SUMATRAN DIARY

by

Margaret Dryburgh[1]

(1890-1945)

[1] Transcribed with added footnotes for explanation by Jeremy Allgrove 2019

A prison camp! A dwelling bare!
Privations and discomforts sore!
And yet a thing of beauty rare
At our own door.
A tree, a wealth of blossom bore,
Its petals of a pinky hue
With rosier buds. Each day it more
Entrancing grew.

It took the mind, in swift retreat
To apple blossom in spring,
To lanes, where hawthorn hedges sweet
Their fragrance fling.
Ah! When, in future years we think
Of sorrows we in exile knew,
We'll see the sprays of pink
Against the blue.

MUNTOK

February 1942

February 15 is marked as a black-letter day, for on it we lost our freedom and became prisoners of the Japs[2]. After two months of blitz we escaped from Singapore[3]. Though very near death at sea we were luckier than many refugees, as we eventually disembarked at Muntok, Bangka Island.

Muntok is a pretty little town with attractive buildings, lovely trees and flowers, but the impression made on us was of horror, apprehension, discomfort and sorrow. After leaving the ship, the servicemen were marched off as prisoners, while the other passengers were landed on a long pier and left to await developments. Tired, hungry and thirsty, we sat, and as darkness fell, we realised we were to spend the night in the open. Our captain strode up and down looking out for possible interference with frightened girls on the part of soldiers. Another officer, in passing, whispered 'Hide your wristwatches' as the guards were forcibly removing some of these articles.

When morning broke, we were ordered to move to the shore end of the pier. It seemed about two miles long to us[4] as we staggered along with our belongings. On a grassy plot, we were separated, the women and children being told to form a column four deep and follow the guard. We noticed, with surprise, another procession of women converging to meet us. Some wore the grey uniform of Australian nurses, others sarongs, men's uniform and army socks. Some had rags around their arms and legs, and strange red sores under their chins, due to the friction of lifebelts. Our amazement changed to commiseration when we learnt that these were victims of bombing and shipwreck, who had just succeeded in reaching land by rafts, lifeboats or even swimming[5].

The augmented procession moved on and reached a building that had been used as a clearing station for coolies on Plantation work. There were blocks of six dormitories, forty being

[2] The British surrender was signed by General Archibald Percival on 15th February 1942.
[3] She was evacuated on the Mata Hari, leaving Singapore on 12th February 1942. It was one of the few evacuating ships NOT bombed and sunk but was captured and escorted to Muntok Harbour on Bangka Island.
[4] It was actually 600 metres in length.
[5] Only four of the forty or so ships that left Singapore between 12th and 15th February were not bombed or sunk.

herded into each dormitory. The first sight struck dismay into our hearts. The room was gloomy and furnished with a sloping concrete slab along each side, leaving a narrow passage in the middle. The slabs, which reminded us of a fish-shop, were to be our beds. After claiming a fortieth part of a slab we enjoyed a much-needed bath: primitive though the bathroom was, it was welcome after so many waterless days. After a meal of rice cooked by volunteers, we settled down on our slabs, hoping for slumber.

Shall we ever forget those nights? Babies howled and whimpered, while distracted mothers tried to prepare food for them in the dark. Exasperated bed-fellows expressed their thoughts loudly and forcibly. Heavy-footed sentries stamped along the passengers and through the dormies, flashing their lights on us. Rain pattered in from the roof, unsavoury whiffs floated in from the back premises. The slabs were slippery, and we found ourselves descending, so we tried to keep stationary and warm by using all our clothes, if we had any, below and above us.

Days had their horrors too. Six hundred people living in the closest proximity. There did not seem to be enough air for us all. Only small patches of sky were visible, and the sun never penetrated the buildings. Washing festooned the covered ways; as it rained a good deal, the wet clothes were ever with us. An eagle eye had to be kept on one's possessions or they quickly disappeared.

There was a terrible clash of personalities. Chinese girls were upset at being classed as 'dirty' Asiatics. Eurasians showed antipathy to Europeans.

Food was something to be endured rather than enjoyed. Women and children were favoured with an early morning drink - whether tea or coffee we never could tell - and a small portion of ship's biscuit. Twice a day a meal was served in the dining room, eaten with any old spoons and forks garnered from the boats. The rice was unappetising and many found it impossible - whether polished or unpolished. Occasionally a little tinned meat and vegetable was added but it was still unpalatable. Our greatest deficiency was fresh fruit and we were afraid of developing beri-beri on such a meagre diet. After some days some flour appeared and was made into hard indigestible biscuits. Even these were popular as a change from the inevitable rice.

Even worse than the physical discomfort was the sight of so much wretchedness and pain. Former friends were almost unrecognisable, in strange, haphazard garments, with hair soaked in oil from sinking ships, hands raw from clinging to ropes[6], arms and legs and chins covered with sores, faces drawn by suffering. As the days passed, fresh batches of refugees arrived some at death's door through exposure and exhaustion. Occasionally there were glad cries of reunion as families, separated, met again. New tales of adventures were circulated: of existence on a waterless beach, of concealment in Malay villages where the natives were very kind, of harsh treatment by some in terror of their new conquerors, of the shooting of helpless refugees by the soldiers[7].

Fortunately, with several doctors in the party, a hospital was improvised. Conditions were terrible with no bedding, mosquito netting, bandages or medicine except what people could contribute from their private stores. When an amputation was necessary a surgical instrument had to be made. The doctors, nursing sisters and ancillary staff worked nobly to alleviate suffering. A new horror alarmed us when cases of dysentery appeared. As no isolation was possible and no disinfectants were available the gaunt spectres of disease and death hovered near.

[6] Many people lost the skin from their hands when sliding down ropes whilst escaping from their sinking ships.
[7] The story of the massacre of Australian nurse on Radji beach was kept a close secret between them for fear of reprisals.

Mental anxiety tended to fray nerves. We felt to the full, the blow to our national pride, anxiety about the future, uncertainty about the fate of friends, and the state of the outer world. Contact with our captors was not pleasant as it meant close proximity to naked bayonets. One favourable trait in the guards was their fondness for children, to whom they gave sweets and biscuits.

Yes, Muntok spelt misery. Yet in the horrors there were flashes of right - self-sacrificing service, a new sense of values, a determination to try one day to share in repairing weaknesses in our social and political structure so ruthlessly exposed by the war.

PALEMBANG

March, 1942

After two weeks, news came that we must be ready to go to Palembang (with emphasis on the 'em') the next morning, taking only hand luggage. Naturally there was no sleep that night. The camp alert was at 3.30 am. By lorry or on foot we reached the pier where we had a long wait. A pretty dawn cheered us and a beautiful rainbow seemed a sign of hope.

We captives left the pier before the dawn
To meet a future dark with threatening fear.
'What lies ahead?' our anxious spirits sighed.
A wondrous rainbow arch with vivid glow
Proclaimed the answer. 'Hope on, hope on,' it cried
'Hope on,' reflected colours echoed low.

We boarded the deck of a small cargo vessel and sailed 50 miles up-river[8], passing many palms interspersed with few houses. A torrential shower, from which a tarpaulin gave very inadequate shelter, did not add to our comfort. On reaching the town we disembarked and faced jeering Malays. At long last lorries arrived and we were taken to a school, occupied by Service prisoners. There was no furniture, but the men had prepared a good meal of rice stew which was very acceptable. We slept on the floor, fifty in a room.

Next morning, we were counted and recounted then divided into groups according to rank (i.e. Service wives) and nationality. We were sent to live in small cottages, seventeen in a group. We felt sorry for the former occupants who must have lost all their household treasures. Our rations were rice, a few vegetables and fish. We had no money, we could get no extras, so were less fortunate than our Dutch neighbours who were quite wealthy[9]. By sewing we earned some welcome cash.

A week later, after a deluge of sensational war rumours, the Japs declared their ultimatum, 'Moving one and a half hours, so with much scrambling and turmoil prepared to obey our captors.

April, 1942

We set off, laden with luggage, and staggered to the crossroads, to join a great crowd of Dutch and English. After a long wait in the broiling sun, our luggage was searched. We had to give up scissors and knives while the men reluctantly handed in their razors. They were marched off to an unknown destination: their wives never saw them again. After another long wait, we

[8] This is the River Musi.
[9] Because the Dutch had been resident before being interned, they were able to retain many more of their possessions and money than the refugees. There is little doubt that the plight of the refugees would have been much worse ha the Dutch not been available to help out, both by providing material help and by employing the others so that they could get some income.

were told to walk uphill and after a quarter of an hour, we reached a row of houses, with neat gardens. Forty folk had to be packed in each house so the overflow had to settle in the garage. With twelve others we four occupied Garage Nine (i.e. G. Cullen, S.E. Mackintosh, Anne Livingstone and self), the house being filled with Dutch internees. There were no tins for cooking and the stoves were difficult. We had the usual rations, rice and vegetables, supplemented by coffee from the Dutch ladies. More refugees kept arriving, including some Roman Catholic Dutch sisters, and their pupils.

We began to organise ourselves to make the best of our situation. Dr McDowell was Camp Commandant and was later assisted by Vice-Commandant, Mrs Hinch[10]. Each house had a captain, Miss Cullen being head of our garage[11]. We learnt the patient arts of queueing for hours, waiting for rations, and also washing rice. Miss Livingstone took a leading part in the camp food rationing, bringing law and order out of confusion arranging a fair 'do' for all. When bags of rice arrived, she had to divide, add, subtract, multiply, cajole and threaten so that all started off with the same portion per head.

Cultural activities sprang up and we arranged discussion groups, language and art classes, travel talks, choral society and weekly concerts. I thanked God for a good musical memory and was able, on the limited paper available, to write out and harmonise music for a choral work. On Saturdays we gave the use of garage nine for morning service, and for evening prayers. With the help of two others we four missionaries conducted services regularly. Our label made us a bit 'suspect' at first but later the feeling died away.

We tried to run a school for the children[12], but had to give it up for lack of accommodation. I undertook the task of rice cleaning. The rice usually looked as if it had been swept up off the streets, was full of glass, stones and dirt, not to mention hordes of fat maggots and weevils. Others had the much heavier tasks of chopping trees, finding bricks and building fireplaces, digging drains and planting vegetables after cleaning virgin soil. Insects were a great pest, and the mosquitoes were particularly fierce, especially in the cool of the evening.

Two special celebrations gave us extra rations. The Emperor of Japan's birthday[13] was celebrated with a long salute and fruit rations were much appreciated. The next day the Dutch kept Princess Juliana's[14] birthday with songs and presents.

THE SANCTUARY

Within the camp's confined domain
No great cathedral reared its walls,
No pointing spire tried Heaven to gain,
No church bells sounding welcome calls,
Not e'en the smallest meeting place
Did offer us the means of grace.

A little company did dwell
Within a garage, scarce supplied
With furnishings of prison cell.
So bare it was! Each eventide

[10] See her tribute to MD at the end of this document.
[11] She also wrote an extensive diary.
[12] As part of this, MD wrote a whole English Grammar for the purposes of teaching.
[13] 29th April 1909. He was Emperor from 25th December 1926 until his death on 7th January 1989.
[14] She was born in 1909 and became Queen of the Netherlands in 1948 on the abdication of her mother, Queen Wilhelmina, and herself abdicated in favour of her eldest daughter, Beatrix, in 1980.

They met for simple family prayers
To God commended their affairs.

Thogh Sunday brought no sabbath calm
A little time they set aside
From morning toils, to seek for balm
To comfort souls so sorely tried
And braving wrath of Sentry grim
They worshipped God in prayer and hymn.

A choir of singers sought to raise
Souls bowed with care to spheres less sad
By sweetest Ministry of praise.
Though but one choral work they had
They dipped in memory's garnered store
And song and anthem did out-poor.

Prayer seem more real to captives there,
They gave their thanks for mercies past,
Asked for God's protecting care
While their captivity should last
Then with full heart did intercede
For dearest kin and those in need.

So as the weary weeks went by
Souls gained fresh courage to endure
By joining the community
Of those whose faith was strong and sure.
To those who weekly thither trod
The garage was the House of God.

CAPTIVES' HYMN[15]

(sung each Sunday in the Camp)

Father in captivity
We would lift our prayer to Thee,
Keep us ever in Thy love.
Grant that daily we may prove
Those who place their trust in Thee,
More than conquerors may be.

Give us patience to endure,
Keep our hearts serene and pure,
Grant us courage, charity,
Greater faith, humility,
Readiness to own Thy Will,
Be we free captive still.

For our country we would pray,
In this hour be Thou her stay.
Pride and selfishness forgive,
Teach her, by Thy laws, to live,
By Thy grace make all men see,
That true greatness comes from Thee.

For our loved ones we would pray,
Be their guardian, night and day,
From all dangers, keep them free,
Banish all anxiety.
May they trust us to Thy care.
Know that Thou our pains doth share.

May the day of freedom dawn,
Peace and justice be reborn,
Grant that nations loving Thee
O'er the world by brothers be.
Cleansed of suffering, know rebirth,
See thy kingdom come on earth.

[15] This was first sung on 5th July 1942 by Dorothy MacLeod, Shelagh Brown and Margaret Dryburgh.

For the next few months life went on with constant fluctuations between hope and despair. The camp abounded in rumours[16], often sensational, which gave rise to much speculation. Doubtless this was intentional and designed to prevent any settled peace of mind.

Life was also a series of unfulfilled promises. When complaints were made about bad food, lack of equipment (no spectacles or dental aids were available for a long while), improvements were promised, but always failed to materialise. Folk had to get used to poor rations, which, as the days passed, were responsible for a general loss of weight. It became a feat of skill to share one chop among fifteen, or make a meal of one third of an egg. Lack of water was a great nuisance, as frequently it was only on for an hour or two each day.

Minor discomforts such as patchy skin and falling hair were alleviated by the discovery of the humble coconut, a veritable godsend in many ways. Its milk was refreshing, while its pulp gave flavour to unappetising meals. The oil cured shiny noses and lifeless hair, the husks made effective pan cleaners, the fronds, tied together, made elegant brooms and the shells were transformed into feeding bowls.

'O coconut, our trusty friend.
Though from the East we may depart.
Thy praises we shall ever sing
With thankful heart'

Clothes became an acute problem. They were patched and darned till they would mend no more. Occasionally a pedlar visited the camp with material. What a treat it was to get a much-needed dress-length as an addition to one's wardrobe. A Camp Jumble Sale was a real event.

We kept busy with our activities. There was much talent in the camp and, by organising musical evenings, choral concerts and services, we were able for a time to forget the barbed wire, our constant hunger and sordid surroundings.

'In foreign land we lived interned,
The depths of bitterness we learned,
As days and weeks crept by.
Hunger, o'ercrowding, sickness, pain
Humiliation, nervous strain,
Made life share misery.
A sudden thought the mind to cheer,
'Much music that thou once did here
Is stored in memory.
It lives forever. Bring it forth.
Use your own instrument of work
Sing! Thou wilt happier be.'
The admonition struck a spark
From souls till then both cold and dark,
The mind's ear heard again
Old songs of schooldays, college glees,
Ditties of home, gay comedies,

[16] This wasn't just true of the women's camp in Palembang. It happened also on the Burma-Thai railway and was primarily intended to try to raise morale.

Anthems of nobler strain[17].
The airs to paper were transferred,
A search was made for many a word,
With harmonies we played.
Willing scribe the live long day
The part of printing press did play,
And scores for singers made[18].
Then music lovers formed a choir,[19]
As music makers did aspire,
To concord of sweet sounds
As blended voices filled the air
The soul could soar to worlds more fair
Escape from prison bounds.'
[Scribe = M.D.]

TE DEUM LAUDAMUS. (A camp Te Deum)

For life we thank Thee, God, this day
The power to work and think and play-
For air so pure, for sunshine bright,
For beauteous skies by day and night;
For brilliant flowers and shady trees,
For grasses waving in the breeze,
For pups and kittens, baby sweet;
For children playing in the street;
For eyes to see each lovely thing
A hymn of gratitude we sing.

For daily food we thank Thee too;
For rice and paddy fields that grow,
For toothsome tubers, sprouting bean,
For cucumbers and various greens;
For wholesome eggs and scraps of meat;
For coconuts and spices sweet;
For fruit and fish in tins safe stored;
For water, too, we thank the Lord.

We thank Thee to, that 'tis our lot
To live in homely houses, not
All crowded in one common place-
We thank the that we have the space
To sleep and eat, e'en though denied
Much comfort we would fain provide-
Our raiment too, we owe to Thee,
For in the time of scarcity
Access to cloth we did obtain,
For skill of fingers and of brain,
That fashions frocks, mends rents with care,

[17] Margaret Dryburgh had an uncanny ability to recall such pieces and be able to harmonise them and dictate the notation.
[18] Norah Chambers was a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music who undertook the task of scribe.
[19] This became the Vocal Orchestra.

From sacks made things of beauty rare,
The joys that colours gay afford -
For all these we would thank Thee Lord.

We thank Thee Lord for daily toil,
The tasks enabling us to foil
The threat of melancholy dire.
We thank Thee for the glow of fire.
For strength that wields the axe, and frees
The drains from source of dread disease;
For cooking skill that turns plain fare
To tempting dishes, new and rare;
For powers we did not know we had -
We thank the Donor and are Glad.

We thank Thee too for moments gay,
That cheer us when the days are grey;
For songs, and music's magic spell,
For birthday parties, games as well;
For welcome presents from the gaol,
For books that tell a lively tale.

For deeper joys our thanks we bring -
For the perfect liberty to sing,
Thy praises, hear Thy precious word;
For helpful testimony heard;
For new experience of prayer -
A knowledge Thou Thyself wert there;
For cheerfulness 'midst trials shown,
For courage facing the unknown.
For service - patient, loving, kind -
To sick in body, bored in mind;
For friendships old proved staunch and true
For comradeship full sweet and new;
For hours of dread uncertainty,
That made us prove Thy constancy;
For hardships showing us full well
How our poor brethren always dwell
For clearer vision of how sin
Can sear and soil the soul within;
How no-one to himself can live,
But for the good of all must strive;
How, though held in captivity
Our souls can keep their liberty.
For all these blessings, freely given
We thank Thee, Lord, of earth and Heaven.

More people kept coming into camp. A sudden order was given to vacate three houses, and the occupants had to be squeezed into others already full to make room for fresh arrivals.

Our camp included the very young and the very old. One old lady celebrated her golden wedding in anything but ideal surroundings. We decorated the house with golden flowers, and as a special privilege she was allowed to spend a day with a husband in the men's camp. Three months later she died.

Three bright young things who persisted in looking at life as an adventure and tried to keep things cheery, were grandchildren of the Prime Minister of Holland. They'd been caught by the tide of war whilst visiting their parents in Borneo. After various nerve-racking ordeals, including bombing, machine-gunning, and six days in a lifeboat, a walk of 60 km brought them, reunited, to our camp.

> 'In truth, the camp has great asset
> In Helen, Antoinette, Alette.'[20]

Our first real thrill came when some people actually left. After many false alarms some Eurasians were allowed to depart to join their families. One girl took a copy of our Captives' Hymn to Singapore, where it was sung in the camps there. (This item of news was not known until 1945, after release came).

A minor relief came when our guards were changed. Instead of Japs we had Javanese police. It was quite a change to see them in grey uniforms with swords. Discipline was relaxed somewhat. The new guards were curious - at night they looked in and made solicitors enquiries. They did not object to the children cheering the men passing to and fro from work. The Head of Police visited the camp and seemed quite concerned at the absence of beds and other necessities.

Our first Camp Chronicle was produced, hand-written in August. It contained travel and social articles, puzzles, crosswords, a stitchery corner, a weekly news bulletin and notices of events. As Editor, I was kept busy producing a copy each week for some time. Paper was scarce, but any scrap was useful for scribbling. Once inspiration dawned, I produced 'Alice in Internment Land,' which was much appreciated by the internees.

ALICE IN INTERNMENT LAND
(abridged)

'Is this a barracks?' asked Alice, looking around a dusty enclosure, enclosed by wooden sheds with thatched roofs. 'I see no soldiers but – surely those are the women and children I have seen before, on 'The Hill'. Can they still be interned?'

'Yes alas,' said a voice at her feet. Alice noticed a black cat.

'Midnight, at your service,' said he, looking important. 'I can give you any information you want.'

'Why are these people not free yet?' asked Alice.

[20] These were the Colijn sisters. Helen Colijn wrote 'Song of Survival', her account of her captivity, detailing the creation of the Vocal Orchestra. It formed much of the basis for the film 'Paradise Road'.

Midnight looked a little crestfallen. 'That I cannot tell you,' he said, 'for we get no outside news here.'

'How distressing,' said Alice. 'Please tell me how they fare here. What are these buildings?'

'This is the Main Entrance, where we are standing,' said Midnight. On your right is the Hospital, on your left a dormitory for the Hospital sisters and Roman Catholic nuns. Right opposite, at the other end, are the kitchens. The two blocks on the right of the square are occupied by the British, the two on the left by the Dutch. The shed in the centre is meant for the children and acts as school, playground and church.'

'It certainly isn't a palace-de-luxe,' said Alice. 'I expect they all feel distinctly aggrieved.'

'No more than I am,' broke in a fretful voice.

Alice saw a long figure in red and yellow, with a pipe dangling around his neck. 'The Pied Piper, surely!' she said with some surprise. 'What are you doing here?' 'It's what I am not doing here that annoys me' he said glaring at Midnight.' 'Word was brought that this camp was over-run with rats of an outside variety. The tale went that one was so busy eating the stuffing of a mattress being repaired, that he was sewn inside and only discovered by his squeaks when sat upon, and yet I was not invited to deal with the scourge,' and the piper cast a baleful glance at Midnight, who nonchalantly licked his lips. 'A curse upon you,' shouted the Piper, 'may you meet with a bad end,' and he vanished.

'Rats are not the only trouble here,' said a new voice.

Alice saw a weird-looking little man, carrying a very large notebook.

'I am the Compiler of Camp Complaints,' said he.

'Let me hear some of them,' said Alice.

'With pleasure,' said the Complier. 'Sit down – that is if you can find anything to sit on. Our few odd chairs are falling to bits.'

The Compiler opened his book.

'A is for Ants that we find on our shelves.

'B is for Bathroom and bugs in our beds.'

'I can understand a complaint about Bugs, but why a bathroom?' asked Alice.

'Come and see for yourself,' said the Compiler.

He led Alice to the central section.

'This is the Bathroom for two hundred people,' he said.

Alice looked round incredulously. She noticed some roughly constructed compartments.

'These are latrines, I suppose,' she said. 'Only seven!'

'Only seven,' repeated the Compiler. 'Look inside.'

Alice saw a deep drain with a slightly raised foothold on each side of it – nothing more.

'No wonder they complain,' said Alice. 'How are these cleaned?'

'Each day a bathroom squad flushes them with pails of water, sending the contents to the Septic Tank just outside. That has to be emptied each day by a noble band of hygiene specialists, affectionately known as the B.A.D. Brigade.'

'I should think it was a very good brigade,' said Alice.

'Oh yes, the B.A.D. Brigade consists of British, Australian and Dutch who go round together hunting for germs. The bathers bring their own water to the bathroom and bathe in public. They complain that they are dirty before they leave the bathroom, for the floor is full of holes, filled with water, muddied by the feet of those coming in.'

'My list goes right through the alphabet,' said the Compiler, turning over his pages, 'in fact, there is no end to complaints. The Dutch complain about the British and vice versa: there are complaints about the shop, the rations, the bed spaces, work and slacking – but some people find a kind of enjoyment in complaining and would be wretched without a cause to grumble.'

'I think I will have a look at the dining room,' said Alice.

She wiped away a tear, as she gazed at the pathetic assortment of enamel mugs, broken plates, coconut shells, old tins and glass bottles that formed the equipment of the diners. Changing the subject, she asked Midnight what the internees did to amuse themselves.

'They read all the books they can get. A librarian changes books in the woodshed twice a week. The centre acts as a rendez-vous, gossip corner, school and church, and a public hall where ANNOUNCEMENTS are made by the AUTHORITIES; on occasions it is a concert hall.'

'Oh, what kind of concerts do they have?' asked Alice.

'They have songs by a choir that practises in the kitchen, solos, and a special choir that calls itself a vocal orchestra. It aspires to classical music and hums it in four parts, the result gives quite the effect of an orchestra. Once a Variety Show, with songs and dances in costume, was produced. The Japanese visitors were so pleased that they gave the performers bits of soap and tins of British army rations. However, concerts have been impossible of late, because of the blackout. Still there are mild forms of amusement – cards, auction sales of clothes, gossip about the guards who have nicknames. Oh, I forgot to mention, the writing of recipes is very popular.'

'That reminds me, you had better see Mrs Feed-Em. There she is, outside the kitchen,' said Midnight. 'Go and talk to her.'

'How are you? Mrs Feed-Em?'

'Oh, not as well as I was when I came,' she said.

'How is that?' asked Alice.

'Come into the kitchen and I will tell you some of my troubles', said Mrs Feed-Em.

Alice looked at a ramshackle shed, with a long brick fireplace along one side, where four large fires were burning. Roman Catholic sisters, in their long robes, were stirring huge cauldrons of rice. 'This is the Dutch communal kitchen,' said Mrs Feed-Em. 'The British did individual cooking at first; the kitchen was a regular inferno in those days, because of the smoke from so many fireplaces and full of noise. When the military authorities took over, they made the British cook communally. Come and see the kitchen.'

They passed into a shed, more decrepit than the first, where there were four cauldrons supported by precarious-looking piles of bricks and stones, with an iron ring or home-made grid of bars, to support the big pots.

'Are those safe?' asked Alice apprehensively.

'Not very,' said Mrs Feed-Em. 'That is one reason for my worries. The women have to make them with anything they can find. No wonder there is a collapse sometimes. Once, the wall fell out, as the cook tried to steady herself while lifting the cauldron.'

'Have a look at the rest of the establishment. This is the woodshed, where a squad deals with the problem of carrying, sawing and chopping the logs sent in - hard work, as you may imagine. Axes are scarce, one for at least 137 people, so ours often 'loses its head' as it seems to fly off on the slightest provocation. Here is the British vegetable shed.' They approached an open shed, with rough tables and benches. 'The vegetable cutters have their set days too; my department is quite well organised,' said Mrs Feed-Em, and the glimmer of a smile lit up her worn features. 'From 3.30 am when the firelighters start the day's work, until 6 pm when the fires are all put out, everything goes by clockwork.'

Now that I have seen the cooking arrangements, I would like to know more about the food,' said Alice. 'Have you thought out any exciting recipes?'

A look of gloom descended on Mrs Feed-Em's face.

'I am more than satisfied if I can give them the barest necessities nowadays,' she said. 'Here is the British storehouse. Look inside.'

Alice obeyed, and saw another tumble-down shed where some empty kerosene tins rested on the bench and some rice sacks lay on the ground.

'Where are the stores?' said Alice in surprise.

'This is a low time, but something will come in,' said Mrs Feed-Em. We have three sources of supply; come and see them.'

She pointed to three automatic machines between the storehouses and door in the corner camp. The first was labelled 'RATIONS' the second 'SHOP' and the third 'B.M.'

'We press the button each day' said Mrs Feed-Em, 'not knowing what will come out. Rice, of course, is a dead cert, usually a supply, unpolished or white, for five days arrives. Often the

bags are not full, though we are credited with the whole amount. Vegetables come daily but they are often faded, and never are there sufficient for all.'

'Does meat come every day?' Enquired Alice.

Mrs Feed-Em had to sit down from shock.

'Meat!' she exclaimed, 'I should think not; pork once a month is on average.'

'Well, the rations sound very meagre,' said Alice. 'I don't wonder underfeeding is among the complaints. Does the SHOP not help matters?'

'Considerably,' said Mrs Feed-Em, 'Once it came on Sundays and the contents of the bullock cart were checked and shared out in the shed. Now the goods come by the back entrance; we never know when they will arrive. There is great excitement when the gate creaks and many eyes watched expectantly for it to open. Sometimes the shop brings fruit, eggs, curry biscuits, coffee, beans, and even sweets. These are sold at very high prices but are bought eagerly by all who can afford them.'

'What about the B.M. Machine?' Asked Alice.

Mrs Feed-Em looked round blankly. 'What are you talking about?' she said.

'Well, I saw a third machine, labelled B.M.' said Alice.

'Are you sure?' said Mrs Feed-Em.

'Absolutely,' said Alice, looking at the spot where the machine had been.

'Why,' she faltered, 'where is it now? Has it disappeared?'

Mrs Feed-Em smiled. 'Move back a step,' she said.

As Alice obeyed, the machine came into view again.

'We have to camouflage it,' explained Mrs Feed-Em, as it is not supposed to be here at all. Press the button and see what happens.

Alice somewhat faithfully obeyed. To her surprise a black figure appeared, grinning, carrying a parcel.

'You are too early' he said. 'This button should be pressed only by night,' when I can't be seen, for I'm not supposed to exist. Black-market you know,' he whispered. 'I had better vanish, I think,' and with these words, he suddenly disappeared.

'There are various ways of sending messages to the B.M.' explained Mrs Feed-Em. 'Sometimes the guards oblige; it has even been said that orders for sugar and other things have been sung to a hymn tune, about the time for devotions. In the darkness baskets are deposited at agreed spots, then at dawn, selling begins, at sky high prices of course.'

'But what about the poor people?' asked Alice.

'Oh, many of them have sold the jewellery and clothes. Some, of course, have only been able to sniff and covet. They have the very slight satisfaction of feeling virtuous when AUTHORITY bursts in occasionally and threatens dire punishment to all concerned in such nefarious traffic.

'I'm sure you must be tired of hearing about food,' said a new voice.

Alice turned, and saw a scholastic figure at her side.

'Are you a professor?' she asked respectfully.

'Correct,' replied the gentleman. 'I am Prof Toromento, L.M.T.'

'That degree is quite unknown to me,' said Alice.

'I dare say,' said the professor. 'It means Licentiate of Mental Torture. I specialise in experimenting on the emotions,' swaggered the professor.

'In what way?' asked Alice.

'Various ways of course,' he replied. 'I have tried the effect of a Mental Vacuum on the internees. Formerly, news used to leak through the hospital, but I have put a stop to that, and now rigidly exclude all news of the outside world.'

'How cruel,' sighed Alice.
'Maybe,' said Prof Toromento with a sardonic grin, 'come and see my apparatus.'

Wonderingly, Alice followed him to where a kind of seesaw was erected, only one plank being visible. It was joined to a barrel-shaped machine labelled 'metal vacuum' on one side and 'secrecy' of the other.

'What a strange machine, how does it work?' asked Alice.

'Well,' said the professor patronisingly, 'as we are past masters in the Secret Service, we easily create the Metal Vacuum that is our goal. But nature abhors a vacuum, so this one is soon filled by rumours. We know when the barrel is full, for other people gather in groups, talking and smiling the spirits campus rise mysteriously.'

As he spoke, he turned the handle, and the plank rose.

'Oh, I am beginning to understand now,' said Alice.

'When there is such a wave of optimism is time for me to act. Watch.'

He inserted something into the barrel through a slit, and the plank began to descend.

'What happened?' enquired Alice.

'I sent out an old newspaper into the camp, with news of our initial successes - quite enough to change the balance, as you see. Watch again.'

The plank began to rise again; when it was quite high, the Professor passed a torpedo-like object through the slit. Down came the plank with a terrific bang. 'A bolt 'from the blue," said the professor blandly. 'A sudden order to get ready to change camp, or an insinuation that things may worsen in a few months. Ha, ha! I do enjoy seeing the change from gaiety to gloom. Now they are afraid to believe anything they hear. As 'Be prepared' is our motto, we arrange alerts at all hours of the day or night, so that no one knows if they are real or faked. Now I shall explain another of my experiments known as delayed action. I announce that something will happen shortly, and then postpone the event at will. I love to see the people hastily packing their goods, ready to move at a moment's notice. After a fortnight, they relapse into uncertainty!'

'But how wearing to the nerves!' said Alice.

'Why should they have nerves?' asked the professor. 'When they are listless, I use the opposite method of Precipitation. Without warning, I give orders for sudden action. It is funny to see the commotion, like an anthill being disturbed' the Professor laughed heartily. 'Oh yes, by the way, there is another little form of torture I use. I have allowed no communication with friends and relatives overseas except one postcard.'

'In two years!' gasped Alice.

'Of course,' chuckled the professor. 'These insignificant women can mean nothing to their kinsfolk. We made a concession to those with husbands in neighbouring camps. We always let them know if their husbands have died.'

'Oh you stupid ignorant monster of cruelty,' burst out Alice indignantly.

A look of apprehension, almost fear, came into the professor's eyes. Astonished, Alice looked around and saw the shadowy figure of a Red Cross nurse approaching. She raised an accusing finger.

'What have you done with the hundreds of letters and parcels sent so lovingly and trustingly to those pining under your guardianship?'

The Professor hastily broke in. 'There is a parcel on its way now. It will be distributed almost immediately.

'When was it sent?' demanded the nurse.

'Only 18 months ago, but what is that to complain about in a war of several years duration?'

The professor hastily departed, and the nurse faded out leaving Alice alone to ponder on what she had heard. She was acclaimed by cheerful voice, asking 'Would you care to see my Conjuring Show?'

'I certainly need brightening up, after what I have heard and seen,' said Alice.

Suddenly a stout figure in a tight uniform appeared from nowhere.

'I am the WIZARD of W.I.C. and can effect most marvellous transformations with the wave my hand,' he said.

'What is the W.I.C.?' asked Alice.

'Women's Internment Camp, of course' replied the wizard. 'Shall I repeat some of my performances for you?' Shut your eyes. Now open them.'

Alice saw the compound covered with yellow dust, the few clumps of grass here and there. The wizard waved his hand. Down came a shower of rain and Alice saw a quagmire of squelching mud. It gradually took the form of regular rows of sweet potatoes and tapioca plants, divided into plots by narrow yellow paths.

'What an improvement,' said Alice, 'how and why was it made?'

'We thought the women were not working hard enough, so we threatened that, as food would be short, they must plant their own vegetables. We used our own famous methods of course[21]. We encouraged them to dig plots themselves and supplied them with a great variety of seeds. Just when the first shoots were appearing and people showed enthusiasm, we scrapped that scheme. Pressed labour was used to dig up the whole compound. Women had to dig and manure (from the Septic Tank) and water the plants each day.'

'With water carried in from the hydrant, while they had to use dirty well water for personal use,' said Alice severely.

The wizard looked annoyed.

'Who has been telling tales?' he demanded. It was unfortunate that our scheme synchronised the worst drought known for years. But we succeeded,' he remarked brightly. Look at those luxuriant plants - quite a credit.'

'Yes, but look at these miserable little yellow ones,' said Alice, but the wizard was gazing elsewhere.

'Now for another change,' he said. He waved his arm and the compound became yellow and dirty as before.

'Why this change? asked Alice.

'Orders came suddenly to move and so we ordered the plants to be pulled up,' exclaimed the wizard

'Were there any roots?' Asked Alice.

'Oh, a few small ones,' replied the Wizard, 'but there were plenty of leaves to eat. They provided food for two whole days, or was it three?'

'Three days, after weeks of strenuous toil!' exclaimed Alice.

'Oh, discipline is good for the character' said the wizard. What right have these women to complain about using their hands? Our women take it as a matter of course.'

[21] This involved the use of the 'chunkal', a kind of hoe that had a large, heavy blade attached at right angles to the handle and was very heavy to wield.

'Well, I don't think much of that transformation,' said Alice. 'It's as bad as the other ones by which you have changed buxom women into walking skeletons, and well-dressed ladies into Cinderellas -' but Alice found herself talking to space, the wizard had gone.

'Now I wonder if there is anything else to see here?' mused Alice.

'Yes,' said a sad voice,

Alice, looking round saw a worn woman by her side, carrying an empty disinfectant bottle in one hand and a grey bandage in the other.

'I am Hygeia' said the figure, 'in a sad condition, as you can see. Come and sit outside the hospital, for I feel too weak to stand, and I shall tell you my sad tale.'

'From what I've heard and seen,' said Alice, 'I should think you have a desperate task, trying to combat unhygienic conditions.'

Hygeia held up her empty bottle. 'With unlimited supplies it would have been difficult enough, but I have had nothing to help me - only a few drops of disinfectant, a small number of pills, and bandages washed over and over again. Look at this one,' she showed Alice her discoloured bandage. 'Even old rags have been difficult to get. Would you like a peep inside our clinic, there isn't much to see?'

Alice saw a tiny room, with a table holding a meagre assortment of ointments and powders.

'This is all we have,' said Hygeia, 'in spite of frequent appeals.'

'How lucky that you have doctors and nurses among internees,' said Alice encouragingly.

'Yes, but workmen, however accomplished, cannot do much without tools and instruments,' moaned Hygeia. 'Look in the hospital next door. Can you see any bed-pans, bedrests or air pillows? Are there any invalid requirements, such as hot bottles, thermometers? No, even towels are scarce. Occasionally a small consignment of lint and sticking plaster is brought in, but it is used immediately. Oh dear.' and Hygeia put her head on her hands and sobbed. 'How I long for buckets of Keating's powder, and Chloride of lime, for soap and hot water. I can tell you it is utter misery to take ill in the middle of the night, for there is neither light nor water nor anything available.'

'I suppose the diet or lack of it, is responsible for many ills,' said Alice.

'Yes,' sighed Hygeia, 'it is the main cause. The whole camp is badly debilitated and unable to resist germs. Nerves are strained by uncertainty and ignorance of world happenings outside of the camp. Our foes are numerous. See what menaces us continually.'

Alice saw a miserable figure holding a cigarette tin passing by.

'Diarrhoea,' said Hygeia.

'Why has it a tin?' asked Alice.

'No toilet paper or rags available,' explained Hygeia, so water is used. There go Dysentery and Typhoid whom I cannot fight without medicine and nourishing food.'

'Who is this yellow-faced creature?' Asked Alice.

'Malaria, of course,' said Hygeia. 'The Swamp round the camp breeds mosquitoes, so we cannot escape their unwelcome attentions. Here comes Beri-Beri, suffering from our unbalanced diet.'

Alice saw a figure with puffy eyes and feet, limping slowly along.

'A pitiable site indeed,' she murmured.

Toothache and Eyestrain followed while Heart-strain, due to the lifting of heavy weights, could hardly drag itself along. Last in the grim recession came a cloaked figure, whose name Alice did not need to ask.

'So Death has visited the camp,' she whispered'

'Nine times already,' sighed Hygeia, 'and even the dead are deprived of their due. The only mortuary is an open shed, coffins are often very late in arriving, the hearse is an unswept lorry and no respect is shown by the guards.'

'A tale of woe indeed,' said Alice. 'What will the world say when all these tragedies are brought to light? All that makes life lovely and worthy seems to have been snatched ruthlessly from these women.'

'Not all,' piped a clear voice. Alice raised her head. Sad Hygeia had gone and, in her place, stood a tiny figure in iridescent raiment.

'I am Hope,' she said. 'In spite of rumours and disappointments, delays and hardships, I live on, and never quite die away. One day, the internees will surely regain freedom and reunion with their loved ones[22]; then my work will not have been in vain.' Hope vanished, but a beautiful rainbow stretched its brilliant arc over the drab buildings, cheering Alice as she left the camp.

Christmas 1942

An angel winging his way over the earth, on Christmas Eve alighted in the Women's Internment Camp in Palembang. To him I cried 'What is happening in the world today? For months we have been shut in here, and have had no news at all.'

'Alas', said the angel 'Men are still at war all over the earth. Christmas songs are drowned by the blare of cannon and the crash of bombs. The message given so long ago of peace on earth and goodwill to all men seems to have been forgotten.'

'True, too true,' I cried. 'Here we languish, separated from our loved ones who do not know whether we are alive or dead. Christmas brings a keener realisation of our loss, and some almost dread the coming of tomorrow.'

[22] Although this was true of many of the internees, sadly Margaret Dryburgh herself was not to see that day as she died on 21st April 1945.

The angel smiled. 'Love may be eclipsed for awhile, he said, 'but it is not destroyed. As it is the greatest thing in the world it can conquer hatred and grief. Perhaps tomorrow you will be privileged to see Love Triumphant.' With these words he went on his way.

After a few days the angel reappeared and asked for news.

'Your words came true,' I told him happily. 'The Christmas Spirit triumphed after all. Our celebrations began when the Men Internees, passing on their way to work, stopped and sang "O come all ye faithful." Tears glistened in many eyes as memories of happier days flooded our minds. We could not be idle with children all expectant. Much love and ingenuity were used to prepare Christmas presents from the meagre materials available.'

'Christmas Day began with an early service. The moon was still high in the heavens, where the first rays of dawn were just showing, giving a sense of awe and mystery and a feeling of "God with us" in a way unknown before. Dutch and English joined in carols and hymns which were repeated at a later service.'

'And what of the spirit of family joy? Asked the angel. 'Did you achieve it?'

'Some of us did. We decorated walls and tables with leaves and appreciated gifts of food from the Men's Camp. The children, after the excitement of Christmas stockings in the morning, had a special party at night with sweets and presents. As darkness fell, they lit a special Christmas tree, then went in procession through the camp holding lighted candles and singing carols. To some of us they typified the Lighthouses of the future helping to disperse the thick darkness enveloping the earth.'

Next day, the men sang again, and we felt joined in spirit, though separated cruelly by space and circumstances. In the afternoon a United Choir of Dutch and British, Catholics and Protestants, under the direction of Mother Laurentia, sang the story of the Birth of Christ.'

'A beautiful example of how love to one Lord can triumph over age-old barriers of creed and nationality,' said the angel with shining eyes. 'One day, if all strive to be men of goodwill, peace will reign again and the nations will work to serve each other as members of one family.'

January – September, 1943

We began the New Year in a despondent mood. Regulations were tightened. Letter writing, waving and 'V' signing were prohibited. Sirens were nerve-wracking, especially when, without warning, the camp was plunged in darkness. It was a relief to find all this activity was only manoeuvres.

At the end of January an important official arrived from Singapore. He made the usual lavish promises, being horrified at the lack of fats in our diet; and the non-existence of beds. He promised improvements in furnishing and sanitation, and arrangements for the garbage to be collected regularly. He also promised to broadcast the names of all internees – the Australian Nursing Sisters to their Government - while ours would go via Tokyo to Geneva, then home. We were very dispirited as we thought this had been done long ago. However, we were cheered by a final promise of being allowed to send a postcard to our relatives.

For once, it seemed as if these promises were to be fulfilled. Forms came to be filled in, for the Tokyo broadcast, and we had to promise not to try to escape.

Minor disturbances were upsetting. For no ostensible reason friends were moved from their familiar quarters and had to settle down in new surroundings. There was an unpleasant scene in hospital. In defiance of the letter order a Dutch woman hid one in her belt. She was discovered and locked up. The Head of Police was very nasty, and no-one was allowed to speak to the patients.

I got a little consolation by having a wonderful birthday celebration. Numerous thoughtful gifts were showered upon me, an original birthday card was very complimentary, and I was very pleased with a wonderful apron which was made from pieces of the dresses of Choral members[23].

After this excitement, we sank into a deep depression, accentuated by terrific rumours, and a sudden degeneration in our rations. One day we got only one sixth of a cucumber and a small quantity of kang kong[24]. It was no wonder that nerves and tempers were strained and there were upsets even in our societies.

March 13th stands out as a red-letter day, as we actually received postcards to send to friends at home. Long afterwards, we heard that, although these cards were nine months *en route*, they did eventually reach their destinations, and gave the first news of our whereabouts to anxious families[25].

Some secret good news cheered us up, especially as rations improved and we were nearer to 300 grammes promised by our Singapore official.

Consternation spread when a sudden order commanded all boys of thirteen to go to the Men's Camp. Their mothers were heart-broken and we all had a sense of great uncertainty about the future. Though we tried to find comfort in celebrating Good Friday and Easter, camp was sombre and depressed. This year both the Mikado's and Princess Juliana's birthdays passed unnoticed, and there were no extra rations.

A piano, recently bestowed on the camp proved a doubtful blessing, as it was never silent. A welcome downpour of rain cured our water shortage. A delicate culinary feat was accomplished when one and a half pineapples were divided among twenty-seven, and some tapioca, like cement! managed to get cooked and eaten.

A Nursing Sister, who had specialised in Public Welfare Work, died after a short spell in hospital. This news came as a great shock. We felt she would be greatly missed as she had shown so much care for the growing girls.

Our guards made much complaint about a missing net and decided to search the camp. They ransacked trunks and bundles, but their zeal abated before they finished the round. Rumours, stating that in Singapore, Europeans were pulling rickshaws and women were tilling fields, worried us, and we were further distracted by the news that we were all to move to a new camp. We felt as if we had reached the lower depths of depression.

Our guards were horrid. Some complained of rudeness, as internees had not stood up when officials entered their bedrooms. Probably as a punishment, we had to be ready for Tenko (counting) at 5:30 am. Later we got an hour's respite and had to turn out at 6:30 am. While waiting

[23] Made by Mother – and after Margaret's death, it came to me (Hand-written note inserted by Sheila Brown)
[24] Ipomoea aquatica, or water spinach etc. grown throughout the Far East for its tender shoots and leaves.
[25] They were supposed only to write twelve words on these postcards. Mavis Hannah, one of the Australian nurses, managed to cram 261 words onto hers despite which it was passed by the censor. This postcard still exists1. Hannah, E.M., *Postcard to Parents from Palembang*. 1943.

in lines, one could not help noticing the universal camp attitude to scratching. This was due to 'itch', a nervous irritation. With scratching, the little blisters went septic, and were very unpleasant. Native trompaks, which replaced worn out shoes, affected the blisters, and some preferred to go barefoot. Lack of food caused frequent fainting, which often occurred at ceremony. The Catholic prayers were stopped, and a concert was interrupted by a guard, who commanded us to keep a day of mourning, with flags at half mast, as an Admiral had been killed in a flying accident.

I got a touch of Dengue fever and just when I was feeling unable to keep up, miraculously, a bed appeared. It had been sent to a camper by her husband, but she had no room for it so it was spare. Mattress, pillows and covers were contributed by kind friends and I lay in luxury, overwhelmed with kindness. Even a reading lamp was fitted for my pleasure, and it was a treat to look at books and magazines. Fashion pictures in the latter seemed to belong to another world.

Some good rations restored our aplomb, and in August we arranged a Café Chantant with fortune telling and entertainments.

A combined Dutch and English service was a success. English and Dutch choirs gave separate and combined items, and the address was translated.

A grand diversion was caused by the arrival of eighteen bales of cloth from U.S.A. It was a great treat too to get some really nice notepaper, a great improvement on our usual scraps.

In September our first orchestral practice was very enjoyable. Camp routine was suddenly upset as the hospital patients suddenly appeared and were housed opposite the Guard House. While cogitating on the meaning of the change, news came that the men were being moved. Lorries were seen moving and the universal question was 'where?. However, we were not allowed to talk about it, so had much inner speculation.

MEN'S CAMP

October – December, 1943

A message written on a piece of wood and sent in by the men informed us that they were being moved to Muntok. Just as opinion was veering round to our being allowed to stay, a sudden order at 11:00 am on September 21st, shattered our hopes. Three houses were commanded to move at 1:00 pm; the others at 8:00 am the next day. Everyone was busy packing and lorries were piled high with luggage. Fortified with two meals of rice and beet we rose at 6:00 am and set off, three hours later by bus to the Men's Camp, a group of huts near the first cottages occupied by the men prisoners.

Conditions were bad, and the bathroom was appalling[26]. More and more people kept arriving until there were over five hundred in the camp, among them a missionary from a Leper Camp. We shared our pots, pans and goods and began to get organised. The predominating feature was mud, which penetrated everywhere and clung tenaciously to our clogs and trompaks. Rain poured in through holes in the roof and our beds were often soaked, after thunderstorms had done their worst. We had to get accustomed to doing unpleasant tasks like collecting garbage (a job refused by the coolies) and cleansing the bathroom and sanitary tanks. A threat (which materialised later) of having to cut down trees was a worry. So were the noises in the night, what could they be? Rats, doge, footsteps or planes?

[26] Not realising that this camp was to be taken over by the women, the men had made it as unpleasant as possible.

December brought rumours of a Peace Conference. The inevitable contradictions sent our spirits to zero, but we recovered in time to celebrate Christmas. On Christmas Eve, the Dutch children sang songs and did a Nativity Play in tableaux. There was a lovely grotto, prepared with ferns, plants and grass with cloth stiffened to form rocks. Figures and candles made it effective. On Christmas Day we wakened with a happy feeling and exchanged little presents. After two early services (Roman Catholic and Protestant) we prepared the festive board, decorating it with paper cloths and candles, and enjoyed a Christmas dinner of pork and plum pudding (made from beans). The next day, as in the previous year, the children carried candles in a Living Tree parade to the hospital and distributed a few sweets. Variety concerts entertained us and quite a hilarious crowd welcomed the New Year.

Reaction soon set in and dullness settled on the camp. Nothing of interest happened. The days were hot, interspersed with torrents, and there was a shortage of fruit and eggs. In February, the Jap guards took their departure, and we were left to the civil authorities.

THE VIGIL

'Tis night and in the camp's wide square
Unwonted silence fills the air
For now, the central open shed
Acts as a shelter for the dead.
How slowly time doth pass!

A tiny lamp with steady glow
Lights up the darkness and doth show
Where watchers solemn vigil keep
Beside the dead, while others sleep.
How slowly time doth pass!

'Why do you use this public place.
Within the walls is there no space?
The living scarce have room to lie,
There is no spot for those who die.'
How slowly time doth pass!

'But, watchers in this tropic clime,
Death brings decay in little time.
Why therefore, do you think it meet
To use nought but a winding sheet?'
How slowly time doth pass!

"'Tis Sunday, and authority
Is deaf to importunity.
A coffin wanted did you say?
Do not disturb our holiday.'
How slowly time doth pass!

"'Tis but a prisoner of war,
A woman too. Why worry more?
To drive away the rats that creep
And hungry dogs, we vigil keep.'

How slowly time doth pass!

A victim of accursed war,
Who ne'er shall see her native shore.
In open shed sleeps her last sleep
While watchers solemn vigil keep.
How slowly time doth pass!

OUR NEEDS SUPPLIED

March 1944

"Oh Lord, for two long years, war has denied
To me the prospect of Thy world so wide,
The right to mould my life as I desire,
The scope for high ambitions to aspire.
When wilt Thou Lord, these chafing bonds remove?"
"My child, earth's comforts may strong fetters prove
Midst deprivations, oft the soul doth grow
Doth rise on eagle's wings, new worlds to know."

"O Lord, my body is no longer strong
Through lack of food, through toil, both hard and long.
Unsightly sores afflict me, ills attack,
But salves and healing drugs I sadly lack.
O Lord, how long will sickness reign supreme?"
"My child, think now thy suffering I deem
As nothing. Strength I give thee to endure,
A cheerful spirit that can sorrow cure."

"O Lord, how great and numerous are my fears,
The present horrifies; the future rears
A threatening head. Danger I seem to see
To soul and body – long captivity.
Starvation, illness, death and worse, O Lord."
"My frightened child believe in This, My Word.
Fear not, for I am with thee all thy days.
Thy needs I will supply, direct thy ways."

"O Lord, at times, my faith has almost died.
Thy power, Thy love, Thy being I've denied.
Doth God still rule, since sin and evil reign?
Can love forbear to wipe out grief and pain?
Does God exist? My darkened spirit cries."
"The earth is mine. If man my laws defies
He learns, through suffering, that my ways are right,
That serving Me brings justice and delight."

"O Loving Father, what a wondrous store
Of gifts Thou hast; all we require and more,
Thy Grace sufficeth for our direst need,

Before we call Thou has an answer meet,
So may we boldly all life's happenings greet
As chances to explore Thy vast supply
Of power, triumphantly to live and die."

April to August 1944

The military authorities took charge again so there was much counting and checking. Everyone had lost weight and averaged only one half of her original amount. Some food supplies came in but they were mostly of poor quality, and vegetables were practically non-existent. We tried to rise above food troubles by celebrating the Easter festivals. Miss Ruth Dickson[27], a missionary nurse from Manchuria, joined us and the stories of her experiences proved helpful and inspiring.

We managed to raise sufficient enthusiasm to arrange a Finance Week for the Red Cross. At the final concert the Japs attended and objected to a Malay song. After this special effort, depression set in. There was no news and no apparent chance of end.

With no warning whatever, Communal cooking was introduced, so I lost my job as rice picker. Unfortunately, a sadder task awaited me. As Camp Chaplain, I had to conduct frequent funeral services. Death began to take its toll of the weakened internees. When no coolies were available, women had to carry the coffins.

Rather ironically, notice was given of the shortage of food, and the consequent need to grow our own rice and vegetables. Each person in the ward was 'pressed' for labour and five thousand potatoes were planted. Grass cutting squads were arranged. These heavy tasks, with drain clearing, filled the day. A fortnight's drought added to our work. Owing to acute water shortage, water draining from the wells was essential and proved a most arduous job. The water was about twenty feet down and was pulled up in pails. One morning, my friend pulled up two hundred pails to fill the big drums for cooking. The kitchens made first claim on water, then a ration was allowed for drinking and bathing. Water carriers were demanded in the heat of the day. There was no organisation for this duty, and everyone felt very tired. Sugar, coffee and one and a half biscuits for seventeen was not a very fortifying repast. We tried many 'strange' foods including gourd, wild bananas and skins, the seeds and inner scrapings of fruit rinds, stems and leaves of tapioca, fish bones and heads, egg shells and hedge leaves.

On August 11th the Australians made an air raid on the oil fields. It began at midday and lasted, with heavy gunfire, until 5:00 am the next day. It made the Japs very nervy, irritable and suspicious, and they drove us to the limit of our strength.

How marvellous it was, at this juncture, to receive our first letters and get home news after two years of war. How consoling to find that the card sent off nine months ago had reached its destination and given news of my whereabouts.

O how a scrap of letter small
Can nectar substitute for gall.
No more I seem a molecule
At beck and call of Fate's harsh rule,
But one with part in world affairs
One for whose welfare someone cares.

[27] A member of the Queen Alexandra Imperial Army Nursing Service. Of a similar age to Margaret Dryburgh, she died in Muntok on Christmas Eve 1944.

September to October, 1944

News came of another move this time to Muntok, so there was great activity in camp. All unnecessary items were thrown out and many sales of goods were conducted the Japs, at preposterous prices.

We got our fifth injection against cholera. All luggage had to be roped up for September 26th. The usual uncertainty and delay followed and fretted our nerves. Just before leaving I took a funeral service and had the strange sensation of being outside the camp for the first time.

The next day orders came for the British to leave at 5:00 pm. We set off in the dark to the boat. Even the Japs said it was not a very good vessel, and we must not move about. It proved to be only a small junk. By the time two hundred women and children got aboard, there was no chance of moving at all. Though terribly cramped, we had to wait all night alongside the quay. When officers came aboard at 4:00 am we set off down the river. We passed boats with camouflaged roofs and other signs of war and saw a training ship. We had three meals of dry rice. An order 'come quickly' when we reached the pier relieved us as we dreaded another night on the junk. The old and sick went ashore in a tender, the rest of us climbed down the ladder and were helped off. A walk along the pier in the darkness brought us to some cattle trucks and lorries over which a Red Cross flag flew. In these we were taken to our destination.

The new camp promised well. The air was like wine, the huts were clean and fresh. We explored with a feeling of freedom and were delighted to find decent kitchen premises. One hundred and fifty instead of fifty to a hut was a 'tall' order softened by the promises of early repatriation. Gradually, with the arrival of luggage we got organised. We were lucky and lost nothing. Some were less fortunate as the loading had been overdone.

A hurried service was arranged and Psalm 121 with its emphasis on 'going out and coming in' seemed appropriate.

Two further batches of folk arrived from Palembang. What a relief it was to find we could escape from the noisy crowded huts and get amongst trees, for a space of quietness. We could see lorries and people passing by outside and hear in the distance the sound of the sea.

O joy, the ocean's vast expanse is near,
A pathway to our friends and kindred dear.
Much nearer home we be
Than huddled in Palembang's Camp,
Hemmed in by miles of guardian swamp
At times, we hear the sea.

November 1944

Alas, Muntok Camp soon belied the favourable impression and became a place of very sad experiences. The place was fever-ridden, and soon sickness was rampant. There was not room in the wards for all the invalids.

Life was still strenuous with water drawing, cooking and sewing and there was no time for any diversions. Night watching was a necessary, though trying duty. Deaths were frequent, sometimes of daily occurrence. One funeral arranged for midday, had to be delayed, as a colonel

was expected. Later women carried the coffin over 200 metres and had to fill in the grave. The last resting place was very peaceful and beautiful.

THE BURIAL GROUND

How silent is this place.
The brilliant sunshine filters through the trees
Their leaves are rustled by a gentle breeze.
A wild and open space.
By shrubs pink-topped, mauve-blossomed, is o'ergrown.
A hush enfolds me, deep as I have known,
Unbroken save by distant insects' drone
How silent is this place.

How awesome is this place.
The pageantry of death approaches nigh
But in strange guise. Two companies pass by
(with slow and stumbling pace),
Of women captives bending 'neath the load
Of comrades, journeying to their last abode
Amid the tinted shrubs up winds the road.
How awesome is this place.

How sacred is this place.
Among the flowers, beneath the sunny sky
The dear remains of two war victims lie
Each in a burial space,
By women's hands, filled in and beautified,
And women offered prayers for those who died,
Set up a cross of twigs so simply tied,
How sacred is this place.[28]

December 1944 to March 1945.

A gift of dollars came from the men as a welcome to Muntok. More money, perhaps from the Red Cross, came the same night. Supplies of oil, sugar, salt and tea brought some relief.

Unfortunately, the epidemic did not abate and the death toll mounted steadily. Everyone being terribly reduced in weight felt tired and dispirited, and sorely grieved by the loss of dear friends.

The thought that this December might be the last month of captivity brought back a little energy, but it was short-lived. Funerals continued. On Christmas Eve, Ruth Dickson passed away and was greatly mourned.

Christmas Day had a happy beginning. The Dutch Christmas Trees were in bloom, and the visit of a Roman Catholic bishop caused great excitement. At heavy expense we feasted on pork and sweets and had a vocal orchestra in the evening.

[28] In the film 'Paradise Road', a version of this poem was read by Pauline Collins, playing Margaret Dryburgh. It read: ""How silent is this place, The brilliant sunshine filters through the trees, The leaves are rustled by a gentle breeze, A wild and open space by shrubs pink-tipped, Mauve-blossomed, did all grow. A hush enfolds me, deep as I have known, Unbroken, save by distant insects lone*, A jungle clearing, a track through which we bear our load to Him, It is our Paradise Road, how silent is this place, how sacred is this place". *I am not sure about this word (it should be 'drone').

Two days later the sudden collapse and death (from beri-beri) of Sabine Mackintosh gave us all a terrible shock[29]. Her funeral followed Tenko. Psalm 121 was read, and we sang 'The strife is o'er.' There was a lovely light on the hills. On December 31st a memorial service 'Unto the End' was held.

A few lively spirits celebrated New Year's Day, but cheerfulness soon disappeared with further sickness and deaths. The monsoon burst, and we had two dreadful days. Mats were put up to try to keep the wind off, but we got soaked during the funeral services.[30]

Depression was lifted a little by the arrival of more home letters, but quickly returned as more intimate friends sickened and died. The burden now seemed too heavy to be borne, and we all felt very low. Wild rumours that peace had been signed, caused great excitement among the natives, but a false alarm only accentuated our misery. Three funerals in one day proved very trying, and my faith reached a very low ebb. My friends tried to cheer me up and celebrated my birthday with little gifts and much kindness.

News of another move was received with much trepidation. We felt very apprehensive about the new camp of Malay houses, each one of which had to accommodate forty. A wet spell came on, and after fifty-eight funerals, added greatly to our misery.

Some unexpected gifts caused a welcome diversion. They included five goats, twelve pigs and – a piano. The livestock came from the men's camp. The pigs were put in a sty. One died, two returned to their owners, whilst two were chased away by the children.

A Deputy from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was reported to be paying a visit so there was tremendous tidying up. A bridge was made over the drains. Logs were neatly piled and everything, clothes, cups, beds, etc. had to be out of sight. The Captain was worried and irate and indulged in face-slapping to relieve his feelings, when people argued with him. At 2:00 pm we were all in line as a whistle blew. A heavy shower came on, so we were allowed to shelter. The Deputy sent greetings and a message that Red Cross parcels would be delivered in the next camp.

April, 1945

This month began with a week of plenty: sugar, oil, cockles and fish. Perhaps this favour was to soften the news of our next move. It was decreed that one third of the camp should go in two days' time[31]. Rice was distributed and there was much cooking. Expenses were terrific and an extra anxiety, but money came in wonderfully.

We followed our luggage to the harbour and found the familiar junk awaiting us. The stretcher cases went on the deck (so called) and the rest were packed in the hold, with room neither to stand up or stretch our legs. It took three days to reach Palembang. There, in intense heat we boarded a train, with orders to keep all doors and windows shut, or the Japs would shoot.

Some sick folk died on that ghastly journey. I took ill and had to be transferred to the stretcher carriage. After two days we reached our destination, going sixteen miles by lorry into the jungle, to a derelict rubber estate[32] at Loebock Linggau near Labat.

[29] She was a Presbyterian missionary.
[30] Mother died 17/1/45 – handwritten note added by Shelagh Brown.
[31] I went in the first batch – handwritten note added by Norah Chambers.
[32] Belalau.

Here the diary ends. Mrs Chambers continues the narrative.

She lay on my bed (32" space) on arrival and we carried her to hospital. She was taken into hospital and should have recovered but, like all the others, was so weak from semi-starvation, that she just couldn't. When I went to see her, she was semi-conscious. She recognised me and tried to speak. After a struggle, I found that she was trying to say her favourite psalm, the twenty-third. I stumbled through it, to the best of my ability, then there was silence. Suddenly, in a strong voice, and with a smile, she said "That's what I wanted." She passed away shortly afterwards on April 21st. I helped to carry her, and before the coffin was closed, put a bunch of flowers in her hands. She looked so peaceful and content, for she had done her job, and done it well. Her grave was marked by a simple wooden cross[33]. We planted some flowers and a big alamander at her head, as she always loved flowers so much.

TRIBUTES

From Mrs Hinch.

To many of us her death was the greatest of our camp sorrows. In my job as Commandant of the British Camp, I felt as though I had lost my strongest prop.

From Fellow Internees.

She was an inspiration to us all. Contact with her meant a real quickening of spiritual, mental and intellectual life. Many would have given up and died had it not been for her strength of character. The whole camp was unanimous that the concerts and music she arranged were a real uplift. She lost herself in her creative work. She regarded the Internment, not as so many wasted years, but as an invaluable training ground for learning many priceless lessons.

FINALE

On Friday 24th August news of peace reached camp. On September 15th, release came to those who were left.

[33] She was later reburied in the Dutch Military Cemetery in Semarang, Central Java.