

JOY HEWITT MANN

Between the Teeth

THE FIVE ENGLISH PRISONERS stood before Hasegawa Koji, head of the small compound near Bedok, Singapore, all but the tallest man with heads bowed deeply. Three Japanese soldiers stood at attention behind them.

"You come from Changi," Koji stated.

The tall man nodded. "Captain Goeffrey Newstead. I request this thing be done quickly." He stood stiffly, staring ahead, this Englishman with his blond hair, his cold blue eyes, his narrow mouth tightly compressed. The other men stared at the matting on the floor.

Koji smiled. "You are lucky to be here, Captain, though I know you think it is not so. Under Changi's new rule many English will die. This is not my intention."

The brutality of Japan's Indian allies disturbed Koji. These prisoners had been sent to him for work duty. He would work them, yes. But not to death. How to convey this? There was no way. They would not believe that his intentions were humane.

"Mo itte yoi," he said. *You may go.*

Captain Newstead turned and followed Koji's soldiers through the open panel of the bungalow. The other four prisoners moved backwards, bowed, turned, and quickly followed him out.

Koji smiled. These men, they had had the English backbone beaten out of them. But not their Captain. *Iie.* Not him.

The next morning Koji had the Captain brought to him.

"How are you, Captain?"

The Englishman stood before him, flipping a coin between his thumb and forefinger. Koji recognized the English sixpence,

worn smooth, obviously secreted away during the overland march from Changi to Bedok. Newstead whistled ten notes over and over, and looked past the Japanese camp commander's head.

Koji smiled. "Bizet, Captain?"

The whistling stopped, and as the coin fell softly onto the bamboo matting and Newstead stooped to pick it up, their eyes met and held.

Newstead frowned. "Yes. *Carmen*."

"I much prefer his *Pearl Fishers—Les Pêcheurs de Perles*."

Newstead cleared his throat. "Is there something you wanted, Commander?"

"Hai." Yes. Koji watched the coin continue its action in the Captain's hand.

"I need you and your men to dig a large trench and then build *benjo* for me. You will find bamboo and rush matting all prepared. The local peasants who began this were conscripted for the railway."

"Benjo?" Newstead asked.

"Toilet. Latrines?"

"Ah." For the first time the Captain's thin lips curled slightly. He nodded. "I think we can manage that."

He paused. His hand came to rest by his thin thigh. "I thought No, never mind."

"We are not *all* barbarians," Koji said.

The Englishman eyed him steadily. "May I go now?"

"Hai."

Koji signaled to the guards and watched as Newstead bent to pass under the doorway.

The next morning Koji's dark head rose from the futon. He stretched his limbs out, one by one, and crawled off the floor like a snake crawling out from hibernation. He saw his breakfast of rice and pickled turnip waiting for him; heard the noise of the Englishmen working. It would be a good day. His command probably thought him crazy. *Giving them weapons of escape*, they would say, referring to the meagre tools. But where would they escape to? He could hear the Englishmen laughing, now that Death had backed into the jungle, and Newstead, whistling another tune, a different one. Puccini.

This would not sit well with his soldiers. They did not like the prisoners to be happy: they themselves were not happy. It was

to be endured only because the camp commander wished it. But soon the prisoners would be hit at the slightest provocation, spat on when his soldiers thought he was not looking, as the peasants before them had been. Newstead would endure it, Koji knew, and his men ... well, they would bow lower.

He himself, Hasegawa Koji, was fine with the situation. Not happy, perhaps, for it was not for a soldier to be happy in wartime. But the noise of the men working, laughing and talking among themselves, and Newstead's whistling, made him think of home and his Dear Little Flower. Hanako-chan.

Koji walked over to his family shrine, knelt and bowed. From a photograph faded to shades of brown his dead mother and father stared back at him. One flower from the vase had drooped during the night and rested its head on the embroidered cloth.

Each morning, the Captain was brought in to him to discuss the work; and each morning their conversation stretched minutes longer, until by the time eight days had passed and the latrine was finished they were talking about opera with a slightly strained camaraderie. The Englishman was fascinated by the Japanese trappings that surrounded Koji; Koji himself was fascinated with Newstead. He wondered if the whistled strains of opera personified Death for him. Put him in control. It was true, was it not: in these operas someone always died.

But all of them, the Englishmen, seemed preoccupied with death. They talked of it often. Koji occasionally stopped to listen late at night, leaning against the wall of their hut, from curiosity at first, and later because he found their fatalistic conversations soothing.

The Captain would start it off with someone from his family: "My Uncle Herbert lived to be ninety-three. Unfortunately, he was hit by a tram just before Christmas. I believe he would have lived to be one hundred, likely as not."

Young Private Jacobs cut in. "Me family all die young. Not a one lives past fifty."

The man called Bull, a barrel of a man, asked, "So how old's your Old Man, then?"

"I don't know."

"Well, how old are you, then?"

"Twenty-three."

"You the oldest?"

"No. Me sister Maris's the oldest. She's thirty-eight."

"Well then, you stupid little kike, your Old Man has to be over fifty."

Jacobs let out a startled *ooo*. They all laughed. He cut in. "I still say I'll go young."

Bull asked, "So where do you kikes go when you die, then?"

Over several weeks the Englishmen dug and seeded, and now tended a pumpkin field to help supplement the dwindling rice supplies. Koji worked them harder. He had no choice. Word had come that there were more POWs, that Changi and other camps were overflowing. He, Hasegawa Koji, must catch the overflow. Someone would be coming from Changi to inspect his facility. The Englishmen felled trees, built sheds, expanded the compound well into the winter months.

One day when he had worked them particularly hard, Koji left a white porcelain bottle of sake by their hut, and listened as the five men sat talking, passing the warming liquid hand to hand. He heard the wheezes of pleasure, the coughs and hoarse whispers. *Bloody hell!* Someone choked.

"Sod, Kline. You never drank before, then?" The voice was Bull's.

Ah! Kline. A skinny, pale-haired, pale-faced boy-man. There was the sound of hands slapping a back.

The men fell into talk of fallen comrades. It was the way of all soldiers. Only drink could loosen the tongue enough to talk of the untalkable.

It was the old one speaking. Mason. A little wizened man with an overpowering mustache speckled brown and white like a civet. "Old Codger got *his* last year. Oldest private I ever met. Said he wasn't cut out for command; needed to fight to keep his conscience clean."

"How old was he, then?"

"Close to seventy, but lied about it when he enlisted. Fought in every bloody war going: Boer, Spanish, the Big One.

"Said he was ready to cash in his chips on this one. Hated the idea of going home."

The Captain moved into the silence that followed. "I had a soldier under my command who lied also. I discovered he was sixteen. Big chap. Good soldier."

There was a murmur, then silence again. It was the way the Captain spoke. Koji knew the boy had not made it.

They quickly switched to talk of women and Koji thought of Hanako-chan, his Dear Little Flower, as he did almost every day now.

Jacobs said, "Always outlive men. Though in me family, s'not that long."

"Oh, give it up, you silly little kike," Bull cut in. "You'll outlive us all, then. God doesn't want you, my lad," he laughed. The others joined in.

The Captain said, "My Uncle Herbert buried three wives."

"Well, he's an exception," Mason said. "The boy's right. Most old darlings I know have outlasted their men by ten years.

"My Aunt Vera had two husbands, Harold and George. Buried them both. Then she took up with a married man, twenty years her junior."

"Don't tell me, then," Bull said. "She joined old Harry and George."

"No. She blooming well buried the young stud. Heart attack *in flagrante*, if you know what I mean."

Koji heard laughter, then young Kline's voice rising above it. "What's in flag ranty?"

And then came the sound of fists pounding Kline's back and good-natured hysterics.

The camp grew, as did the friendship with the English Captain. They talked of life in Japan, life in England, until the shadows of the trees stretched across the compound. Newstead listened to Koji's phonograph records; Koji gave to the Englishman from his small library. But they had not touched on private matters, as yet.

They separated to eat their scant meals of rice and pumpkin. If fish were caught they were for Koji. This was only right. Food supplies were dwindling fast; word came to him from passing soldiers that rice supplies were running out. *But we take what we find along the way.* "Hai," Koji had said. This was only right. But how, he wondered, would he feed the new prisoners when they came?

Food. The scent, the sight. He pictured Hanako-chan walking small-stepped toward him, balancing a lacquered tray of kumquats, ginger slices, bamboo shoots and pork, all covered with a glazing sauce that shone like her eyes. The tray, the meal, her eyes, all shining like new things.

One day Newstead showed an interest in Koji's family shrine. Koji explained the significance; how the daily care of it kept him connected to all he was.

Newstead held up his coin. "This is my ..." he pronounced the word slowly, "*buktsudan*, I suppose. It is part of me, part of England, part of all my ... ancestors."

"But it does not change," Koji said. "It is ever the same. These wildflowers I change. I honour my ancestors, so."

"The picture leaning against it doesn't change."

"Hai, so." Koji contemplated the photograph. "I move it. In this week gone it was here." He indicated a spot two inches to the left.

"My coin gets shinier," Newstead said, and smiled.

"Ah, so."

A week before Lieutenant-General Nagai and Chandra Singh of the Indian National Army were expected, the work was finished. Koji allowed the Englishmen to rest. Except for tending the garden and keeping the compound clean, they had little to do. They lay around smiling, reading, and looking out at the jungle. Newstead and Koji stood nearby, talking.

They had all lost weight. Mason looked ill. Kline had fits of coughing. He himself, Hasegawa-Koji, had lost some weight. His uniforms fit him with greater leisure now.

It would not do to feed the prisoners more. His own soldiers came first. But if he were indebted to the English Captain ... and he knew that Newstead would share any extra food with his men.

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"This opera you whistle, Captain. How do you remember it all? The last piece you whistled. Rossini, was it not? *Barber of Seville*."

"It is our school system, I suppose. All rote. Poems, tables—memorized. And the whistling is typically British. We are all great whistlers."

"We also," Koji said, then drew himself up stiffly. "I have never been able to learn this whistling. I was a shame to my family. They all tried with great patience, but ... perhaps I did not try enough."

It was not easy to acknowledge a weakness to any man, even a weakness of this insignificance.

"I would be most honoured if you ..." Koji groped for the words in English that would not give the proceedings too great a meaning. "If you would *take me on*," he said finally.

"You are asking me to teach you?"

"I would be ... appreciative."

He could see Newstead weighing the significance of the word.

Koji said, "If I could whistle as you do, if I could take the music with me as I walk, ah ... this would be *majutsu*. Magic."

"It would be a trick, all right," Newstead said. "We'll see what we can do. No promises."

"Iie. I only wish to try."

Three days passed. Koji and Newstead stood facing each other. The Englishman was frowning and stiff-lipped.

"Zenzen dame-la!" *All wrong*, Koji grumbled. "I cannot do this thing."

Newstead flipped his coin faster, thinking.

"What is it you do with your teeth, Commander Hasegawa? You know. When we are listening to your phonograph records you make a hissing sound."

Koji thought again of his opera recordings; *Madame Butterfly*, *Don Giovanni*, Lily Pons as Rosina. *Hai*. Yes. He had hissed in appreciation.

"It is like clapping, like smacking one's lips. A hiss shows pleasure in the subject."

"Have you noticed," Newstead said, "that oftentimes when you hiss, you whistle? It is the gap between your teeth, I believe. If ...," he bowed a little as he said this, "if you would not mind attempting this, I believe I can teach you to whistle between your teeth. Many English lads whistle this way."

Newstead bowed slightly lower and looked at the ground as he added, "I believe your problem is your tongue, Commander. It is, if you will excuse me, too large for your mouth."

"I am not offended, Captain. It is pleasing to know the fault does not lie in myself. I will try this whistling between my teeth."

Newstead smiled. "It will not be as jolly a sound, but it *will* be whistling."

Captain Newstead, Kline, Mason and Jacobs marched across the compound, whistling the familiar ten notes from *Carmen*. Bull, snorting like his namesake, charged into the jungle. Koji whistled

from a distance, aware of the puzzled though not disapproving looks from his soldiers. While the Englishmen's backbones had regrown, his own men's had softened. Koji smiled, then turned at the sound of shouting.

Bull came bursting through the jungle edge, stumbled and fell on his knees. Blood trickled slowly down one side of his face. A soldier came through the leaves behind and hit Bull with his rifle butt as he tried to rise. Three more soldiers, and a Japanese and an Indian officer appeared behind them.

Lieutenant-General Nagai yelled in strident Japanese, *This dog was escaping.*

Koji stepped forward to explain when suddenly Jacobs ran toward Bull who lay face-down, a pool of blood slowly forming. Jacobs was quickly grabbed by two of the advancing soldiers.

Chandra Singh spoke in measured English, "You would let another escape from under your nose, Commander Hasegawa? You seem to have lost control. *We must make an example.*"

He spoke rapidly to Nagai who in turn gave orders to his soldiers. Jacobs was forced onto his knees.

"Now wait a minute." Newstead strode forward.

Koji moved in front of him. "No, Captain."

"But the bloody fools don't understand. They will shoot him. Do something."

"Captain, please. I can do nothing."

A strained look passed over Newstead's face. He pushed Koji aside and marched toward Nagai. "There has been a mistake."

Three rifles leveled at him. He stopped.

Lieutenant-General Nagai said nothing, but gave Koji a look of disgust.

Koji spoke clearly and slowly in Japanese. *Do not bother with this one. I will handle him myself.*

How so, Commander?

He is an English officer. I will whip him like a dog.

Nagai nodded his approval.

Jacobs was on his knees, rocking back and forth in his distress and moaning softly to himself. The blood had stopped flowing from Bull's head.

Kline and Mason were talking loudly, ignoring Nagai's shouts for silence.

"Hold on Jacobs."

"Think of your Mum, son. Think of how she'd want you to go."

At the word “go” a shiver ran through Jacobs’ gaunt frame and he sobbed. His rocking slowed and Koji saw him making an effort to keep still.

Nagai nodded sharply to one of the soldiers. With no hesitation a pistol was placed against Jacob’s skull and fired. He fell forward as if shoved.

“Bloody bastard!” Newstead yelled. Birds rose screeching from the trees.

“*Commander!*” Nagai screamed.

Koji gave orders. Newstead was tied to a compound fence post. A bamboo cane was placed in Koji’s hand.

Mason and Kline’s faces had convulsed into knots of loathing, but Newstead’s face was worse. The mobility was gone. The cheeks that sang as he whistled, the upper lip that swelled out with an Italian aria, were stiff and cold as rock, as immovable as Fuji-san.

The three pairs of eyes followed Koji as he stooped to pick up the coin Newstead had dropped. He bowed deeply and held it out to the Englishman.

“Iie,” Newstead whispered. *No.* And walked with the support of the other men back to their shed.

Koji set his soldiers to work—to dig a shallow trench—and saw the visiting officers and their men to quarters, all the time bowing low; all the time clutching the coin in his fist.

Minutes passed. The smell of gun oil and cordite, the scent of Newstead’s blood, persisted, but he would not be affected by it. The sounds of breaking the earth for the graves reached him and he felt strengthened, knowing there was an end to things, and an order of things to reach that end.

As Koji marched past the prisoners’ shed, he saw Newstead sitting cross-legged, his fingers plaiting blades of grass in an ever-lengthening rope. Kline and Mason lay on the woven straw mats, hands behind their heads, staring up. Koji saw the books he had given them lying, spines broken, pages fluttering like dying butterflies.

For a moment his eyes met Newstead’s and he saw something slide across the blue, slowly, like the movement of a *shoji*, a rice paper screen.

Koji walked toward the jungle and threw the coin with all his strength. A feeling of great shame filled him. *What a thing to do. What a loss of dignity.* He turned, relieved that no one had seen him fling the coin away with such visible agony. He was not a *baniwa*, a servant to be buried alive with his owner; the deaths of the Englishmen did not affect him.

But the coin's scent was still there on the palm of his hand as he bowed that evening at his *buktsudan*; rising up, an incense smelling like fresh blood. He reached out and touched his parents' photograph. He thought of Hanako-chan. Newstead and he had never touched on intimate things.

A bowl of Imari china filled with chrysanthemums in her room. Reading Basho together. These were things he understood. Why the Englishmen could not comprehend that his actions were necessary, that they were not personal but part of his honourable duty, his loyalty to his General, he could not understand.

And the feeling deep inside him, this foreign feeling as if his roots had been clipped too soon, this ... this he could not understand.

"Bloody hell!" he whispered. *Bloody hell.*