

Diddle-de-da, diddle-de-da, in rhythmic unison with the wheels. As the time had come closer the talk had been of nothing else. Their eyes had shone like kids before a party, their tongues wagged as incessantly.

My old girl's got a turkey ordered. Always had a turkey every year since we've been married — sort of custom. Wouldn't be Christmas without it. And let me tell you the way my old girl'll cook that turkey'll be . . .

Christ, when the boys and I get together again. . .

Got my little tabby waiting for me. Last leave she . . .

But Jim didn't talk about how it would be for him. Somehow he couldn't tell about Peg and the pattern of life that had become so deeply a part of him in that brief time. They'd never spent a Christmas alone together, so it was all to be new. He couldn't talk about it. He couldn't even think about it clearly to himself. He could only be it. He simply drew breath all day and each night so that that time would come closer. Even this life that he hated became tolerable, for in a way it ceased to exist—he went through it like a sleep-walker, his true presence in the future, at that precise moment when he would put his arms about her again—nothing before that, nothing after it. Just that. Completion, freedom, life's meaning once more.

And then all leave was cancelled.

HE couldn't realise it at first. And then, by the time that deeper sub-strata had registered this shock, his upper mind had already started to plan cautiously and cunningly. It was some days before he even realised himself exactly what he had decided—and by that time the plan was there, formulated and settled upon. All he had to do was act.

But they were expecting this sort of thing. They had been given a special lecture on duty and responsibility at this time, and a special warning for possible malefactors. Pickets were doubled at all exits, and all round the camp. It was rumoured they were thick as flies at the station, and had been posted at further stations down the line. Trains were to be searched. The police had been authorised to question suspects—and so on. No one knew anything for certain, but everyone was sure of the latest rumour.

Jim talked to no one. When the others in the tent cursed and grumbled, he was silent.

Hit you hard, has it, son? asked Shorty, and he nodded, refusing to be drawn out.

By the time Christmas Eve came they had got over the worst of the shock. They were still mutinous, but sullenly so. They had started to talk about the extra rations that had been promised for Christmas Day, and the concert party that was coming up in the evening. No one thought anyone else would be crazy enough to jump the fence—it was a certainty one would be caught. Pickets were thick as flies—not worth the candle—that was the general opinion.

Jim had told no one. He had made his preparations furtively. He got ready when the others were out of the tent, and no one saw him slip cautiously from shadow to shadow till he was clear of the lines and could strike out into the open country.

It was quite easy to leave the camp, he simply kept clear of the gates and found his way through the mass of slit trenches that bordered the lines. He

was glad of the storm, of the noise of the wind and rain, and of the darkness, grey rather than black, because the moon was hidden somewhere behind the clouds.

The country was rough. He tumbled over mounds of earth, and clumps of tussock, slipped into pools and slit trenches, and was soon soaked and muddy. But at least he was alone. He was on his way to freedom.

He struck the seldom used desert road, and now everything was easier, except that here all his senses were strained, expecting the sudden challenge, the unfriendly presence. He passed the P.W.D. camp, and the watchman at the gate flashed his torch, shouting a cheery Good-night, mate.

SUDDENLY he realised the stupidity of it all. The natural, cheerful hail showed him that he was no criminal, not one of the hunted and condemned after all. He was a free man whom another free man hailed in a friendly way. All men were not his enemies. Fear and hatred and imprisonment were not everywhere. A voice in the night need not be a signal for flight and terror—it could be a blessing and a god-speed. He felt grateful to the watchman, but by the time he had calmed himself enough to answer, he was too far down the road.

Raindrops bulleted on to his head and shoulders as he passed under a group of macrocarpas. Then coming round a bend in the road he saw lights and heard the roar of a diesel engine. What could it be? The grader at this time of night? In the glow of the lights he saw three figures silhouetted and coming towards him.

He flung himself in the shallow clay ditch, crouching lower and lower, holding his breath. But for the grader he would never have seen them. He would have been caught. The grader passed. The clatter of the men's boots on the bitumen came nearer. They were flashing a torch round. Had they seen him too in the lights?

He knew now how a rabbit felt—rabbits that he had seen crouching, ears flattened, eyes staring, paralysed with fear, in the grass. He swore that never again would he go hunting rabbits.

Then the footsteps passed. And he was safe again. He had scarcely gone another hundred yards when there were more lights. Hidden behind some bushes he saw a small army truck pass, probably carrying pickets.

They were certainly keeping a watch. He'd have to go the rest of the way across country again. The road was too dangerous.

He crept up through the scrub on the offside of the station. A row of trucks separated him from the dimly lit platform where he could see more pickets grouped. The express was almost due. He moved cautiously nearer. He could see now that the pickets had torches. As he watched they scattered and began to search the yards and trucks, flashing their lights as they went. He silently drew back, hiding in the shelter of some stunted heather.

They were evidently well prepared for train jumpers, but he knew nothing could stop him now. He'd do his best, and if . . . The ground vibrated with the oncoming train—a whistle, then the headlight glimmering on the lines. It ground to a stop and the pickets lined up on both sides, each man guarding about twenty yards, and flashing his torch about him.

(continued on next page)

HIS MAJESTY'S COLONIAL SERVICE

There are vacancies for Civil Engineers in the Public Works Department, Malaya.

2. Qualifications entitling applicants to consideration are Corporate Membership of the Institution of Civil Engineers of Great Britain or Degrees or Diplomas recognised by that body as granting exemption from Sections A and B of its examination. Applicants, preferably between 25 and 30 years of age, should have had experience of the construction and maintenance of roads, buildings and bridges, or of aerodromes or of urban water supply schemes.

3. Appointments, which will be subject to a medical certificate of fitness for tropical service, will be on probation for a period of three years with the prospect of emplacement on the pensionable establishment at the end of this period. Salary is at the rate of 400 dollars a month, rising by annual increments of 25 dollars a month to 800 dollars a month. Starting salary will depend on age, civil experience, and length of approved war service.

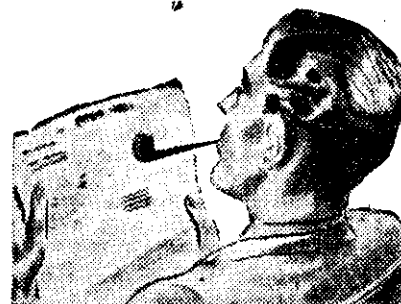
4. Free quarters are not provided, but Government quarters partly furnished are usually available at low rates. Free passages for the officer, his wife, and children under the age of ten years, are granted on first appointment and on leave. Home leave on full pay is normally granted after 3 to 4 years of service at the rate of 4 days for each month of service.

5. Allowances in respect of children are payable at the rate of 50 dollars a month for the first child and 50 dollars a month for the second child until completion of the 18th year of age, and outfit allowance equivalent to £60 sterling is payable on first appointment.

6. For the purpose of exchange with sterling one Malayan dollar equals 2/4.

7. Applicants would be required to serve anywhere within the Malayan Union, Singapore, or Brunei.

8. Those interested should write to the Colonial Office Representative, Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, P.O. Box 992, Wellington, stating age and professional qualifications and giving date when those qualifications were obtained.



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