SINGAPORE, 1943: *"We looked into space, our hearts pounded, there did not seem enough air to go around . . ."*

The Christmas Present

by Freddy Bloom

Illustrations by RONALD SEARLE

A week after her marriage in Singapore Mrs. Bloom found herself a captive of the Japanese. There, thrown together in misery, Occidental, Chinese and Sikh found that prison bars could not confine the human spirit. In Britain on Christmas Day, 1949, it is good perhaps to reflect on another Christmas in a far-off land just six years ago . . .

SINGAPORE, Christmas, 1943. I woke up and watched them drawing back the last of the blackout curtains from the outside. That meant that soon the glaring lights that had been on all night would go out. I tried to stretch my legs and kicked Reddy. He did not stir, and vaguely I wondered whether he was unconscious or just sleeping the deep sleep of exhaustion. It did not really matter; in either case it would do him good.

I turned my head and looked at the Sikh who was lying next to me. Poor Mahinder Singh. When they had brought him in he was tall and strong and magnificent. Now he was tall and skinny and just very young. His beard and long, coiled hair were no longer sleek and shiny. His smooth brown skin had a greenish hue. Perhaps dark skins always turned green when fair skins became pale.

I looked at my own hands. They were quite beautiful. Slender, smooth, and white, with nails that I had carefully bitten into a good shape.

Just as well that I could not see the rest of me —except my feet. I had seen so much of them recently. They had made us all take off our shoes as we entered the cell. None of us had stockings or socks. Who would think of wearing such things after 22 months of internment? Anyway, most of the women in Singapore had gone about barelegged even before the Japanese came.

I thought of the silly line of shoes parked just outside the cell. Sixteen pairs, all shapes and sizes, but mostly *trompahs*, native wooden-soled, one-strapped sandals. My own were real shoes, white leather with crêpe soles, and they would have to last me until the war was over. I certainly was not wearing them out at the moment. Perhaps they would not fit the next time I was called out for questioning. The last time there had been difficulty putting them on.

I looked at my feet again. They were white and fat and dimpled, like a baby's. That was beri-beri. The shoes would have to fit. Everybody always made a proper business of putting on shoes when called out. It gave you a chance to do something outside the daily routine, and it gave you a chance to collect your wits and fight the blue funk that filled every inch as you thought of the questioning to come.

"We Would Show Them—But What?"

This was Christmas Day. Perhaps nobody would be taken out for questioning. What a hope! The Nips would pile it on thick just to show us. This was Christmas Day and we would show them. But what could we show them? This was the Kempetai, the Japanese Gestapo, and we were their prisoners. Oh well, it was Christmas Day and I was going to wash my hair.

I looked across to the w.c. in the corner. Dr. Choo was washing. He was always washing. Washing had become an obsession with him. Other things had become an obsession with him, but it was hard to know what they were for he talked so little. Of course, the Nips did not allow us to talk, but he was the only one who did not disobey them. He was scared. So were we all, but it affected each in a different way. He seemed to sink more and more into himself. The other day, when Mac had accidentally bumped into him, he had almost shrieked, "Don't touch me. Don't touch me. I'm superstitious." Mac had barked back, "I'm no devil, fool."

Mac was a dour Scotsman. Imprisonment had made him more dour, more Scots, and, somehow, more of a man. Mac was hard. Dr. Choo was not hard. He was just a hard-working Chinese doctor who had suddenly been torn from his work, his wife, and his children. He swore he did not know why. I looked at the w.c. again. Choo was now using it. I looked away.

Mahinder Singh woke up. He rolled his head on his stiff neck and started to massage his body. He turned to me and smiled. "May Kismas, memsahib." "Merry Christmas, Mahinder."

"Today Kismas. Today good day. Today all go home. Catch big eating." After 75 days of the Kempetai, Mahinder was still the complete optimist. He was my friend. We had played a great joke on the Japanese. This joke was our bond; it was our strength.

Mahinder and the Mouse

They had brought the young Sikh policeman in a few days after me and they had insisted that he sit next to me during the day and sleep next to me at night. This, they reckoned, would be most degrading to the proud Sikh and to me, a white woman, the only woman in a cell with fifteen men of different races. Degradation meant nothing to me, but at the start I was a bit frightened. I tried to stay as far away from him as possible, but that was not easy, with sixteen people in a cell 10 feet by 18.

The first night we lay next to each other I woke because a mouse had slid up between the warped floorboards and slipped up my shirt. My femininity had never included a horror of mice, but to have one scuttling round my ribs under my shirt was another thing and I sat up with a start. We had to lie so close, that this woke Mahinder, who sat up too. Just then the mouse leaped out of my bosom and scurried away. I was shaking with horror. The young Sikh put a hand on my shoulder, smiled a lovely paternal smile and whispered, "*Thik hai*, memsahib. Is only a little mice."

At that point the Nip sentry on night duty screeched at us and we both lay down quickly. From that moment we were friends. We never let the Japs know. When they were near, Mahinder and I would play at being enemies, and this was the best game we had. When they beat him up, I nursed him. When I was ill, he took off his shirt at night and put it over me.

Mahinder's greatest gesture was when he lent me his comb. The Sikh religion forbids men cutting their hair, so they all have beards and silky black tresses, which often reach below their waists. The hair is then combed up, twisted, and coiled into a knot on the crown of the head and held in place with an adroitly inserted small wooden comb. Ordinarily a turban is worn. They had taken away Mahinder's turban in case he tried to hang himself with it (they had removed the elastic from my knickers for the same reason), but had left him his comb. After we had been together for some days, he watched me trying to comb my hair with my fingers, and then, to my utter astonishment, he handed me his comb. His gesture meant a great deal.

Thereafter he lent it to me every day, but he would never lend it to anyone else. Mahinder had proved himself, as mentioned, my friend and here we were wishing each other a merry Christmas. Then we both looked towards the w.c. That w.c.! How our life revolved about it. It was no ordinary toilet. It had no wooden seat, and instead of the ordinary flush arrangement, it had a tap that could be turned on fast or slow. When the bowl was full, it automatically drained itself. This was a very practical arrangement, and for a time I thought of having a similar fixture in our home in London, until it occurred to me that in England we did not use toilets for such varied purposes. In the Smith Street lockup in Singapore the w.c. was used for washing, for drinking, as well as for our basic needs.

WATCHING: *"Between the two rows of cells, the Japanese sentries marched up and down. We made rude remarks about them . . ."*

Initiation

When they had first flung me into the cell with all these strange men, I had sat for some hours until it had become imperative to catch the attention of the sentry who marched up and down outside the bars that formed one wall of the cell. Since he spoke no English, I pointed to the w.c. and then to myself. He obviously understood, for he went out and spoke to the corporal on duty, and within a few minutes a Japanese voice bellowed, "If the woman wishes to wash, drink, or pass water, there is a toilet in the corner of the cell."

The embarrassment of the men about me was so strong that it broke through my own. When I eventually got up, each man seemed to try to disappear within himself. Now, after so many weeks, we all took each other very much for granted.

Across the cell Walter was reading his Bible. Walter was, in some respects, a privileged prisoner. He was an Englishman who had lived for years in Nagasaki, spoke fluent Japanese, and understood Japanese customs and manners. He had been our camp interpreter and done a wonderful job until he had been

arrested for running a strictly forbidden radio.

Now he still acted as interpreter in our urgent demands for medicines, foods, and the barest essentials of life. Most of the time his efforts were in vain, but any vaguely human touches that were ever shown us by the Nips were almost always due to his efforts. He was a deeply religious man and had somehow obtained permission to bring his Bible into the cell. As I watched him, he looked up and smiled.

Though there seemed to be a rule that a sentry should be on constant guard, marching up and down, passing each cell about once a minute, this had slackened considerably during the past few weeks and was only in force when higher officers were expected at our lockup. Ironically enough, the headquarters of the Singapore Kempetai were housed in what had been the Y.M.C.A. This morning the guards were all busy with their own affairs and paid no attention to us.

The First Present

Walter got up and came to me. "Merry Christmas, and here is something the postman left for you." With care he took a little picture out of the Bible and gave it to me. It was the type of highly coloured little holy card that is often given to children in Sunday schools. Perhaps one of Walter's children had put that particular one in that particular Bible. Now he was giving it to me as a Christmas token. I held it carefully; it was very beautiful.

And then our first meal of the day arrived. Choy, the young Chinese conscript, clanked down the corridor with a high stack of tin dishes, the size of small cake tins, and a bucket of rice. He stopped outside our cell, counted the number of inmates, slung a dollup of rice into that many tins, unlocked the small door in the barred wall, and slid all the dishes on the floor. The men sat down in the places they occupied all day. I got up and handed each man a tin. This had been my duty ever since the beginning, when there had been squabbles. There never was very much rice.

We ate all meals with our fingers; there were no utensils. When we had finished, we waited for Choy to come back with the tea bucket. Then we lined up at the door while he poured tea (no milk or sugar, of course) into the tins. This led to difficulties and contortions, for many of them were rusted and full of little holes, and we had to try to hold the tins so that the fingers plugged all the offending holes. Since the tea was often boiling hot, my fingers used to blister, and often one of the men would hold the tin for me while I drank.

Greetings to Cicely

One of my cellmates was a Chinese Communist called Tang, who was the head of one of the up-country resistance movements. He was short and squat and, unlike most Chinese, grew a thick stubbly beard. He was the toughest man I ever knew. No matter what the Nips did to him, he never changed his expression and never made a sound. When anybody tried to nurse him, he just shook his head and said, "*Tidapa*," Malay for "Never mind." He spoke no English. Sometimes I thought that I would rather be a white woman in Japanese hands than a Japanese in Tang's hands. He was tough . . . and he was always the first one up to hold my tin when the tea was hot and he would tilt it carefully like a mother feeding her child.

Remembering Christmas, 1943, there is a great deal of sentiment but no sentimentality. We were a group of extremely mixed people sharing a most unpleasant experience. Some showed up better than others. As far as I personally was concerned, there was not a man, European, Indian, Chinese, Eurasian, or Malay, who was not thoughtful and kind and they had a great deal more than my presence to think about.

That particular breakfast differed from the others in one respect. Three or four cells down was Cicely, another woman and a good friend. They had brought her in the day after me. We had seen each other on one or two occasions since then. As far as we knew, we were the only women who had been taken from Changi Camp. While Choy poured out my tea, I whispered, "Christmas greetings to the other lady." He did not bat an eyelid. Later, when he collected the empty tins, he growled, "She say you too."

I was just going to the w.c. to wash my hair when there were heavy footsteps in the outer office. Quickly we all sat down in a straight row facing the bars, knees bent, feet tucked in, and waited. We spent at least 14 hours a day in that position. To straighten your legs was considered very bad form. And so we sat on Christmas Day as we had sat for weeks before silently, all in a neat row, looking through the bars into the corridor, and then through another set of bars into the cell opposite, where a similar row of miserable beings faced us. The thing to do was to wiggle into a position where the gap between one's bars coincided with the gap of the person opposite and one had a clear, if not large, view for signalling.

Sign Conversations

Opposite me sat Perry. We had known each other before the war in Penang, where we had played games at the same club, danced at the same hotels, and been invited to the same cocktail parties. The next time we saw each other was through the gap in the bars. It did not take us long to work out an inconspicuous sign language and we spent the tedious hours having long conversations. We also passed on information about what had happened at the various interrogations.

Christmas morning we wished each other all the best and while the sentries marched up and down we made rude remarks about them. Suddenly the noise in the outer office increased. Three of the Nip bigshots stamped down the corridor, followed by a drip of slouching, arrogant interpreters. They looked at us the way a person looks at a harmless beetle before stepping on it. They called out a few names in front of cells farther down, then turned round and stopped at our cell. We looked into space, our hearts pounded, there did not seem enough air to go round. They called Dr. Choo's name and turned to the cell opposite, where they called for Perry and two Chinese. The rest of us relaxed.

Cell doors were opened and those who were due for questioning got out and put on their shoes. Perry held on to the bar in front of me while he put someone else's *trompahs* on his swollen feet. He wiggled his fingers at me and before he left he winked.

We continued to sit, looking straight ahead. Only those who had been badly beaten and tortured were allowed the luxury of lying down. When the Japs were working on a man, he never got much rest.

I wondered about Perry, about Dr. Choo. We had heard some cars leave. That meant some of the prisoners were being taken to the Y.M. for questioning. That was bad for they were very thorough. Others were being questioned here. The noises that went with questioning were too familiar by now. It is almost impossible to identify voices under such conditions, and yet one cannot stop trying.

We sat until the second meal, just like the first, was brought round. We put a tin of rice aside for Dr. Choo, and it was eyed greedily, for when a man has been questioned he has either been given food or he is in no condition to eat. In either case the cell may share his ration.

Perry Comes Back

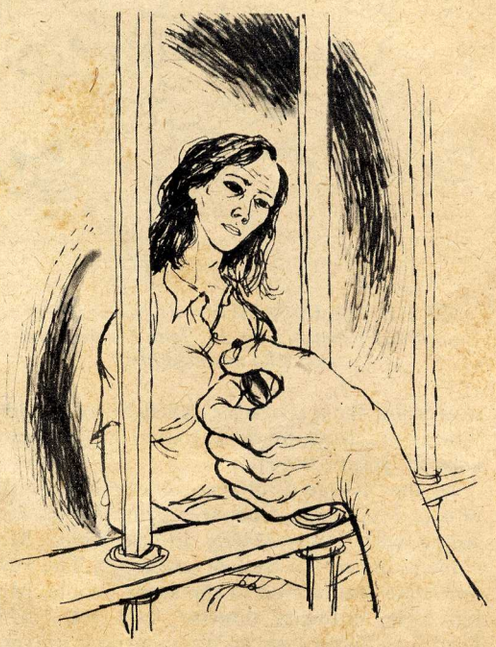
After "lunch," we sat down again. I wanted to wash my hair, but thought it better to do nothing till the bigshots had left. After all, it had not been washed for ten weeks; Boxing Day would really do as well as Christmas. We sat. A couple of people from cells farther down were brought back. They did not look too bad. We sat some more. A scuffle outside and two interpreters dragged an unconscious figure down the corridor. We could not be sure, but he seemed to be Chinese. We sat some more.

Hard to say what time it was when Perry came back. He seemed a bit stiff and his face was bruised, but not too bad. He did not look at me, but as he bent to take off his shoes, he held on the bar nearest me. As he bent, his hand slowly came down the bar. When he eventually let go and turned to enter his cell, there was a tiny parcel on the floor in front of me.

It was not until a good deal later, when most of the prisoners, including a still silent Dr. Choo, had returned and the Japanese officers from headquarters had left, that I could examine the parcel. It was a single sheet of toilet paper, and inside was a sliver of real soap. They had allowed Perry to wash up after his interview, and he had stolen a Christmas gift for me.

Before the third and last rice meal of the day, I took my precious gift and, with great ceremony, washed my hair, with soap in the w.c., and a Eurasian lad lent me his shirt to dry it. And then, of course, there was Mahinder's comb. . . .

Many years have passed since then. Most of the people who were in that prison died. I was lucky. We are back in London and since then have had two wonderful babies. Looking back to Christmas, 1943, I remember that was the day I washed my hair and Walter gave me a holy picture.



GIFT: "*As he bent, his hand slowly came down the bar . . .*"