

MS-756-1³
Item 3. 100

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[IN THE 'AUCKLAND WAR
MEMORIAL MUSEUM' FILE
CONTAINING THIS MS.
IS A NOTE THAT THE TWO
CHILDREN WERE REFERRED
TO AS "JOAN AND PETER"
AND BUSBY WERE REFERRED
TO AS "MOLLIE AND ROBIN".]

2,458 words in Manuscript

It was a perfect tropical night in Singapore. The moonlit pattern of light and shadow through the rain trees was a delight as we took a late evening stroll before retiring. But it was the last night of peace in the Pacific. In the early hours of the next morning we were awakened by the first bombs that fell upon the city.

Three days before the fall of Singapore, after some two months of living under the strain of daily air attacks, amid the confusion of a city unsufficiently prepared and inadequately defended, we got away on a ship overcrowded with Asian and European women and children and some older men.

Toward evening of the first day at sea, after repeated enemy attempts to bomb our ship, five Japanese cruisers appeared over the horizon and signalled us to stop.

Clocktime ceased while we awaited our fate. At last came permission for us to take to the lifeboats. After thirty-six hours at sea, we were marooned for seven days on the coast of Sumatra. Then came two weeks journeyed day and night down the coast in a lifeboat. We were a company of seventeen men - mostly survivors from the Prince of Wales and the Repulse - and two women, Eileen Higgs, an Australian and I, a New Zealander.

Short rations, tropical storms, hours becalmed in the broiling sun, were our lot until, after a stormy and terrifying crossing of the Sunda Straits, we landed on the coast of Java. Here we hoped to reach safety, but instead within a few hours were taken prisoners by the Japanese. A stark experience of imprisonment in a native prison in Serang, West Java, under incredibly primitive conditions was followed by less rigorous interment with forty Dutch women and children in a house nearby.

During this time, when the guard on our house had been somewhat relaxed, we received word from an Indian neighbour asking us to come to his house that afternoon to meet a woman from Singapore who needed help. Here we met Mrs. Stanton, a slight dark haired Siamese woman and her small boy Peter.

Like ourselves she had come down the Sumatran coast in a lifeboat with her children, Joan and Peter. They had landed at Anga Lor, Java, and for some weeks had lived in a native village under the protection of the "Wedana" (the head of the village).

Now Mrs. Stanton had come to Serang, a twelve mile journey, hoping to find some way of arranging to get to Batavia (now Jakarta).

We gave her the address of the Y.W.C.A. where she could go for advice in the event of her reaching the city, though this seemed a remote possibility at the time.

During our conversation Peter, a fair haired boy of seven, with great brown eyes, sat cheerfully munching peanuts and equally cheerfully throwing the husks about the immaculate room, quite heedless of request to desist. "He's such a naughty boy" said Mrs. Stanton casting a fond and admiring gaze upon him.

Mrs. Stanton and Peter returned to the village and we heard nothing more of them for some time.

It was a red letter day when, a little later, Eileen and I were released from internment and set out in a Japanese army truck for Batavia, some sixty miles distant.

Here, completely destitute, we were received with incredible hospitality into the home of Edythe de Niet, the president of the Y.W.C.A. of Java.

Before long Mrs. Stanton and the children also reached Batavia and going to the Y.W.C.A. were given accommodation there until some more permanent plan could be made. Some weeks later Mrs. Stanton agreed to have the children placed in a Church home, directed by some Dutch Sisters.

The day before they went Mrs. Stanton was evidently ill at ease. Finally someone said "what is troubling you Mrs. Stanton, you are not happy". Then we learned that Joan and Peter were not her children, but that she and some Australian

soldiers had rescued them from the sea, hauling them on to their lifeboat. When they reached Java, to protect them from the natives who had proved treacherous where Europeans were concerned, she had said they were her children and Joan and Peter, warned by her never to betray the true state of affairs, called her "Mummie". Despite the problems raised by this situation it was finally decided to send the children to the home, where we were assured, they would receive the best of care.

Not long after this two large internment camps were opened in Batavia and all Dutch women and children, who until then had been free (though the men had been "picked up" months earlier) were instructed to proceed to these "protected areas" as the Japanese called them.

Here Edith, Eileen and I were assigned a small cottage and we had barely settled in when news came of the internment of the Sisters who had been in charge of the Children's home. Becoming anxious for the safety of Joan and Peter we determined to try to bring them to our camp where we could care for them.

Mrs. Stanton, free in the city, agreed to get the children, but upon their return she refused to let them come to us. She had been a taxi-dancer in an amusement park in Singapore and despite her fondness for the children, had proved her inability to give them adequate care. We were greatly concerned.

Other attempts having failed, it was decided that I should go to to see Mrs. Stanton. At this time the camp was open for certain hours daily and internees were free to go and come.

Early one morning I set out in a "bedja" (a small three wheeled conveyance propelled by a native boy). In a tiny cottage on an obscure street I found the place. Only Joan was at home but after a wait of about two hours the others returned and what a discussion followed. All my arguments seemed futile. At last Mrs. Stanton said "I'll bring the children to the camp tomorrow, their clothes are in the tub and today is too inconvenient". Mistrusting "tomorrow" I urged that they come right away, suggesting that she come too and see where they would be; later she could visit them and occasionally take them out. Finally she yielded. We set out in two "bedjas", each of us having a child sitting beside her and bundles of wet clothing at our feet.

The children told us that with their Mother and a younger sister they had fled from Singapore, their Father, a British official, remaining behind. When their ship was badly damaged by a Japanese air attack, the passengers had to jump into the sea. Their Mother had held the youngest child as she leapt, but the other two had to fend for themselves. It was something of a miracle that they had been rescued together, but until the end of the war neither they nor their Mother knew of each others' fate. To Peter the situation seemed unreal; to Joan its possibilities were all too vivid. I shall never forget the time she came to me, her little face strained with emotion, saying "sometimes, Auntie, I think I shall never see my Mummie again".

During the first days when we walked about the camp, Joan never spoke above a whisper. One realised the fear which had haunted her in the native village. "It is so nice to see white faces" she whispered one day.

How completely life changed for the three self constituted "Aunts"! Little jobs about the house were found for Joan to help her feel at home and her birthday coming soon after her arrival, a simple party with young guests was a great thrill.

Peter mystified us by spending much of the first three days up a tree overlooking the street upon which other children played. No comment was made, but on the fourth day our young man sallied forth and in a short time had found his place among them. He had watched for three days (and his powers of observation we were to discover were unusually keen) and now he was ready to join them.

But he had much to learn of the give and take of social life and not without dust and heat was this accomplished. One of his first days he built a wonderful barrage of empty coke baskets right across the street. Such a satisfying achievement! And how was it possible for him to break it to allow a big girl, wheeling her baby brother, to pass? Completely unreasonable of her to expect it and what a battle ensued and what a furious small boy to cope with after.

Soon school became the order of the day. Voices from the little back room kept Edith and me aware of the drama taking place there. Eileen, a good teacher, proceeded with their instruction but the children found it impossible to settle down after their strange experiences.

After some weeks, the aunts agreed that the struggle was too great, helpful neither to the children nor their teacher and we decided to send them to the Dutch school in the camp. Here

they had the company of other children and school discipline was easier to accept. The children were delighted and what a peace descended upon our morning! Alas, this excellent arrangement soon ceased, the school building being required for a hospital.

Many strands were woven into the fabric of our life together. Whatever the ups and downs of the day, bedtime came with prayers and talk about the day's doings. "Goodnights" were important and not to be hurried. Peter, self-sufficient undemonstrative youngster of the daytime hours, became the warm-hearted little boy demanding his full measure of affection.

It was on one such occasion that he said "Auntie, do you think you'll be alive when I'm twenty-One?" "I don't know, I suppose I could be". "Well, if you are, would you like to marry me?" "Oh! that's an ideal! But perhaps you wouldn't want to marry me. How about waiting until you are twenty/one and then we'll see". "Alright then". Auntie, needless to say, was charmed by the compliment!

One evening, when food was scarce and we were always more or less hungry, the question came "Auntie do you know what I'm going to give my children to eat each day? Two eggs, a pound of meat, a pint of milk ----." Plucky compensation for present deprivation!

During the same hungry period I had a pact with them. They had asked if they might lick their plates after a meal as others did. Now, morale was important and there were only simple ways to preserve it. So on this we compromised; we agreed that when we were alone plates might be licked, but if we ate where others were, it would not be done, an agreement loyally kept!

At last the end of the war came and suddenly for me the opportunity to be flown back to New Zealand. Edith had agreed to care for the children in such an eventuality. We thought they should not be taken so far from the area where they were most likely to hear of their parents. After sad farewells to the members of our little camp family, I was flown across to Singapore, the first stage of the homeward journey.

Imagine my joy when within a few hours of arrival, I learned from fellow patients in an Australian hospital where I was billeted, that the children's Mother and little sister, having been interned in Sumatra, were safely back in another hospital in Singapore. Their Father also was free again and staying at Raffles Hotel, the official centre where British P.O.W.'s from all the adjoining countries were gathered and so marvelously cared for by the Y.W.C.A. War Service women, under stalwart Jean Begg of New Zealand. She it was who found me in the hospital and in her inimitable way, cut all the red tape of hospital routine and took me to Raffles.

I had been there less than an hour when I found the children's Father and had the wonderful news for him that they were alive and well. Clutching unopened my first letter from home for over three years, I told him everything I could to fill in the gap of the years of separation.

Of course the immediate concern was to get the children over from Java. Only military personnel were going across and despite various efforts, for several days nothing happened.

At this time Lady Louis Mountbatten, in Singapore with her

husband, visited me and was interested to hear of our internment experiences and especially the story of Joan and Peter.

Two days later a great Thanksgiving service was held in St. Andrew's Cathedral. As we sat in the packed cathedral waiting for that unforgettable service to begin, Lady Louis walked up the aisle to take her place in the front pew. Suddenly Jean Begg said to me "Lady Louis is flying to Java tomorrow on Red Cross business. I'll ask her to bring the children". A brief note hastily scribbled on a scrap of paper was handed to her chauffeur after the service. We heard nothing further until the following Tuesday when quite unannounced Peter and Joan arrived with Lady Louis.

How lovely to see them again and so soon! Their father had gone to pay his morning visit to their mother so I took them to have morning tea. We sat at a table on the far side of the big hotel ballroom, my eyes never long away from the entrance. Suddenly the father was there! Almost too stirred to speak, I managed to say "Joan, Look!" Following my gaze she saw him. In a moment she sprang across the room, Peter following after. She leapt upon her father, arms around his neck, legs clutching his body. A little later they came to me. The father, hardly conscious of his action bent his face and I kissed his cheek.

As soon as transport was available we were off to the hospital to the children's mother and there again, was the indescribable joy of reunion.

How wonderful, this miracle of a whole family re-united; and what a deep satisfaction to know that Joan and Peter for long such an important part of our life during the years of internment, were

safely back in their hearts' home.

Standing aside I watched them for a minute and then slipped away.