

# THE CAN-OPENER

## A Story from a Japanese Prison-Camp

(Written for "The Listener" by JAMES BERTRAM)

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**P**TE. WILFRED STOKES, of The Londoners, was a "natural," though the Orderly Room of that famous regiment had found—in the years of his peacetime soldiering — more pungent names for him. More simply, Wilfred Stokes was a thief.

He had far and away the longest crime-sheet in the battalion; and the weeks he had done in "the Glass-house," laid end to end, would have reached from his native East Ham to Aldershot. No one else, in a self-respecting regiment, could have stood up to that record and still worn the King's uniform.

But there was something about "Wilfie," as he was universally known, that melted official justice like morning dew. By the time he had finished explaining the precise nature of the temptation and promised soulfully never to do it again, everyone—from the Colour-Sergeant to the Colonel—was usually in tears. Wilfie would seize the propitious moment to produce from nowhere a grimy photograph of his very attractive wife and small daughter.

"That's my girl," he would say hoarsely, blowing his nose in an easy and natural manner. "Allus thought a lot of me, did Nellie." And as he pulled a sleeve across his nostrils, the photograph would vanish like magic into thin air. For there was nothing Wilfie could not do with his fingers.

"That man Stokes is a menace," said the Colonel, when Wilfie came out of detention barracks a week before the Japanese attacked Hong Kong. "But we can't send anyone home just now. I only hope that one day he'll be more of a nuisance to the enemy than he is to us."

The Colonel went down with the *Lisbon Maru*; and the Japanese saw to it he did not survive to give evidence about that. But he would have liked to hear the rest of the story.

WILFIE didn't win any decorations in the battle of Hong Kong, though The Londoners—in that brisk little bit of fighting—more than upheld their reputation when another famous British regiment did not. But we may still catch a fleeting glimpse of him in the unofficial history of those days. The Colonel had come round the advance machine-gun posts in Wanchai right at the finish, when the garrison was pushed back into the city itself, and things were pretty hot. Wilfie, who was a company runner, had the misfortune to turn up at the same time, unshaven.

"Good God," said the Colonel. "That man's scruffy! Tell him to shave at once."

"No water here, sir," said the sergeant laboriously. He might have added that his section had been in action for three days without a break.

"Then drain off the Vickers," snapped the Colonel. "The guns need cooling anyway. I can't have my men going around

looking like that." So Wilfie had a quick shave in hot water, punctuated by Japanese mortar-shells; and a few hours later Hong Kong surrendered.

It is highly doubtful if Private Stokes would ever have let himself become a prisoner of war, if he hadn't been near the stores after the surrender, and got in on the rum. So when Victoria Barracks were surrounded and cordoned off, Wilfie was already inside, in the cells. That was the beginning of his four years of martyrdom. But the martyrdom, in this particular case, was not altogether one-sided. The whale might have swallowed Jonah, but this was a Jonah who could make himself pretty uncomfortable for the Japanese whale.

We heard a lot of Wilfie's exploits during the next year, when all units in Hong Kong were together in one big camp. Pilfering may not begin in a prison-camp, but unfortunately it does not end there either. Every now and again, though, something happened in a big way. A whole sack of sugar was missing from the Japanese stores, or a whole case of cigarettes vanished from the officers' canteen. Then—just as, in Chicago's palmy days, a connoisseur might read of a particularly inclusive killing and murmur "Capone"—the knowing said, "Wilfie!"

There are certain advantages in being a universal scapegoat. Wilfie spent most of his time in jug, which at least kept him off working-parties. And if he complained mildly about the number of times he had "carried the can" for someone else's misdemeanours, there were always the other times when he's got away with it. Still, it was a relief to the senior officers in the camp when the Japanese decided to send a first draft of prisoners to Tokyo, and suggested that any "undesirables" in the ranks should be given priority. For the first time in the history of the United Services, all unit-commanders were in complete agreement; the name that headed the list of that first draft from Hong Kong was Private Wilfred Stokes.

It was a year before I saw Wilfie again, in rather curious circumstances. I had just been transferred to Omori HQ Camp

in Tokyo, where with three companions I spent a fortnight in the guardhouse cell. This cell is important, for it was to be the scene of Wilfie's apotheosis; so I must take a moment off to describe it.

Omori Camp was a drab collection of wooden huts of orthodox military pattern, built on a flea-ridden sandbank in Tokyo Bay. The guardhouse which so hospitably welcomed us stood just inside the main gate, and rather resembled an outsize New Zealand garage. It had



"A shabby figure in the remnants of a British battle-dress digging a vegetable patch"

three main divisions within its oblong. In front, which was open, was the guard-post itself, where half-a-dozen Nips with an N.C.O. were on duty day and night, and where the sentries patrolling the camp reported every hour for their relief. Behind this open front were the guards' sleeping-quarters, with *tatami* mats down one side and a corridor down the other. Finally at the back of the building, chill, windowless, and bleakly lit by electricity, were the cells.

Of these, the one in which we found ourselves was about twelve feet square, with panelled walls of Japanese pine on three sides, and a massive wooden grille, divided by heavy batons into six-inch squares, across the front. Once the door in the grille had been locked upon a prisoner, it was never opened until his release. Food was passed in through the wooden bars by the guards. The interior of this cell was completely bare of furniture. Nearly one-quarter of the floor space, however, was taken up by the concrete coping of a drop-toilet, or

*benjo*, of the traditional unsavoury Japanese sort. All in all, we decided, a good place to get out of.

When finally we did get out, and were being marched across to the Camp Office to be registered, we noticed at once a shabby figure in the remnants of British battle-dress digging a vegetable patch in one corner of the sandy yard. Fore and aft it wore an enormous placard, like the caricature of a London sandwich-man. The black letters screamed at us:

I AM A THIEF !!!  
GREAT DISHONOUR  
OF BRITISH ARMY !!!

"Bless my soul," said the young officer of The Londoners who was with us, "if it isn't Wilfie Stokes!"

Head in air he marched past, while I gazed in dismay at this wretched victim, whose shoulders drooped so path-

etically beneath their badge of shame. Wilfie dug on stolidly, though when he raised his shock head, with short-sighted eyes peering dimly behind metal-rimmed glasses, I thought I caught the ghost of a wink. Then I was quite sure that I read the soundless movement of the lips "One up on the butt, mate!"

We had been given a smoke to celebrate our release. Watching the guard's eye, I flipped a half-smoked *Hikari* across the sand. Warily Wilfie stooped to clean his spade: an instant later there was no cigarette to be seen, but a spiral of smoke curled briefly in front of the thick glasses. "Thanks, chum!" the lips signalled again; and that was that.

A YEAR passed—a year, for me, of fairly strenuous activity on the wharves and railways of Tokyo, where with some of the roughest and most loyal companions in the world I learnt to shift cargo, and how to become a pretty fair amateur thief myself. We didn't see much of Wilfie, in all this

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