

ADVENTURE

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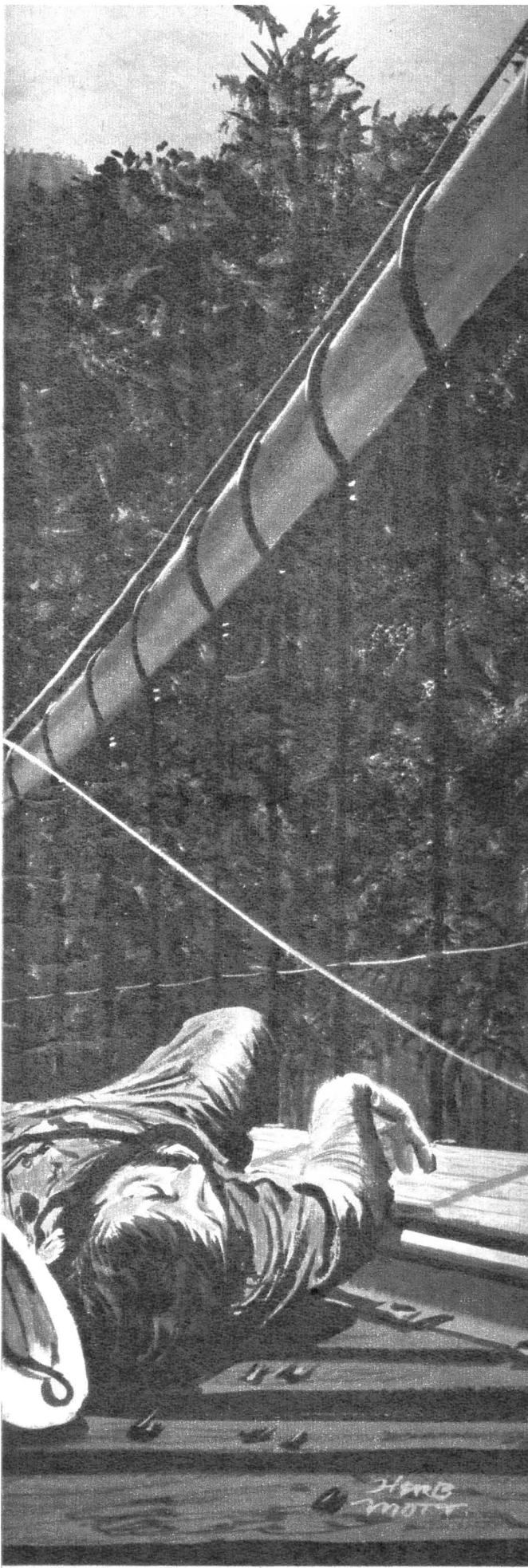
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ADVENTURE NOVEL
OF THE MONTH



A murderous burst of fire leapt at them from the darkness in front. Charlie heard his partner groan and go down . . .



We, Too, Can Die...

by PAUL LE BUTT

**The Japs had nearly wiped out the
British column. But some fought free—
an outnumbered but hardy band who
swore to settle the score**

ALONG a mountain path, deep in Burma, a column of weary men and overburdened mules struggled doggedly on.

The day before, supplies had been dropped to them, so each man carried his full five days' ration. The sun was obscured, but the heat was none the less intense.

At the head of the column strode a young man, tall and so thin as to seem almost unreal. In his left hand he held a compass; in his right, a seven-foot bamboo pole. His eyes shone bright with fever; the stubble on his chin barely concealed the suppurations of barber's rash; his bare arms were scarlet with prickly heat. Over his left shoulder an automatic carbine was slung; over his right, a gray metal box.

Behind him, in single file—for the path was narrow—marched two men. Rifles were slung over their left shoulders, in their right hands they carried machetes. They were the cutters who widened the path sufficiently for a loaded mule to pass. Behind them marched the rest of the leading platoon, and behind that the column.

They had just breasted a steep hill, and had reached a plateau, thinly wooded and with little shade. The first cutter darted forward and tapped the tall officer on the arm and muttered quietly but in an urgent voice:

"Just ahead of you, sir, to the right."

The officer strained his eyes in the direction indicated, easing his carbine off his shoulder. Just then a squat figure stepped into the open path ahead. The tall officer muttered over his shoulder: "Okay—it's the 'Reece.' " (Continued on page 80)

ILLUSTRATED BY HERB MOTT



WE, TOO, CAN DIE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

Two minutes later the two officers met. The short one was young and rosy-cheeked, the picture of health. He was stripped to the waist, his bush hat was hanging down his back, tied around his neck by a plaited bootlace. The Recce Platoon Commander said:

"Hallo, Tiny, you're late."

"Those bloody gunners and their mules," mumbled the other, in explanation. "Is this it?"

A nod was sufficient answer, and Tiny held up his right hand. The men behind halted wearily.

Tiny blew two shrill blasts on his whistle, then eased the gray metal box from his right shoulder. He unscrewed a protuberance from one end and pulled out the telescopic aerial. Immediately a metallic voice like an intoxicated parrot greeted him:

"Hallo, Able Two. Hallo, Able Two. Pass your message, pass your message. Able One to Able Two, over."

Tiny pressed a rubber lever and spoke into the transmitter.

"Hallo, Able One. Hallo, Able One. Have contacted Willie. We have reached bivouac area. I say again, we have reached bivouac area. Over."

The intoxicated parrot replied:

"Hallo, Able Two. Hallo, Able Two. Hallo all stations. Proceed into bivouac area, proceed into bivouac area. Conference will be at one three zero zero hours. Over."

Tiny pressed the lever and said, "Able Two okay. Over."

The intoxicated parrot took up the theme like reciting a litany:

"Baker okay. Over. Charlie okay. Over. Dog okay. Over. Easy One okay. Over. Easy Two okay. Over."

Willie pointed to a tree somewhat larger and shadier than the rest. "Headquarters Tree, line of advance east. Cheerio, Tiny."

Tiny wearily took out his compass and, marking a bearing of forty-five degrees, moved forward with his platoon.

Willie stood by headquarters tree and watched them pass. If he noticed the weariness on their faces he made no comment. Now and again he would exchange friendly banter with someone he knew.

"The cinema is just beyond that tree. . . . There's a Stop-Me-and-Buy-One just down the hill. . . ."

Stale, stupid stuff, he knew, but what would you? Ah! Here came "Old Mrs. Miniver."

Lieutenant Colonel Minton-Vernon looked tired, but wore a bright smile. He was a spare little man, with a tidy, old-maidish manner, and a sense of duty as strong, if not stronger, than his faith in God. Though he frequently laughed at tales of Indian fakirs who subjugated

their bodies to their wills, his own frail body performed this miracle daily.

"Hallo, Willie," he said. "Have any trouble?"

Captain William Montgomery came to attention smartly. "No, sir, not a thing. But the natives seem scared—my Havildar thinks there are Japs about, but we haven't seen any, and the natives, as usual, won't talk. . . . With your permission, sir, I should like to move on ahead as quickly as possible."

The colonel unslung his pack and threw it under the Headquarters Tree. The column filed slowly on. The adjutant came up and slung his pack next to the colonel's.

"Hallo, Willie. Anything doing?"

Willie smiled to himself: he knew just how many times he would have to answer that question before the lunch halt was through.

"Nothing yet," he muttered, "but I am not unhopeful. If only the old man will let me get away."

"No chance of that." Tim Brodie, the adjutant, became confidential. "Mrs. M. thinks we are running into plenty heap trouble. There's a conference at one; you'll have to be there."

The column was still filing past to their positions on their usual compass bearings, the gunners with their mortar and machine-gun-laden mules, the rifle company commander deep in whispered argument with the nearest platoon commander on some tricky problem, the C.S.M. urging the mule in front of him on with a sharpened bamboo cane.

On and on they came, an endless unwieldy string of near-exhausted men, staggering mules and starved ponies.

The company second-in-command; the sapper officer, a cheerful cockney; the string of explosive-laden mules that a burst of machine-gun fire would blow sky-high, together with half the column.

The rear column commander, a stolid, unimaginative materialist; the padre, an egoist of the "Thank God, I'm saved" variety. The M.O. and his staff. All hurried past. For it was getting near the tail of the column and the tail moves incredibly faster than the head.

As the rear platoon commander came up to the tree, Willie whispered, "Wotcher, Ronnie, how goes it?"

Ronnie gave a weak smile. "It was the schooner *Hesperus*." And passed on toward his bivouac area.

The company commander, second-in-command and C.S.M. were under a tree fifty yards due east of the headquarters tree. Fifteen yards away the platoon runners sat, smoking and looking hungry and impatient. A headquarters runner came up and whispered in a loud stage whisper which they could all hear:

"Water, bottom of hill due south, no move before fourteen hundred hours, same order of march."

Edward Fielding, the company commander, saw that the platoon runners had heard.

"Okay. Go and spread the good news—and don't forget there is a conference at thirteen hundred hours." Then, turning to his batman: "Let's eat."

Undoing their packs, they spread their ground sheets between the trees, tied by parachute cord to give them some shade, took off their boots and put on their brown gym shoes. Then, taking out their small brown packets of "K" ration, they broke them open and started to eat.

For the last fortnight they had been in "enemy-infested territory" and the order was: "No fires," so it had to be a cold meal. They had had the same lunch meal now for nearly two months: a small tin of cheese, two small packets of biscuits, a cup of lemonade made from synthetic lemonade powder, five American cigarettes, and a stick of chewing gum. The carton of dextrose tablets they kept for the forthcoming march.

After lunch they wandered down to the water-point to fill bottles and shave (this was compulsory)—and wash or bathe, if there was sufficient water. They hadn't much time: the water was three hundred yards away, down and up and down a steep hill. After that, weapons had to be inspected and feet examined. Then there was that blasted conference. If one wanted to get a dressing put on, or buy a bar of soap from the column canteen, one had to look slippy.

Leonard McIvor, No. 5 platoon commander, was in a quandary. What to do first? He was wearing his last clean pair of socks, the bandage over the "jungle sore" on his knee had slipped. If he rolled up his trouser leg, it immediately became covered with flies; if he kept it down, the chafing was unbearable. His carbine had fallen into a river while he was helping a wounded man across, and was now red with rust. He had to inspect his men's feet and weapons, fill his bottle, shave, eat his lunch, attend the conference, give out his orders, inspect the mules . . . Oh, God, which should he do first?

To you and me, sitting in our armchairs, the problem is simple. We say with a bright smile: "Easy. Hand our socks, water bottle and carbine to our batman to deal with. . . . Have our knee dressed. . . . Order the men to parade for weapon inspection with bare feet, sitting down. . . . Examine the mules just prior to saddling, and take our lunch to the conference. That, we will say, should give us at least half an hour to wash and shave. . . . Give out the important data while standing by to move off and the rest of it at the first halt. . . . Too easy."

Leonard did none of these things. For one thing, his batman had malaria, so Leonard filled the batman's bottle as well, and brought him a mess tin of water to shave in. The water was scarce—just a hole dug in a dry riverbed into which muddy water reluctantly seeped. He inspected his men's feet and rifles conscientiously, section by section, because it was suicide to allow more than

a section at a time to take off its boots or dismantle its weapons. He was just in time to attend the conference. His lunch must wait. He borrowed a piece of elastoplast and stuck it on his knee. . . .

Everyone was surprisingly punctual for the conference. Every officer in the column was there, also the R.S.M., a tall, dour, black Scot. Sandy McPherson believed in the Divine Right of Regular Officers and regarded the Pipes and the Kilt as Holy Relics. Haggis to him was as an ancient wine, to be savoured with reverence. He seldom smiled and never deviated one hairbreadth from his Duty.

The gunner officer was the last to arrive. Though the regiment was the famous Perth Highlanders, Jock McLeod was the only genuine Highlander among them. His real name was Charles, but, being attached to an English unit, he was naturally called Jock.

Lieutenant Colonel Minton-Vernon looked at the adjutant.

The adjutant said in a subdued voice, "All present, sir."

Everyone relaxed. The colonel lit his pipe; those who smoked lit up.

The colonel cleared his throat. The officers stiffened to attention.

"Gentlemen, as you no doubt know, we are about thirty miles southwest of our objective: the Irrawaddy is approximately twenty-two miles due east. Slightly northeast of us is the village of Bunichaung, where, we are informed, country boats may be had for the purpose of making our crossing. Bunichaung, as you see, is on a small tributary. Our objective—or, rather, the brigade objective—is Mutigaung. This is reported to be held in strength. The enemy are known to have a number of motor-propelled transports. The brigade task is to capture or reduce the garrison of Mutigaung. Two columns of the Herefords and two columns of the Northumbrians will carry the assault. The two brigade columns are in reserve. Our task is to cross the Irrawaddy, unknown to the enemy, and destroy any bridgehead opposite Mutigaung. We are to hold the far bank and prevent any attempt the enemy may make to fade across the river.

"Information: The enemy are reported to have evacuated outposts at Bunichaung. Our two columns are advancing parallel and are both approximately the same distance away from the battalion objective.

"Intention: The 2nd Battalion Perth Highlanders, with supporting arms—"

"Blimey, you ruddy infantry wallahs," Charley Billforth, the sapper officer, muttered to the company second-in-command.

THE C.O. continued in the same precise, meticulous manner, giving everyone their task, and explaining each man's role, at every stage of the advance and attack. There was little to interest the sappers, and, weary from nearly two months' solid marching, Charley almost dozed off. The word "dispersal" brought him to the alert.

The colonel was saying, "Dispersal points: Although brigade information

says that Bunichaung has been evacuated, in my opinion we are quite likely to bump the enemy there, or even before we get there. For this reason I am not sending the Recce Platoon on in advance."

Captain Montgomery almost rose to his feet in protest.

"Thank you, Willie," the colonel said drily. "Perhaps I may now be allowed to proceed . . . As my friend, General Wingate, said to me before we left 'Aberdeen': 'If you must bump the enemy, for God's sake see that you can bump him hard.' To this end we are approaching what I consider to be highly dangerous territory, with both columns parallel. Whichever is held up will stand fast while the other does the attacking. However, there is always the possibility of hitting something too big; therefore, as I said before—dispersal points."

He proceeded to give out a stream of map references, supplementing each with a brief description of the country, taken from the map. The conference over, each hurried to his own particular headquarters. There was little time. The order had already gone around to load the mules. Hastily they gave out the dispersal points, then as much of the orders as was really urgent. Section commanders hurried off to pass on the "griff."

OLD Mrs. Miniver was worried: he had not contacted brigade yet. There was only five minutes to go. It took that long to pack up the wireless set and load it. He strode over to the signalers.

"Any luck yet?"

The signal corporal didn't look up from his dials or cease to tap out the recognition signal.

"No' a worrd, sir."

The colonel shrugged, then after a moment of indecision said, "Well, I'm afraid we can't wait any longer."

He walked back to his tree and had just put his equipment on as Tiny marched past with his platoon.

Three hours later, the column was in as bad a way as it had been at midday. Three men had passed out and were being supported forward by men in their platoons, their packs grossly overburdening already overloaded and exhausted mules. The two medical orderlies were in a raging fever; one was strapped to a pony, deliriously singing hymns. The doctor, his face haggard with overwork, his body reduced to a skeleton with amoebic dysentery, looked compassionately at him and muttered to the padre, "Poor little devil, I shall have to gag him if he goes on like that. I just daren't give him a shot of anything."

The padre strode on with forceful, determined strides.

"Very wise, but don't worry—there is a halt in ten minutes. All will be . . ."

Then it happened. . . . Burst after burst of machine-gun fire came from the direction of the head of the column. Everyone halted in their tracks . . . Suddenly the left flank blazed like a bush fire as a solid wall of lead rushed at them. At the head of the column, the colonel realized its implications. "Ambushed. Not a chance." He turned to the

bugler at his elbow: "Dispersal, quick."

As the liquid notes rang out, twenty Japanese broke from the cover on his left. A tall Jap, topping him by a good head and a half, plunged his bayonet twice into the frail body. The colonel stood stiff as a ramrod, then, raising his pistol waist-high, he fired six bullets into the stomach of his adversary. His task accomplished, he sank to the ground without a word.

The column had faded into the jungle as the first notes of the bugle were recognized. That is to say, what there was left to fade, for the unexpected broadside had done an incredible amount of damage; men were torn in pieces by the fierce fire at such short range. Mules, their stomachs ripped open and their bowels trailing on the ground, galloped madly back and forth in their agony. Everywhere lay the dead and dying.

Rear column had got the worst of it. The M.O. and the padre lay huddled together, almost unrecognizable. The terrific blast had nearly cut them in two. Close to them, strapped to his fallen, but still kicking pony, the delirious medical orderly was still singing hymns.

"Jesus, the very thought of Thee . . ."

A young Japanese corporal passing by smashed his head in with his rifle butt.

The tail end of the sapper platoon, unversed in infantry tactics, was lying where it had stood a few minutes before. The mules, with their quarter of a ton of explosive, had vanished into the thick jungle.

The battle was over; stocky little Japanese emerged from cover. Systematically they examined every body, took away marks of identification. Unhurriedly they removed the loads from the dead mules and stacked them neatly. Arms and ammunition were similarly dealt with. If any of the bodies showed signs of life, a swift bayonet thrust ensured that the signs were not repeated. Intelligence staff made notes of the type and quantities of ammunition and stores, and took possession of all maps, papers and identification marks. Suddenly, as silently as they had come, the Japanese disappeared. In the distance a faint howl went up, to be immediately followed by others.

The howls drew nearer: the pi-dogs had got the scent. But before the pi-dogs came another army.

BURMESE villagers, following in the wake of the Japanese, crept on to the scene. Cautiously they approached the bodies; then, as they realized that they were all dead, a loud chattering started as men, women and children started to strip the corpses.

Two years with no cloth imported had left them without the clothes necessary to life. They had seen their women and children die from exposure. They held nothing against the British—or the Japanese, for that matter—and here were sufficient clothes to clothe four villages, and leave some over to trade for the now almost unobtainable opium.

After a while, as the sun was glinting redly through the trees, they, too, moved

away slowly, for they were heavily burdened. The sun sank rapidly and darkness fell, spreading a new beauty over the scene of death.

From the hilltop came a long-drawn-out howl, followed by a hundred more. They were close now. The scene of death was mantled now in a dark garment of beauty. . . . Great ugliness was to come.

Thirty miles away a brigadier was saying to a distracted signalman, "I don't care a damn. Keep plugging it, send it in clear, and keep repeating it. We must get to them, we must . . ."

Wearily the signalman tapped out in clear the six-hour-old message:

"Enemy have evacuated Mutigaung, are reported moving southwest in great strength toward Bunichaung. . . . Enemy have evacuated Mutigaung, are reported moving in great strength southwest . . ."

WE TOO CAN DIE

THE Japanese, among other lovable traits, have the intriguing habit of digging long, deep holes by the sides of tracks. In these holes are planted sharpened bamboo stakes. The holes are then skilfully camouflaged with brushwood. On the other side of the track, an ambush is laid. Thus, when the Japanese open fire, the enemy rush for cover, and, falling down the holes, are impaled on the bamboo spikes.

In view of this, it is generally considered wiser to move into cover in the direction of the enemy when fired upon.

But to Charlie Bilforth, the sapper officer, this wise precaution was merely "one of them ruddy infantry drills." So that, when the first shots rang out, he hurried the five explosive-laden mules, and the section with them, into the bushes on the right and, as luck would have it, discovered the only perfect cover in the vicinity.

Not ten yards through the thick bushes was a deep chaung, with steep, sloping banks down which the mules were unceremoniously pushed, just in time to miss the deadly burst of fire which would have blown them sky-high.

When the firing died down, Captain Bilforth crept out of the chaung and wriggled forward to survey the damage. He returned as silently as he had left, looking deathly pale, and, retiring to a quiet corner, vomited. Then, without a word, he led the seven sappers and five muleteers and their mules along the bed of the chaung and eventually, by careful calculation, back on to the path along which they had come, but facing the opposite direction, and several miles back on their tracks.

His men, although not in possession of maps or compasses, soon realized what was happening, so, after a brief consultation, decided to put the matter tactfully before their commander. As the most suitable person to broach the subject they chose his batman, Sapper Francis Rotherwell, who rejoiced in the nickname of "Flatout." Flatout put on his most ingratiating grin and said cheerfully, "Ere, Skip, goin' the wrong way, ain't we?"

Charlie, who for the last three hours had been marching like a somnambulist, came out of his trance. The color came

back to his face and his cheeky cockney grin returned. "Well, Flatout, in the manner of speakin', yes, and in the manner of speakin', no. It depends where you're headin' for. Anyway, it's getting late, so we'll doss down here."

And with that Flatout and the rest had to be content.

The reason for Captain Bilforth's peculiar behavior was over a week old. The column had been crossing a high mountain range, with the usual agonizing delay of having to cut footholds for the mules. To this end, Charlie had gone ahead with the colonel to survey the route.

On reaching the summit, the sapper, looking to the right, had seen a truly beautiful sight. Spanning a two-hundred-yard-wide gorge between two mountain ranges was a brilliantly constructed suspension bridge, for road and rail traffic, and, even as he watched, an ancient engine chugged across, pulling an endless string of empty flats.

In his excitement Charlie seized the colonel by the arm and pointed. "Look, sir, what price me slippin' across and makin' a dent in it? Wouldn't take no longer than six hours, eight at the most. Be back with the column by suppertime."

Lieutenant Colonel Minton Vernon carefully released his arm from Charlie's clutch. "Certainly not, Charles. The bridge is known to be defended; at our last conference I told you that there was approximately a battalion holding the Sunchaung Gorge. I also told you that our orders were not to engage the enemy this side of the Irrawaddy. So forget about your big bangs and get on with your road-making."

Charlie Bilforth had a simple, straightforward mind, and he absolutely failed to understand why, after they had been marching for two months without doing a thing, they should pass up such an excellent opportunity of doing the Japs some real harm.

It was not surprising, therefore, that when Charlie found himself on his own, with a section of sappers and all the explosive he needed, his thoughts returned to the bridge over the Sunchaung Gorge. With Charlie Bilforth, to think was to act. Thus we find him well on the way back to the place he had dreamed of for the last week.

The next morning he had a hurried conference with all the members of his party. He told them frankly, and in a very few words, what his plans were. He treated the conference as a debate and allowed anybody to make any suggestions that came into his mind. At the end, he put the matter to the vote. To his surprise, all voted in favor of it except one. Charlie was extremely surprised that Sapper Dunnit was the one to vote against the scheme, because Dunnit's passion for destructive work almost equalled his own.

"Well, Dunnit, what's eatin' you?"

"About this 'ere battalion guardin' the bridge."

"Go on with you! We're always hearin' rumor of places bein' full of Japs, and how often have we found them?"

Dunnit's brain was in inverse ratio to his heart and he could find no answer to this. The fact that the column had al-

ways avoided places where the enemy were reported in strength did not occur to him as an answer.

So Charlie Bilforth made his plans for his own little war, and very complicated they were. In the first place, they could not return along the track they had come up; it would undoubtedly be watched. In the second place, they had to avoid all villages and open spaces. Their only chance was surprise.

CHARLIE decided to go on a compass-bearing slap across country, mountains or no mountains, so he worked out the bearing, and off they went. Before starting they filled ten chargals with water dug for in a chaung and tied two to each mule load. They might not touch a river for many hours. They had agreed to eat only two meals a day until the job was done. After that, they could go to the villages and live on the country. Charlie Bilforth could remember the bridge perfectly, a lovely job, and quite impossible to reconstruct under wartime conditions. Must be strong to carry a railway line, but with five hundredweight of 808 with gun-cotton primers electrically detonated . . . Blimey, what a bang! . . . Then the little matter of the battalion guarding the bridge . . .

Charlie, in spite of his suggestion to Dunnit, was under no delusions regarding the possibility of the bridge being unguarded. The study of his map had shown him that it was an essential part of the Japanese line of communication and must therefore be held in considerable strength. To understand why he imagined that the bridge could be blown, in spite of a large force of Japanese troops, one must understand Charlie Bilforth. And to understand Charlie Bilforth, one must understand the London cockney. The cockney is essentially an individualist, and not a gangster. His is not the strong-arm system of winning by superior force; rather does he favor opposing greater force with nimbleness of wit.

Charlie, being a cockney, was not in the least impressed by the enemy's numbers. In fact, to be quite truthful, he didn't think about the enemy at all. He knew in his bones that there must be some way through the defenses, and that somehow or other he would find it. So, quite cheerfully, he gave himself up to the unaccustomed and somewhat tedious task of navigation. By midday, the men were exhausted. There were only seven of them, and the muleteers. At every halt, the mules must be off-loaded, to do which requires five men—one to hold the mule's head, and two to remove each load. This meant that practically the whole halt was taken up with taking off and putting on equipment and loading and off-loading mules, with very few minutes for rest or obeying the calls of nature. The only solution was to lengthen the halts. That meant lengthening the journey, and that brought up the problem of rations.

Charlie began to realize that there was more to this soldiering business than he had imagined. There must be some solution. He racked his brains, but could not see the answer. His head throbbed,

his pack weighed a ton. This was driving him nuts. He held up his hand in the signal to halt, slipped off his pack, and sat down on it.

"Ere, all of you gather round. Take your packs off and sit down, and listen. Something has got to be done. You're tired and I'm tired and we're getting slower and slower. The slower we get, the less rations we have, and the less we eat, the weaker we get, and the weaker we get, the slower we get, and that's where I came in. . . . Now, if anyone has any ideas, let's hear 'em."

The twelve men who squatted around Charlie Bilforth in the inadequate shade of the tall teak trees might have been a cross-section of the United Kingdom, so different were they in appearance. Although most of the sappers were Londoners, they varied from the cheeky-looking, snub-nosed type represented by Charlie and his batman, to the blue-chinned East-Ender, Lewis. The muleteers, too, presented a contrast. When the Chindit columns were formed, all divisional troops were absorbed, and most of the odd files like cooks, bandsmen, drivers, etc., became muleteers rather than go to the unaccustomed discipline of the infantry platoons. Thus, there was Bombardier Ivor Jones, a Welshman, formerly cook corporal in the artillery officers' mess, Piper Jay, from the Perthshire Highlanders Pipe Band, a Yorkshireman of pronounced religious views, and others of even more diverse appearance and ideas.

After looking blankly at each other for a few minutes, Piper Jay took the floor. Brother Jay, as he was usually called on account of his aggressive religiousness, never missed an opportunity of catching the limelight.

"If it was me, sir, I would" — he paused dramatically, then, like the opening of flood-gates, got as much out as he could before anyone could stop him—"godownonmykneesto the Lord . . . and thank Him for bringing us thus . . ."

Bombardier Jones looked dangerous. "Man bach, if you have anything to say, then say it!"

Everybody laughed and the tension eased. Jay, who thrived on opposition, was enjoying himself, particularly as the solution of the trouble had just occurred to him.

"Well, sir, it seems to me that we have too many mules. There are twelve of us here. If we had only four mules, we could divide ourselves into two teams of six each. At each halt, five men look after two mules, therefore two of us could be having a decent rest at the halts. Then there is the matter of rations. If we shot one mule, we could have a good scoff now and cook enough to last tonight and tomorrow. That would save most of two days' rations. The only snag I can see is that we would have to dump some of the explosive."

Charlie looked surprised. It seemed all so simple; this chap Jay must be a brainy cove. As for the explosive, he hated parting with any of it, but he would have more than enough to do the job. He looked around; a new interest shone in everyone's face.

"Well?" He knew what they were thinking: someone had to give a verdict

on the killing and eating of the mule, and no one wanted to be first.

"I think Brother Jay's idea is a good one from the point of view of there being too much work for us to do at the halts, so I have decided to get rid of a mule. Obviously we cannot turn it loose in country like this—it would go to the nearest village and give us away. So it must be shot." He was coming to the difficult part now.

"As to eating it, we'll think about that later. Our bombardier can do some of his famous butchering and we can see what it looks like and what we feel about it. If it looks anything like beef, I could do with a juicy steak myself."

Just below them, in the valley, part of the forest had been burned down by the mysterious fires which broke out for no apparent reason, and some of the trees were still smoldering; a pall of white smoke hung just above the trees and would give them all the cover they needed for their cooking arrangements. Charlie led his small column down the hill. There would be no more marching for them until the next day. In the meantime, they must find water.

The plan, as suggested by Piper Jay, was extremely successful in every way. The mule meat, properly butchered and jointed, looked delicious to men who had been eating only tinned food for over two months, and, with one or two shame-faced jokes, a large fire was built near one of the smoldering trees and fat steaks were soon sizzling, and stews made with vine-root tubers and bouillon powder bubbled in brimming mess tins. Water had been found by digging four foot deep in a small, pebbly chaung.

In fact, the afternoon was extremely pleasant. They filled the mule buckets and bathed luxuriously, washed socks, sewed on buttons and even, in the uncontrollable optimism that sudden and unexpected luxury brings, wrote letters home. Of course, a lookout had to be kept up the hill, but half an hour each was all the duty required.

Bombardier Ivor Jones was in his element, and extremely popular. Had he not, as if by magic, conjured this delicious beef out of the wilderness? He spent most of the afternoon cooking the ration for the next day to keep it fresh. Cooked to death and very tough, it was a Lucullan feast beside the nauseating tins of alleged beef roll they had had to eat day after day. He prepared about four pounds per man and instructed them to keep it wrapped in green leaves, inside a cloth, so as to keep the flies off.

THE only damper on the feast was the muleteer whose mule was being eaten. He steadfastly refused to touch it, and nothing Charlie Bilforth could do or say would shake him. He was firm and dignified: "Old Monk was my mule, see? . . . If you says one of 'em has to go, all right; he's little and can't carry so much as the others, so it's right it should be him. But I don't have to eat him. I don't blame the others—I'd eat Barbara or old Snorty. But old Monk was my pal, see?"

The journey began to get difficult. In

most of the valleys, villages could be seen, and if you stuck to the hills there was no water. Watering once a day was the order now, and this was carried out at night, in out-of-the-way chaungs. The mules were given as much as they could drink, bottles and chargals were filled, and the party moved on, after carefully covering their tracks. The country, too, was getting more difficult. Footholds had to be cut for mules, and the heavy mule loads frequently had to be carried up steep, crumbly slopes. Long detours had to be made around impenetrable tracts of thick bamboo. The mule fodder had run out, and on the rough scrub and bamboo shoots the mules were beginning to fall away.

The men, too, were feeling the strain badly. Three meals a day of "K" ration are considered just enough to keep a man fit over a short period. On the sixth day, most of them showed signs of under-nourishment on their self-imposed ration of only two.

Charlie wondered if they dared go to a village; they needed just the things one could always get from the natives—salt, chickens, tomatoes, boiled rice for the mules, tea and tobacco. And yet they must by now be very close to their objective. The Japanese would be getting their labor and supplies from the villages all around. No, they must either carry on or they would have to abandon the scheme altogether.

As if in answer to his unspoken question, Flatout, who had been scouting out ahead, came running back.

"It's right ahead, Skip, not more than two miles out there. . . . See it easy from the top of the hill."

Charlie gave the signal to halt, took off his pack, picked up his map case and compass and went forward with his batman. Yes, there it was, very close indeed. He took a bearing on his compass to each end of the bridge and drew them in on his map. Yes, they were on this little knoll, about three miles from the east end of the bridge. Now which end should they strike? He had an idea. "Ere, Flatout, 'op down and get that Brother Jay. This needs a master mind." Then, rather weakly, "Well, he's an infantry wallah, isn't he?"

The master mind wriggled up to the observation post and surveyed the position with the smugness of one whose advice is being sought by a senior officer. The fact that he had never in his life been called upon to take part in any military exercise other than as company runner or piper did not deter him in the least from making his pronouncement with the assurance of an expert.

"Well, sir, this chaung is a pretty good obstacle, so they must assume that any attack will come from the west. That is, unless they know we have got in behind them. In my opinion, they won't know this, and, in any case, they will expect the main attack to come from the west. If that is so, to protect the bridge they must have their main force on the far side, with troops well forward. Supposing that is so, they cannot have any reserves on this side, because they could not bring them across the bridge under fire. In which case they will have only a small party here."

Charlie Bilforth was impressed. "Well, supposing they have a battalion like what the C.O. said—how many do you think they will leave on this side?"

Piper Jay was stumped. His brain flashed back through the years. How could one answer a question like that? That was a poser indeed. Then a memory darted through his mind. In the defense of Crete, he was company piper, and he remembered hearing someone say, "You cannot defend a perimeter this size with less than two companies, and, if we must hold the hills, it will take a battalion." So that was it: it was a question of frontage.

A look of superiority, or what was meant for it, appeared on his haggard face. He twirled his mustache.

"Well, sir, that is of course impossible to say, exactly. It is all a question of platoon frontages, arcs of fire, and company commitments. . . ." That sounded good. He didn't know what it meant, but he had heard it somewhere. "Supposing they have a battalion of four companies, say, six hundred men, and supposing they want to defend the bridge from the west—where will they place their men?" He picked up the map. Luckily the bridge was fairly plainly marked, or he never would have found it. Also the clearly marked Sun Chaung made fairly obvious which were hills and which valleys. What the scale was he didn't know, but he knew a way of finding out. "How long would you say the bridge was, sir?"

"Almost exactly two hundred yards."

PIPER Jay studied the map closely. With a chinagraph pencil he marked the high points on the west side of the bridge. He marked every place he felt would be necessary to hold if you wanted to stop anyone reaching the bridge. Then he drew a line from the chaung to the nearest high point, then through the other high points, until he had a more or less semicircular perimeter. At this point he began to realize his limitations. Charlie's look of expectancy reminded him that men's lives depended on his appreciation; he had led the sapper officer to believe he could work out these things, when in reality he was only making the wildest guess.

His superior look vanished, and an unhappy, hunted look appeared on his emaciated face. "I'm afraid, sir, I don't know anything about tactics or strategy. I've never been anything except a piper—I don't want you to think I'm in a position to give you any advice, sir."

Captain Bilforth put his arm around the piper's shoulder. "Look 'ere, Brother Jay, I know all about that, but I reckon you've got a brain, and a darn good one. I reckon that without your ideas we wouldn't have got as far as this. Just go on talkin'—you've given me ideas all the time. And don't forget, the responsibility is all mine. Now, what is that line you've drawn?"

Jay, thus encouraged, explained his idea. The line he had drawn was the minimum perimeter the enemy must hold to guarantee the safety of the bridge from the west. Together they

measured the line. It was eleven hundred yards long. Together they divided it up into platoon areas and both agreed that in close country, as this undoubtedly was, it would take at least eight platoons. That left four platoons for the counter-attacking force and for the defense of the east bank of the chaung.

For over an hour they worked it out and in the end came to the conclusion that not more than a platoon could be holding the east bank, and that some of these troops would be engaged in bringing up supplies and keeping a check on the inhabitants of the nearby villages.

Between them they worked out their plan of attack and for the rest of the day, in the hidden depths of a nearby chaung, each man was rehearsed in his part until all were one hundred per cent accurate. The plan called for exact timing and, above all, technical accuracy.

While the men were practicing their several roles, Captain Bilforth was busy drawing maps. They had only one set between them and, depending on how things went, they would have to scatter pretty widely after the big bang, so Charlie drew a series of maps and Flatout copied them.

This was his first attempt at an attack, and when he thought of it he felt extremely humble. He was opposing a section to a battalion and attempting a major blow at enemy communications. He felt that it could not possibly succeed. There must be something he hadn't thought of. He had better call the whole thing off. After all, why risk more lives? That thought pulled him together. Three-quarters of his men had been mowed down without mercy by the ruddy Japs without a chance to strike a blow. Well, they came into this together, so they would stay in together. His whole platoon, including himself, was not too big a price to pay if this job came off. He had lost three-quarters of his capital, but the other quarter would bring in the dividends.

He looked far across the valley to where an early moon lit up the suspension bridge with a ghostly radiance, and his mouth tightened into a lipless seam. "We'll show you, you bastards, we'll show you . . ."

At two o'clock the moon was still visible, so Charlie showed his men their objectives for the last time. As the moon slipped toward the horizon they left in silence, singly. His own party had an hour to spare, so they sat around and chatted in whispers.

THE whole essence of this attack was based on the psychology of troops in defense. Both Charlie Bilforth and Piper Jay had been in several battles, so they knew the unvarying sequence of the attack; also, since most of their battles had taken place before we had armaments equal to the enemy, they had been defensive ones. So they knew all about the softening-up process with artillery which preceded the inevitable dawn attack.

To this end, they had organized a dummy mortar softening-up barrage, to come in from the northwest. The method was that one of the sappers went out

with six small charges and got into a position such as might be occupied by a mortar platoon, outside the Japanese perimeter. The other sappers, with the spare muleteer, carrying six large charges, went along the chaung, and took up a central position behind the enemy defenses. At zero, the "mortar battery" would open up, the distant *plop . . . plop . . . plop* would be followed at about nine-second intervals with terrific crashes from the chaung. In the dark, it would be impossible for the enemy to see what was happening, so they would be bound to imagine they were being mortared. Meanwhile, Charlie, Flatout and the four explosive-laden mules would rush the bridge silently from the east.

It was soon time for Charlie and his party to start out, so, after once more checking their equipment, they stepped forth silently into the night. Although it was very dark, Piper Jay had spent most of the afternoon reconnoitering the route, so for the first mile of it they were pretty sure of their ground. For the rest, Charlie had prepared a night map—that is, a black map with wide white markings which the glow of the luminous face of a watch would illuminate. At five-thirty, the first distant *plops* sounded, followed by the corresponding number of explosions, each some distance apart, and beautifully timed. Charlie reached for Piper Jay's hand and shook it heartily. Now for the rest of the show. Without more ado they rushed out on to the road and made for the bridge. There was a burst of automatic fire and the mules made a rush forward.

This was all to the good, but they had to get to the right spot for the demolition to be effective. By some miracle the first burst had missed them, so they charged on to the bridge to where the main stays joined the girders. Without hesitation, they whipped off the saddles and dragged the double load toward their objectives. The charges were all connected up, ready, one saddle around each girder, and one saddle with its double load around each stay. They were all wired together and to the battery, and, as quickly as they could, Charlie and Flatout connected them up to the two-hundred-yard coil of wire. This they intended throwing over the bridge. They would then roll down the slope as best they could and set off the charge by the simple expedient of joining up to the circuit, by merely touching two wires together.

Meanwhile, in accordance with the plans, the muleteers had leaped on their mules and galloped away.

Just then, a murderous burst of fire leaped at them from the darkness in front. One of the mules went over on its nose; its rider lay where he had fallen. All the charges were made fast. Flatout had just thrown the coil of wire over the side when he subsided with a groan. A pang of fear shot through Charlie's heart.

He felt for Flatout's head. His hands came away covered with blood. He had been shot through the throat and the carotid artery was pumping like a fountain. Another burst of fire came as he jabbed the second shot of morphia into his batman's arm. He felt as if someone had kicked him in the chest; he coughed

a wet, gurgling cough, and spat. Well, that was that. No chance now . . . Flatout gone . . . whole ruddy platoon gone . . . all right, he'd show 'em. . . . Stop him, would they? Well, see how they would like this one.

Every breath was an agony now, blood was dribbling from the side of his mouth as, with his pliers, he cut through the wires, being careful to see they didn't touch. He thought of the Japanese holding grenades to their chests rather than submit to capture. "Hurry-curry—blimey, too ruddy 'ot for me." Then, to Flatout, now happily unconscious: "Ow's this for a bang?" With that he touched the two wires together.

Half a mile away, trotting along uncomfortably on his saddleless mule, Piper Jay was suddenly flung to the ground as Barbara, his mule, reacted to the violent explosion which rolled up the chaung, echoing from hill to hill. In the lavender dawn he could see the bridge swinging down into the chaung. Turning his eyes to the heavens, he murmured, "Praised be the Lord."

Barbara, still shivering with fright beside him, suddenly received a resounding whack on the rump. "And that's for you, you scarlet daughter of Belial." He mounted and rode away.

MA MA GALAY

SAPPER DUNNIT'S part in the destruction of the bridge over the Sun-chaung Gorge was of vital importance, and at the same time, fairly simple. He it was who had the task of doubling for the battery of three-inch mortars, in the imaginary mortar attack.

As previously explained, Sam Dunnit, although in possession of a magnificent physique, was not long of brains, so, when a sapper had to be chosen to detonate six light charges of guncotton to resemble distant mortar fire, from nowhere in particular, Charlie Bilforth's choice unerringly fell on Sam.

With orders to select a spot anywhere within five hundred yards of the bridge for his operations, Sam set out on his own. Strapped to his wrist was Flatout's watch; in his haversack were the six charges, ready primed and fused, and firmly implanted in his mind were his instructions for their disposal.

Striding through the forest of tall teak trees, in the light of the early moon, he might well have been mistaken for some Norse god, bent on a bloody deed of vengeance. Six foot three in his ammunition boots and topped with a shock of flaming red hair, he swung through the jungle, oblivious to the uproarious crackle of the two-foot-long dead teak leaves which carpeted the ground. Upon his red-bearded face was a look of Olympian wrath, but his brows were not furrowed with anger but with deep concentration, for to the exclusion of all else he was repeating over and over again the orders for his part in the night's action.

One . . . Find a position screened from the enemy about five hundred yards from the bridge. Two . . . Dig in your charges in a line about three yards apart—"So you won't set 'em off all together." (Captain Bilforth had been explicit on this point.) Three . . . Mark

the position well—"So you don't go losin' 'em in the dark." Four . . . Watch out for zero: 0630 hours. Five . . . Set 'em off. Six . . . Run like hell.

The Sunchaung Gorge looked like the bottomless pit. A quarter of a mile away, the bridge, burnished silver in the moonlight, resembled a meccano toy. From the top of a hill, Sapper Dunnit surveyed the scene with considerable regret: he would have liked to have stayed to watch the fun. But orders were orders.

Sam had buried his charges between two saplings about twenty yards apart. The moon was waning, but the shiny black stalks of slow fuse could be seen sprouting out of the ground at regular intervals. Flatout's watch greenly indicated zero minus five. The moon dipped into the blackness behind a distant mountain. Zero minus one.

Sapper Dunnit went to work with well-rehearsed skill. The head of a match was pressed against the core of the first fuse, and the matchbox struck against it. The match spluttered into flame, the core of the fuse glowed . . . The second fuse was ignited, then the third, fourth, fifth and sixth, with methodical precision. Then, in obedience to rule six, Sam rushed blindly down the khud into the chaung below.

From up the hill came six evenly spaced bangs, testifying to the skill of his work. Sam grinned.

Then six distant booms from the direction of the bridge echoed down the valley.

From the distance came the rattle of automatic fire. Sam turned about. . . . Should he go back? No, the old Skip had told him to fade, so best obey orders, or he might muck everything up. An enormous bang which sent the wind whistling through the trees told him that the operation was over. Good old Charlie.

The chaung was dry and sandy. Trees overhung the banks. In the deep shadows fireflies flickered lunatic Morse to each other. Sam was blind to these things: he was thinking how good it was to be alone, walking like this in the warm night air.

For four years he had always been one of a crowd, ordered here, ordered there, always in the company of others. "Even in the perishin' lats," he muttered resentfully, thereby echoing the heart cry of the soldier since the earliest days of militarism.

"Private soldier!" He laughed bitterly. "Bung-all privacy in the Army, I reckon." Why, this was the first time he had been really alone to do as he liked and go as he pleased. But it wouldn't last. . . . No, it wouldn't be long before . . .

And there a great light dawned, for, as has been seen, the only fault in the magnificent scheme to blow the bridge was that no provision had been made for reassembling after the action.

Sapper Dunnit's first reaction to the uncomfortable thought that he was to all intents and purposes a babe in the wood was pleasure. Now he could do as he liked—walk or stop, sleep, drink. . . . Here he pulled up with a start. Where was he to find water? Never before in the whole of his career had he had to conjure water out of the earth; it had always been done under the direction of

officers who had an obscure magic called navigation.

He looked upward automatically. Overhead the sky was turning from rose-pink to orange. "Better climb up and 'ave a dekko," he muttered, and proceeded to make his way laboriously up the steep khud.

WHEN he reached the top, he sat down and automatically reached for his water bottle. It was half full, but he had two good swigs before common sense got the better of him and made him put it back on his equipment.

Sapper Dunnit wandered along the top of the thickly wooded hill, looking for an open space from which he would get a view of the surrounding country. At length a fallen tree provided the window he needed, and he eagerly scanned the country before him for signs of water or habitation. In the distance, olive-gray mountains towered into the sky. Before him lay a valley, banked by high hills covered by dense foliage of every known shade of green. The valley, or plateau, was a teak forest, and the sun, straight ahead, showed the massive trunks glinting grayly through the undergrowth. Beautiful, no doubt, but little comfort to a man seeking food and water.

It occurred to Sam that it might not be the direction he wanted, anyway. "Don't want to get bloomin' well lost!" . . . He pulled out his map and studied it carefully. There seemed to be a lot of villages on it, but, of course, if one didn't know where one was to start with . . . Ah, a river—the old Bula . . . they had crossed that several weeks ago. . . . Well, according to this map, it stretched from almost due north to nearly southeast, so all he had to do was to head northeast until he hit it, then travel upstream until he arrived at "Aberdeen." Easy. . . . Then a thought struck him: "'Old on, where is this ruddy north?"

The question puzzled him quite a bit, as it has undoubtedly puzzled many others to whom the arts of navigation are a mystery. He knew that the sun was the clue, but, although he must have been told many times the solution to this particular problem, it had not seemed important enough to remember.

All he had to do was point the hour hand of his watch at the sun and bisect the horizontal line between it and the figure twelve to find due south. Instead of this, he started working out a complicated calculation, based on the fact that dawn had been at approximately five forty-five, and that it was now nearly nine o'clock. The sun, therefore, must now be approximately southeast. To find northeast, he pointed his right arm to the sun and his left arm at right angles to his right. Then he looked along his left arm. He remembered the new army phrase, "Line o' my arm," and chuckled. Then, serious again, he looked hard and long to try and find something in the distance to give him a guide.

There were too many trees for him to get a proper view, so he climbed along the fallen tree until he found a better spot from which to take his observation. The country seemed much the same, pos-

sibly more hilly, but still the same unbroken jungle. He very wrongly decided that the best plan was to select an object close at hand, so chose a withered tree on the next hill. With that he was content, and, going back to where he had left his pack, decided to try to find something to eat before starting out.

A careful search yielded three biscuits, two packets of bouillon powder, three pieces of chewing gum, and a lot of crumbs. Wisely, he decided that the crumbs should be eaten first, then one of the biscuits. The rest would have to be kept until he was desperate. As for the water, he shook his bottle. Not much there—better hang on to it.

Sam set off down the hill full of confidence. The fact that he didn't know how far he had to go, that he had no food or water, that he knew nothing of the difficulties of navigating in jungle, that even with map, compass and plentiful supplies it is still the hardest going in the world, did not worry him, because he did not think about it. He imagined that he had worked out his direction, that he was bound to hit the river if he went straight, and that if it were too far to reach in a day or two, he would surely come across a village on the way.

As a matter of fact, on rounding the first wide clump of bamboo, he turned due north. On rounding the second, he headed northwest. By the time he reached the top of the hill in front of him, the withered tree was about three hundred yards behind him, well out of sight.

He had been marching for nearly two hours without a break, so he decided to rest. Then the thought of water struck him, and, in spite of the now intense heat, a cold shiver ran down his spine. He must have been mad not to have realized its importance before. He must have water. What hope was there for him if he couldn't find any? . . . To hell with navigation! The river might be two or three days' journey away. He must concentrate on finding water right away.

Water! Amazing how thirsty the word made one feel. He scanned the country in front of him. "Trees, nothing but perishin' trees . . . Only Gawd could make a tree—must 'ave worked overtime 'ere. . . . Well, Sam, you won't find water on top of a ruddy 'ill."

He made his way down to the foot of the hill and struck off across the valley. He decided to keep to the low ground until he found a chaung.

Presently, he realized that he must stop and rest; to keep on would mean exhaustion. He must husband his strength. Sapper Dunnit was beginning to learn wisdom. He flung himself down in the shade of a clump of bamboo, took off his boots and equipment, and soon fell sound asleep. He slept the clock 'round.

When Sam awakened, the night was far advanced. The moon turned the teak trees into silver pillars and cast long shadows in which the firefly flashes gleamed like the twinkling lights of a city. That gave him an idea. If there were any villages around, they would probably show a light of some sort. He decided to climb the nearest hill and see what he could find.

His equipment seemed unbearably

heavy, although there was little in it to make it so, and his rifle sling cut into his thin shoulders as he climbed the steep hillside. His almost overpowering thirst came back after the first few yards. By the time he reached the top, he was panting with exhaustion.

In every direction he looked, lights flickered, but he realized that these were fireflies, that what he must find was a steady flame. But no . . . nothing but the jungle. Despair tore at his heart. . . . He was alone, lost, without hope. "Gawd," he muttered as, in his weakness, tears started to his eyes. He turned and wandered brokenly down the slope.

"Craak . . . craak . . . craak . . ."

He stopped, his heart pounding with excitement. There it was again—over to his right. "Craak . . . craak . . . craak . . ." Bullfrogs! That meant water.

As fast as the dim light would let him, he made his way to the spot from which the sound was issuing. He knew that on his arrival all croaking would cease, so he had to stalk the sound with the utmost care. At last he could see something shining in the distance, something which glinted silver among the trees—the moon, reflected in water. Sam doubled forward.

Yes, there, among the reeds, was a long, narrow, shiny strip of wetness from which the face of the reflected full moon looked up mockingly. Mud, evil-smelling, slimy mud. Sam was disappointed: he had expected to find a sweet, rippling stream from which he could drink his fill and wash his body and his clothes. Now he would have to dig. For he imagined that water lay beneath the surface. So, without more ado, he set to with his machete.

He had selected a spot adjacent to the mudhole, and after three quarters of an hour he had dug a hole about two feet square and two-foot-six deep. It had been hard work, for the soil had to be removed by hand, but he was satisfied that, when the water filtered in from the mudhole, it would be drinkable. With that, he sat down to wait. He was tired and thirsty, so, without hesitation, drank what was left in his water bottle.

He must have dozed off, for the sun was up and he was able to see the kind of predicament he was in. The hole he had dug was bone-dry, and he now understood why. The mudhole was all that remained of a pond formed during the monsoon. Months of fine weather and intense heat had gradually evaporated all the water so that only about four inches of mud remained. On the top of this a fine veneer of water still remained.

WELL, he had to have water somehow. He unfastened his tin mug and sank it up to its rim in an endeavor to drain off the surface water, but it didn't work. There was only one thing left. Taking a handkerchief from his haversack, he filled it with the mud, then, gathering the four corners together, he twisted them until the pressure forced some black, evil-smelling water through the handkerchief into the tin mug.

Sapper Dunnit tasted the water and retched. It was stagnant and had an

awful tang of decay; there was sufficient mud in it to coat the roof of his mouth, but it was water, so patiently he went on with his straining until he had filled his water-bottle.

From the top of the nearest hill he tried again to find his direction. He had waited until twelve o'clock, when he realized that the sun would be due south, and this time he chose a more distant landmark—twin mountains with spiky tops, almost on the skyline. He ate the two remaining biscuits and tightened his belt to try to combat the awful gnawing hunger, and set out on his journey.

THE sun was blazing down and Sam's gait became slower and slower. The lack of water and salt was taking effect, and his mighty physique was feeling the strain. The lack of sugar was becoming noticeable, too, in a dulling of the perceptive sense. The journey became harder; it became more difficult to decide whether to go left or right of a clump of bamboo. The whole thing was like a dream, in which aching shoulders, parched lips and gnawing pain in one's middle were part of the plot. . . . The trees slid past easily enough, so it must be all right. What was important was burying one's charges evenly apart . . . strike the box on the match . . . don't try to light the fuse like a cigarette. . . . Zero . . . zero . . . land fit for zeros. . . .

Sam's body wandered as erratically as his mind, but by some strange fortune it wandered in the direction of the village of Pindor, though it was not until Sam fell into the foxhole dug by the Japanese to guard the entrance that he realized where he was. He struggled out on to the path. His pale-blue eyes showed signs of returning intelligence as he saw the ruins of a burnt-out pagoda, with its adjoining monastery also showing signs of recent fire.

Sam became alert. There might be Japs in the village. He must proceed cautiously. Then it occurred to him that if there had been Japs about, they would have posted a sentry in the foxhole into which he had fallen. With more confidence, he began walking toward the village.

More signs of devastation were apparent. On his left, a large wooden house had been gutted by fire; there were still a number of houses standing, but all were deserted. Flowers and vegetables were growing in the garden, but the occupants had disappeared.

Hungrily, Sam helped himself to tomatoes, onions and bananas. The mixture was too strong for his weakened stomach and he was horribly ill. He staggered up the steps of a house on to the veranda. A chatty of cool water stood in a shady corner, and he helped himself liberally. Inside the house was a bedroom containing a large, carved, teak bed. Throwing off his equipment, he lay down and was soon sound asleep.

With Sam safely disposed of, the village came mysteriously to life. In the back gardens of houses, wooden trapdoors were raised and incredibly ancient men and women crawled out of cunningly concealed hiding-places. They had

a hurried consultation and agreed that since there was only one soldier, and he, obviously, an Englishman, there was no danger; that, in fact, they might be rewarded if they took care of him. If the English arrived first, they would get silver for looking after the soldier; if the Japanese came, they would hand him over and pretend they had taken him prisoner. Then, perhaps, some of their young men would be allowed to return.

A sound awoke Sam Dunnit with a start. It was the sound of a giggle. The sun, though low, was shining redly in through the window. He looked toward the veranda and his heart gave a thump. There stood the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her hair was raven-black and decorated with white flowers, her skin was the color of creamy coffee, and her face, dimpled with laughter, was of such loveliness that it almost hurt him to look at it—enormous wide-spaced eyes of rippling gold, high cheekbones, which gave a heart-shaped effect to the otherwise rounded face. His gaze swept over her, taking in the bare shoulders and firm breasts which defied the tightness of her brilliant green *lungyi* to hide their perfection. Like a man in a dream he rose and went toward her, expecting that at any moment she would vanish. But no, she was still there when his hungry, outstretched hands touched her naked shoulders . . . she was still there when he crushed her little body to him in an embrace he was to remember for the rest of his life. . . . She was still there the next morning when the two old cronies, Ma Thwa and Ma Tin Tin, arrived with two wooden bowls of stew for the lovers to eat.

Sam had learned that the girl's name was Ma Ma Galay, and she had been taught to say "Sahm," but that was all they said to each other that was at all intelligible. What did it matter? They had each other, and the whole sunshiny world was theirs. They wandered through the woods, picking wild orchids from the trees, or lay, naked, in the warm, swift-running stream, watching the glittering specks of gold dust sparkling on each other's bodies. They ate the succulent dishes prepared by the ever-helpful Ma Thwa and Ma Tin Tin.

If they were not welcomed to the houses of the older members of this strange village of ancients, why should they worry?

Days rolled lazily by, and nights spent rapturously passed all too quickly. Clouds now invaded the skies, and sometimes light showers heralded the approach of the monsoon. The old people were busy repairing the bunds in the paddy fields and sometimes Sam and Ma Ma Galay would go out and lend a hand where the need for more youthful vigor was apparent. It was a lazy life, and Sam enjoyed every minute of it. The thoughts of reaching "Aberdeen," so as to fly back to civilization to carry on the war, receded from his mind. The little village of Pindor was heaven. He would be a fool to go. . . . So Sam decided not to be a fool.

Then one day a British officer limped into the village. He was short, dark and heavily bearded; he carried a rucksack and supported himself by leaning on a long pole. He limped painfully, and Sam

jumped to his feet and went forward to assist him up the steps of the veranda. The stranger held out his hand and shook Sam's cordially.

"My name's Masters—Tom Masters, Major, Burma Rifles."

He fumbled with the breast pocket of his bush jacket and pulled out a red, Indian-pattern identity card.

"Best to make sure who you are talking to."

Sam pulled out his A.B.64 and handed it over. "Sam Dunnit, sir. Sapper."

These formalities concluded, they told each other of their various adventures before reaching Pindor.

"I owe a bit of an apology, Dunnit. I knew you had arrived six weeks ago. I, by the way, have been in the next village, Bunlebin, for over a year—a relic of Wingate's first expedition. Got shot in the thigh by an explosive bullet. I was getting on nicely until I fell down one of those blasted foxholes and the whole thing went bad on me. However, all right now. Healed up nicely, but still a bit sore. I shall be glad to get back to where they have X-rays. I didn't make myself known before because I didn't want to be a responsibility in case the Japs returned."

"How do you mean, return, sir?"

"Well, they came through this way before, collecting labor for their underground defenses of the Sunchaung Gorge. Now that your chaps have blown the bridge, they will be bringing them back, and billeting their troops in the village. I had an awful time when they were in Bunlebin: the Burmese hid me down a disused well full of every kind of terror that wriggles and crawls. Incidentally, old chap, that is why I have come to you—we have got to get out. Quickly, too. It would be better if we left this evening, I feel."

SAM went rather red in the face. "Well, sir, as far as I am concerned, there is a bit of a complication. My young lady . . ."

"Oh, you mean Ma Ma Galay? Yes, I heard you were having a good time. Well, never mind—just bid her a fond farewell. . . . And, look here, you can give her this."

On his little finger was a ring of Indian workmanship. He pulled it off and offered it to Sam, who went purple and backed away as if he had been stung.

"I don't think you quite understand, sir. My young lady, that is, and I are going to be married. If I go, she goes with me. You see, sir, we're in love."

Tom Masters' look of bewilderment changed to one of infinite pity. . . . The poor young fellow couldn't speak a blighted word of Burmese, so how could he possibly know? But what to do? Sam Dunnit looked such a decent fellow, he just couldn't bring himself to tell the blunt truth. Not yet, anyway.

"Sapper Dunnit, you are still in the Army, and, as your senior officer, I order you to leave this village with me alone at dusk today."

The hangdog look of abject misery on Sam's face was almost more than he could bear. He had kept his voice as

cold as he could. If Sam hated him, it was not more than he hated himself for the misery he was causing.

Sam's voice was so deep as to be almost inaudible. He didn't look at Masters, and the shaking of his hands testified to the agony of his feelings.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't want this to appen. I've always tried to be a good soldier. I know you got to 'ave discipline, but this is different some'ow. I hate to think of you 'obblin' through the jungle with that there leg—I do straight. Why, sir, if you'll let my young lady come, too, I'll carry you on my back all the way. You're only a little 'un and I could easy manage it. . . . But when it comes to leavin' Ma Ma Galay, why it's just like tearing my insides out. You see, sir, she is the only really beautiful thing that as ever appened to me; she has changed my whole outlook on life. Why, sir, I used to look at sunsets and think they was just one color, while now I feel that if I live to be a 'undred I won't have time to appreciate the whole of their beauty. Chaps like me, born poor, don't 'ave much beauty in their lives, and it seems to me this is my one chance to really live. . . . I'm sorry, sir, but that is all I 'ave to say."

THE sincerity and humility of this handsome red-headed giant wrung Tom's heartstrings. What could he do? He put one hand on the sapper's shoulder.

"Look here, Sam . . . I'm in an awful fix. . . . I didn't want to tell you, because I didn't want to spoil your dreams. But the Japs are on their way here so we have got to move anyway—and even if we hadn't, you'd have found out as soon as you picked up the language.

"You see, Sam, old man, you never stopped to think why all the young people should have been taken and only Ma Ma Galay left behind. They only leave behind the very old and the sick. Well, there is nothing wrong with Ma Ma Galay's body, as no doubt you know. She is sick, very sick, in her mind."

"You mean she's daft, sir?"

"Yes, I'm afraid she is. You can't understand what she says, but I can, and I'm afraid she doesn't talk intelligibly—just prattles on about flowers, insects, birds, almost everything except anything connected with the real life she lives. Even you are among her dreams. You are 'Shive Thakin'—'the golden man who dances on the clouds.'"

Sam's face was ashen. "But, sir, even if she is sick I cannot leave her. I'll take her back and take her to one of them trick-cyclists. . . . I must do what I can for her, I'll never stop loving her. Please let her come, sir. After all, she is quite harmless."

Tom looked at Sam thoughtfully. He had certainly been bitten pretty hard. Probably his first affair, and Ma Ma Galay was certainly a beauty. It would have to be the surgeon's knife . . .

He limped over to where the ancient villagers were chattering together and gave some crisp orders. They hurried away, to return presently with chatties brimming over with water.

"Well, Sam, I am not going to say

any more. Take this box of matches and Ma Ma Galay down the garden and light a little fire. I want you to get the girl to help. If, after this, you still want to bring her, all right—we will take her to 'Aberdeen' with us. But don't forget—I wanted you to keep living in your fool's paradise. It is you who are tearing it down."

Wondering what it all meant, Sam picked up the matches and took Ma Ma Galay by the arm and led her to an open space in the overgrown garden. Here he collected dry sticks and dead leaves and, with a couple of stones, built a fire which was soon crackling gaily. When Ma Ma Galay saw what he was doing, she clapped her hands and started to help him with enthusiasm, chuckling and talking excitedly. Suddenly, without any warning, she seized a brand from the fire and rushed with it to the house. Before he could stop her, she had set fire to the eaves and had darted round the back to set fire to the storeroom. Sam dashed after her and caught her by the shoulder. Without hesitation, she jabbed the burning brand in his face, setting his beard alight, and raced away.

That Sam was not disfigured for life was due to the prompt action of Ma Tin Tin, who dashed the contents of her chatty into his face. After ten minutes of strenuous fire-fighting, the house was saved, and Ma Ma Galay was sent down to the river for a nice bath, while Tom and Sam prepared their plans for the journey to "Aberdeen."

"You see, Sam," Tom explained, "there was a series of mysterious fires in the village just after I arrived at Bunlebin. Nobody knew who it was until Ma Ma Galay's father, mother and baby brother were burned to death in their beds. They searched the ashes for signs of the girl's body, but, of course, could find nothing. Then old Ma Tin Tin discovered her sleeping blissfully on the river bank, with a burnt-out brand by her side. After that they watched her carefully. However, in spite of their vigilance, she burned down the pagoda about a week before you arrived."

Sam was examining Major Masters' oil compass with exaggerated interest. "And to think that if I had only had one of these 'ere, I would never 'ave come to this blighted village."

I SHALL NOT WANT

AFTER the bridge over the Sunchaung Gorge had been blown, Piper Jay, muleteer and evangelist, trotted away in the breaking dawn with the warm feeling of a deed well done. He had helped to plan this coup, which must be one of the greatest blows struck at the Japanese by the whole brigade during the campaign.

"Praise the Lord." They had succeeded in cutting the enemy supply route in a way which might have a tremendous effect on the whole war in Burma. "I will break also the bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitant from the plain of Aven. Amos. 1, 5," he muttered, "And now to get together again and go off to a village for a good scoff."

Piper Jay pulled the mule to a halt. A cold sweat broke out on him, for the

dreadful truth had just dawned: They had made no arrangement for meeting after the action. They had given out no dispersal points, they were all on their own, at least a week away from the column dispersal line, and about a month from the airstrip.

HE FELT terribly guilty. Captain Belforth, the sapper officer, had relied upon him to suggest all the infantry organization and he had forgotten that very elementary precaution. Well, for that matter, so had all the others; they had been so intent on organizing the coup that not one of them had thought of what would come afterwards. Well, it was a case of every man for himself. Brother Jay's philosophy was all-embracing. Here he was, in enemy-infested territory, with an inadequate sketch map, no compass, no rations, and no water. At least a month's journey in front of him, and yet he was not in the least bit worried as to the future. He had the most complete faith in the Almighty. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" meant to him exactly what the words said. He had no doubt but that the Lord would provide.

He had arrived at a small wooded chaung, so he dismounted, tied Barbara to a tree, and made his plan of action. First of all, he drew a compass card on a piece of paper, then looked at his map—at least, it had the villages marked on it, that was something. The nearest village was about four miles northwest, so he had better make for that. He needed water and food. His map did not contain enough detail for him to find water, so a village it had to be. Suppose there were Japs in it? Well, he still had to find a village and there was not one any nearer than that. Anyway, what did he care? "The fear of man bringeth a snare, but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe. Prov. 29, 25," he said to himself, with some satisfaction.

He then made a mental inventory of his possessions in the manner of Robinson Crusoe. He had the usual equipment, including a Sten gun and three magazines, which all muleteers had, and a .38 pistol which had been issued to him as a piper. He lightened his equipment by putting his blanket and ground sheet on the mule. In repacking his pack he discovered a small quantity of biscuits, two lumps of sugar and a stick of chewing gum. Breakfast.

Now to take the bearing: This was not so easy. He took his improvised compass and pointed the "E" at the rising sun; he then put a pencil on the card pointing to "N.W." and looked along the pencil. In the distance was a range of mountains and the pencil pointed to the right of one of them. He studied it carefully, because his only hope of going straight was to aim at this particular mountain. Ah, yes, there was a distinct hump on the top, slightly to the left. He took the card away, turned himself around three times, then tried to identify the mountain. Yes, there it was, the bump, as plain as anything. He checked it up with the card and the sun. Right.

The sun was now a fiery ball about

a yard above the hills and rising rapidly. He put on his equipment and, leaping onto Barbara's patient back, rode off.

The country he was passing through was extremely difficult; the hills were steep and the slopes rocky. He had to choose his way carefully and try to keep the mountain with the bump in sight. Naturally this was not always possible, especially in the low ground or in thickly wooded patches. Frequently, on crossing some high ground, he would realize that he was going out of his way and have to turn right or left to get back onto his line.

After two hours, as near as he could judge—for he had no watch—he was still unable to see the village, so tethering Barbara to a tree, he climbed to the top of a hill on his left. It was difficult going, the surface was crumbly and most of the studs were missing from his boots. At last he was on top. It seemed a tremendous height from the valley below, but the view was good and if the village were anywhere in front he would see it. No buildings were to be seen anywhere, but a patch of brilliant green caught his eye, away to the west. That might be paddy. Anyway, it was worth investigating. Perilously, he descended the hill. A sprained ankle at this stage would mean death, or incredible discomfort.

The hill descended steeply to a narrow valley, through which ran a dried-up chaung. Then suddenly he came across the path. That settled it. He was on the right route. Mounting Barbara once more, he rode on slowly. Of course, he was not more than seven or eight miles from the enemy post at Sunchaung, so it was more than probable that the village would be occupied. He must be strong in his faith. Quietly he murmured the words of the Seventy-first Psalm: "In Thee, O Lord, do I put my trust. . . ." The patch of green turned out to be a bed of tobacco plants. The country around was thickly wooded, and still he could see no signs of the village. Beyond the tobacco was another plantation. The plants were pale-green, with blobs of scarlet here and there. "Tomatoes! Boy, oh boy, oh boy!"

By the time he got to them, after hiding Barbara among some thick bushes, his mouth was watering. They were small, some only the size of a cherry, but sweet and ripe. He gathered handfuls of them and ate them.

"Leave my tomatoes alone!"

He looked up with a start. A young Burmese woman stood before him. She was not beautiful, but her skin was light and her features regular. Her black hair was drawn back into a bun and decorated with white flowers. A green *lungyi* was bound tightly around her slim figure, crushing her full breasts flat against her body and leaving her shoulders bare. To anyone but Piper Jay, a provocative and attractive sight.

Piper Jay was amazed. He could have sworn someone spoke to him in English.

"You are stealing my tomatoes!"

This time there was no doubt about it being true.

"I am sorry, lady, but, you see, I am starving. But tell me how it is that you speak English."

The woman looked at him. Yes, he

certainly looked starving. She had a kind heart, and the English, though a foolish race, were generous. Perhaps he would give her something.

"I went to Mission School, Rangoon side. I was *ayah* to aristocrat family. When bombing starts I come back to home."

"Then you are a Christian?"

Her eyes shifted guiltily. "Oh, yes. I am saying prayers every day."

"Praise the Lord! Then you can take me to your home and give me food and water for my mule."

A look of swift alarm crossed her face.

"No, no, there is Japanese agent in the village. Every day Japanese soldiers come and take food and men to work."

"But I must have food and water; so must my mule. And I must get to . . ." He stopped himself in time—no good telling her too much. "I must go to the north; you must tell me where to go for help. Look . . ." He took one of the silver rupees which all troops carried against emergencies and held it up in front of her face. Her eyes widened and she looked at it greedily. Two years ago she would have scorned it—a rupee meant nothing to her—but silver. . . . Her uncle was so clever at making jewelry, she would have a pair of earrings.

"I cannot take you to the village, but down there"—she pointed—"is running water. Wait for me there and I will bring what I can—but don't steal any more of my tomatoes." And she left.

Piper Jay went on collecting tomatoes: after all, she might not come back. He filled his mosquito head net with them, then untied Barbara and led her down to the chaung, where she could drink her fill and graze on the coarse grass, while he filled his water bottle and chargal.

HIS hand leapt to his revolver as the bushes rustled behind him. It was only the girl returning, laden with parcels.

"This is some curry for you to eat. This is rice, this tobacco, and this tea. Here is a note to our cousin, Elmo, the headman of Mingon, a village about twenty miles north. He is not a Christian, but he will help you, I think."

Piper Jay gratefully handed over the silver rupee, and, getting his spoon out of his haversack, fell to with a will.

The girl watched him as he ate. He was not a bad-looking boy, though not like the ones she used to meet at the dance halls Rangoon side, but his thinness and pallor appealed to the woman in her. Besides, he had kind eyes and he might have another silver rupee.

He packed the parcels and the rest of the curry into his almost empty pack and was preparing to move when, to his surprise, she sat down next to him.

"You may do what you want, but you must be quick—my father will be waiting for me."

He looked at her and read the unmistakable invitation in her eyes.

"If you wish to please me, sister, then kneel with me and pray." He knelt down a few yards away, facing the west, and covered his face with his hands. To his great surprise, the girl went over and knelt beside him.

That night Brother Jay made camp on top of a small knoll. Barbara was tethered just below him, to avoid being silhouetted against the sky. They had made good going that afternoon, about eight miles or more, and he was pleasantly tired. He ate the rest of the curry with no misgivings; he felt sure that something would turn up the next day. Anyway, he had about two pounds of rice, which would at least keep him alive.

THERE were times when he rather wished that he smoked and this was one of them, but since he'd given that up, he had no intention of going back on his vows. It was too dark to read his Testament, so he lay under his ground-sheet cover, on his blanket, with his head resting on his pack, and said his prayers. Soon sleep overtook him. The night was quiet. The usual jungle noises were not in evidence, the only sound was the scratchy patter-patter of the inch-long ants scurrying along the large dead leaves which carpeted the ground.

As the sun rose, Piper Jay was ready with his compass card to take a bearing on the distant mountains. His rough navigation the day before had given him confidence. The village of Mingon was slightly east of due north of the village he had stopped at the day before, so he decided to go due north. By mid-day he hoped to be able to see it from the top of a hill. Meanwhile he needed water for Barbara.

The country was very varied: there were patches of thickly wooded forest, large open spaces where the forest had been burnt down, forests of giant trees widely spaced, and dense thickets of bamboo.

He made his first halt at a bamboo thicket and tied the mule up while he cut a large quantity of bamboo shoots for her, then he looked around for water while she was eating. He found a small chaung which, though dry, looked promising, so he started digging with his dar. It was hard work because he had to shovel the earth and stones out with his hands, but as the hole showed signs of getting wetter and wetter, he kept on. After half an hour of back-breaking labor, muddy water started oozing into the hole. He continued pulling out double handfuls of mud until the water got clearer, although, of course, it was still pretty muddy. He filled the canvas bucket and let it settle. Yes, that was drinkable—he had drunk worse himself. Barbara, at any rate, seemed to appreciate it.

They moved off again in better spirits, although Jay was by this time feeling pretty hungry. The sun seemed unusually hot, and, although he rode whenever they came to even ground, Jay soon began to feel tired. Marching on an empty stomach was always exhausting and, when you had no salt and an insufficiency of water, the strain became acute. Still they plodded on.

By midday, Jay was just about all in. He was riding the mule, but the lack of a saddle had made him so sore that he could hardly bear it; yet marching was more than he could manage at any more

than a snail's pace. He was singing quietly, "Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove," when it suddenly occurred to him how nice it would be if a plane would land and pick him up and take him to the airstrip. Lightheadedly he began to pray for an airplane. His thoughts wandered somewhat, but the main theme was that the heavens were to open and a plane was to be deposited in a clearing in the wood. He prayed to all the people he could think of, and psalms jumbled and tumbled about as he asked the Almighty to send him an airplane.

The woods thinned out and gradually opened into an uncultivated paddy field. There, as large as life, in the middle of the paddy field, was a light plane, and standing by it was its pilot. Brother Jay was not in the least surprised.

Not nearly as surprised as the pilot, when out of the wood rode a thin young man whose eyes burned feverishly, who looked like St. John the Baptist, and who rode straight up to him and said politely, "I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"Kept me waiting! Say, what's all this? If it's any interest to you, I've been here for two days."

"That's funny," said Piper Jay, "I only prayed for you this morning."

"Oh, so you prayed for me, and I came, eh? Waal, stranger, take a gander at that wheel. If you want to get out of here, you'd better start praying for a spare wheel mighty quick."

Piper Jay tried to dismount but was too weak, so he stumbled and fell. He had been marching for the best part of six days with hardly any food and his emaciated body had had about all it could take. The American pilot caught him and lowered him gently to the ground.

"Poor kid, you've sure had a tough time. Drink this." He poured some whiskey down Jay's throat. It had the desired effect; the evangelist sat up, considerably horrified.

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that, sir. You see, I'm a Christian. I never touch alcohol or tobacco."

"Well, I guess we're all Christians, eh? As for the liquor, it's a matter of taste. All I know is, I'd give a lot for the makings of a cigarette."

"I have some tobacco, sir." Piper Jay opened his pack and took out one of the parcels, which was wrapped in banana leaf and fastened with a thorn. He undid it. Inside was a dark brown crumbly substance, which he handed to the pilot officer. "Native stuff, sir. A lady friend gave it to me."

"Thanks, pal. Now, let's get this clear—we'll cut out the 'sir.' All my friends call me Joe. What's your moniker?"

"Well, sir—Joe, I mean—all the boys call me Brother, on account of me being a Christian."

"Brother it is, then." By this time he had rolled himself a cigarette and lit it. "Say, brother, this stuff here is pretty lousy tobacco."

"In that case," said Jay philosophically, "it is probably the tea," and he handed over the other parcel.

Joe gave him a queer look, but there was nothing in Piper Jay's face to make him think that a joke had been intended.

"Tea? I sure could go for some of that. Let's go along to the village and cook ourselves a meal. Like a prize idiot I came away with only one day's ration. I feel as if my navel were beating against my spine."

Jay took out his letter of introduction. "We shall be all right in the village. My lady friend gave me a letter to the headman there, name of Elmo."

"Well, Brother, I'm afraid you're too late. In the words of the song, 'Elmo doesn't live here any more.' The village has been deserted for some time. This food question is pretty bad. Say, can't you rustle up a few prayers for a nice, juicy steak? But seriously, Brother, we'll starve if we can't think of something. You don't look as if you'd fed for a month, and me, well, I'm just not used to not eating."

"As a Christian, I put my trust in the Lord, Joe. Look at the Prophet Elijah. When he was in the wilderness, starving, ravens fed him."

"Ravens fed him . . . ravens fed him!" He banged Jay on the back so hard he nearly knocked him down. "Why, Brother, you've got something there. This village has thousands of blackbirds—big ones. I could knock over half a dozen with that Sten gun of yours and we could make a big stew. There are still some potatoes and chives in the village, and it would last us several days. How about that?"

"Those birds are pretty dirty eaters, Joe."

"Never mind—the dirtier the eater, the sweeter the meat. Look at prawns—live on dead bodies."

"Okay. I'm game for a good scoff."

They arrived in the village. It was quiet and deserted. The inhabitants must have fled suddenly, for they had left behind quite a lot of valuable goods, presumably because they couldn't carry them. There was a sewing machine in one house, and in most of them the larger cooking pots had been left behind. It was a small village without either monastery or pagoda—just a collection of well-made houses on wooden props. The Japanese had obviously been there, because the usual round foxholes had been dug in all the gardens. They selected the best house and the pilot officer went off to shoot carrion crows, while Piper Jay prepared a fire and drew water from the well.

The pot was bubbling on the fire, so he went out to collect vegetables. The villagers had taken all they could with them, but other stuff had grown since they left. There were potatoes in plenty, a few tomatoes and a number of leeks. Added to this were the chives which every villager grows in a pot on the veranda, chillies, and mint—and, of course, the rice from the last village.

JOE came into the compound dragging about a dozen of the horrible birds with him. It had been too easy. He shot one, then, when the others pounced on it, he picked them off. They always came back; he could have shot a hundred with no trouble at all.

"Take your shirt off, Brother, when

you help me skin these—they're covered with lice."

They set to. It was an unpleasant job. They cut off heads, wings and the lower parts of the legs, with Jay's dar, then cut the skin down the front from the neck, pulled it over the wings and off at the legs, like taking a suit of rompers off a child; raked out the innards with one finger, washed the bird in a bowl of water, and threw it in among the boiling vegetables. Not very appetizing so far, but soon the memory of the unpleasantness faded and the thought of a large stew brought back their appetites.

They sat on the steps of the house and, to fill in the time, told each other their adventures up to date. The American was impressed with Piper Jay's story: his own was pretty uninteresting. He was out on reconnaissance when his petrol feed jammed and he had to make a forced landing. He had circled around, wildly looking for a place to land, and had spotted the paddy field. He had hit one of the bunds with a wheel and smashed it. As he didn't know which village this was, and as there was nobody to ask, he hadn't been able to work out the bearing back to camp.

"Well, that's all right, I know it," said Jay. "It's Mingon, so, if you have a map, we can set off after lunch and try to get back."

"Suits me," said Joe.

It is curious that neither of them worried about the possibility of Japs visiting the village. Perhaps at the back of their minds they realized that they wouldn't stand an earthly chance, so they might as well enjoy themselves.

AFTER a bath at the well, Piper Jay felt fit for anything, and just then the stew began to give off delicious aromas. The lack of salt was a pity, but could not be helped. Joe tested the bird flesh from time to time to see if it was cooked, but it remained pretty tough until it had been cooking for about two hours. At last the great moment came, and they dished up two mess tins full of stew. Both were rather chary of eating the meat, but Joe made a start and pronounced it delicious. Piper Jay risked a mouthful and found it quite edible. The meat was dark, tender and juicy, but with practically no flavor. However, the onions and potatoes were tasty, and it was good to get one's teeth into something, anything.

Afterwards, they studied the map. The airstrip was northeast; due east of them was a river and a road, both of which went north to the airstrip. They decided to get to the river and travel up it—at least they would have fresh water all the way. Also there were villages on the road which could possibly supply food from time to time. The only danger was meeting the enemy. Well, they could do that almost anywhere at all, so why not travel in comfort?

There was a track of sorts from Mingon to the main road, so that traveling should be fairly easy, even at night. Joe took the compass off the plane before setting fire to it, and off they marched. Barbara, having gorged herself off the

contents of the gardens in the village, ambled contentedly in the rear. The night was clear and the early moon gave plenty of light, so they continued on in an effort to reach the river that night. Joe was feeling the strain of marching, even though he had no pack.

"Say, Brother, my dogs are beginning to bark—I don't think I can go much further."

"Even the youths shall faint and be weary and the young men shall utterly fall."

"Come again."

"Isaiah. fortieth chapter, thirtieth verse."

"Oh."

The pilot officer mounted on the mule and found that riding at night wasn't so good. His face was a target for all the leaves, creepers and cobwebs which bridged the path, his seat was uncomfortable with the hard web siringle beneath him. However, it was better than skinning his feet any more. . . .

On and on into the night. Just before the moon went down, they came to the Bula River.

In the silver light the river looked majestic and immense. Thick, black woods covered the far bank, the near bank was higher and sparsely covered with bushes and clumps of bamboo. They found a well-concealed, dry, sandy chaung, and very soon were bedded down for the night. Joe was asleep almost before his head touched the pillow of banked-up sand. Piper Jay managed one quick prayer before sleep overtook him. Barbara, after a brief roll in the sand, settled into a deep oblivion.

The next morning the pilot officer, as senior member of the party, insisted on making a reconnaissance of the road the other side of the river. "But, for the love of Mike, keep your ears and eyes open. Brother, because it may be lousy with Japs, and you want to be ready to get out quick if I walk into it."

"I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower."

"What the . . ."

"Habakkuk, two, one."

"Huh."

Half an hour later, he returned, looking rather pale, but excited.

"Cheez, you never seen anything like it! There's hundreds of them all as dead as doornails. Come and have a look, and bring the donkey—and your gas mask."

The river was wide but shallow and the opposite bank gently sloped, so they had no difficulty in getting the mule across. But on the far bank she showed signs of distress. However, they drove her on through the woods, and when in sight of the road tied her to a tree, and went forward to investigate. The stench was sickening. Swollen, blackened corpses lay strewn across the road, some of them half eaten by pi-dogs, others burrit beyond recognition. Three trucks were standing in the road burned down to the chassis. The backs and cabs contained the charred bones of the occupants. Another truck had run off the road up the bank and looked as if it were trying to climb a tree.

Obviously there had been an ambush, and the Japs had walked into it. It looked like the work of flame-throwers.

but one couldn't be sure. Joe, who had been looking at the truck which had gone off the road, waved excitedly. Piper Jay went over to him.

"Brother, am I dreaming or am I dreaming? There is nothing wrong with this truck at all—look, the driver was shot through the head and the truck left the road. When it hit the tree, it stopped. There's plenty of petrol and the battery's okay. Help me get these bodies out, and we'll have it on the road in no time at all."

He was right. The truck was in good condition and he got it back on the road without a mishap.

"And now for the airstrip, about two hundred miles up this road."

"But what about Barbara?"

"Put her in the back."

"And Japs?"

"Say, are you on my side or not?"

"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"

"What's that?"

"Amos, third chapter, third verse."

"You sure know your stuff!"

The chief difficulty lay in the bridges. They had to stop and examine each one they came to. And just as well they did, because three of them were mined, and it took them the best part of an hour

to de-louse them. The petrol carried them to within five miles of the airstrip, but that last march was a pleasure. They could see the big Dakotas fly in at dusk, the bright lights of the runway, and the twinkling lights in the little villages at either end; they could hear the cheery laughter of the West Africans as they trundled barrels of fuel oil and petrol away to the dumps. As they drew nearer the sentries challenged them and let them pass, the Dakotas started flying again. They would be on one soon, and, after that, perhaps, home.

"Praise the Lord," said Piper Jay.

"Praise the Lord," said Joe. ■ ■