities of rice. None the less, we were glad to be told that another dropping had been laid on in two days' time. That meant a

bit of variety in the grub again, and more "biscuit lob extraordinaire."

We reached the spot appointed about 3 o'clock in the afternoon of the second day, and had not long completed our arrangements when the Air Force made its appearance.

The stores were to be dropped in an open space about four or five acres in extent, constituting the paddy fields of a nearby village. This space was bare and dry just now, because the rice planting had not started yet, and offered an ideal area for the purpose. Our preparations were not extensive. All round protection during the operation was, of course, necessary, and our platoon was posted on the forward slope of a knoll at the south end of the clearing, with one look-out section on the backward slope to give warning of any attack from that quarter. Our Bren guns were mounted covering the paddy fields, and immediately below us, at the foot of the knoll, was one of the column's Vickers guns and also one 3-in. mortar. The main body of the column was in the jungle some 350 yards away, on the west side of the clearing. A chain of fires, four in number, was laid across the clearing, and lighted as the appointed time drew near. When the noise of approaching aircraft was heard, green twigs and leaves were heaped on the fires, and dense columns of smoke went up from them. These served the dual purpose of letting the pilots know they had reached their destination, and telling them that the wind was in the south.

The aircraft circled the clearing once, and then the dropping began. They flew at a height of only about four or five hundred feet and we could see the airmen as they pushed the bundles out. We waved and shouted to them, and they waved back. I shouldn't think they felt any pressing desire to change places with us, but most of us

would have been quite ready to swap. With the usual perversity of the British soldier, we grumbled a bit. "Lucky devils! Off back to India. They'll be dancing to-night, with plenty of Brylcreem on their hair . . ." that sort of stuff. But we didn't mean it, really, and were as grateful to them as they deserved.

The parachutes, eighteen feet square, and made of Indian cotton instead of the expensive silk used for personnel parachutes, were pushed out of each 'plane in bundles of four, and each parachute carried six containers. Most of them landed safely in the area, but a few drifted off a hundred yards into the jungle. They were all recovered intact, however, and the dropping was a hundred per cent. successful. Not even a single one of the sacks containing the corn for the mules burst. These were ingeniously packed, a fifty-six pound sack of corn being securely wrapped up in four hundredweight sacks stuffed with straw. When these ungainly bundles hit the ground, they bounced ten feet into the air, and anyone who had happened to be standing in their path wouldn't have lived to tell the tale.

The whole business was successfully completed in half an hour, and the aircraft circled the clearing again and flew off into the west. Our platoon was summoned by signal to come and draw its rations, which had been stacked by the main body. We went over by sections, and were issued with seven days' rations per man. But we also received something else here which pleased us almost more, in the shape of a chaggal, or canvas water-container apiece. These held two pints each, and though they materially increased our load when they were full, nobody grumbled about the extra weight. Those two waterless days were still too close at hand for that!

My own section had just completed the drawing of its

rations and taken up its position on the knoll again, when suddenly, from the south-east, there came a burst of machine gun fire. We knew at once that it must be the enemy, and no doubt whatever was left in our minds when the first burst was followed by another, and by the exploding of several mortar-bombs close to our position. We did not answer the fire for two very good reasons: first, we could see nothing in the nature of a target, and second, we had orders not to disclose our position. The enemy kept up an intermittent fire, but without doing any damage. I think they must have observed the aircraft and seen what they were doing, and naturally come to the conclusion that there were troops at the receiving end. So they decided to loose off and let us know they were wise to us. We were all in excellent cover, and as long as we did not show ourselves, they must have been firing blind. This was the first time most of our men had heard a shot fired in anger, and as the anger was not very evident, it was as gentle and propitious an introduction as anyone could have wished for them.

Captain Coghlan was with the main body at this time, where he had gone earlier to receive orders, and he now made us a signal telling us to join him. We got ready to cross the open in a series of short rushes, and just before we broke cover, a Japanese mortar bomb came soaring over and fell with a vindictive plump only a yard or two from our own machine gun position at the foot of our knoll. We all dropped flat, and waited for the burst. But it didn't come, and finally I rose cautiously and had a look. The bomb was sticking there in the hard ground, unexploded. Fortunately for everyone, it had been a blind. The enemy machine gun fire still went on sporadically as we made our series of rushes over the paddy field, taking advantage of

the cover afforded by irrigation ditches. But there was never any real likelihood of casualties, unless our luck was completely out, and we all made it safely.

Our policy was evidently still to avoid all contact with the enemy until we had reached our first objective, and the column proceeded to retire in a north-westerly direction. It was growing dark now, and we had been' looking forward to converting our newly-acquired rations into a savoury meal. But we resigned ourselves to a night march, which looked like being a long one, to get us well out of the way of the enemy. What was our surprise, then, to be called to a halt when we had gone only about 500 yards into the jungle, and to be told to fall out for the night, and cook our meal. Surely to light fires with the enemy so close was asking for trouble? However, orders are orders, and it is just possible that the Commanding Officer knew something we didn't, because we saw and heard no more of the enemy at that time.

Two days later we halted again in the evening, and this time everyone was in a state of tense expectancy. We knew that we were within touching distance of our first objective, the railway line. We lay up in thick elephant grass, under cover of trees, and every precaution was taken against advertising our presence. We were so strung up that we scarcely dared even venture to talk, and whispered to each other as though there might be a Jap hiding behind every bush. The men, although they were all comparatively raw soldiers, showed little or no sign of nerves, and this bore out a favourite theory of mine that if you are in perfect bodily trim, your mind won't let you down either.

Darkness fell, and it was black, too. There was only a very new moon, and conditions were as good as they could be for our nefarious business. Our own particular job

was to take up a position some quarter of a mile in the rear of the railway line, and give covering fire to the Commandos who were going to do the actual destruction; and, if necessary, to deal with any enemy interference. The minutes went by on leaden feet, but zero hour eventually arrived, and we advanced in column snake, or single file. We took up our pre-arranged position without incident, and the working party crept on towards the railway, bearing slightly to the right. We waited, for what seemed hours, on the tiptoe of expectancy. Not a light, not a sound, came out of the blackness in front of us. Then suddenly the whole night seemed to be torn into fragments by a dozen sheets of flame, followed almost immediately by a colossal, stupendous, epoch-making explosion that couldn't have been bettered by Sam Goldwyn himself, in his palmy days. Bridges, line, and sleepers had all gone up together in one glorious mess. So well had the boys timed their explosions that they all sounded together as one, and if the Japs were not too close, they might easily think the devastation was the result of one or two big ones from the air.

We held our position for some time, waiting for any sign of retaliation from the enemy. But none came, and the order was given to advance again. As far as we could see, there had not been a single Jap in the vicinity. The whole operation had been a completely successful and devastating surprise.

We pushed on to the east over the remains of the railway line, and put a good distance between ourselves and it, before camping several miles nearer our next objective, the Irrawaddy River.

We had not, we then discovered, come out of the engagement, if it can be so called, without our losses.

The mahouts, on hearing the explosion from the railway

line, had evidently decided that people who could be crude enough to make a noise like that were no fit company for them. They had unloaded their elephants, dumped the ammunition and stores, and pushed off for home. Their loads were redistributed amongst the mules and bullocks, and we were not greatly put out by their defection.

CHAPTER X

OUR next day's march was one of twenty-five miles, still in the direction of the Irrawaddy. For some reason, spirits did not seem to be so high, and there was a feeling of uncertainty and tension in the air. Perhaps the brush with the enemy the day before had made us actually realize for the first time that we were in the enemy's territory, that we might be attacked or ambushed at any moment, and that we were far from any base and completely on our own. Up till now it had all seemed just like a "scheme," one of those orderly exercises on which you attack a given point at a given moment, well-knowing in advance what the outcome will be, and what opposition, if any, you are likely to encounter. We had all taken part in dozens of these during our training, both at home and in India. The atmosphere of this expedition had been just like one of them, up till yesterday. But now all that was changed. Ahead of us lay the Irrawaddy, still to be crossed, and to left of us, to right of us, all round us, might lurk any quantity of hidden foes. None of us were actually frightened (or if anyone was, he certainly didn't admit it!) but we were all inclined to be jumpy and short tempered.

There was another cause, too, which perhaps contributed to this general nerviness. For some days back the chargers, of which there were twelve with our column, had almost without exception been ailing. They had been listless and uninterested in their food, and sweating profusely. Two of them had already had to be put down, and now, on this depressing day, another eight of them had to be

similarly dealt with. It is not a pleasant job to lead a horse a few yards off a jungle track, and put a bullet through its head. It's not even pleasant to know that someone else is having to do such a job somewhere in your vicinity. Like most Englishmen, I have a soft spot for horses. It upset me to think of these chargers being left lying there, far from green pastures and fragrant hay, to make a meal for scavenging jackals and vultures. I think everyone else was affected in the same way.

The mules, too, were showing the strain. They were not in so bad a way as the horses, being better equipped by nature for roughing it. But they were becoming definitely part-worn, all the same. For one thing, it was impossible to feed them regularly. On the occasion of a dropping, they were allowed to gorge themselves on corn till their bellies were distended and they couldn't swallow another grain: the more they ate, the less there was left to carry. By reason of this, their meals until the next supplies arrived by air were smaller than they normally would have been. Some of them were in a sorry state, gone at the knees, and badly galled. And of course, the vanishing of the elephants had not improved the situation.

Marching, which had been well on the way to becoming purely automatic, was on this day a weariness to the flesh. There was little or no back chat to be heard in the ranks—always a bad sign, that—and everyone plodded doggedly on, the world reduced to a circumscribed vista of blistered heels, aching legs, and close, foetid, menacing jungle.

Then suddenly the atmosphere changed. Four of the Burmese "Intelligence Section," who had been out doing flanking duty as usual, reported that they had spotted what looked like a Japanese rest camp a few miles ahead of us. There seemed to be, they said, no sign of unusual activity

about it, and it did not look as though the alarm of our presence had yet reached them.

This was news indeed. It was just what everyone had needed to cheer him up. With the breaching of the railway line the embargo on engaging the enemy had been lifted, and this looked like a god-sent opportunity to strike a blow at them. With the thought of action, our depression and nerviness vanished, and we were our old cheerful selves again.

A section of the Burma Rifles was sent forward to reconnoitre, and after we had waited what seemed an interminable time, the news filtered down the column that it was a Japanese Rest Camp, and that we were to attack it. There could not be a greater strength of Japs than 250 or 300, and they should be easy meat. But in order to avoid unnecessary casualties to our force, which was already none too large for its task, the R.A.F. were to be called from some aerodrome in India to soften up our objective before we made the final assault.

Columns number two, seven, and eight were detailed as the attacking troops. We left all our heavy kit with the mules, and took up our position some two and a half miles from the reported position of the camp. The jungle here was very thick, but the scouts told us that there was a clearing of some three acres extent round the Japanese buildings.

We stood to in a state of high expectancy. At last we heard the sound we were waiting for, the hum of aircraft, coming from the west. They came over very high, so high that we couldn't spot what they were, though we agreed that there were six of them, two fighters and four bombers. Almost immediately after they had gone over, from ahead of us thudded the concussion of falling bombs, and we heard the coughing of machine-gun fire. It was all over

in a matter of minutes, and we heard the 'planes going back the way they had come. We went in to finish off the job.

We reached the edge of the clearing without incident, and lay under cover looking at the hutments which comprised the enemy camp. There was absolutely no sign of life. No animals were to be seen, no smoke of fires, except those kindled by the Air Force. The whole place seemed utterly deserted.

And that was what it, in fact, was. There was not a Jap left and they had left precious little behind them, too. The few buildings not destroyed by bombs had been riddled by machine-gun bullets. The Air Force had done their work with great efficiency. There was nothing of any value there at all. The men dynamited or burned the buildings which were still standing, their efforts being somewhat impeded by Norman Lambert, who kept dashing from hut to hut, shouting to the demolition squad, "Half a minute! Don't do that one till I've had a look inside."

"What on earth are you looking for?" I asked him.

"Japanese?" he exclaimed, with a world of contempt in his voice. "Bloody barbarians, that's what they are. A rest camp, and not a sign of a piano in it!"

Night was now falling, and we lay down to sleep, in extreme discomfort, in the jungle near the clearing. The place where we had left the mules and our blankets and kit was too far away to make it practicable to fetch them. You may wonder why we didn't make use of the huts to sleep in before we destroyed them, but that might have been playing directly into the enemy's hands. The Jap is a wily little fellow. There might have been all sorts of booby traps concealed in those innocent-seeming hutments, and all sorts of plans laid for counter attacking them again that

night as we slept. We preferred discomfort, and the jungle. And **we** had double guards out, too.

However, the night passed uneventfully, and next morning off we set eastward again, and again climbing, this **time the** last **spurs** of the Chin Hills to lie between us and the Irrawaddy. Yesterday's unease had caught us again. **The** air seemed closer and more sultry, the utter silence of the jungle more threatening than usual. The track wound up and up, now skirting the edge of some steep khud, or bank, now emerging for a brief instant from the never-ending greenness into the open light of the blinding sun. Suddenly, from ahead of me came a hoarse cry. I wrenched my eyes from the ground, and looked up. The silhouette of a mule, rearing up on the brink of a sheer drop, was clear against the sky. Then it disappeared, and from below came a crash. We looked over, in time to see the **muleteer** disengage himself from his animal, which was threshing wildly, examine it, and call for a revolver. The poor brute had broken all four legs. The man, by some miracle had escaped with a few bruises, and was soon marching with the column again, outwardly none the worse for his experience.

At last we topped the range of hills, and below us could **see** the silver Irrawaddy winding away to north and south. **The** country below us and on the other bank of the river, was flat and featureless, and presented, as usual, an almost unbroken monotone of green. We camped there with our second objective in sight, and I am sure that we were all certain in our minds that the achieving of this one was not going to be accomplished without loss as had the first.

The edge of the jungle comes almost up to the banks of the Irrawaddy here. Between the vegetation and the water course lies **only** a narrow track. The duty assigned to my

platoon the next day was to cover this track and the immediate vicinity to the southward of the area where the main body were crossing, in order to prevent any enemy troops arriving on the scene from that direction at an inopportune moment, and in order to prevent any unfriendly natives from leaving the area of the crossing to give information to the enemy that it was in progress.

The same conditions prevailed here as had done in the case of the Chindwin, number five column had made the crossing first, and were now holding a protective bridge-head on the opposite bank. The only particular in which the two enterprises differed was that there we had been comparatively certain that one bank at least was free from the enemy's presence; while here, he might appear from any direction and in any strength.

The crossing began in the morning. There were no elephants to be dealt with this time, and the number of mules was also, alas! sadly depleted, because it was decided that forty of them were in no fit condition to go farther with us. They were turned loose on such grazing as they could find, and the villagers were told that they were welcome to them if they wished. To accommodate our stores to our now greatly reduced transport, we all sacrificed our blankets, though we looked forward not at all to the coldness of the jungle nights without their protective warmth. Loud-speakers and megaphones that we had brought with us in the hope of making propaganda addresses to the natives were also discarded, and anything that was not absolutely necessary was here left behind.

The natives again were very helpful, and produced amazing quantities of native boats, or dugouts, which they ferried across themselves, one of them rowing three of our men over at a time. For this they were well paid, though

I think they would have been quite ready to do as much for us without any prospect of reward at all.

While acting as road-block platoon we had no adventures at all, except that we picked up two Burmese attempting to leave the crossing area and proceed southwards. We questioned them, and, although they both convinced us that their motives, if not entirely innocent had nothing to do with the Japanese, we kept them with us until we were ordered back to rejoin the main body, and ourselves cross the river. One of them was out gathering mushrooms, and the other, judging by his air of furtive but rather triumphant shame, was on his way to some not altogether innocent assignation.

When we came down to the place of embarkation, we found that the villagers had cooked enormous quantities of rice, which they were offering to the troops with numerous gestures of hospitality and invitations to eat plentifully. They had once again proved that either the Burmese is a good concealer or the Japanese a poor searcher, and had preserved the greater part of their food stores from the marauding bands.

For this, too, we paid them very well, at the rate of one silver rupee for a dish of cooked rice. The reason for our being instructed by our officers to give this excessive price was that the Japanese, although they too go through the pretence of paying for everything, actually do so in their own worthless paper currency. A Burman knows silver when he sees it, and he knew which kind of people he liked best, the ones who came to him and took his food and gave him paper in return; or those who waited till food was offered to them, and then insisted on paying for it with good, shining rupees.

Contrary to the expectations of us all, the crossing of the

Irrawaddy was accomplished with no incident at all. No sign of the enemy was seen either by the main body or by the scouts during the whole of the twenty-four hours occupied by the crossing.

On the opposite bank that night, I lay and took stock of the situation. We had crossed the Chindwin, destroyed the railway, and reached the far bank of the Irrawaddy, all without losing one single casualty by enemy action. It was extraordinary. It was uncanny. It was too good to be true.

There must be a catch somewhere.

CHAPTER XI

IT is impossible for me in a chronicle of this sort to keep a count of days, and to tell you, "On this day we did so-and-so, and on the next day we came to such-and-such a place after covering so many miles." Except for the times when something out of the ordinary happened, one march was very like another, one halting place not noticeably different from the one that had preceded it, and the one that, D.V., would come after it.

We had by now reached a stage of physical tiredness which made it impossible to cover the thirty-six and thirty-seven miles that had at one time been our daily ration. Cumulative fatigue, fever, shortness of water and rations, hard lying, all had taken their toll. And now another apparently inconsiderable plague was added to us. We were lousy. And if you have never been in this charming condition, you can have no idea how maddening it is to know that your body is foul and to be able to do precisely nothing about it. At every halt, off came our shirts, and fingers, knives, and lighted matches were plied indefatigably. But all to no avail. Lousy we were, and lousy we would remain until we returned to civilization.

After completing the crossing of the Irrawaddy, we were content to put a mere five miles between ourselves and the river before making camp. It was now, I think, nine days since we had last been dropped supplies, and that had been a seven days' ration. However, the rice we had obtained from friendly villagers had kept us from feeling any danger of starvation, and we were now told that the next dropping

had been arranged for a point some forty miles farther **cast**. At this point, the columns which were operating in more or less the same part of Burma should all rendezvous.

Forty miles, and three days to do it in. We had any amount of time and could afford to travel at a comfortable speed. Even so, it was hard going. The country, though flat, was difficult, broken by dry water courses and nullahs abounding, and as thickly overgrown with vegetation as usual. The water question was very difficult, there being no water in any of the streams at this season of the year, and springs being conspicuous by their absence. We had to dig, and sometimes we had gone down as deep as seven feet before a trickle rewarded our efforts. And even then the water was not pleasant to the taste. Tea was not so effective as usual in dispelling our thirst as sugar was scarce, and like all soldiers we liked only a little tea in our sugar.

We were not in very good shape when we made the rendezvous with a day to spare, but we cheered up considerably at the news that there was a river in the vicinity. Water foraging parties went out immediately, but they soon returned with disappointing tidings. The river was dry, and the only water to be found was in a few slimy, weed-grown pools lying in rock-pockets. It was not appetising, but we boiled and drank it, and suffered no ill effects. In our present condition anything was to be preferred to the labour of digging.

We lay that night on the slopes of a wooded hill, chilled to the marrow as usual, but comparatively happy in the knowledge that no march lay ahead of us to-morrow, and that the whole of the day could be spent in the earnest pursuit of our crawling friends. Then the following day

would come the dropping, and that meant more biscuit lob to look forward to.

The next morning at nine o'clock the Platoon Commander was summoned to Headquarters for orders. The Brigadier himself was with us now, and we waited on the Captain's return with interest. We had a feeling that there was probably something in the wind. However, when he came back, everything seemed on the surface to be quiet and as normal as anything on a show of this kind ever can be. All the orders he had received had had to do with to-morrow's dropping, and the safe and uninterrupted carrying out thereof.

The Platoon Commander relayed his orders to Mr. Rowlands and myself (Sergeant Quick was sick) and they were roughly as follows: Some four miles ahead of us, to the east, lay a village. It was in the paddy fields of this village, which lay between us and it, that the 'planes were to drop their packets. Our task was to proceed under cover of darkness that night, by-passing the village, to a point some way to the east of it, where we were to sit astride the only track leading into it, and carry out the same dual duty as we had done on the banks of the Irrawaddy, namely, prevent any enemy interference from that direction, and stop news of our proceedings being carried out of the village to the Japs. In fact, it looked as though we would merely spend a quiet and uneventful day disguised as a road-block, as usual.

The rest of that day passed in the hopeless quest of hygiene and cleanliness. Hopeless it was indeed, for not only had we our animal friends to deal with, but none of us had been able to shave for weeks, and presented a veritable barber's nightmare, while any washing that we had been able to do had of necessity been extremely intermittent

and sketchy. Dirt is unpleasant, but thirst is worse. It was now 23rd March, we had been in Burma for two months, and we knew.

It was very dark when we set out at 9 o'clock to carry out our task. We followed the track in the direction of the village until we reached the edge of the paddy field clearing. We skirted the edge of this, keeping in the cover of the jungle, then struck back again until we reached the track once more, when we again turned in the direction of the village. After going a short way further, the Platoon Commander halted us. I suppose he must have had his previous orders countermanded during the day, for he told us we would go no farther, but would lie here till first light. This we did, and at dawn were up and ready to carry on. We could now see the lie of the land. We were on a slight eminence, very thickly overgrown and offering no field of fire or vision at all. In the direction of the village, the jungle was completely unbroken. Behind us lay the open expanse of dry earth which would eventually produce the villagers' supply of rice.

Putting out a file of scouts, one of whom was the Burmese, Bugyi, we advanced toward the village. We came to a little water course, or nullah, down which to our surprise a stream was running at a good fast speed. There was a raised bank on either side of this, the forward, or village-side bank being higher than the one to the rear, behind which we now were. Bugyi led the way over the nullah. No sooner had he topped the further bank than we saw him stiffen, and heard the stutter of his tommy-gun. He fired a burst, then dropped down beside us again. The first thing he had seen in the immediate vicinity had been a Jap sentry, oblivious of our arrival, and he had given him the works. The question now was, what were

we to do next? Were we to push on and attempt to carry out our task, ignorant as we were of whether the Japs held the village in considerable strength, or were we to retreat upon the main body? The Platoon Commander seemed to be a little uncertain, as indeed anyone well might be, but the question was settled for us in an abrupt and unexpected fashion. In something like three seconds after the sound of Bugyi's burst, four mortar bombs arrived on the scene, and pitched with deadly accuracy right in the middle of the nullah. It was obvious that the Japanese had a fixed line laid on it, and this was no place for us. The Jap is deadly with his mortars. He can get them into action in an incredibly short space of time, and do amazing damage with them when he does.

We employed the better part of valour, and retired to the eminence where we had spent the night. Here we prepared to hold this position, as we knew that the sound of firing must have been heard by the main body, four miles away, and that as we were the only British troops in the neighbourhood, they would know that we had engaged the enemy and act accordingly.

We took up our defensive position on the crest of the rise, my section on the right, the Platoon Commander, with another section, in the centre, and Mr. Rowlands with the third section on the left. As I mentioned, our field of fire was practically nil, visibility being certainly not more than ten yards. But in spite of this we had not been in position for more than a minute or two when the enemy opened fire on us with their machine guns. Most of their fire was directed against my section on the right. I don't know whether they were extraordinarily lucky, or whether there was better visibility from their end than from ours. But in any event, we soon suffered several casualties. Birch

was killed, no fewer than seventeen bullets finding him out. Norman Lambert was shot in the chest, Yates in the finger and shoulder, and I myself received a bullet in the right shoulder. In the centre section, Suddery, who was slightly in advance of it with his beloved L.M.G. commanding the track, was hit by a bullet which went through his right biceps, punctured his ribs, and came out, or almost came out, through his stomach. In spite of this, he carried on with his Bren, and apparently his injuries had in no way lessened his enthusiasm.

In this phase of the fight we were at a considerable disadvantage, in that we had been warned that ammunition was by no means inexhaustible, and that every round must be aimed at a definite target and made to count. The Japs were restrained by no such orders. They blazed merrily away into the blue, or rather green, where they fancied us to be, and their policy brought results. Our Platoon Commander, naturally worried as to our safety, would shout to me every now and again, "Are you all right, Aubrey?" and I would have to reply, "O.K., sir." It was nice of him, but I wished he wouldn't, because every time I shouted, those little yellow blighters sent over another burst of machine-gun fire.

Suddenly I saw two of them creeping round a bush only a few yards from our position. I pulled out a hand grenade and hurled it at them. I saw them fall, and no more appeared. There were two E.Y. rifles in my section, and we now commenced using them to despatch grenades in the direction of the enemy. They didn't seem to like this much, and it kept them pretty quiet on our sector. Things were now hotting up a bit in the centre. One of the Japs' ideas of attack is to plaster a position with machine-gun or mortar fire, and under cover of this to send forward crawl-

ing infantrymen, whom we used to call "beaters," to **fall** upon the sheltering foe with the bayonet. **They were trying this one** now against the Platoon Commander's section. **But** they had reckoned without Suddery. In spite of his wounds, he kept up a steady fusillade of fire on **the Japs** whom **he** could hear creeping up through the undergrowth, though he couldn't see them. At last, one of them suddenly leapt out from a bush only a yard **or** two **from** Suddery, and sprang upon him with his bayonet at **the** "point.."

It looked as though it was all over with the Bren gunner, and that he and his buddy, Birch, would be pulling one another's legs as usual that night after all, when suddenly, for no reason that we could see, the Jap pitched over backwards and lay where he fell. Suddery told us afterwards that he had given up the ghost, because he was in no condition to lift a Bren to the level necessary to kill his assailant, and his only emotion when he saw him fall was one of complete surprise. It was just as well he fell backwards, because if he had toppled the other way, Suddery would have had the unusual experience of being bayoneted by a dead opponent. Not that the unusualness of it would have done him any good! We examined the body afterwards. It had been shot beautifully between the eyes by Mr. Rowlands, it transpired, and in its pockets were a powder puff, a looking glass, a comb, and sundry photographs of the girl friends. One of the Tokyo boys, apparently.

A few minutes after this, the Japanese ceased firing on us, and seven and eight column moved past us, one to the north and one to the south, carrying out a pincer attack on the village. Those of our platoon who were **unhurt joined their** column and went on to take their part in **the fight,**

while I took the wounded back to **the** aid post, which had been established on the hill where we had spent the previous night.

There were four of us, Suddery, Lambert, Yates, and myself. Suddery was the only one who was badly hurt, but **even he** could walk with our help. It was not a particularly pleasant experience, that four mile tramp. It was hot. We had no water. The flies were very interested in our wounds and we were annoyed about missing the final assault on the village. But Suddery, whose wounds made ours look like a collection of scratches, made it much less trying than it might have been. His spirits were unquenchable, and he had apparently enjoyed himself thoroughly. No yellow-bellied Nagasaki corner-boy was going to get him down, he informed us, and if he had a souvenir of them in his stomach, they had certainly proved themselves even better collectors of these trifles than he.

When we made the aid post, the medical officer used the precious contents of his own water bottle to clean our wounds. He took the bullet out of Suddery's stomach, where it had finally come to rest half-visible on the surface. As he plugged the hole with cotton-wool, the indestructible Bren gunner asked if he might keep the bullet.

"It will do to show my kids when they ask me 'What did you do in the **Great** War, Daddy?' " he said.

CHAPTER XII

THE medical officer gave us some sulphonamide tablets, and told us to lie down and rest. We made ourselves as comfortable as possible on the ground in the shade of some trees, and did our best to follow his instructions.

But it was not so easy. Lying on the hard ground did not worry us. We were used to that. Our wounds were not very painful, with the possible exception of Suddery's.

Even the thousands of ants which immediately began to crawl all over our bodies could not have kept us awake, for familiarity and our state of dirt enabled us to treat these with contempt, too. No, what made it impossible for us to rest was the state of bustle in the camp. I have seldom seen such a state of bustle, or men working harder than the few muleteers who had been left behind by the main body when it went in to attack.

To understand the reason for this it is necessary to go back a little. While our brush with the enemy was at its height, the aircraft which we were expecting had put in an appearance, and had actually started to make their dropping of stores. We had been so busy that we had scarcely noticed them. Headquarters had succeeded in contacting them and stopping them before they had parted with more than one or two of their precious packages. Now, again by arrangement of our headquarters, they were going ahead with the dropping, not on the paddy fields, but actually in the jungle itself. This was the first time we had attempted to deal with an operation of this kind in any sort of ground other than a clearing, and it was bad luck that only a few men should be on the spot when

it happened. But you can't budget for a battle, and the few there were tackled the job very manfully. Packages of rations seemed to be falling everywhere. They dropped into the middle of thorn bushes, whence they had to be retrieved, not unpainfully. They roosted in the tops of trees and shrubs, like great ungainly birds, and the trees and shrubs had to be cut down with dhas to collect them. The men worked like niggers. Not only did they salvage every package, without loss, but they piled them in platoon heaps ready for issuing, and they made a separate pile in a place of concealment, to be left there for the use of five column who were expected to arrive at the rendezvous, and who, as far as was known, had not received a dropping for some considerable time.

These labours had just been safely finished, when the two columns started to arrive back, platoon by platoon, from the engagement, the distant noise of which had acted as an accompaniment to most of the afternoon's work. The men were not at all talkative. They were tired, hungry, and thirsty, and not inclined to satisfy our curiosity until their own wants had been satisfied first. They drew their rations and lighted their fires, and it was not till they had eaten and drunk that we heard what had happened at the village.

Seven column had circled the village, and closed all exits to the far side. Then, under the covering fire of three platoons, eight had advanced into the village from the front. They had met with no opposition. Not a single Burmese was to be seen in or about any of the bashas, and, naturally, not a single Japanese.

The village consisted of about fifteen of these bashas, or little straw-built houses, raised off the ground on legs, and one very much bigger house, probably belonging to the

headman, standing a couple of hundred yards from the group of the others and commanding the whole street.

There was not a sign of life as the men advanced. Only one thing at all unusual was to be seen in the whole length of the village. There was a ham, a large and succulent ham, hanging from the door-post of one of the bashas. This was very quickly spotted, and the men of the leading platoon showed an inclination to go and seize it before it fell into other, less-deserving hands. But one of their N.C.O.s, Corporal Roos, a South African, stopped them. He smelled a rat. It wasn't like the little yellow men to leave a perfectly good piece of food behind them. One member of his platoon, however, did not see eye to eye with Corporal Roos. He liked ham, and he wasn't going to miss the chance of a bit of this one. He broke ranks, and ran up to the basha. Corporal Roos dashed after him, in a last attempt to stop him. In vain. No sooner had he laid a finger on the ham, than there came the staccato tapping of a machine gun, and a hail of bullets killed both him and Corporal Roos. The machine gun was seen to be sited in the headman's house, and the attackers took cover while it was pestered with mortar and Vickers fire. All reply from it was quickly silenced, and a cautious advance was made upon it from all sides. Its garrison, as many as the house would hold, were found to be all dead. They had obviously stayed behind there in the hope of doing considerably more damage than they had in fact done. The remainder of the Japanese force was caught in the jungle to the east of the village between seven and eight column, and wiped out to a man. The number of Japanese killed in this engagement was 219, and we ourselves lost the two dead already mentioned, and seventeen wounded, none of them seriously.

WITH WINGATE IN BURMA

As soon as all the men of the two columns had eaten, camp was struck, and we prepared to put some distance between ourselves and the village. Tommy Vann had kindly brought me back my pack which I had discarded at the spot where I was wounded. In common with the rest of the wounded, I was incapable of carrying it myself and a place had to be found on the mules. This was not so easy as it sounds, for by now our animal transport was becoming very few and far between. We had been forced to dispose of still more of our mules, as sickness was making them more worry than they were worth, and a considerable number of our bullocks had already found a comfortable last home beneath our waistbands. However, our packs were stowed away somehow, and we started off. We all managed to carry our own rifles, although if any firing had had to be done, I would have been a doubtful asset as I should certainly have had to fire from the hip. Suddery was with difficulty persuaded that an L.M.G. was not for him in his present condition, and given a rifle, with which he was not at all pleased.

Our march on this occasion was only one of five miles, in a northerly direction. We did not want to go too far from the rendezvous appointed with five column, and next morning one of our platoons at least had reason to be glad that we hadn't. This was the platoon which was detailed to return to the rendezvous and guide five column, which had just communicated with headquarters by wireless, to its ration cache. This particular platoon was not at all pleased at being selected for this duty but it had to be done, and they put as good a face on it as possible. They duly helped five column to acquire their food, and brought them back again to Brigade Headquarters and seven and eight, whom they rejoined the following morning shortly after dawn.

Incidentally, this ration dump which we had left for five had been a great boon to them, as they had not received a dropping for some considerable time, and had been on very short commons. Their arrival constituted a reunion, as all of us had friends in their column, and we had not seen them for some time. They, too, had had their adventures, and were at least as glad to see us as we were to see them.

Major Fergusson of the Black Watch was commanding five column, and succeeded in looking, though bearded, as immaculate as ever, monocle still firmly at the high port. There was a good story current about this arrival. It was said, with I know not what truth, that Major Fergusson had lost his Wireless Code. It was naturally impossible for us to communicate with each other by radio in clear, and it was necessary that he should find out from Brigadier Wingate whether radons indeed awaited him, and if they had been left at the rendezvous. So he wirelessly, biblically, "My ribs suck out, and thy servant is an hungered." Wingate replied, "Though ye walk in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, yet fear no evil. For I will feed ye." This may be entirely apocryphal, but it's a good story.

We lay up at this place, still only some nine miles from the last village, for two days, one day awaiting the arrival of five, and one day after they had come.

These two days' rest were very welcome to most of us, particularly as radons were at this time plentiful, and water, though it still had to be dug for, no scarcer than usual. We ate some more of our bullocks here—it was the best use we could put them to now—and altogether we enjoyed our hard-earned leisure. According to the bulletin which used to be posted up each day on a tree outside headquarters, every man in eight column had now covered a

distance of 1200 miles in our perambulations. No wonder we felt a little weary I

On the morning of our second day here we received a piece of news which, you might expect, would have sent us into paroxysms of delight. We were told that orders had come through for our return to India. The powers that be considered that we had done our job. We had destroyed the railway line, spread alarm and despondency among the enemy and more or less got them chasing their own tails, and we had acquired much invaluable information. It was time to come home.

Somehow this news failed to arouse in us the to-be-expected enthusiasm. It wasn't that we had lost any of our love for home, or our desire to see it again. It was just that it all seemed so unreal, so far-away, like a dimly remembered pipe dream. We had lived all our lives in the jungle, and it was ridiculous to think that now we could simply turn our backs on it, and leave it.

Besides, between us and home stretched all these miles we had covered; all these hideous miles of bamboo and thorn and scrub; these miles of dirt and sweat and thirst.

Also, still before us lay the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin, conquered once, and surely not to be overcome so easily and at such small cost again.

CHAPTER XIII

FIVE, seven, and eight, all started on the march to the river together. We had a matter of forty miles to cover, but we were in pretty good fettle after our rest period, and made light of the prospect.

When we had covered about half the distance, five, who were in the rear, were fired upon by the enemy. Two platoons were detached to contact and engage them, but failed to do so. Thereupon it was decided that five would leave the main body, and that was the last we saw of them.

The remainder of us proceeded on our way, and we hit the Irrawaddy shortly after first light the following morning. There was a village on the bank at this point and close by it, to our astonishment, we discovered fourteen or fifteen rowing boats, and two motor boats. This flotilla had evidently been collected by the Japs for some nefarious purpose of their own, but there appeared to be no guard on them, and what was sauce for their goose was certainly very acceptable for our gander, so it was decided that we should use them. The sooner we were over the river the better. From the attack on the rear of our column, it was obvious that the Japs had their eye on us, and I imagine that the Brigadier had information that they were closing in on us from the south-cast and the north-east. It was more than likely that they were waiting for us on the opposite bank, too. But whether they were at this spot at this time or not, we did not yet know.

Seven column was detailed to provide the first platoons

to attempt the crossing. Two platoons were selected as the first party, to go in six rowing boats (the motor boats were of course immobilized) and the remainder of us lined the jungle along the bank, to give covering fire and protect, as far as possible, their venture.

It was now about six o'clock, and broad daylight. It seemed that with the Japs in our rear, just as capable as we of making use of wireless telephony, this crossing was likely to be a hazardous business. However, it was a business that had to be done.

The two platoons took to their boats, pushed off, and started to pull for the opposite shore.

No sign of opposition came from the other bank, and as they neared the middle of the stream it began to appear that once again the seemingly impossible was going to happen, and that we might pass this obstacle for the second time unhindered. Just as this thought formed itself in my mind, machine-guns spoke. We saw the spurts of water kicked up by the bullets rising round the boats, and I for one realized that I had been quite certain all the time that this was going to happen. You can't have all the luck all the time.

We immediately opened fire with all we had, peppering the opposite jungle as thickly as we could. There was no need to think about saving ammunition now. It was obvious that the amount we should be able to carry away with us from here was going to be strictly limited. Our barrage achieved its object. The Japs raised their fire from the boats, and directed it on us. This was a tactical error on their part, as we were all well covered, and their fire was completely wasted. The boats held steadily on their way and at last reached the other bank, some way down-stream from the spot where the enemy appeared to be

in force. How many casualties they had sustained during the crossing, I do not know. But the jungle swallowed them, and that was the last we saw of them. For another two hours we continued to keep the Japs in action, hoping that the task of replying to us would keep them from following our friends. At last they ceased fire. We, too, rested on our arms.

By this time the Brigadier had been informed that the force of Japs on the other side had been only a patrol some sixty strong. But he knew that some fifteen miles farther up the river was a Jap strong point, manned in considerable force, and it was certain that reinforcements had been summoned from there by the enemy long before this, and might be expected to arrive at any moment. Under these circumstances, he decided that we should separate and make our way back to India independently. Accordingly, he himself with headquarters, started off to the south, and as we learned afterwards, was successful in crossing the river later that same day. Seven and eight prepared to move off together as the first part of our routes lay in the same direction, north-east. Before leaving the Irrawaddy, we regretfully parted with all the rest of our mules, except six which we kept to carry medical stores, rubber dinghies, our wireless apparatus, and one or two other vital necessities. The remainder were destroyed, the comparatively healthy ones being cut up for meat, which was also the fate of our one or two remaining bullocks. We were sorry to part with these animals which had served us well to the top of their bent, but anthrax and galls had played havoc with them. And even with healthy animals, men cannot travel as fast in the jungles of Burma as they can without them. Speed was now going to be more important than transport capacity. We were racing not

only the Japs, but also the monsoon which might be expected to break soon now. It was imperative that we should reach India before that happened.

The abandoning of the animal transport also necessitated as jettisoning our support weapons, the mortars and the Vickers machine guns. We rendered them useless to the best of our ability and heaved them into the river, together with such ammunition for them as was still left to us. This was very little, as we had blazed away all that we could at the Japs in the engagement that had just ended.

We now went our way armed only with rifles, Bren and Tommy guns, and the inevitable and necessary dhas. Seven column left us when we had put fifteen or sixteen miles between ourselves and the river, and struck off to the east. We had been with them for a long time, and were sorry to see them go. There were handshakings and exchanging of addresses, and many arrangements to meet over a beer in Calcutta or Bombay, or back in Blighty after it was all over. Then they went their way, and we went ours.

Eight column was now on its own. The first thing that Major Scott did was to divide us up into small Dispersal Groups, each under the command of an officer or senior N.C.O. In the event of a surprise attack by the Japanese or any other unforeseen eventuality, each of these groups would strike off on its own in a direction to be decided upon by its commander, and when the trouble was over all would reassemble at a rendezvous appointed. A new rendezvous had to be agreed upon at each stage of our march, and the first was a hill a short way north of the Shweli River.

We were now crossing the triangular piece of territory

which is bounded on the east by the Irrawaddy and the north by the Shweli, one of its tributaries, which at this point bends northwards. Major Scott decided that our best chance was to cross the Shweli first, and after that make another shot at the Irrawaddy at a point further north. Here, we were about 500 miles from the nearest place in British hands, and the quicker that 500 was cut down, the better we should all feel about it.

We reached the Shweli River shortly after nightfall, and received orders to have a meal and rest for a couple of hours, preparatory to making the crossing at moonrise.

The Shweli River here is about 180 yards across. The banks are of soft sand, gently sloping. The first fifty yards of water from the southern bank (on which, of course, we were) are very deep and the current is fast, flowing at a good four knots. Then comes a sandbank, several feet clear of the water, and beyond that the remaining hundred yards is only waist deep, and quite fordable.

Before the crossing started, there were one or two preliminary jobs to be done. First, the deep part of the river must be swum, with pegs and a rope, in order to make an endless pulley-rope on which our rubber dinghies could be operated. We had, I should mention, only four of these with us, but that number should be easily sufficient though the crossing would be fairly slow, each dinghy only carrying six men.

I hoped to be allowed to take my part in the swimming, but my shoulder, though healing rapidly, was not altogether well yet, and I was forced to be a spectator. As always when volunteers were wanted, the difficulty was, not to get sufficient but to choose the number you wanted without giving too much offence to those you refused. How-

ever, those chosen stripped to the skin, and succeeded in safely ferrying the rope and the stakes out to the sandbar, which was as far as it would be necessary for us to use the dinghies. These men were some of our strongest swimmers, and it was quite clear from the comparatively heavy weather they made of the trip that the ordinary man, laden with rifle and pack, would not have a hope in hell of getting over. Without our rubber dinghies we should have been, quite literally, sunk.

The rope was duly passed on pulleys round the stakes, the dinghies were attached by smaller ropes and a running noose to the parent rope, and the ropeway was ready.

To Captain Williams was given the task of taking his platoon across first. At moonrise the first twelve men, the Captain included, took their places in the dinghies, and the crossing began. At first all went well. They pulled themselves across hand over hand, and as they went over, the empty dinghies on the other reach of the ropeway came back, received their complement of men, and were in turn handed across. The only pauses were occasioned as each dinghy reached a spot where there was a large knot in the rope. Over this the slip-knot of the tie-ropes had to be lifted and eased every time, an annoying but unavoidable delay.

My mother used to tell me a tale of an old man who was her father's gardener. This amiable old gentleman was alleged to have been given the task of cutting a large branch from one of his employer's apple trees. He duly climbed the tree, sat himself down upon the end of the branch in question, and proceeded to saw it clean off between himself and the trunk. Not unnaturally, he fell, and broke both his venerable legs. I had always been inclined to look upon

this tale as a flight of fancy. But in view of what I saw happen next, I am now inclined to think that there may have been some truth in it after all. About thirty-five men had made the sandbank in safety, and there appeared to be no reason why the rest of us should not follow them as per schedule, when one of the dinghies, manned by a sergeant and six privates, reached the point where was the aforementioned knot. As usual, the* noose refused to pass over it. This particular sergeant evidently considered he knew a thing or two more than those who had gone before. Why waste time fiddling about when there was a much more direct method available for dealing with this obtrusive knot. He raised his dha, and before anyone could stop him had struck the knot off the rope with one fell sweep.

Into the water fell the rope. Down stream at a hearty four knots disappeared one sergeant and eleven other ranks and what was at this moment more important, our only four rubber dinghies, worth to us at this juncture considerably more than their weight in any precious metal you care to mention.

For a minute or two there was a stupefied silence. It was the sort of disaster which leaves you utterly speechless. Then the dams broke, and I think it was as well for that sergeant, poor fellow, that he was at that moment being carried away to an extremely uncertain fate on the inhospitable waters of the river, rather than here with his mates. The flood of fury was soon over. What can't be cured must be endured. Our boats were gone, and there was an end of that. Major Scott gave Captain Williams, gibbering with fury on the sandbank, instructions to treat the men he had with him as a separate command and be on his way. We shouted good wishes across the stream, and they went. And that was the last we saw of them.

We now turned to consideration of our own problem. Full daylight was now here. It was quite obviously impossible to cross without craft of some kind. The country behind us and around us was more than likely by now swarming with Japs, so that visits to villages with the object of borrowing dugouts must be fraught with considerable possibilities of danger. Yet it was certain that this was no healthy place for us to be, and we must get out of it as soon as possible. The river must be crossed. So Major Scott decided to build rafts. Bamboo and other timber was there in plenty for the chopping down, and each man was still wearing his coil of rope, and also had at his disposal yards and yards of string collected from the parachutes, and treasured against just such an emergency as this. As another string to his bow, the Major also wirelessed to headquarters, asking them to send rubber dinghies to our rescue. But we were not very sanguine about the success of this appeal. H.Q. probably had their own problems to deal with.

We retired four or five hundred yards from the river bank into the jungle, put out our sentries and set to building our rafts, each small school of buddies getting together to make their own to their own specifications.

All day long the jungle resounded to the sound of dhas. The noise we made must have been audible miles away. We were working against time, and in any case if you have ever tried working with Indian wood, you will know that quietness is the last thing you can hope to achieve. While we worked we waited for the arrival of a party from H.Q. bearing succour; and equally, if sub-consciously, we waited for the arrival of the Japs.

But neither came. The day wore on to evening, and

with the arrival of darkness we moved up to the river bank again, taking our rafts with us.

These were of all shapes and of all sizes. But they all closely resembled each other in one important particular, we found.

As soon as they were put into the water they sank.

CHAPTER XIV

So there we were. A whole day had gone. The Shweli still lay before us, and we were no nearer getting across it than we had been when we started. The situation didn't bear thinking about, and yet it had to be faced.

There was obviously nothing more that could be done in the dark, so once again we withdrew into the jungle, and waited for the dawn. Major Scott, however, was not idle. After many efforts, he at last managed to contact India on the wireless, and explain to them the desperate necessity of sending us boats at once. Unfortunately, our message, though apparently received at the other end, was not confirmed, so that we could still feel no certainty that it had been understood.

Dawn came. We were short of rations by now but we made such a meal as our resources allowed, and then moved up to the river bank again. I don't know how the others felt, but I was beginning to hate that implacable piece of water. It was so fluid, and yet so final; so narrow, and yet so infinitely broad. On this expedition there never seemed to be the right amount of water—there was always either too little or too much.

We tried to make a human chain as far as the sandbank. It was no use. Even in the shallows where a man could stand, the sandy bottom was so unstable and the current so strong that he found it exceedingly difficult to keep his footing. Out in the middle of the stream, where the water was deep, the thing was obviously impossible. Then we thought we might be able to do something with the short

coils of rope that each man was still carrying. But this was too flimsy for so stern a purpose, and in any event it would have meant going through all yesterday's business of making rafts again, and at the remembrance of last night's fiasco, our hearts misgave us. There seemed to be only two alternatives left; to continue along the river, hoping to find a village not occupied by the Japs in strength where we could borrow boats, or to wait where we were, hoping for help to arrive by air. Major Scott decided that we should wait, for that day at least.

And wait we did. With every hour that passed our prospects seemed to grow dimmer. We had little or no food left. We felt that we were orphans of the storm, faint, fed up, and far from home. It began to grow dark. Even the more sanguine of us thought that the prospect of a march through hostile country along the river from village to village was now a certainty; when suddenly, out of the gathering dusk came the sound we had all been waiting for, the hum of an aeroplane engine rapidly growing louder. We set light to our fires, piled them with green wood, and waited. There was a moment of awful suspense when we thought the pilot was going straight over us. Then he banked, and started to circle. Everything was going to be all right. The Shweli would lie safely behind us that night after all.

The aircraft started to unload. Package after package came floating down, to be eagerly retrieved from the jungle. Rations, rations, fodder for the mules, and again rations. All very welcome, but where, oh where, were our rubber dinghies? Finally, the last two parachutes were released, and the 'plane made off. The packages came to rest at our very feet, were greedily pounced upon, and proved to be six rubber boats, and a rope. All was well,

No time must be wasted now. The Japs would have seen the aircraft as well as we. They would know what its circling meant, and they would be on our trail. It was dark, but there was no time now to wait for moon rise. Hurry, hurry. Get the rations issued, one day's for each man. Let the mules eat. God only knew when they would cat so well again. Over to the sandbank with the rope and the pegs. Inflate the dinghies and make them water-worthy. Let's get on, on, on.

My platoon was this time detailed to be the first to cross. It was pitch dark when we stepped into the dinghies. Hand over hand, we reached the sandbank without mishap. Then we extended in single line along the river, and advanced slowly to the opposite bank, our rifles at the high port, and in my mind, at any rate, the uncomfortable thought that it probably wouldn't be long now before we heard the machine guns speak. Suddery, who was on my left, and Lambert on my right, both told me afterwards that their thoughts had been exactly the same. On we went into the dark. The water was becoming shallower now. Now the sand underfoot was dry. Now we were climbing the bank. Now we were in the shelter of the jungle. And still nothing had happened. We were over. We had made it without opposition.

Quickly we made as efficient a bridge-head as we could under the circumstances for the rest of the column, and waited for them to arrive. Section by section and platoon by platoon they came, and last of all arrived our one remaining mule, laden with the wireless equipment. The other five we had perforce left behind, but this one we must have; it represented our last, our one remaining tie with civilization. The wireless set itself had been man-handled over the river, and the mule had swum.

In an astonishingly short space of time **we were on the** way, our Burma Riflemen leading, and a section protecting our rear. Our objective now was the mountain which had been the rendezvous appointed the previous day. There we hoped to find Captain Williams and his men awaiting us.

For three days we marched. The road, on this occasion, did wind uphill all the way. The one day's rations we had had dropped to us were used with care. But we passed no friendly villages where we could obtain a supplementary issue in the shape of rice, and we were on pretty short commons. There was no water to be found at all on the higher levels. Parties had to make the steep descent of the khud which lay always on one side of us to forage for it, and when they had found it, to climb the same steep slope again, eight or ten chaggals suspended round their shoulders. Home comforts, in fact, were few.

On the third day, we reached the summit. Here there was a strange phenomenon, in this dry land : a little circular pond, like a Scottish mountain tarn. The water in it was bright green, and festooned with weeds. But we were not particular. We boiled it, and drank it, and used it to cook our last small pieces of food, and suffered not at all from our use of it.

We found signs that Captain Williams had been there before us. We saw the places where he had lighted his fires, apparently the night previous. But he had gone, and his men with him, and there was no sign to show us in which direction they had taken their departure.

We slept that night, there, on the top of the mountain, 2000 feet up. I think it was the coldest night I have **ever** spent. We huddled together over our fires, but they seemed

to give out no warmth. We had no great quantity of food inside us, and our powers of resistance were low.

It was a long night, but morning came as it usually does. There was no delay in starting, as breakfast didn't enter into our scheme of things. We went down the mountain by the eastern slope, the farthest from the Irrawaddy. The west side was absolutely unnegotiable, and even this was very steep. No alpine feats were necessary in making the descent. You simply stood at the top and slithered down, arresting your headlong progress by grabbing bamboos as you passed them. Before we started, the side of the hill was virgin jungle. By the time the whole column had come down, there was a wide and visible roadway.

Our platoon was first down, with the exception of the Burma Rifles, who had as usual gone ahead to prospect. The main road east to west from Lashio to the Irrawaddy was somewhere near, and we didn't want to come upon it unawares. We sat at the foot of the hill, in the pleasant morning sunlight, admiring the sight and the scent of some brilliant red and yellow flowers growing on creepers in the trees, and thinking about eggs and bacon. I remarked on the peace of the morning. There might not, I said, be a war on at all. At once, from the jungle, appeared the Burma Riflemen, in a hurry. And closely following them arrived the stutter of machine-gun fire. We hurled ourselves to cover, and waited to take stock of the situation. The Japs could apparently see us, but we couldn't see them.

Fortunately, the whole of the column was now safely down, including the mule, and we waited for Major Scott's orders. They were brief and to the point, as always. The road, it appeared, had been even nearer than we had thought, and directly ahead of us was a Jap block house.

We would take it, and destroy the garrison. Our platoon was given the extreme right. We advanced by sections. The sergeant with the section on the extreme right, himself and seven men, advanced under covering fire from the remainder of us to occupy a rise in the ground which appeared to offer the chance of a better field of view and fire. He duly reached the top of the rise without casualty, and disappeared over it, and with this disappearance he also disappeared into thin air, as we never saw him or any of his section again. The block house put up a stiff resistance, but after a short engagement we silenced it, some of the Japs making their escape. Then we heard the sound of trucks coming up the road. This could be nothing but Jap reinforcements. The Brens hastily covered the road. As the trucks appeared, they were greeted with a hail of fire. The leading driver must have been killed immediately. His vehicle left the road and overturned in the jungle, where it immediately burst into flames. There were three other trucks behind it. They, too, were destroyed, and none of their occupants were left alive to worry us again.

Our casualties were heavy in this short engagement, but light compared to those of the enemy. We searched the vicinity thoroughly, staying there for two hours, and sending out reconnaissance parties, but of the sergeant and his men we could find no trace. Presumably they had been carried off, prisoners.

During this halt, Major Scott again succeeded in contacting India, and a supply dropping was arranged for the following morning on the top of a mountain fifteen miles north. As soon as it was clear that our search was to be useless, we pushed on. Our march this day was similar to the one of the day before, but the climbing was not so steep,

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and water was rather more easily come by. So it was no great disappointment to us when this summit did not prove to be decorated, like its predecessor, with a miniature lake. A couple of bread fruit trees would have been welcome, however. Our rations were non-existent, and we lay down tired and hungry. But not before we had given every possible attention to our one remaining mule. This was now a sorry sight. Bamboo as a sole diet did not seem to agree with it, and its galls were bad. It was bandaged with field dressings, bandages, four by two, and other odds and ends, and even had a puttee wound round its off fore leg. It could not have been more carefully groomed if it had been due to step into the ring in the morning.

Next morning, the air-dropping was carried out successfully, and without incident. We ate a good meal, and felt the better for it. But we saw with foreboding that not even a spread of corn could rouse the mule out of the lethargy into which it seemed to be sinking.

Major Scott now called a conference of officers and section commanders. He didn't attempt to minimize the seriousness of our position. He said that there were three possible courses open to us. The first was to make northwards. The objections to this course were the wicked nature of the ground, the scarcity of water, the sparseness of the Burmese population along the route, making it unlikely that we could rely upon villages for our food supplies, and the fact that there were two strongly held Japanese positions on the way. The second alternative was to make for China. What distance that would involve he could not with any certainty say, nor what difficulties we might meet on our way. If we took this course, we should have to navigate by guess and by God, because we had no maps. The third was to return by the way we had come,

by the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin. We knew all about that already, but there were just two points he would like to call to our attention. He had information that all river craft had been withdrawn to the far bank of the Irrawaddy by order of the Japanese, and that they had stringently warned the villagers against giving assistance to British troops, the penalty for which offence would be death, summary, unpleasant, and inevitable. Also, did we happen to remember that we would have to cross the railway line which we had honoured with a visit before? Probably the Japs would be ready and eager to welcome us there, if we put in a return date. Now, would we please go back to our men and find out what they all thought about it?

We went back, and put the situation to them. There was only one course for which no one had a word to say. They had had enough of the rivers. Once was an elegant sufficiency. Maps, too, they thought, were good things to have.

So, taking it by and large, they thought that we should be making the best of a bad business if we made for the northern route.

We went back and told Major Scott what they had agreed.

His opinion was the same. So it was decided that this it should be.

CHAPTER XV

THE hardness of the road, and the scarcity of villages on the way, made it seem likely that small bodies would have a better chance than large ones of winning through. So it was decided that we should split up into the dispersal groups previously decided upon. The officer commanding each group would choose his own route and employ his own methods.

Another decision was also arrived at now, and this the hardest that anyone could be called upon to make. We had carried with us since the action of the previous day three wounded men whose hurts were so serious that they could not walk. Two of these were British and one Burmese. We had no proper stretchers to carry them on, and had improvised litters for them out of bamboo. The jungle which now lay before us was to all intents and purposes virgin. To make our way through it unburdened would be a task of the utmost difficulty. To carry litters through it would be a virtual impossibility. The discomfort to which the wounded men themselves would be put on such a journey would be horrible, and would in all probability aggravate their injuries to a fatal extent. Both they themselves and the remainder of the column would stand a better chance of survival if they were left behind. The situation was put to them, and they at once agreed, like the men they were. There was a village twelve miles away, and here we decided to leave them, in the hands of the Burmese, who had always shown themselves friendly towards us, and who would look after them to the best of their ability.

Some of the Group Commanders decided that their best course would be to stay where they were, on top of the hill, till nightfall, and march under cover of darkness. But Captain Whitehead of the Burma Rifles, made up his mind to start at once. So the wounded would be sent, under the protection of his group, to the village. Volunteers were called for to make a carrying party. Thirty men were chosen, under Mr. Hamilton Bryan, with myself as his sergeant. Major Scott said that he would wait for our return until dark before leaving; all the cigarettes available were collected and given to the wounded, farewells were said, and we started.

That march was a nightmare. Captain Whitehead was in a hurry, and so were we. We had no intention of failing to return to Major Scott, and what seemed comparative safety, before the time laid down by him. Yet every step in this jungle, the thickest I have ever seen, had to be won, and our dhas were in constant use. The pain the wounded must have suffered beggars description, but not one of them uttered a sound of complaint. It had been still early morning when we started, and it is a tribute to our strength, and our anxiety, that we reached the village which was our destination shortly after twelve mid-day.

But reaching it did us no good. It had been a village once, but now it was only a collection of burnt patches on the ground. There was *no* sign of life, not a Burmese, not a domestic animal, not even a Jap was to be seen. It was complete desolation. Captain Whitehead, who knew these parts pretty well, having been, I think, a Resident Magistrate, said that there should be another village six miles farther on. Probably it, too, would be in this same condition, but it was worth investigating. While the remainder of us rested and cooked a meal, two Burma Riflemen were

sent on to reconnoitre. They **were** back in an incredibly short space of time, with the news that this village had not been molested in any way, that the villagers were carrying on as usual, and that there was no trace of Japs in the neighbourhood.

If the carrying party went on as far as this second village, it meant that they would have to cover another twelve miles, six carrying the litters, and six unburdened. That, in its turn, meant that they would almost certainly fail to contact Major Scott back at the rendezvous. So Captain Whitehead's party took on the carrying duties, and we were allowed to make our way back. I prefer not to think of saying good-bye to the wounded. Two of them I knew very well, and one had even travelled out from England in the same ship with me. This was war with a vengeance. The weak, as always, must suffer.

If we had travelled fast coming, we tried to travel at twice the speed going back. We followed, as far as we could, the same trail, and we made good going. But it was to be a tight squeeze. We came to a stream-bed in which there was a little trickle of water, and **here** we thought the men would find that a cup of tea would add inches to their stride. They stopped to brew it, while I went on ahead alone, to contact Major Scott and tell him that the party was on its way.

I stepped out as fast as I was able. The first part of my way lay along the side of a dried-out river bed. I remembered it well, and did not have to stop and consider my every step. I was congratulating myself on my progress, when suddenly the river-bed petered out. That was odd. I didn't remember that happening on the original march. I went on a little way further in the same direction. Then I halted and looked around me. Through a small gap in

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the jungle, I could see that I was in a valley between two hills, the shape and contours of neither of which seemed to me in the least familiar. I pulled out my compass and consulted it. It told me that due west lay almost directly through the middle of the hill on my left hand. I must have been doing my best, in the last short part of my travels, to describe the traditional circle. And now, I was well and truly lost. I couldn't, it was true, be very far from the track we had made, nor, if it came to that, from the hilltop on which sat Major Scott, patiently waiting. But for all the chance I had of finding them, they might as well have been in another continent.

I told you once that I'm no hero. I certainly proved that to my own satisfaction now. I was, quite frankly and unashamedly, terrified. For a minute or two, my mind absolutely refused to work, and I sweated even more profusely than I had been doing before. Then I took a pull at myself. Our original march to the village in the morning had been to the north-east. So coming back I had been travelling south-west. What I must do now was obviously to climb the hill on the left, or west, of me, and see what I could see. So I climbed.

I suppose the height of that beastly hill was about a thousand feet, but to me it assumed the proportions of Mount Everest and Kanchenjunga rolled into one. Every time I thought I had beaten it, it produced yet another maddening little summit out of its green waistcoat pocket. However, to the top of even this expanding mountain I came at last. And then there was indeed a song in my heart, and I sat down and enjoyed one of my last few cigarettes with a mind almost at ease. For I knew where I was. We had passed over this same hill this morning, but in a direction at right angles to that I had now been

following. The rendezvous with Major Scott was only a few furlongs away, and it was still a good hour from night-fall. All was well that ended well.

I smoked my cigarette for five minutes, then proceeded on my way. My memory had not been at fault. Within half an hour I found myself climbing the hill on top of which was the bivouac. Evening was drawing in, but by no stretch of the imagination could it be said to be dark. I would very soon be enjoying a well-earned cup of char, and a bite to eat, and telling Major Scott that the others were well on their way.

As I came near the top, I could hear not a sound to show that there was a body of men near me. But that did not worry me unduly. Perhaps they had received news of enemy in the vicinity, and were observing unusual precautions. I could see no smoke from their fires, but that must be because of the deepening twilight. I gave the whistle on three notes which made up the column's recognition signal. Answer came there none. I started to sweat again, and broke into an uneasy sort of trot. I reached the bivouac. Not a soul was to be seen. I went to the place where Column Headquarters had been. Not even a X marked the spot. I went to my own platoon's area. Blackened fires were all that remained to show they had been there. Something unexpected must have happened. Major Scott had been forced to push on. Probably he thought that we would not come back after all, and that when we found ourselves already on our way, we would continue with Captain Whitehead.

That was my second bad moment of the day. I did not know what to do. Perhaps the main body had only left a short time ago, and if I attempted to follow their tracks, I might catch up with them. On the other hand, suppose

I followed **and lost them?** And meanwhile Mr. **Hamilton** Bryan and the carrying party reached the rendezvous, found no one there, concluded that I had gone on with the Major, and turned themselves into a separate dispersal group on the spot? Where would I be then? The answer was distressingly obvious. Alone. In the middle of Burma. I wasn't **at** all happy.

Surely Major Scott must have left a note or a message of some sort for us? I hunted every corner of the bivouac, but could find nothing. It was now beginning to grow dark in earnest. Whatever I meant to do, I should have to do it quickly. Anything was better than inaction. I went down the hill, and cast round till I found the track by which the column had approached it yesterday. Now, leading straight on from this, I found marks which told me that they had continued on in the same direction. I hesitated for a moment, then decided to follow them. But first, knowing that Mr. Hamilton Bryan's reactions on finding no one at the rendezvous would probably be the same as mine, I picked up a cigarette packet which I found lying there, and printed on it "GONE FORWARD. FOLLOW THE ARROW." And I drew a large arrow underneath, and stuck the thing to a tree with a spike of bamboo. Then I dumped my pack underneath it. I had no intention of lugging it about the countryside unnecessarily, and it weighed about a ton by now. I went down the path taken by the column with the utmost caution. I couldn't quite understand what had been going on, and, to me, it smelt.

I had crept along for perhaps a mile, when a sudden noise ahead of me brought me to a halt with my heart in my mouth.

It was the column recognition whistle, and if I had known **that failure to answer it would mean death that second (as**

it very well might have) **I couldn't have** whistled **in reply**. My heart was hammering too loudly, and my mouth too dry.

But all was well. The gladdest sight I had seen for many a long day was that of Tommy Vann stepping out to greet me. He was in charge of the Bren gun post left there to protect the rear.

"Hello, there," he said nonchalantly. "They were getting worried about you. But not me. I told 'em you'd turn up. Like a flea in Rowton House, you are. Can't get rid of you, no how."

I was so glad to see Tommy, that I couldn't even be rude to him. I asked him to go and fetch my pack, and to wait somewhere near there till my party arrived and guide them in. Tommy put a lance-corporal in charge of the gun, and went. I pushed on to report to Major Scott.

He was very glad to see me, and to know that the party were on their way. He had left the bivouac on the hill top because the air dropping of the morning must have given it away to the Japs, and he knew that we would find him while he remained so close at hand.

For the sake of the men of the carrying party, he decided not to push on that night, but to rest where he was.

I, for one, did not quarrel with his decision. I was ready for **some sleep**.

CHAPTER XVI

NEXT day no other dispersal group left the parent body. It was necessary that Captain Whitehead should be given a few days' start, as the smaller the body of men who descend upon a village the more likelihood there is of their getting something out of the villagers. The remaining groups, therefore, marched together, and covered sixteen long miles, to the north. We saw and heard nothing of the enemy. But always on our left, lurking like some inescapable monster, lay the implacable Irrawaddy. It had begun to be almost an obsession with us now, this river. There it lay, flowing calmly and serenely southwards. But however much water flowed down, there was always enough left to act as a seemingly impassable barrier between ourselves and home. It had assumed a personality. I was surprised that I didn't dream about it at night.

I think it must have affected Major Scott like that, too, because next morning, instead of giving the order to march north, as usual, he led us off to the west, back to the river again.

Two villages lay on the bank, and we were aiming to hit it at a point midway between them, two miles from each. We made camp a mile back from the river in the jungle, and a party of Burma Riflemen, disguised as local natives, were sent out to reconnoitre. We set about cooking ourselves a meal while we waited for their report. Rations were still comparatively plentiful, but any addition to our supplies was always welcome, and here we had a stroke of luck.

One of us had retired into the undergrowth, in search of temporary privacy, and we were surprised to see him come rushing back in a moment, greatly excited. He ran to his platoon commander, and urgently requested him to come and see what he had found. They, too, disappeared in the same direction, and soon the private was back again, with a message that the presence of Major Scott was now required.

This man, in his peregrinations, had stumbled on the opening to a cave, well concealed with bushes. Naturally, he had investigated, and to his considerable surprise had found that the cave was stacked, from floor to roof, with British army petrol tins. And every one of these tins was crammed full of rice. He had evidently come upon the villagers' store, saved and hidden from the Japanese. Major Scott had no doubt about the proper destination of some of this treasure trove. Our need was greater than theirs. We were told to take what we could of it, every man of us, and we willingly complied, stuffing our socks and cap comforters, and mosquito veils and any other possible receptacle, to the limits of our packs' capacity. For every tin of rice we took, we left in the tin five silver rupees, a further supply of which we had received with the last lot of stores from the air. When the natives eventually discovered what had happened, they must have thought they had been paid a visit by the Burmese equivalent of Father Christmas. It was an outlandish episode, this, and for some reason it reminded me of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, and I murmured "Open, Sesame" under my breath.

We were still in the midst of stowing away this unexpected addition to our larder, when our scouts came

back, and Major Scott summoned another conference of officers and section commanders.

There is only one word to use about Major Scott. He was a "smasher." He had personality, courage, foresight, and, the greatest of all qualities in a leader, luck. "Jammy" Scott, the men used to call him, and they would all willingly have followed him into a climate which is alleged to be even hotter than Burma. He had been a lance-corporal during the Battle of France, and he knew the men's viewpoint as well as the officer's. He always had as much time to spend on the troubles and ideas of the humblest private as he had to expend on those of his second in command, and he liked the men to know that he respected their opinions, even though he did not in any way consider himself bound to be guided by them.

The scouts, he told us now, had reported that each of the two villages was held by troops of the Burmese Traitor Army, men who had ratted, and accepted the service and pay of the enemy. In the northern-most village, there were sixteen of these fellows; and there were also four native boats, or dugouts, drawn up three or four hundred yards into the jungle, and carefully guarded by them day and night. These, presumably, had been kept on this side of the river for the use of the Japanese in an emergency. Conditions in the village to the south were similar, except that there, there were only nine of the Burmese traitors, and besides four dugouts there was also a sampan.

The Major told us that in his opinion there were once again three courses open to us. First, splitting up into our dispersal groups as already arranged, we could storm the north village, destroy the garrison, and use their boats to cross in. Second, we could proceed in the same way against the other village. And third, we could continue to make

north. There was one point he must impress on us before we made up our minds, and impress on us very strongly. If we attacked the villages, the attack must be made with such speed, and must be so complete a surprise that not one of the defenders must have the chance of firing so much as a solitary round. One rifle shot would spell our doom, and would bring down on us immediately the large enemy forces now in the neighbourhood.

With that, he sent us back to our sections.

As far as mine was concerned, I could have told him now what the answer would be. No time would be wanted for consideration. They were all just as fed up with the thought of the Irrawaddy as I was, and as anxious to be done with it.

I put the case to them, and asked them for their opinion.

There was a pause while you could have counted three, and they gave it me in unison: "Storm the mucking village."

So that was that. We went back to the Major all armed with the same answer. But he didn't seem satisfied. He smelt a rat, that was clear. And the rat made its appearance not two minutes later.

Another of the Burmese scouts came in with his report. Two large Japanese motor boats, crammed with troops, had just put in at the north village. That, of course, settled it. Even if those boats hadn't put in their appearance, I am very doubtful if the attack would have taken place. Major Scott had such complete confidence in his men that it would never have occurred to him that they could question a decision of his, even one directly contrary to their own expressed, and invited, opinion. And his men had such infinite confidence in their leader, that they certainly would never have questioned it. "Scotty says it's all right,

so it must be so" would have been the way their thoughts ran.

So now orders were given to move, and we turned our backs again on that maddening river. We struck due east about two miles into the jungle, and made camp. Then an hour before moonrise we started off again, and marched deviously to the northward, till we had made nine or ten miles up the river, when we turned west, and soon found ourselves face to face with our favourite obstacle again. It had exerted its fascination, and the Major had decided that we must have a crack at it.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when we got there. Some of us crawled down to the bank to reconnoitre. We found that the river here was narrower than we had ever seen it before, only about 250 yards from bank to bank. The near shore was of good firm sand. Opposite, there were rocks, and it looked as though landing, though possible, would not be too easy. The current was running at the usual rapid Irrawaddy rate of knots. Still, Major Scott, with the light of battle in his eye, decided that we would have another shot at it with rafts in the morning. We retired into our jungle fastness, and waited for the dawn.

We were up betimes, and straight down to the riverside to reconnoitre. The first things that met our eyes were two sampans coming slowly up the river towards us. Each of them was manned by three Burmese, poling them gently on their way. They were loaded to the gunwales with bamboo; somebody preparing for the wet weather, no doubt. They forged past us and disappeared from sight. But it was obvious from the way the Major was champing at the bit that they had put ideas into his head. He

motioned to us to stay **where we were**, under cover, and it was evident that rafts were out for the time being.

We lay there for about half an hour, waiting for the Major to make a move. At last, from the way he braced himself, it was obvious that the moment was at hand. Another sampan came lazily up the river. Its crew, too, consisted of three Burmese, but it was empty. When it was almost opposite us, the Major suddenly leaped to his feet, hurled himself into the water, swam to the boat, climbed aboard, and before the astonished occupants had realized what was going on, had drawn his revolver and forced them to draw into the bank on our side. I've never seen anyone so pleased as he was then. But perhaps I would have done if there had been a mirror handy.

The Burmese were evidently terrified of what would happen to them, not at our hands, but at those of the Japs afterwards. The sampan was actually the property of the enemy, and was even now on its way up to a Jap post. They wanted to help us, and we calmed their fears as well as we could, after which we found they worked very willingly and very hard.

Major Scott fell us in along the bank in lines of platoons. Then for the first passengers in the boat, he detailed the first ten men of each platoon, Gurkhas, Burma Rifles, and so on. As far as he was concerned, everyone was going to have an even chance. The men piled into the boat, until they threatened to swamp it, and those of the first detail who couldn't get aboard clung to the side. I don't know exactly how many she carried, but we made it in three crossings. The bank at the other side, though steep and rocky, didn't appear to constitute much of an obstacle to the first men across, and they swarmed up it and formed a bridge-head in case of interruption.

With the second detail, went the wireless and the mule. It must always be kept with the majority, as it was now our lifeline. The muleteer led his mule into the water with all the pride of the owner of Exhibit "A." It had refused to eat again that day, and we were pleased to see that it apparently relished the idea of a swim. Perhaps the water would put it right.

The second boat load crossed in safety. The men made light of the landing, but the mule was not so agile. He scrabbled and pawed and snorted unavailingly, while his muleteer tugged with all his might on the head rope. At last he made it, but he was a sorry sight. He had been dilapidated before, but now he wouldn't have fetched sixpence in the yard of a blind knacker. He was on his last legs.

I was in the third, and last detail. I was just getting ready to take my place in the boat, when suddenly Norman Lambert said to me "Hey! What about Walsh?" Difficult though it may be to believe, it was only then I remembered that one of my lance-corporals and nine men were out forming a listening post to cover our rear. I doubled off into the jungle, they were fortunately not very far away, and broke the glad tidings to them. Were they pleased to hear them?

We were the last aboard the boat, with the single exception of the Major, and I have seldom enjoyed anything so much in my life as I did that crossing. Our bogey was laid, our hoodoo was defeated. That relentless, implacable river was fast falling away behind us, and soon we would be forced to battle with it no more. I stopped when I got out on the other bank, turned, and gave vent to a symbolic exhortation. I spat me of the Irrawaddy.

The Major thought of everything. No sooner was the

last man landed than he set the Burmese to cleaning every sign of our occupancy out of their sampan. They scrubbed away the boot marks, and swept up the dirt. Soon the boat was as good as new. If they themselves didn't tell there was no reason now why their unwanted masters should ever know the use to which it had been put.

Before we left them, the Major presented their leader with 500 beautiful shiny silver rupees. Never have I seen such absolute astonishment and delight on any faces as then appeared on theirs. They fell on their knees and attempted to kiss the Major's boots.

We bid them a hurried good-bye, and walked into the jungle.

CHAPTER XVII

THIS day there was no rest for the wicked. What we must do now, and what we all wanted to do, was to put as much ground as possible between that accursed river and ourselves.

The jungle was dense, and the ground sloped steeply uphill. We were all tired to death, but we plodded on. As we climbed the ground grew drier, and the heat ever more intense. All round us sounded the ominous cracking of bamboos, loud as a shotgun report, which meant that the monsoon was on its way.

In the late afternoon we found ourselves on a comparatively level track, which wound its way round a mountain top. In a sort of embrasure in the hillside, we decided to make our bivouac for the night. There was no water up here, and a watering party of forty, sufficient strength to be able to provide its own defence if attacked, was sent down for water. The descent they had to make was a steep one, almost precipitous. In spite of this, they all carried rifles, and some of them, fearful of being stranded without resources, even went so far as to take their packs and equipment. They disappeared into the jungle below, slithering and sliding, and the rest of us went to work to get a meal.

Half an hour went by. Then suddenly, from the direction in which they had gone, came a fusillade of loud reports. Mortars and machine guns, we thought. The watering party had been attacked. It would be our turn next. We took up defensive positions. That was all we could do. It would have been worse than useless to abandon

our height and go to their assistance. The fusillade went on. Then below us, to our right, we saw a dense cloud of smoke rise above the tops of the trees. Dense, black smoke, it was, and soon it began to be shot through with huge orange jets of flame. The huge, wicked mass gained volume and density, and began to roll slowly past the bottom of our hill to the east. We knew then that the forest was on fire. The fusillade of fire had been made not by guns, but by the cracking and breaking of trees and branches.

I had seen forest fires before, but only on the screen. I realized now that Mother Nature leaves D. W. Griffiths at the post as a producer. By merely rubbing two dry bamboos together she provided us with a much more majestic spectacle than he could do with the outlay of five or six million dollars.

The watering party made their appearance on the hillside. They were scrambling up, *ventre a terre*, as fast as they could. From the low level, they had not seen the cloud of smoke, and they were still under the impression that the Japs were after them. When they reached us, blown and panting, we disabused them of the idea. The chaggals, usually brought back brimming, were now all half empty, but they didn't apologize, and we didn't blame them. We all stood and watched that cloud of black mischief roll away out of sight into the east, and put up, each in our own peculiar fashion, a prayer of thankfulness that the wind had been out of the west.

Next day we marched from dawn till 2 o'clock, when we found ourselves on the summit of another of the Chin Hills, this time looking down into a deep and heavily wooded valley. This lay directly to the west of us, and as WNW was now our course, it had to be crossed. We

had seen no human being, either Burmese or Japanese, since leaving the Irrawaddy, and now it seemed most probable that some of our enemies might be lying down in this valley. Every now and again, we had seen trees with great patches of bark cut out of them, to form a sort of rude notice board. And on these had been scrawled in Burmese such messages as, "We have guarded this spot for five days. No British or Chinese troops have passed. We have gone to rest."

The Japanese had evidently pressed the natives of this district into their service, and had set them as guards to keep an eye open for any intruders. So we had no desire for the company of any of our kind whom we would be likely to come across in that neck of the woods.

At the far side of this valley we could see only one obvious landmark, a small knoll, with no other features near it, and this was fixed as our next rendezvous or objective. If it turned out to be one of a range of foothills below higher mountains behind, we would make our next camp there. But if it was merely a solitary mound in flat country, we would have to push on farther. The Major was determined not to be taken by surprise in the middle of the flat.

We started on our way across the valley at first darkness. The going was very bad, almost every step we took having to be cleared for us with our dhas, so progress was slow. However, we met no one on the way, and eventually reached the knoll at about two in the morning. Then, as the Major had feared, it proved to be only a solitary hump, and we had to push on. Soon after leaving it, the jungle began to thin out, and soon the trees had disappeared altogether and we were marching in the open, with no cover other than low and prickly scrub. The moon rose at

3 o'clock, and if any of us had had the inclination or the energy to admire it, it must have been a strangely beautiful sight, the file of men winding its way along amongst the thorn and cactus, bent and twisted, and the moon indifferently illuminating all.

After some two hours of this marching, the ground began to grow soft and marshy, and it was necessary to walk with care. Occasional hummocks and pieces of broken ground were easy enough for us to negotiate, but the mule had to be led round each of them, and he was growing very tired. At last, in avoiding a bunch of thorny tussocks, he got himself bogged in a patch of spongy marsh, and quickly sank almost to his belly. The column was halted, and a party attempted the task of digging him out. And a task it was. He seemed to take no interest in it himself, and would evidently have been quite ready to stay there indefinitely, particularly when his load was taken off. But without him we were lost. We must have him out. We dug and sweated, and shored him up with bamboos, and tied ropes to every visible part of his maltreated person. And at last, after a solid hour's work, he came out with a loud sucking plop. It was all he could do to stand, but we had to get on. Light was coming, and we were still in the open. Luckily for us, after another two miles, the jungle started again, for as little reason as it had left off, and we were under cover again. Another couple of miles, and we would be able to bed down.

We stumbled on, almost blind with fatigue. Even when disaster overtook us, we were too tired to realize it for what it was. It wasn't till we wakened up next day that it hit us full in the wind.

The mule, since his adventure in the bog, had been in poor fettle. But we were so used to his condition that we

didn't see just how poor, until suddenly he stopped, shivered, and lay down. We did our best to rouse him, but it was no good. His race was run. He quietly and firmly died on us. Just another army mule gone west, but our last means of communication with the outside world gone west, too, our lifeline severed. And he had been a good mule. He ought to have had a medal.

The mule was not by any means the only one of us to be feeling the strain. It hasn't, deliberately, been stressed in these pages, but we had had a hard time, and it was getting us down. Long marches, scanty and irregular food, lack of water, heat, fever, mosquitos, short rations of-sleep, and, by far the worst of all, the constant uncertainty of life in an enemy country, had taken their toll. It was all we could do to force ourselves along, and the very thought of any extra burden was utterly intolerable. The Bren guns, which in early days had been carried by one man for four and five hours at a stretch, could now be seen changing hands every ten or fifteen minutes. That night one man, whose feet were in a very bad state, made up his mind he could go no further. He lay down. His mates, worn out as they were, tried to carry him. But he wouldn't allow them to. All he wanted was to be left alone with as many hand grenades as we could spare. So we gave him the grenades and left him. There wasn't anything else to do. Another man, the same night, took a false step, and fell over the khud. He didn't fall far, but he landed awkwardly, and ruptured himself. We had no M.O. with us now, he having gone on with Captain Whitehead, but we bandaged his hernia up as well as we could with a shell dressing, and he marched on. He was soon at the rear of the column. Sometimes he was ten yards behind us, sometimes a hundred, sometimes he was

lost to view altogether. At first we worried about him. "How's so-and-so making out?" we asked each other. But after a time we forgot him. He was just another bit of the landscape.

This must sound like a case of man's inhumanity to man, but it wasn't, you know. We were just too tired to care.

We stopped where the mule died, and rested till 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Then on again. But not before Major Scott had put through what looked like being our last message by wireless to India. He asked them to arrange a mammoth dropping for us the day after to-morrow. Not only food, he wanted this time, but clothing, monsoon capes and boots in particular, for the boots of most of us were mere useless lumps of leather. He fixed on a point well within our compass for the dropping, and we destroyed the wireless apparatus.

At 8 o'clock that evening, our Burmese came in and told us there was a road immediately ahead of us. We halted, and made camp. The Burmese went out to reconnoitre. At dawn they came in and reported that the road was little better than a cart track, unmotorable, and there did not appear to have been any traffic on it for some time. It led in the direction we wanted to take, north-west, so we followed it.

We had still seen no human being since the Irrawaddy, but about 9 o'clock, the Major suddenly spotted two natives hidden in the jungle watching us pass. Our scouts had evidently spotted them, too, and they closed in on them from behind, and brought them in. They were not spies or Japanese auxiliaries or anything melodramatic like that. They were simply junglefolk, always shy of foreigners, and now, after one or two experiences of the

kindly Japanese, doubly so. We soon persuaded them that we meant them no harm, and they led us to their village, not far away, but well concealed. Here we were hospitably, if nervously, received. The headman told us that they had seen no Japanese for the last three months, information which was both pleasing and unpleasing in our ears. It was good that they weren't there now. But it would have been even better if they had been there a couple of weeks ago. There would have been less chance of their coming back!

The stock of rice in this village was low. They sold us what they could spare, enough to fill a sock for every man. They had not even the usual standby of the Burmese villager, a flock of chickens. The Japs had cleaned them out, and they hadn't had time to rear more. Those they had were too small to be worth buying.

We cooked and ate a meal here, then proceeded on our weary way.

In the evening, we were drawing near the place which Major Scott had given as the place for the dropping from the air. The jungle was thick here, and it looked as though we might have difficulty, first, in contacting the 'plane, and second, in retrieving what they dropped. It looked as though the spot chosen without knowledge of the country, and only from our maps which were not perfect, was to turn out to be by no means an ideal one.

However, the luck of the Scott's held good. About 6.30, we suddenly emerged from thick jungle to find ourselves on the edge of a clearing. It was like coming out of the densest wood on to the middle of an English meadow. There was not even scrub growing in this clearing, but short grass.

There was one thought in all our minds. Tommy Vann, as usual, put it into words.

"Bring on the ruddy Air Force!" he said.

It was hard to believe that this open space had not been made by hands. It was in the shape of an enormous "T." We were standing at the foot of the upright, which was 400 yards wide, and 1200 yards long. The stroke was 300 yards wide and 800 yards long. It was a perfect natural aerodrome. If only a flight of passenger planes could suddenly appear, sweep down to a landing and carry off the whole shooting match of us back to India! I wouldn't have cared even if they had been Harrows.

Scottie had done it again. There shouldn't be any trouble about the dropping to-morrow.

On that comforting thought we lay down, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

NEXT morning we were up with the lark or its Burmese equivalent. Shortly after first light, the fires were laid on the ground in readiness to give the 'planes their usual information as to our position, and the direction of the wind. We were all set for our end of the dropping.

The aircraft did not put in an appearance till about 10 o'clock and it was well before that time that the rumour started to make the rounds. I don't know how it started, or who was responsible for it, but perhaps you've heard of the "bush telegraph?" This must have been its jungle cousin at work. Everywhere you looked you could see men with their heads together, and hear their tongues busily wagging. "Scottie's going to try to get the 'planes to land." That was how it ran. And if there was any truth in it, you'll agree there was something to get excited about. Even the remotest prospect that instead of having to face the weeks of heart-breaking, soul-destroying marching that had seemed inevitably to lie before us, we might be whisked at one fell swoop out of Burma and all our troubles into India and safety, was enough to get under the skin of the most hard-boiled of us, and make him behave like an excited schoolboy on the last day of term.

I, for one, was sceptical. It was far too good to be true. It was the sort of thing that simply doesn't happen. I did my best to discredit the tale. Much better if no one believed there was anything in it. Then, if by chance it were true, the delight would be all the keener; and if it weren't, the drop would not be so great.

Then I saw Major Scott and Mr. Hamilton Bryan pacing the length of the leg of our "T," and carefully examining the state of the ground, and I began to think that perhaps there was something in it after all. Hamilton Bryan was a surveyor in Civvy Street, and he was presumably the nearest thing we possessed to an expert on landing grounds. This inspection was all that was required to raise the men's expectation to fever pitch, and the whole place buzzed like a beehive before a swarm.

The usual four transport 'planes, and their escort of Hurricanes arrived on the scene at 10 o'clock. As soon as we had identified them, we lit our fires, and the dropping began. I suppose the R.A.F. had been told that this was the last time we should be able to contact them, and they certainly did us well. Rations for ten days per man showered down on us, and these were followed by quantities of bully beef and baked beans. And then, to top the tiling off, a deluge of half-pound blocks of chocolate cascaded down out of the sky. Good! Biscuit lob extraordinaire again. The aircraft circled once, and made off into the desirable, the infinitely distant west. But we were not down-hearted. They had not given us any of the clothing and equipment we had asked for, so we knew they would be back again later.

Beioje they came back, there was work to be done. First, we collected the parachutes they had dropped, and tore the cotton into strips, about thirty inches wide. Then we pegged the strips out on the ground, and formed them into letters which read : "PLANE LAND HERE NOW. And leading away from the letters, we laid a long white line with an arrow at the end of it, to tell them where we thought was the best place for them to come down, taking wind and ground into consideration.

So the rumour, unlike most of its kind, had been founded on fact after all. We waited, with such patience as we could summon, for the return of the 'planes, and deliverance. There is no good telling you how we felt, or what we talked about. You will easily be able to imagine it all for yourself.

They came back at 4 o'clock, and released their parachutes. This time they dropped us monsoon capes, and boots, army and hockey, and equipment, and Tommy Guns (it was now becoming impossible to find anyone strong enough to carry the Brens) with quantities of ammunition both .450 and .303, and more of the welcome chocolate. Then our hearts stood still. They circled, and it looked as though they had failed to see our message, and were going. But all was well. We breathed a sigh of relief as one of the transport 'planes came so low as to be just above the tree tops, and circled us. You could hear the caught breath and the suppressed sigh of tense excitement as we saw that the undercarriage was down. The pilot was bringing her in. He was going to land!

Then at the last moment it seemed to us he changed his mind, and started climbing again. But as he rose, we saw floating down to us a long streamer of red, white, and blue, obviously carrying a letter on its tail.

"Sorry. Impossible to land without permission," said the letter. "Back to-morrow."

Our momentary disappointment was forgotten. Of course they couldn't land without permission! Good old R.A.F. They wouldn't let us down. They'd be back first thing to-morrow, and then ho! for India, and a long cold drink of beer and a soft bed.

As soon as darkness had fallen, we lit our cooking fires and prepared and ate a Gargantuan meal. Whether we

were to be picked up to-morrow or not, there was no need to go easy on food to-night, as no matter how much we ate, we would still have all we could carry. Many and various were the dishes produced, and one gentleman, who shall be nameless, distinguished himself by putting away single-handed the entire contents of a seven pound tin of bully.

Replete and swollen with food, we put out our fires, and shifted our bivouac to the north-west corner of the crossbar of the "T." Even if we intended to be more than one day in any locality, we invariably took this precaution, in case we had been spotted by the enemy. We left behind us a listening section, who, if an attack came, would give the alarm and fall back on the main body.

Next morning, our breakfast was cooked and eaten, and the fires out, before daybreak. We never took chances of the Japs being able to spot our smoke, but to-day we redoubled our precautions. There must be no slip when the cup was so near the lip. Flankers and listening posts were put out all round our improvised aerodrome, and the rest of us settled down to wait.

At 2 o'clock, after hours that seemed endless, we heard the noise we were waiting for. We had laid no fires this time, as they should not be necessary as a guide, and the wind was in the same direction as it had been yesterday, out of the east. Also, fires on even the edge of the runway might possibly interfere with a landing, and we were not taking the slightest risk of doing that.

The hum of engines grew louder, and the aircraft came into sight. But what was this? Where were the big two-engined transport planes we had been expecting? What use were these two tiny Hurricanes to us? They couldn't even pick up the casualties, far less the fit and compara-

tively well. Perhaps these two were only scouts, an advance guard for the main body of 'planes that was doubtless following on behind. We waited hopefully, but no more aircraft appeared. The Hurricanes circled twice, then one of them peeled off, and came down very low. He dropped another of those red, white, and blue streamers, and as it dropped, our hearts sank with it. Another letter! There had obviously been a hitch of some kind.

We waited in silence while the letter was retrieved, and taken to the Major. News of its contents flashed round the column like wild fire. They only wanted particulars of the airfield, length, breadth, condition of ground, and so on, and to know if there was an R.A.F. officer with us, who could guarantee that a landing was possible.

So there hadn't been a hitch after all. They were only doing what we always did ourselves, taking no chances. And you certainly couldn't blame them.

The Hurricanes shot off back the way they had come, and we got the information they wanted ready for them. We rearranged our strips of cotton on the ground, and this time they read: "1200 YARDS, TWENTY CASUALTIES. LAND ON WHITE LINE. GROUND V.G." There was no more we could do. The rest was up to the Air Force. We went back to the woods and our weary waiting.

About 6 o'clock the Hurricanes came back, circled the field, and read our message. Then out came another of those streamers. The *message* this time was laconic. "LANDING TO-MORROW." SO that was that.

I don't know what sort of night the others spent, but I know that even though I was full of food and warmer than usual under my new monsoon cape, I didn't sleep a wink.

With the prospect of release from it so close at hand,

the jungle seemed more oppressive than ever. Its creakings and crackings and rustlings, which had become with familiarity, inaudible to me, now sounded twice as loud as ever they had, and I all but convinced myself that the place was stiff with Japs, waiting to pounce on us. My brain raced round and round and round like a six-day bicycle rider, and I thought the sort of thoughts you do think at 3 o'clock of a sleepless night. What was I, Tony Aubrey, doing here in the middle of a Burmese jungle, tossing sleepless under a monsoon cape? What was all this cock-eyed business about, anyway? And so on, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

But with the morning, I knew just exactly what I was doing there. I was waiting for a 'plane to come and take me out. And so were all the rest of us. No one was parted from his pack that morning, and the jobs which were likely to take a man some distance away from the clearing were not popular. But listening parties had to be posted, as usual; And when at last, about 10 o'clock, the noise of approaching aircraft was heard, there were only about fifty men, including the eighteen casualties (for two of the twenty mentioned in our message, flying out was no good now), free to watch the landing. These all gathered at the edge of the jungle at the spot where they judged the aircraft would come to rest, and got ready to give it a welcome.

This time, there was no deception. First came four fighters, and then one of the two-engined C47 transport 'planes. Another four fighters brought up the rear. Only one transport 'plane! Oh, well. They were obviously going to take the casualties out first, and then, if they were successful in landing and taking off, they would come back for the rest of us. Another hour or two more or less

made little difference, although every hour brought the monsoon by that much time nearer. And if the monsoon broke, we might as well give up the ghost.

The fighters covered the sky above the field, flying as low as they could without interfering with their own field of vision, to minimize the risk of giving our position away to the Japs. The C47 circled the field, then flew straight along our white line at a low altitude.

Twice, the pilot took his machine low along the line, and seemed to be about to land, but each time apparently he didn't like the look of it, and balked. The third time, however, his wheels touched the ground, and he made a neat landing, and bumped roughly over the uneven ground to a stop, well clear of trouble.

Out from the woods we raced towards the 'plane, with difficulty restraining ourselves from shouting in glee. We capered towards it like a parcel of school children, and a very odd sight we must have presented to the crew, thirty odd bearded, dirty, lousy scoundrels doing a sort of war dance of triumph, while the casualties limped along behind us at the best pace they could muster.

First out of the 'plane was an enormous and imposing figure, who turned out to be an American war correspondent, one Vandivert. We stared at him in amazement. A white man, clean, neat, and without a beard! Could such things be? We swooped *on* him, and on Flying Officer Vlasto, the pilot and his crew of three, and beat them on the back, wrung their hands, and otherwise expressed our pleasure.

There was no time to waste. The escorting fighters had gone, and their place had been taken by another flight which had flown straight from base. But a fighter's range is limited, and we had to hurry. "Casualties aboard" was

the order, and while they climbed or were lifted into **the** 'plane, Vandivert took picture after picture of us, and we gave them a hearty, but silent, "three times three." I managed to get close enough to the American to whisper to him "Give us the gen., chum. Are they coming back for us all?" The second pilot heard me, and smiled, and answered "We've got to make it first!" Equivocal, but not altogether discouraging.

The loading of the casualties was completed in ten minutes, the crew got aboard, and they were ready to take off. As the pilot climbed in, we heard Major Scott shout to him.

"If H.Q. want to fly any more out," cried Scottie, "tell them we'll hold this field against anything the Japs can send."

Good old Scottie! That was the stuff to give them.

The door of the 'plane was shut, the engine roared, and she began to taxi. Her speed increased, and she took off slowly, lazily, almost as though her load was too much for her. But she rose. She reached the level of the tree tops. She was over them, by inches only, it seemed to us. She was away.

If one had made it, others could. G.H.Q. would soon have the glad tidings, and to-morrow at latest would see us, too, safely in the air and on our way home.

For me, at least, there was great comfort in the knowledge that Norman Lambert and Suddery were both safely out of it, and on their way back to England.

CHAPTER XIX

THE whole of that extremely long and wearisome day, we waited for the 'planes to come back. But they never did. Thoughts of those lucky casualties filled our minds, and we would gladly have changed places with them, ruptures, fever, jungle sores, and all!

There was, I am afraid, a general feeling of discontent and dissatisfaction. Didn't they realize at H.Q. just how near at hand was the breaking of the monsoon? Didn't they realize that a day might mean to us all the difference between life and a peculiarly unpleasant death? Of course, if they were going to fly us all out, to-morrow was just as good a day as to-day, and we had twenty-four hours longer to revel in the anticipation of a bath, a drink, and a bed. But suppose anything went wrong with the works, and they found they couldn't fly us out? We had already been here for three days. To-morrow would make the fourth, and it seemed more than likely that the three days we had frittered away since the dropping would prove to have been our undoing. Then, too, there was not only the monsoon to be feared, but the enemy. All this coming and going of aircraft must certainly have been noticed by the Japs, and it would be a miracle if they had not pin-pointed our position to a nicety. Altogether we didn't feel too happy about things, and we shifted our camp farther into the jungle, and set our pickets even more carefully than usual.

There were only two subjects of conversation that night. "Just think of those lucky devils," was the theme song of one and "Do you think they'll be back for the rest of us

to-morrow?" was the burden of the other. We ran over in our minds the menus of the meals we proposed to eat, and the constituents of the drinks we proposed to drink, and even, I regret to say, the specifications of the girl-friends we proposed to secure at the first opportunity. We planned gigantic parties, and canvassed the respective merits of Calcutta and Bombay as the venue of our first leave. But always the second motif kept recurring. "Do you think they'll be back to-morrow for the rest of us?"

Next morning we were up and about again at first sparrow chirp. But we might have spared ourselves the trouble. Seven, 8, 9, 10, 11 o'clock came and went, and nothing happened. Neither the Japanese nor the Royal Air Force put in an appearance.

We were now becoming, as the Air Force themselves would have put it, "cheesed off." It was difficult to realize out there the delays that were bound to occur, the time lags there must be in communicating with G.H.Q. You couldn't have made us see, then, that they had anything to do but hop into their crates, step on the gas, and come and pick us up. We champed at the bit, and what we didn't say about the "blue types" could be written in large letters on a threepenny bit, old style.

And then, round about mid-day, we heard the beat of engines in the distance. Here they came at last. Better late than never. Good old R.A.F.! Everything was changed in a second. Frowns gave place to smiles, and we positively romped as we adjusted our packs.

Then the 'planes came into sight, and we stopped romping. There were only two of them, and they were fighters. The very best of fighters, no doubt, but how willingly would we have given them both for one old C47.

They circled the field, and down came another of the

same old streamers. To me, there seemed to be something ominous about it. It floated drearily down, and even the red and the white both seemed tinged with depressing blue.

The fighters flew round us once more, shook their wings, and quickly disappeared to the west. There was a finality about their going.

We watched Major Scott reading the chit. But we couldn't tell a thing from his face. When he had finished, he looked up and grinned.

"Well, that's that," he said. "Well be walking. Feed yourselves, and we'll start at two."

We cooked a meal. It didn't matter now about lighting fires in daylight. That place of hope and disappointment would soon know us no more. It didn't seem to matter very much even if the Japs did attack us. Life, for the moment had lost its savour. That letter had taken it away.

I don't know what it actually said, because Major Scott naturally didn't take me into his confidence. But we found out long after what had happened. H.Q. had refused permission to make another landing, because there was a Jap fighter station only twenty miles away, and the old C47 had been spotted on her way home the day before by two Zeros. It seemed all the teak in Burma to a Japanese monkey against another transport 'plane making the journey in safety. And, of course, we were not the only pebbles on the beach. There were still many other parties at large in Burma, and every 'plane was wanted. They couldn't afford to take the risk.

We didn't know all this then, though, and a more bitterly disappointed set of men can never have been known anywhere. We cooked and ate our meal in silence. There was nothing to say.

Automatically, we cleared up the bivouac, and put out the fires. Automatically, we shouldered our packs, which were by now as natural to wear as our shirts and trousers. Automatically we took our places in the line, and started off again on our march. We were not so weary in body now, but our minds were sick.

However, as we marched, our disappointment and resentment insensibly grew less. Things were bad, and the outlook not rosy. But they might have been worse. In fact, they had been worse—much. Where before we had been walking practically upon the naked soles of our feet, we now had whole boots and clean socks. Where before we had slept in the chill of the nights unprotected, we now had our monsoon capes, which would protect us, too, when the rains broke. Where before our stomachs had been empty and our next meal problematical, we were now fat with food, and if our packs were heavy, our stomachs were, too. Where before we had been dirty beyond belief, unkempt and ragged, each one of us a playground for hundreds of our little friends, we were now reasonably clean, well-clothed, and practically deloused, for we had spent profitable hours on the banks of, and in, a little stream which we had found near the field.

So as we marched, while our packs averaging sixty-five pounds each grew heavier with every step, our hearts grew lighter, and our disappointment less and less urgent. After all, the Major had put the whole thing in a nutshell in the few words he had given us before we started.

"We are certainly no worse off than we were before," he had said in effect. "We have lost four days, and that loss may prove very expensive. But on the other hand, we have plenty of food now. We are clothed and in our right mind. And last, but by no means least, we have been

relieved of the casualties, and have no need to worry any more about them. That, in my mind is worth the time lost alone. So keep your chins up. Step out as fast as you can. And go easy on the rations, because the less foraging we have to do, the less chance there is of the Japs getting on our tails."

Of the next three days, there is nothing to tell. They were all the same as any other day we had spent marching through the jungle. Sometimes the going was frightful, sometimes it was very bad, and occasionally it was just bad. The first day, rested and refreshed, we made good speed, and covered about twenty-five miles. The second day, our rest was further away, and fatigue was creeping up on us. We did just under twenty. The third day, we had almost forgotten that there was such a thing as a rest. We were, to all outward appearances as dead beat as we had been before the halt. We did somewhere around fifteen. To use a colloquialism, the men were pretty well back on their chin straps again, and all spring and purpose had gone from the marching. We kept on walking automatically because that was the only thing to do.

Towards the end of the third day, we struck a road. It wasn't much of a road as roads go, dusty and uneven and rutted. But there was no jungle growing all over it, and it led west, in the direction we wanted to go. So scouting parties were sent on ahead to discover if there were any Japs in the vicinity, and if there was much traffic along this road.

They came back the next morning and reported that as far as could be discovered, the area was completely bare of Japanese, and the road appeared to be very little used. The Major decided that any risk we ran by using the road would be more than outweighed by the extra mileage we

should do along it, and the lessening of the fatigue involved.

So that day we marched on the road, sections staggered in case of air attack. The going was certainly much easier. But the dust! In the first five minutes our throats and eyes and noses and ears were clogged with it. In ten minutes, you would have sworn that not another speck of dust could find a spot to settle on you, anywhere. But it could. And it did. Much as we dreaded the arrival of the monsoon, most of us, I think, decided that a spot of rain was just what we needed, here and now. Anything to lay this appalling dust.

The wish was no sooner formed, than it was granted. We got a spot of rain. But nature, with her usual careless liberality proceeded to give us far more than we wanted. Our idea had been a gentle April shower, to lay the dust, and cool our fevered faces. Instead, we were given a down-pour such as I, who had seen tropical rain before, wouldn't have believed possible. It was as though someone up above had turned up an unimaginably enormous bucket, and deluged us with the contents. It came down in one solid, unbroken sheet of water.

In a quarter of an hour, instead of walking along a dry and arid road, we were wading in a tumbling stream, for the surface of the road was lower than the general level, and it acted as a trap for the rain. Sometimes we stumbled into pools that were up to our waists, and we were quickly as wet as a bunch of Channel swimmers on the last lap. Each little rift and fissure in the jungle now was a foaming torrent, and belched out its load onto the roadway, to add to our discomfort. It looked as though these four days were to be fatal. It looked as though the monsoon had broken.

But fortunately for us, it hadn't. This was only a warn-

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ing of **what was to come**. **After three** hours, the downpour stopped, the sun got down to business again, and we were soon travelling in an atmosphere that reminded us of the steam compartment of a Russian bath. To add to our discomfort, while walking in **the** water we had been attacked and occupied by masses of leeches, which had dug themselves in with their usual tenacity. It was almost dark by now, and the Major decided we would halt for the night and carry out some much needed repairs.

Our first occupation was to build a bonfire—there were still no Japs reported in the area—and dry ourselves out. Building the fire was easy enough, but lighting it was another cup of tea altogether. All the wood we gathered was soaking, and refused to ignite. But at last we managed, by using the internal parts of bamboo, and small dead twigs, to start a blaze. This done, we proceeded to strip, and hung our clothes round the fire while we dealt with the leeches. The unfortunates who did not know the pleasing ways of these little creatures, merely gripped them between the forefinger and thumb of the right hand and pulled. By this method, you get rid of the body of the leech all right, but you leave his head inside you, and he quickly and competently proceeds to grow himself a new body. To get rid of him completely, you must dig him out with two match sticks, or else hold a lighted cigarette close to him, when he objects to the prospect of being burned to death, relinquishes his hold, and drops off. When we had disposed of these amiable blood-suckers, we cooked and ate a meal. Then we dressed, extinguished the fires, and moved our quarters some way away. As soon as the fires were out, we found how bitterly cold **the** night was. The rain had taken most of the warmth **out of** the air, and if it had not been **for**

our monsoon capes there would have been little chance of sleep for us that night.

When we had been in our new bivouac area for not more than five minutes (we had not even taken our packs off) the word was passed up the column from the front, "Quiet. Something coming up the road from the west."

We concealed ourselves behind trees and bushes, and lay still as the dead. In our present condition, if we were forced into an action, we should almost inevitably come off second best. Secrecy and silence were our best remaining weapons.

In a minute or two, we heard the sound of wheels on the road, and the noises of animals, and the loud and would-be-valiant shouting with which the Japanese and the Burmese scare away the devils which are abroad after dark. At first, we could not tell what language they were using. But when they came a little nearer we could hear that it was Burmese. As they drew level with us, we made out that it was a caravan of about eighty Burmese, with bullocks and elephants. We made no move to disclose our presence. Even though there were no Japs with them, and they would in all probability prove to be friendly, we still had a good week's food in our packs, and there was no shortage of water, so what would be the advantage in stopping them? Much better let them go in peace and ignorance of our whereabouts. However friendly they might be, there was always the danger of an unguarded word giving us away to the enemy.

So we lay, scarcely breathing, until the noise of their passing died away, and their shouting was heard no more. Then we curled up under our monsoon capes, and gave ourselves to sleep.

CHAPTER XX

FOR another three days after this alarm, we continued our march without any event of note. We still had enough food to keep us from going actually hungry, but our packs were growing emptier. It was with the greatest difficulty, and only with much urging from the Major, who was a fount of constant encouragement, that we managed to keep up a daily average of somewhere in the neighbourhood of fifteen miles. By the end of each day, our legs seemed to be shambling forward of their own volition, and our bruised and aching feet cried out bitterly against each additional step.

On the evening of the third day, we were coming dangerously near a place where the Japs were bound to be on the look out for us; the railway where we had done the damage on our way in. Not only had we destroyed a long stretch of the line, but Majors Calvert and Fergusson, with their columns, had also made a more than considerable mess of it in other places. So the enemy would certainly be on the qui vive, in case we had decided to play a return date.

We halted just before nightfall, some three miles short of the line, and the Burma Riflemen went forward to find out all they could about the Japs' pickets, block houses, and patrols. We could make no plans until they returned with their information, so we setted down to cook a meal.

The scouting parties did not come back till well on into the night, and when they did their news was very odd. They had gone down the railway line as far as they could, and up it as far as they were able, and never a sign of a

ap had they seen. To all outward appearance there were neither pickets, posts, nor guards, either permanent or temporary, on this part of the line. This seemed altogether too good to be true, and a trap was immediately to be suspected. But the riflemen were insistent upon the fact that there were no Japs about.

The Major had a difficult decision to make now. But as usual he knew his own mind, and had confidence in his decision and in his luck.

"Back to sleep now, boys," he said. "We'll cross in the morning."

Sleep wasn't so easily come by, though. I, for one, didn't like the look of this at all. It all sounded far too easy. Where was the catch? I spent most of the rest of the night cleaning my rifle. It was a problem to keep our arms clean, as oil was scarce; a pull-through is an article that is very easily lost, and we were always so weary by halting time that it required an enormous effort of will to get down to any job of work. Rifle inspections were, of course, out, and it was a matter for every man to decide whether it was worth keeping his weapon spotless or not.

Next morning, our patrols reported that there was still no sign of Japs. We adopted our usual "column snake" formation, took only our usual precautions in the way of scouts and flankers, and proceeded to walk across that railway line we had been dreading for days in broad daylight, and with no attempt at concealment. It was positively uncanny. Every second we expected to hear the sound of enemy fire. Every second we expected a flight of mortar bombs to come lobbing over. But nothing happened. We simply walked across, as easily as you might cross the Southern Railway at home on manoeuvres. Even after the permanent way lay behind us, I still couldn't

believe we had really done it. Probably the Japs were closing in in our rear now, and there was another force of them in front, and we should be taken between two fires and quietly massacred. Luckily, we were so weary that it didn't seem to matter much. We were too tired to feel fear.

But still nothing happened. We crossed the clearing on the west side of the line with no incident, and the jungle, friendly cover now, closed round us.

Scottie had done it again. Here was the last, and final manifestation of his incredible judgment and luck. We put ten miles between ourselves and the railway as quickly as our strength allowed, and made camp.

After this, another three eventless days passed. We still saw not a sign of the presence of the enemy. This was strange, because we had received some days before, reliable information that he was moving bodies of troops from the south and from the north, and even, it was said, from as far away as the Salween front, to intercept the remaining parties of the Wingate Expedition, and to prevent them from reaching India in safety with their job safely done. This seemed likely to be true, as the Japs would obviously not wish to lose "face" with the Burmese, the Thais, and the Chinese, by the successful conclusion of such a foray into their territory right under their noses. Whether it was true or not, I don't know. The jungle may have been swarming with Japs, but we didn't see any of them, and I don't think even Major Scott's luck can have been so potent as that.

On the third day, about 12 noon, we came upon a little stream. There was not very much water in it, but there was quite sufficient to fill our mess-tins, and make the cooking of a meal pleasantly easy. Most of us had by now

teamed up in pairs, each of which shared one mess-tin, the other having been thrown away. Every pound, even every ounce, by which we could lighten our packs seemed important these days. And rations were growing so short that one tin easily accommodated a meal for two. Where in the days of comparative plenty we had eaten three or four packets of biscuit at a sitting we now had to be content with one packet between two, and, unless something utterly unexpected happened, it looked as though we should soon be making do with even less than that.

We split up into our pairs, or trios, and made our little fires, washed in the stream, drank, got odds and ends out of our packs, and enjoyed the active sensation of pleasure we obtained from not having, for the moment, to make one foot reluctantly pass the other. Our listening posts were out as usual, and our scouts, for we never neglected any precaution, even when there appeared to be no enemy within miles of us. The posts and scouts, as appeared later, were evidently also cooking their meals, keeping look out, no doubt, but only the sort of look out you keep when you're pretty certain in your own mind that there's nothing to look out for.

Our rifles were leaning, with our packs, against adjacent and convenient trees. We were trying as best we could to make believe to ourselves that such a thing as marching on again that afternoon simply didn't exist. Down the bed of the stream, from north to south, a trickle of water flowed gently and peacefully. The jungle silence was broken only by the occasional ring of a utensil against a mess-tin, and the subdued murmur of men's voices.

Suddenly, from the bed of the stream fifty yards south of us, where it took a bend, came a withering burst of machine-gun fire. Small arms spoke from the woods to

south and west of us, and mortar bombs started to drop into our section areas. We had made our one and only error, and it looked as though we must pay dearly for it. The continual reports of "no sign of enemy" had bred over-confidence, we had allowed our vigilance to relax that fatal mite, and now we were for it.

A wild scramble took place. Men whose rifles were immediately to hand, grabbed them, took cover, and made a fighting withdrawal to north or east, whichever seemed easier. Those whose weapons were a little farther away, leaped for them. Some reached them, some didn't. Others simply had no chance at all of getting near either their rifles or their packs. It would have been certain death to attempt it. Mr. Rowlands, lying in cover on the edge of the stream, and doing great execution on the advancing Japs with his rifle, was shot through the head. Major Scott succeeded in drawing off a party about forty strong to the east. The remainder of the officers and senior N.C.O.s rallied to them as many men as they could. And all the column withdrew as it could, crawling from cover to cover, now managing to get in a couple of shots, now unable to see any target to fire at, but always hearing the chatter of the Jap machine guns, and the bullets passing above their heads. I found myself withdrawing in a small group under the command, as far as command in these circumstances was possible, of a subaltern. One of us was shot through the knee, and fell, helpless. Two men ran to pick him up, but he angrily shouted them away.

"I'm all right," he cried. "I've still got some grenades left."

The two men hesitated. One of them was hit in the fleshy part of the thigh. They turned, and dived for cover.

We left the wounded man there with his grenades. There was nothing else we could do. The Japs wouldn't get him, anyhow.

The enemy fire pursued us for about half an hour, by which time our splitting up into small groups had evidently put them off the scent. We, at any rate, saw no more of them, though occasionally for some time after we heard firing, sometimes quite close, sometimes away in the distance.

We travelled north for a few miles, then struck west again, and did not halt till darkness had almost fallen. Then we took stock of the position.

Our party was seventeen strong, we found; the subaltern, myself, and fifteen men. Between us, we mustered eleven rifles, and seven packs, besides the officer's revolver. We were not short of ammunition, but the food situation was critical. On a full scale of rations, in each of the remaining packs was about two days' rations for a man. That meant that we had a full day's allowance for fourteen men. There were seventeen of us, and the Lord alone knew how many days' marching between us and the Chindwin River. Also, we had been in the habit of carrying nothing at our waists, so our water bottles, chaggals, and bayonets had always been worn on the pack. That meant that we had only seven water bottles, seven chaggals, and seven bayonets. For seventeen of us, that wasn't a lot. In our retreat, we had described a devious course, and we had only a sketchy idea of our exact position. We had seen nothing of any of the other parties into which the column had split up, and could not tell if there were any of them near to us or not. We daren't try to attract their attention by firing or shouting, because that might equally well attract other people

whom we had no desire to meet again. That was all on the debit side of the ledger.

On the credit side, what had we to show?

First, we knew from our experiences on our way in that this particular part of the country was not bad for water. Second, we only had one wounded man with us, and his hurt was a slight one, a bullet-hole in the flesh of his thigh. Third, we still had with us two men of the Burma Rifles, so that if we did have the good fortune to find a village free of Japs, we would not lack interpreters of our wishes. Fourth, we knew that if we kept going to the west, we were bound to hit the Chindwin. Once across that last barrier, we should be safe. And fifth, and by no means the least of our blessings, we were alive. And you've no idea how important and heartening that seemed at that moment.

We held a hasty council of war. It was obvious that recriminations would do us no good. We had been caught, so to speak, with our trousers down. But even if we had not been taken so completely by surprise, the Japs in any force would have been more than a match for us in our present condition. We fought really rather to be thankful that we had got as far as we had with so little trouble, and so few pieces of bad luck. It was no good thinking about yesterday or to-day. To-morrow was all that mattered.

There was one thing about which we were all of one mind: we should not stay in this area, hoping to contact other parties. The place was probably stiff with Japs, and a lot of small groups would have a much better chance of getting through than one large one. We must make our best speed to the west, and hope that the Chindwin would turn out not to be so far away after all as we had reason to fear. As far as food was concerned, it would be naturally

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share and share alike. The men who had brought their packs had been lucky. Those who had had to abandon theirs had not been to blame. We must pull in our belts, and make every biscuit and every raisin do the work of a couple of pounds. Marching through jungle by night is harder work than marching by day. So, weak as we were, march by day and rest by night must be the programme.

So there we had it. West, always west by day. On to the Chindwin River. Tighten your belts, and put your best foot forward. On to the Chindwin River.

Such of us as had monsoon capes pulled them over us, and offered their shelter to the others, and we did our best to sleep.

CHAPTER XXI

Now began the nightmare.

Our aim was westwards. But soon we were so weak that every rise or irregularity in the ground was sufficient to put us off our course, and we went forward in a succession of twists and twines that would have done credit to a paggal gymkhana. Although perhaps in the hours of daylight we managed to force ourselves to cover fourteen or fifteen agonising miles, our total progress towards our goal at the end of the day was likely to be only six or seven. It gradually began to seem to our fevered imagination that a Jap was lurking in every patch of darker shade, in every clump of denser scrub. As day followed relentless day, our effort at putting out screens and keeping a look out became, I am afraid, more and more feeble. The concentration required to keep our bodies upright, and our feet moving forward on the trail, however slowly, occupied our minds almost to the exclusion of everything else.

Almost, I say. There was one persistent thought that would intrude. No concentration, no suffering could have been intense enough to banish that. It was, of course, the thought of food. Food! Great luscious piles of ripe red meat in the butcher's shop. Steaming trays of loaves being borne out of the bakery. Fragrant frying pans full of crisp, ambrosial bacon. Platefuls of tempting yellow and creamy *eggs*. Pictures of all these floated before us. The smell of them was all but in our nostrils, and our packs were empty.

For the first two days we ate very sparingly. If we

hadn't, there would have been nothing left for the third. The third day came, and we ate more sparingly still in order to leave a little for the fourth. On the fourth day, we divided what scraps were left to us into two, so that on the fifth, the cupboard should not be entirely bare. The fifth day, we ate what we had left. It was not worth dividing any further. On the sixth day, came the dawn, as they say, and we turned out our packs and hunted for crumbs of biscuit and grains of rice. After that, we just pulled in our belts another couple of holes and went on marching, or, rather, lurching onwards.

The seventh day was a bad one. For the first time, we ate absolutely nothing at all. Our two Burmese plucked little bamboo shoots and the tenderest and greenest pieces of grass they could find and made themselves a sort of stew. But we could not stomach that yet. I tried to swallow a small piece of soap I found tucked away in an odd corner of my pack, but the results were unsatisfactory. It merely made me very sick, which was disappointing, because they always say in their advertisements that there's fat in soap, don't they?

The eighth day wasn't quite so bad, curiously enough. I suppose our stomachs were growing used to being completely unoccupied. Everything began to assume an aspect of slightly comic unreality. I found I couldn't, for instance, judge distances at all, and would take an enormous step into the air to get over a root four or five inches high, while the next moment I would walk straight into an overhanging branch which I had thought to be still five or six feet away.

It was on this day, I think (though the days from here on are muddled, and not clear-cut, the one from the other), that we were climbing a slight rise, which seemed to us a

positive precipice. I was lying second in the line. We came to the summit of the rise, and saw in front of us one of those sudden windows you find in the jungle, a cleared tunnel down which you can see a long way. To my astonishment, the fellow in front of me suddenly stopped, rested his left shoulder against a tree trunk, raised his rifle, and took careful aim. I moved as quickly as I could to his side, and looked down the tunnel with him. Then I struck down his rifle, just in time to prevent him firing.

At the bottom of the vista open before us, was a little jungle pond. And in this pond, disporting himself in naked indolence, was a Japanese soldier. There was something delightfully sylvan about the sight, and something comic, too. It made me want to laugh, and at the same time, for some obscure reason, it took my thoughts back to England, to the cinema, and the fugitive woodland glimpses of Hedy Lamarr and Simone Simon afforded by "L'Extase" and "Lac du Cygne." But it was not admiration of the Jap's physique that had made me stop my friend from shooting him. It was the thought, or rather the certainty, that where there was one of the beastly little yellow brutes, particularly in this defenceless condition, there were bound to be others close at hand. Another brush with the enemy now would certainly have meant the end of us.

So we silently withdrew from the hill top, and signalled to the men following us to make a wide detour. We saw no more of the enemy that day.

Next morning, that of our third day without food, the sense of the exquisite comicality of everything had left me. If you have ever sat in a room where others are talking, and have felt yourself poised on the delicate edge between sleep and waking, you will have heard how their voices seem to come to you from an immense distance, as

though there was a veil of thick velvet between them and you. That was how I felt that day. I seemed to have no direct contact with the world. I wasn't even conscious of acute hunger. Everything was dim and curtained off from reality. If it was necessary to cut a path with my dha, I seemed to be someone else, lifting an enormous, paralytically heavy blade, and striking through swathes of muffling and tangible blackness at some phantom, but stubbornly resisting tree. Where one blow of the dha would have been sufficient to clear a path before, now we stood and hacked and sweated and rested, and hacked and sweated again, before we could go on.

It was the next day, I remember, that the voices started in my head. They talked to me all the time, without ever stopping, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. Either this maddening veil was still between them and me, or else they were talking in some language which I did not understand. I couldn't decide which it was. It worried me. Then every now and again, I would come to myself with a start, and I would feel terror such as I have never known or imagined before or since. Terror, not of the jungle or of the Japs, but of going mad. Only mad people heard voices. But they always knew what the voices were saying, I consoled myself. Perhaps that was the second stage. Perhaps I would soon know what my voices were saying, too. And then I would be really mad. The moment of clearness passed. The voices started again. I stumbled on.

That night, when the Burmese started to gather their bamboo shoots and their grass, we joined them. They were lucky enough to catch a couple of bull-frogs, and these they skinned, disembowelled, and added to the mess. I managed with difficulty to keep my share of it down,

but I can't say that it seemed to do me much good. I suppose, however, that there must have been a certain amount of nourishment in it, for next day I found that my voices had receded far into the distance, and I only heard them at rare intervals.

It was sometime about now that we suddenly emerged from the jungle into a clearing. It was a large clearing, and appeared to have been made by hands. It was probably the paddy fields of some nearby village. We had decided that nothing would induce us to go near any habitations we met with on our way, the risk of running into Japs being too great. But now our hunger mastered our discretion. After all, if we took all possible precautions, there could be very little risk attached. And surely, a bellyful of rice and perhaps a couple of fowls, was worth any risk, however great. So we argued with ourselves. And, as is usual in arguments of that kind, eventually we won.

We skirted the edge of the clearing cautiously in the direction where we imagined the village must lie. We halted in the thick patch of scrub, and sent the Burmese on to reconnoitre. They came back with the news that the village, a big one, lay a couple of hundred yards away and that there did not appear to be any Japs there. But it was clear from their manner, that they didn't like the look of this village. The people were too quiet, they said. There was not enough movement. So they had not gone into the village itself to investigate, but had come back for orders.

Once again, we argued with ourselves. Secretly, we trusted our Burma Riflemen's judgment absolutely. Secretly, each one of us knew that if they said there was something fishy about the village, we ought to give it a

wide berth. But there would be rice there, bags and bags of lovely, fat rice. And chickens! Juicy, white, well-fleshed chickens. We couldn't argue with the thought of them. We capitulated at once, and proceeded carefully down the edge of the clearing in the direction of the village. Before we could actually reach it, we had to leave cover, and come out into the open. We emerged very cautiously, and had only advanced thirty or forty yards across the open space, when we saw a villager, working in his paddy field, gesticulating to us violently. He was shouting, too, but we couldn't hear what he was saying. Then, as he came nearer, we heard.

"Japan!" he was yelling at the top of his voice, as he waved in the direction of the village. "Japan!"

We might not be able to speak Burmese, but we understood this all right. We turned in our tracks, and bolted for cover. It seemed to us that we were running like the wind, but in fact it must have taken us quite half a minute to cover those forty yards. And in that half minute, the Japs opened up on us. They must have come out at the double, and their aim was bad, though we heard one or two passing unpleasantly close. No one was hit. But when we were in the shelter of the jungle, I looked back over my shoulder. The unfortunate cultivator who had warned us had paid for his gesture with his life. His body lay, pathetic and defenceless, in the middle of his native paddy fields.

The Japs fired a few desultory rounds into the trees after us, but they made no real effort to pursue us. They did not know how easy it would have been for them to catch us.

That night we fed on bamboo and grass again. This time we caught no frogs, but one of the Burmese found a nest of grass snakes and killed two of them. Skinned and

boiled, they were edible, but only just. The frogs, the night before, had tasted faintly of fish. But these—they couldn't have been anything but snakes, even with their heads off. There was definitely something reptilian about the flavour.

After this, the days all run together in a blur, with one glorious high spot when we had a stroke of luck. We were stumbling along in our usual state of semi-coma one afternoon, when without the slightest warning we came upon a bullock. What it was doing there I have never been able to imagine. We had seen no sign of habitation for days before we fell in with it, and we saw none for days after. But ours not to reason whose or whence. We accepted the gift of the gods, and fell upon it with our dhas. Here was meat in quantity, on the hoof, it was true, but still meat, and it was a case of every man his own butcher. I don't think the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals would have taken a good view of that bullock's slaughtering. It died a messy death. Still, it was a quick one, and it died in a good cause.

The problem of skinning it, once dead, was a difficult one. The dha is a serviceable weapon, but not much good in a butcher's shop. Then someone remembered that we still had our razor blades, always carried in case of snake bite, in the paggaris of our hats. They were small, but they were sharp. We used them to good effect, and though a taxidermist might not have been pleased with the results of our efforts, they suited us. Some of the men, losing their self-control at the sight of all this goodness, hacked off portions of the carcase and devoured them raw. The remainder of us restrained ourselves long enough to light a fire, and scorched the outside of the pieces we proposed to eat.

I have heard great tales of the spices of Arabia. Much has been written of the fragrance of myrrh, and the intoxicating scent of frankincense. Some women rave of Chanel; others swear by Houbigant. For me, never till my dying day do I expect to smell so heavenly a smell as the odour of that scorching flesh. We ate not wisely, but too well, and, stowing away what was left (which was remarkably little) slept a heavy, drugged sleep.

We expected to awake next morning like giants refreshed, with a completely new lease of life, and restored energy and determination. Instead, it was the worst day we had had. We were heavy and lethargic. Our heads were splitting, and it was all we could do to make our legs obey our brains' commands. We had grossly overloaded our stomachs, unused to even a normal cargo, and now we paid for it. I think we covered less ground that day than on any other of that hideous journey. By mid-afternoon we had all had enough. Two of the men were to all intents and purposes reduced to crawling, and a third, who had all along been showing the strain most of all, was obviously come to almost the end of his tether. To add to our discomfort, we found that myriads of ants had travelled with us on the remnants of the bullock, and had done their best to make them unfit for human consumption. By now, however, we could scarcely be classed as human, and we managed to eat. The ants were all presumably burned to death in the cooking, and, even if we did swallow a few, they weren't any more likely to be harmful than snake.

It was now clear to the Lieutenant and myself that if we did not make the Chindwin in the course of the next two or three days, most of us would never make it at all. By our reckoning, which could not be expected to be anything

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near accurate, we worked it out that the river could not be more than twenty to twenty-five miles ahead of us. We decided, therefore, to do an ordinary day's march the following day, and on the day after to push straight on for as long as we were able, in the hope of hitting the river.

CHAPTER XXII

MOST of us felt slightly stronger the next day, but one of us was very weak, and it was touch and go whether he could start out with us or not. . He made it eventually, and we others gave him what help we could to keep up. But that was little, for we all had enough to do in propelling our own carcasses. We were very anxious to make as long a march as possible this day, to give us a better chance of reaching the river on the morrow, so we pushed ahead as fast as we could. I think the pace was better than it had been. Perhaps that was the result of the meal we had eaten thirty-six hours before making itself felt at last. Or perhaps it was just that my thoughts, winging ahead to the Chindwin, made me imagine that my body was getting there rather quicker than usual.

About mid-day, one of our Burmese reported that he had spotted what appeared to be a deserted village a little way ahead. He asked permission to go and have a closer look at it. He had been watching it for some time, he said, and had seen no sign of life. We told him to go to it. He came back in an hour's time, and reported that he had examined most of the houses, and had found them empty. There was, he said, no sign of any food in the place, but the inhabitants had apparently made a hurried departure, as clothing and furniture was still lying about. We decided to investigate quickly. Surely in a village we must find something to eat.

We entered cautiously, and worked along from basha to basha. There was no one in any of them. Crude tables

and chairs were still in the rooms, and the ashes of fires lay undisturbed. An occasional piece of cloth was lying on the floors, and it looked as though the ordinary life of the village had been suddenly interrupted. But not so suddenly, apparently, that they had forgotten to take their stores of food away with them in their flight. Search we never so carefully, in the first five or six bashas we found not so much as a grain of rice. And, of course, the street was not infested by the usual flock of chickens.

We had come out of the sixth basha, and were on the point of calling the search off as useless and leaving the place, when suddenly, from a house right up at the far end of the village, a man came running out, waving his hands, and doing what seemed to be some sort of step dance. He was more fair-skinned than Burmans usually are, and he was wearing nothing but a sarong wound round his waist. He was shouting as he came towards us, and to our complete astonishment, what he was shouting turned out to be "I'm English! I'm English!" We put down our rifles, which had instinctively gone to the ready on his appearance, and gathered round him. He couldn't have enough of shaking our hands, and putting his arm round our shoulders. He seemed to want to make sure we were real.

Just at first, we had our doubts about his reality, too, but we soon recognized him. He was a corporal who had been with Captain Williams at the crossing of the Shweli, on the occasion when the rope had parted, and they had been safely over the river, while we were left on the far bank. He told us the story of that ill-fated party.

They had gone, as arranged with Major Scott, to the rendezvous on the mountain top, and had waited there forty-eight hours for us to arrive. When we hadn't come

by then, they made up their minds that either the Shweli had been too much for us, or the Japs had got us, and they decided to proceed independently. We must have reached the rendezvous only a short time after they had pulled out.

They proceeded northwards for two days, and then struck west, towards the Irrawaddy. They were, you will remember, about thirty-five strong, and at that time they were well-off for food. They made good time, and they found no traces of the enemy. On the fourth day after leaving the mountain top, they struck a deep river-bed, with rocky and precipitous sides and still a fair-sized body of water flowing along it. This cut their path at right angles, and as they were anxious to keep as straight a path to the Irrawaddy as they could, they decided to cross it, there and then. They tied their packs on their heads, slung their rifles, hung their boots round their necks, and proceeded to ford the river. It was not very deep, they found, and the current, though strong, was not strong enough to make their foothold insecure. Everything went merrily as a marriage-bell, until they were in mid-stream. Then the Japs opened fire on them from cover on the opposite bank. L.M.G.s and rifles blazed at them, and about half of them were killed by the first burst. They were absolutely helpless. The only cover available to them was the water, and if they made use of that, they would drown. Their rifles were slung. Before they could get at them, they would all be massacred. The position was utterly hopeless. Captain Williams did the only possible thing, he surrendered. The Japs held their fire, and the party or what was left of it moved dejectedly across the stream to give itself up. But apparently one or two men on one of the flanks thought they saw a chance of making a break. Probably they thought that anything was to be preferred to a

Japanese prison camp, or Japanese playfulness. They never thought what their attempt might mean to the rest. They made a sudden dash for freedom. At the first move, the enemy opened fire again on the whole party, and in a few seconds it was all over. There was not a single survivor, except this Corporal, who had been the last man into the river-bed, and had managed to regain the shelter of the jungle on his own side. He saw the whole thing happen, before making his own getaway, with a bullet hole through both cheeks.

For days after that he wandered, alone, with no company but his thoughts, and you can imagine what pleasant companions these were. He still had a few days' rations in his pack, and when his food was nearly finished, he was lucky enough to stumble on a herd of wild pig, of which he managed to kill a couple with his dha. At last he reached the Irrawaddy, and by now I imagine, careless of consequences, hailed the first boat that passed. This proved to be occupied by a Poongyi, a Burmese priest, who ferried him to the other bank, and left him with what the Corporal imagined, and hoped, to be a blessing. He wandered on again to the west, and eventually, after a time which was quite blurred in his mind, stumbled on this village. It was quite deserted. It seemed that the Japs had come and gone a day or two before. He went from house to house, and in each he found a little store of rice, the family's daily requirement, no doubt. He transferred all this to one basha, where he also found a sarong, in which he clothed himself. Here he decided to rest for a few days, and feed himself up on the rice, until he felt more fit to tackle the remaining distance, and cross the Chindwin. The second day he was there, he was seated on the floor of his chosen basha, enjoying a bowl of rice, when suddenly,

without warning, two Japanese soldiers walked in. They stood in the doorway for a moment, looked at him and the remaining objects in the room, said something which appeared to be amusing, and went out. He sat there, petrified, for about an hour, he said, expecting every minute that they would return and shoot him out of hand. But they did not come back. Then next day, he heard the noise made by another body of men arriving in the village, and took cover. They came nearer and nearer to him, searching the bashas, for him, he supposed. At last, he decided that he must make a bolt for it, and left the shelter of his roof. He was prepared to dash away into the jungle, and abandon his slender store of rice. Out he came, and heard our voices. And immediately his fear was turned into delight, and he shouted the first words that came into his head—"I'm English! I'm English!"

It was good to find him, but it was not so good to hear about the rest of his party. We couldn't help wondering just how many of the whole expedition would succeed in getting back. One thing we were quite certain about, and that was that we were going to be amongst their number. This rice the Corporal had amassed should add considerably to our chances, for when we had cooked ourselves a good meal of it, we found that there was enough left to give each man a pretty good sock-full of it. After the last few weeks, that seemed to us a veritable cornucopia. We spent the night there, although we did not sleep in the bashas for fear of unwelcome intruders, and in the morning we had another small feed of rice and pushed on at dawn. This was the day when, we had decided, we should march without halting till the Chindwin was reached. There seemed to be a chance now that we would be able to do it. We were all in pretty good fettle, with the same one exception

as before. Not even the comparatively generous feeding of the last two days had been able to do anything for him. He was beyond help. And I'm afraid he knew it. Yet he was determined that he would see and cross the Chindwin again. Only this resolve, and sheer guts kept him going.

We made what was, for us, very good progress till mid-day. Then finding ourselves in a thicket near a stream, we halted during the heat of the day, intending to push on in the cool of the evening, and make the Chindwin before morning. We posted our scouts as usual, and settled ourselves to rest. I felt thirsty, and went down to the stream about ten yards away, where there was a good, clear pool. I bent and scooped some water to my mouth, then straightened my back, and looked up. There, straight ahead of me, not twenty yards away, was the face of a Jap, staring fixedly at me from behind a tree. In front of him, aimed in my direction, I could see the barrel of what looked like a sub-machine gun. I stood frozen for a minute. He made no move, either. My rifle was with my pack, ten yards away. I hadn't even a grenade in my pocket. I was caught. I did what seemed to me the only possible thing. I jumped backwards and sideways as suddenly and as far as I could, into the cover of a shrub. All the time, I expected to feel the thud of a bullet. But no thud came, nor any sound of a shot. As I jumped, I shouted "Japs!" and I could hear the sudden scramble behind me. From my patch of cover, I squinted out at the tree behind which I had seen the Japanese. There wasn't a sign of him. It couldn't have been more than about fifteen seconds since I had first spotted him, and yet he seemed to have vanished into thin air. We attempted to do likewise, and were under way in well under five

minutes, hitting the trail westwards again. The Jap must **have gone** to fetch the rest of his party which could not be any distance away, and they would be on our tracks at once. They would no doubt guess that we were heading for the Chindwin, but that couldn't be helped. Detours were out of the question for us now.

For the next few hours we were on tenter-hooks. Every time a bamboo cracked, we thought "Here they are now!" Every time we heard any unusual sound, we imagined that they had caught us up. But time went on. The hours passed, and still nothing happened. Gradually we began to forget the incident, and to relapse into our usual lassitude. On and on we went, our pace growing slower and slower, each step more of an effort than the step before, still doggedly determined to see the Chindwin before we slept that night. One man dropped his rifle, and stooped to pick it up. As he stooped, he overbalanced and fell. He tried to rise, but he couldn't make it. The two men behind him came to his rescue, and between them they managed to set him on his feet, and he shambled on again, the rifle about which the fuss had been still lying on the ground, forgotten.

We kept on going for what seemed a long time after darkness fell. There was no moon. The jungle appeared to be twice as dense as usual, and full of unexpected obstacles which pushed themselves into your face, and rose mysteriously under your feet, and came up between your legs and tripped you. We may have been averaging half a mile an hour now, but I doubt it. Even the strongest of us was only shambling along in a semi-coma, while one man was reeling from tree to tree as though drunk, and another two, too weary to stand, were actually crawling in their determination to keep up with the rest. At long last,

we realized that there was to be no river for us that night. The spirit was more than willing, but the flesh was weak-sick unto death. The order to halt was given, and we collapsed where we stood. The possibility of being surprised by Japanese or other prowlers was forgotten. We didn't even think about food. We simply fell to the ground and enjoyed the incredible, the marvellous, the unutterable luxury of having to march no more.

They say there's a providence which looks after fools and drunkards. It must have had us in its care that night, for fools we were to post no sentries, and we were certainly drunk with fatigue. The hours of darkness passed without disturbance. No Japanese stumbled over our inert forms, or, if they did, they left us undisturbed!

Looking back on it now, I wonder whether that yellow man I saw by the bank of the stream was an hallucination? Or was he, like ourselves, lost and alone, afraid to fire his Tommy gun for fear of attracting hostile attention? Whatever he was, I know now exactly how it feels to be certain that your ticket to eternity is due to mature the next moment.

CHAPTER XXIII

BEFORE dawn, we were up and had cooked our remaining rice. We ate without appetite. Our stomachs had become so used to ill-treatment, that they seemed not to want food any more. They tried to reject it. However, we swallowed what we had, and took the road again. To-day, surely, must see the end of our wanderings. To-day we must surely cross the final obstacle, and find ourselves in a friendly land again.

We started off at our usual brisk morning pace of about two miles an hour. We were eighteen strong now, as Captain Williams's corporal had, of course, joined us, and none of the original seventeen had fallen by the way-side, though one of them was living on his spirit alone. He had been able to take no rice that morning. For two long hours we climbed, lame and stumbling, sweating and weary. Suddenly the man who was leading halted, and put his hand to his eyes. Then he turned, and made a gesture which, though slow and infinitely strained, yet had about it something which we all knew at once to be triumph. We crowded up beside him, and looked down from the summit of this, our last trans-Chindwin hill, to where, far below us, the river wound its way down to join the distant Irrawaddy. There below us it lay, only a mile or two further on, the river which had been our destination for so long. We had made it.

There should have been a feeling of exhilaration here, a sensation of pride in our own strength, and the knowledge that we had taken on the jungle and the Japs, and had

beaten them both. But there was not. There was no impulse to shout and sing, and beat one another on the back. There was only a feeling of inexpressibly deep relief at the knowledge not so much that we were in all probability safe, but that we wouldn't have to do much more walking, that there would be days, soon, when we needn't ever put on our boots, and nights which we would spend between sheets in a soft, clean bed.

We stood there for a minute or two, drinking in the sight. Then by a common impulse, we all started down the slope towards the river. Even the knowledge that we were really on the last lap couldn't make us travel fast. But it seemed to us that we were covering the ground like Sydney Wooderson in the last lap of the mile. We had just sufficient sense left in us to stop before we came out of the jungle on to the bank, and here we lay in cover, and prospected up and down the stream. Our two Burmese, weak as they were, had lasted rather better than the rest of us on their diet of bamboo, and they went off on a short scouting expedition. They had two objects: one, to find out if there were any Japs about; and two, to look for boats to ferry us across.

They were gone for some time. They were still away when we suffered our only casualty, as a party, up to now. The idea of seeing the Chindwin had evidently been the only thing which had kept the weakest member of our group going. He saw it, and reached the banks of it. Only his great heart had brought him so far. Like another great heart before him, he saw his Naples, and died. There was no drama and no sentimentality about his manner of dying. He gave us some photographs to send home, and asked us to write to his people. Then he lay relaxed on the dead leaves of the jungle, with the green leaves of the

jungle between himself and the sky, and he died. We would have wished to bury him, but it was beyond us. So we said the best prayer we could muster up over him, and left him.

The Burmese came back and reported that they had found neither Japs nor boats. There was not a village for a mile or two in either direction. As far as the enemy went, this news was all to the good. But what were we to do about crossing the river? Even in our normal state of health and strength it would have been beyond us. Now, it was no good even thinking about it. Yet cross we must, and to-day. We had no food left at all, and soon there would be more prayers to be said on the banks of the Chindwin river.

"We've come a long way together," said someone, "but it looks as if we've still got a long way to go."

No sooner had he said these words, than into sight upstream came a sampan. At sight of it, we cast discretion to the winds. We burst from cover, and shouted and waved. At first, it looked as though we had been too impulsive, and had frightened the two Burmese in the boat away. But one of our riflemen shouted, and told them we were British. They did not hesitate then, but put about, and came straight to the shore. When they heard that we only wanted them to take us to the other side, they seemed relieved, and urged us to get into the boat quickly. There were, as far as we could make out, parties of the Japanese in the neighbourhood. These peasants were anxious to aid us, but were naturally anxious to be done with the job as quickly as possible, although they did not seem to fear the Japanese as much as others we had met, because they lived on the west side of the Chindwin, where the little yellow men were seldom seen.

We made what haste we could into the boat. Two of us, even with the incentive of taking the last step off enemy occupied ground, couldn't make it without assistance. The crew helped them over the gunwale, and we all stowed ourselves aboard. Then we pushed off, and made for the opposite shore, and safety.

Safety—that and comfort were two words of which we had long since forgotten the meaning. Our tired minds couldn't grasp the fact that when we stepped off this boat in a few minutes we would be only a few short miles from men of our own kind, men who spoke our language, thought as we thought, were, in fact, our friends; and men, moreover, who would give us good food to eat, and heartening drinks to drink, a razor to shave ourselves with, a bath and soap to clean ourselves with, and a bed to lie on. Subconsciously we knew all this, but we were too weary to look forward to it consciously, to revel in anticipation. All our minds were fixed just one step ahead, on the opposite bank of the river. When we reached it, and felt the boat ground, we just sat there. We had made it. So what? I, for one, felt that the effort of getting up again, and walking as much as ten yards was more than I could face. But we had our friends, the crew, to think of. They were getting very nervous. It was unfair to let them suffer for helping us. We must reward them, and go. We had no coin of the realm left. We had long since thrown all that away. Silver may be the last thing you wish to part with in everyday life, but it's the first thing to go when you want to travel light in the jungle. So we gave them a chit for 250 rupees cashable by any British unit, and made the final effort necessary to get out of the boat.

Half the party were safely ashore, and the others were getting out as fast as they could, with the Burmese's assist-

ance, when the Japs opened fire on us, not, as we had secretly feared, from the bank which we had left, but from the west bank, the one to which we had only just attained after such toil and tribulation. As I stumbled and reeled towards cover, I didn't even feel surprised, and I certainly felt no fear. Here it was, then. After all we had been through, we were going to be killed here, almost on our own doorstep. And curiously enough, I didn't appear to care a damn! Automatically, I took cover behind a bush, and shoved my rifle out in front of me. To right and left of me, I could see the rest of us doing the same. No doubt they were acting under the same sort of dream-compulsion as I. We did not seem to have suffered any casualties. I could not see any bodies lying on the shore. Our Burmese boatmen were making their best time up river. I put one cartridge up the spout of my rifle, finding considerable difficulty in doing so, as it required all my strength to open and close the bolt, stiff with dirt and rust. Then I looked for something to fire at. But I couldn't see anything. The Japs had ceased fire as suddenly as they had opened it, and we had no way of knowing what they were up to now. Perhaps they were creeping up on us, either wanting to take us, or not being anxious to give away their position to our patrols this side of the river. We waited for what seemed a long time. Then all of a sudden, about 200 yards further up the river, we saw three small rowing boats being pushed into the water. And the pushers, who seemed to be in a hurry, were Japanese troops. They jumped into the boats, and made for the other side, all out. We might be on our last legs, but this was a chance too good to be missed. Our seven remaining rifles were trained, with one accord, on the fleeing enemy, and a ragged volley rang out. Six rounds went off somewhere in the right direction,

but the seventh was a non-starter. One of the rifles, probably choked with dirt, suddenly opened out until the barrel resembled some strange tropical growth. Part of it, with the foresight still attached, came back and hit the unfortunate marksman on the cheek-bone, making a nasty gash. That was the party's second casualty!

It would be pleasant to say that we inflicted heavy losses on the Japs, but I regret to say that as far as we could see our fire did not take effect. By the time we had succeeded in getting another round into the chamber, they had reached the other bank, and were making off into the jungle.

The gentleman with the burst rifle was lying close to me. I looked at him. I did not know whether to be angry or compassionate. Then I discovered that I was feeling neither of the appropriate emotions. I was merely amused. The thought that he had come through all the perils of the jungle unscathed, only to be hit a shrewd crack by his own rifle at the end of it, was too much for me. I laid my head on my arms, and laughed till I cried. Then I realized that I was crying because we hadn't hit these bloody little men on the river, and I pulled myself together with a jerk. It wouldn't do anybody any good if I started behaving like an hysterical school girl at this stage of the proceedings. It certainly looked as though we were out of the figurative wood, but we still had a mile or two of the actual one to traverse.

We started off, still going west, in our usual formation, and still taking our usual precautions, for, though we should be safe enough here, what had just happened had not increased our sense of security.

We had not gone more than a mile or so, when our advance scouts came in, and reported a party in the jungle

ahead of us. They had not been able to get close enough to see who they were, as the growth here was not very dense. But they had heard their movements, and it seemed as though they were coming towards the river.

We concealed ourselves as well as we could, and waited. If they were Japs, they would probably be in a hurry, like the last lot, and we might have a chance of a shot at them. If they were ours—but somehow, we couldn't believe that they would be ours. That still didn't seem possible.

After a little, we could hear them coming. They seemed to be making a lot of noise, but it was still the sort of noise that could as easily be Japanese as British. Then, suddenly, it wasn't that sort of noise at all any more. We heard a stumble, and the sound of a fall. On top of this came two completely unprintable words, uttered with a feeling of which never a Jap in the world could be capable, and in an accent which could only have its origin north of Tweed. We jumped up, and tried to shout. Then we hurried forward towards the sound of that heavenly, homely voice.

"Oy!" we cried. "Oy! It's us!" and other such illuminating inanities.

They saw us coming, and gaped, startled for a minute. Then one of them said, "Christ! These must be Wingate's," and they ran to meet us, a stalwart sergeant of a famous Highland regiment, and his section of nine men.

They say the Jocks are hard and unsentimental. Are they hell! They say the Jocks are inhospitable and like to look twice at every bawbee. Don't you believe it! That patrol were fathers and mothers to us. They loaded us with all their cigarettes, took our packs and rifles from us, and all but carried us back to the nearest British post, which was manned by a detachment of the Assam Rifles. Here,

too, we were welcomed with open arms, and given charpoys to lie on, and a meal to eat while we waited for arrangements to be made to carry us back to the comparative civilization of Imphal.

The meal, I'm sorry to say, was a dismal failure. Our digestions were completely out of order, and even our palates did not seem to be functioning. But it was heaven to lie and smoke, and to realize that to-morrow no blistering march lay ahead of us, and that our boots could be given indefinite leave.

We lay and luxuriated, and blessed the thoughtfulness of the officer in charge of the detachment, who had decreed that we should not be bothered with questions. We wanted to try and forget all that lay behind us, not strive to remember it.

CHAPTER XXIV

WELL, this is where we part. The journey by truck down to Imphal over rough and half-made roads would, at any normal time, have been an uncomfortable one. But now, bumps and rattlings meant nothing in our young lives. Safeness was all.

At Imphal, we were taken straight to the hospital, where we received a right royal welcome. At least, I should say it started off by being a right royal welcome, but after we had been disembarked from our trucks for a minute or two, I noticed that the enthusiasm was evaporating remarkably quickly. The* crowd who had gathered round us, eager to shake us by the hand and hear what we had to say, were melting away with odd celerity, and soon we were left with only the sisters in charge of us, who couldn't make their getaways, poor dears. It was only when they suggested, ever so tactfully, that we should, perhaps, care for a bath, that I realized what the trouble was. Even our best friends wouldn't tell us, in fact, to use a good old Anglo-Saxon word, we stank. Politely, but quite firmly, we were prevented from entering the ward until we had imprpersed ourselves in a row of large iron tubs set out for us in the open. In these, we made our first attack on our dirt, and succeeded in getting rid of the outer two or three layers of it. The clothes and equipment which we took off were unceremoniously burned, and, clothed in hospital pyjamas, comparatively clean and in our right minds, we were inducted into bed.

I can't begin to tell you the exquisite sensation of feeling

cool sheets against your body, after all those months of Kāshmir blankets, ground sheets, monsoon capes, and ever-lastingly and without escape, your clothes. I stretched myself and waggled my toes against the smoothness, until I was actively savouring the delight with every inch of my whole body, and with every atom of my whole mind.

Then the native barber arrived, and stood appalled at the task before him. We encouraged him with cries and exhortations as he fell on each of our companions, and stripped them of their flowing beards and tresses.

But it wasn't so funny when he actually arrived at your own bed. As is usual with these estimable gentlemen, his scissors were blunt, and his razors had seen better days. He tugged and pulled and excavated amongst the luxuriant undergrowth, and brought tears to the eyes and objurgations to the lips. But at last, the job was done, and you looked in a mirror, and remembered vaguely that in the dim and distant past you had known someone who looked rather like that. And you rubbed your hands down the smoothness of your cheeks, and stroked the almost-forgotten contours of your chin, and revelled in cleanness. Often in the days when I had been a polite and shaven citizen, I had longed to be able to throw my inhibitions overboard, and be a wild and hairy man. But now I knew what wild and hairy men felt like, and to be a smooth citizen again was good enough for me.

Our insides were now in pretty good working order again, and eating, as they say, was the order of the day. Not for us the common or garden three meals a day of hospital routine. For the first two or three days, we were allowed to command food whenever the fancy seized us. And it seized most of us pretty often. Six good tuck-ins in twelve hours was nothing out of the common run. And

we were allowed beer, too. I don't think I had ever realized before just how good beer tasted, or indeed, how it tasted at all. But now I savoured every single hop, and followed it down my gullet with complete approbation.

But it was remarkable how soon everything began to seem ordinary and normal again, and the events of the past months soon assumed the aspect of a nightmare. At first, none of us wanted to talk or think of the tilings that had happened. 'But after a week or two, the tragic and terrifying incidents began somehow to sink into the background of our memories, and we enjoyed occasionally remembering some of the lighter side of the expedition: what Tommy Vann said when the monkey bit him, how comic Scottie looked when he stormed the sampan, the boats sinking to the bottom of the Chindwin, and the rafts performing the same feat in the Shweli, Captain Williams's face when the sergeant cut the rope—some of these had not seemed so funny at the time, but we laughed over them now, from the safety of our hospital beds. Then after another week or two, the whole show began to appear in its proper perspective, the good and the bad, the tragic and the comic, the friends we had made, and the friends we had lost. What was it, after all, but another episode in the war, another small piece of the enormous patchwork that makes up the whole? It would certainly make something to tell the wife about in the long winter evenings, and it would always be a good answer to give the kiddies when they asked, "What did you do in the War, Daddy?" You would always be able to say, "I was with Wingate," and not to feel ashamed when you had said it.

It won't be known for many a long day to come just what the Expedition did achieve, and what effects it has had on the campaign in Burma as a whole. But there is

one thing that seems certain, that whatever we set out to do, whatever task we were given, that we certainly succeeded in doing.

I saw, as you have heard, only a small part of the show. It was impossible even for those holding much higher rank than mine to see it whole, and see it clearly. But from my own small share, I have learned two or three things that are not without interest. First, I've learned what "guts" really means. It's not the sort of spectacular heroism of a moment that brings off brilliant exploits, and wins medals. It's not the bravery that keeps a man unflinching in the face of the enemy. It's not, even, the quality that makes a man fight as well in a losing battle as he does in a winning one. Rather, it's that rock-like, basic steadiness which keeps the British soldier going, not only in the face of long odds, but also under the accumulation of hardships, little irritations and unpleasantnesses and discomforts, which are almost harder to cope with than danger. The adjective "British," remember, embraces every member of the British Empire.

And that brings me to the second thing. I have discovered something that I always suspected to be true, in spite of a great deal of criticism, both cheap and legitimate; that, the British Empire still counts for a good deal in this cock-eyed world. It gives you a kick when you meet some uneducated savage in a remote jungle, and know that he is still relying on you for protection; know, too, that just because you are British he is your friend, and trusts you.

Third, I learned something about "leadership," that much abused word. I learned to see and recognize that quality in a man which makes other men put implicit confidence in him, look upon him as a cross between an older brother, a friend, and a master; which makes them

ready to follow him, quite literally, to the death. It's a quality that doesn't always go with a Sam Browne and a shoulderful of pips. It lurks in unexpected places. It takes danger and hardship, sometimes, to produce it. But when it's there, sooner or later it will come out.

Perhaps all that I learned and all that I feel, can be best explained like this.

A few days ago a Brigadier came round our ward. He was a human being, this Brigadier. The sort of man who has a twinkle in his eye, knows a thing or two, and makes you feel he really is interested in what you have to say.

He stopped by my bed.

"Well, sergeant," he said. "Getting on all right?"

"Top of the world, sir," I told him.

"Good. Good. Glad to be out of it all, I suppose?"

"I certainly am."

"What are you hoping to do next?"

"A spot of leave, I hope, sir."

"And after?"

"Well, sir, I have heard there's a new Wingate show in the making. I was hoping I might be able to get in on that."

He put in his monocle, and looked at me. Then he laughed.

"Good God!" he said. "Why?"

I thought for a moment.

"Well, sir," I answered, "if it comes to that, why not?"



