

Nor deem the irrevocable past
As wholly wasted, wholly vain,
If, rising on its wrecks, at last
To something nobler we attain.

Longfellow.

The Tale Of A Table.

With the compliments of
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KUALA LUMPUR,
SELANGOR,
MALAYA

DECEMBER, 1947.

Neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder
 Shall wholly do away, I wean,
 The marks of that which once hath been,
Coleridge.



The characters are the Japanese equivalent of my name "Reid-o"
 in three types of Japanese writing.

Bonus animus in mala re dimidium est mali.

Plautus.

THE TALE OF A TABLE.

Java 1942.

THE R.A.F. orderly room in Boei Glodok, the civil gaol in Batavia for long-term prisoners, in half of which some 1200 R.A.F. personnel were crowded, was a cell-like room in the administration block some twelve feet by six. The furniture consisted of one small table, a chair and a couple of empty boxes, and the table did duty for the C.O., myself and the clerk, as necessity demanded. After cajoling, threatening and imploring the officer in charge of the workshops for a month or more an extra table was made for myself. The table was made from old sleeping boards used by the civil prisoners in peace time, but found to be so hopelessly bug-ridden as to be unusable by our men. The top was a single piece of teak, approximately thirty-four inches by twenty inches.

As Adjutant and interpreter, my time was more than fully occupied for the first three months, but after that things got easier, and I occasionally found myself with nothing to do, there being very few books available. The then Japanese Commandant, a regular officer, had encouraged arts and crafts, and a successful exhibition had been held, many of the exhibits being made by expert hands. One day it crossed my mind to do something of the sort myself, and the idea of carving the names of the Officers and Warrant Officers on my table occurred to me. I found that I had more space than was needed, so included a view of the solitary confinement cells. I finished up by placing a symbolic chain round the outside, the links being copied from the chains used on the civilian prisoners.

I managed to borrow an extremely blunt and jagged-edged gouge for a short while to remove the wood to give depth to the picture, but, apart from that, had only one blade of a "Dewars" advertisement penknife, a bone handled nail-file and a sharpened nail or two to work with. It took nearly four months to complete and looked a pretty amateurish job when it was finished, but it kept me occupied and I was quite pleased with, not to say proud of, it. In October, the night before our first draft left, I got everyone available to autograph the back of it, but one man would never be there to sign. He had been captured one night early in April with two Sergeant pilots while making a gallant and very

nearly successful attempt to steal an aircraft from the local aerodrome, after they had escaped from the gaol and made their way through the town. We never saw them again.

I put a coating of brown boot polish on the carving, made a three ply cover for it, and was looking for a place to hide it when, quite unexpectedly, in January 1943 the R.A.F. were moved to a camp at Tandjong Priok, the port for Batavia. Before leaving I handed it over to a Dutch friend, Lieut. G. Vischer, R.N.N.R. to hide for me. We stayed at Tanjong Priok only three months, and were then moved to "Cycle Camp", Batavia, an old Dutch army barracks. Here I met Lieut. Vischer again. His crowd had been moved suddenly from Boei Glodok the day after we left, so he had handed the table over to an Ambonese officer, who had been unable to hide it before he himself left and the gaol was closed.

The gaol was re-opened for some months as a rope-spinning factory, and several hundred British personnel went there from "Cycle Camp". The Adjutant found the table and looked after it, but, when the time came to leave, was too busy to hide it, so once again it was left lying about.

Although they closed the gaol again the Japanese decided to keep on the vegetable gardens in the grounds around the gaol, and for quite a while a party went there daily from "Cycle Camp". The Dutch officer in charge of the party told me that he had been inside the gaol, and had seen the table stowed away in a furniture store. And that was the last I heard of it up to the time I left Java at the end of September, 1945.

II

London 1946.

One day in June my friend Dudley Grundy telephoned to my flat and said he had great news for me. He had just heard from "Wiggie", Squadron Leader C. C. Wigram, that the table had been found. Wiggie had just arrived from India, where he had been recuperating after our release, and on the way home in H.M.T. "Cape Town Castle" had met a Wing Commander of the R.A.F. Regiment. It transpired that the latter had been in Java, particularly Batavia, and, while describing what had been going on there after the arrival of the British, mentioned that one of his raiding parties had found a bit of wood with a lot of names on it, and had taken charge of it. Wiggie recognised the description as

that of my table top, and told the Wing Commander that he knew the owner and would pass on the information. As a result I got in touch with the Wing Commander, who told me that the carving was in safe hands, but he could not say where. At his suggestion I went to the Historical Records Section of the Air Ministry. It was not there, but a lot of stuff was expected from Singapore, and I was assured that if it arrived I would be informed at once. I then wrote to the Officer in charge of the Historical Records Section in Singapore asking him to keep it, if he had it, as I was sailing for Malaya very shortly. I received no answer to this letter.

When I reached Malaya I started my search again. After a number of letters had been written and answered I traced the table top to the R.A.F. Provost and Security Services in Singapore, in whose custody it was, pending onward transmission to the War Museum. I then wrote to the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief S.E.A. asking for the necessary authority for its release, and, on 8th December, 1946, saw it again after nearly four years. It was a bit knocked about. Several of the letters were chipped and vandals had seen fit to knock a few rusty nails into it, but the boot polish finish was still there. The autographs on the back had nearly all faded away, and did so completely when I oiled the wood.

I finished off the carving by inserting the date of our release, and by splitting the bottom centre link of the chain, which, with justifiable optimism I had made one inch larger than the others, in preparation for the day when our bonds would be broken. (I did not explain this to the Japanese who saw the table!)

Now there was one thing left to do. There was space inside the broken link for an autograph, and there was one person only whose name I wanted there. I had intended sending the carving itself to England, but it was bulky, and would be inconvenient; in addition to which it would take months to get there and back. Instead of this I took the spoon and fork which I had used throughout my prisoner-of-war time, which constituted the last of the "Family silver", the remainder having been looted from my house in Malaya, to a local silver-smith, who made a flat plate out of them. This I posted home by air mail, and, in a few weeks, it was returned, autographed, together with a short but gracious letter. A coat of varnish to keep the silver from oxidizing and into its place it went.

Of those whose names are on the carving the majority are alive. I send them this card as a memento of hard times shared, and with my best wishes for the future.

To the relatives of those who are gone, I offer it as my humble tribute to the memory of the dead.

Just as the flint contains the spark unknown to itself,
which the steel alone can wake into life, so adversity often
reveals to us hidden gems which prosperity or negligence
would cause for ever to lie hid.

Billings.