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Jungle Soldier

The True Story of Freddy Spencer Chapman

Written by Brian Moynihan

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JUNGLE SOLDIER

**THE TRUE STORY OF
FREDDY SPENCER CHAPMAN**

**BRIAN
MOYNAHAN**

Quercus

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PROLOGUE

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

Freddy Spencer Chapman set off to war from Kuala Lumpur on Christmas Eve 1941 at the wheel of a scarlet V8 Ford coupé. The dicky seat behind him was packed with tommy-guns, grenades and explosives. The Japanese had invaded Malaya two weeks before, and Freddy – he was always Freddy – was driving north to find them. He had two volunteers with him, and a driver to take the car back to KL. Freddy intended to get behind Japanese lines, and report back first-hand on their strengths and weaknesses. In particular, he wanted to see if it was possible for ‘left-behind parties’ to survive and carry out guerrilla raids in Japanese-occupied territory.

He arrived in Parit, a small town in the rubber country 125 miles from KL, expecting to find British troops. It was a derelict and smoking ruin. The Japanese were the other side of the Perak river. He and the volunteers left the car, plugged the holes in a shot-up ferry-boat and paddled across the river.

As they scrambled ashore, he saw his first Japanese soldiers, cycling three abreast, ‘laughing, just as if they were going to a football match’, and took cover in the jungle. It was the first time he had been in primary jungle – before the war, he had been a man of cold climes, the Greenland ice cap, arctic Norway, Tibet – but it gave him ‘a feeling of great reassurance . . . In one dive, I was completely hidden.’

It poured with rain that evening, flooding the small stream that ran by the road where the three men lay, shivering with cold, observing the Japanese. Freddy ‘noticed with delight’ that they passed in dense

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groups of forty or fifty, and had tied their tommy-guns and rifles on the frames of their bicycles, making them vulnerable to ambush. As the water rose higher in the stream, Freddy made a dash for the jungle on the other side of the road. A large party of Japanese swept round a bend and nearly ran him over. They seemed certain to recognise him as a European. 'All I could do,' he said, 'was to put up my arm to hide my face and wave to them.' The Japanese waved back. Freddy's companions, watching from the shadows, marvelled at his presence of mind.

They laid up for the rest of the night. Next day, they moved on through jungle and rubber, within twenty yards of the enemy in places. Freddy confirmed that the Japanese were now on both banks of the upper part of the river, and observed their movements and equipment minutely. They were advancing so rapidly that he had to get thirty or forty miles south before he had any chance of extricating himself from their lines.

That night, in a tiny, flat-bottomed boat, the three Englishmen set out into the swollen river, and were swept downstream. In the dark, they could not see whether they were in the middle of the river, or near the banks, where the Japanese would spot them. 'It was exhilarating to be whirled along at speed, but frightening to be so completely at the mercy of the river . . .' Before dawn, they hid up again in the jungle. The next night, they were back on the river going further downstream. When it grew light, they were told by villagers that the Japanese had not yet arrived, though the British had pulled back. Freddy went on down the river until he reached the British lines.

He reported that the Japanese troops he had seen were 'good second-class material, well-trained but poorly equipped'. They were, he said, 'singularly vulnerable to attack by trained guerrillas'. He was convinced that 'left-behind parties' could inflict real damage, and he pleaded to be given '500 men, or even a hundred'. He was told none could be spared. He would have to rely on the volunteers he had found among the planters and the fervently anti-Japanese among the many Chinese living in Malaya.

On 7 January 1942, with malaria, and running a temperature of 103 degrees, Freddy went back behind Japanese lines, this time for good.

Malaya was overrun, and then Singapore. Churchill called it 'the worst disaster and greatest capitulation in British history'. Other Europeans in Freddy's left-behind parties were soon gone, dead from jungle fevers, or taken prisoner, two of them beheaded by the Japanese. As months and then years passed, he was posted 'missing believed killed'. The Japanese, though, knew he was still alive and they hunted for him as they did for no other.

Field Marshal Wavell, who knew both men, thought Spencer Chapman was the jungle Lawrence. 'He has never received the publicity and fame that were Lawrence's lot,' he wrote of Freddy, 'but for sheer courage and endurance, physical and mental, the two men stand together as examples of what toughness the body will find, if the spirit within it is tough; and as very worthy representatives of our national capacity for individual enterprise.' Perhaps the comparison sells Freddy short: Lord Mountbatten, commander in South-East Asia, thought so, and recommended him for a VC. Unlike Lawrence, he was alone for much of the three-and-a-half years he spent behind Japanese lines, separated by more than a thousand miles from British forces, without supplies or shelter, living on his wits in an environment more brutal by far than Lawrence's. The deserts of Arabia are healthy, but in the Malayan jungle Freddy suffered tick typhus, scabies, blackwater fever, dengue fever, ulcers and sores from leech bites, and was once unconscious for fourteen days with pneumonia and cerebral malaria.

His is one of the greatest tales of endurance and survival in the history of war. It is also a very British story, for the qualities – the genius – that enabled him to survive were, as we shall see, bred in the bone.

CHAPTER 1

A VERY ENGLISH BOYHOOD

The child, more so than with most, was father of the man.

‘One good result of my unhappy childhood was that I became both self-reliant and enterprising,’ Freddy was to write, ‘and I developed an inner fortitude sometimes amounting to austerity.’ He was born in Kensington on 10 May 1907. By the time his birth was registered a month later, his mother had died of blood poisoning. At the same time his father, a solicitor with the family firm of Spencer Chapman & Co in the Temple, faced ruin as well as bereavement. His managing clerk had defrauded the firm and a client, and Frank Spencer Chapman became an undischarged bankrupt.

His health undermined, he left on a world tour with a younger unmarried sister to avoid the bailiffs. He was away for two years, whilst Freddy and his elder brother Robert stayed with an aunt. Frank returned briefly to England in 1909. That autumn, he took the two boys by train to Carlisle. Freddy was two-and-a-half and his brother five. From the station, they took a hansom cab for eight miles to the vicarage in the small village of Raughton Head on the northern edge of the Lake District. The vicar, Ernest Dewick, and his wife Sophie, had agreed to bring up the boys. They were fifty-nine and forty-three, with no children of their own. They were only the vaguest of relations – Ernest’s brother, also a clergyman, was married to Freddy’s aunt – but they were a kindly and affectionate couple. The vicarage is a fine Victorian house of local stone, set in fields and woodland some distance from the church, an ancient building of millstone grit little larger than a chapel. Frank Chapman

left his boys after a day or two, to make a new life on a ranch in British Columbia.

Little Freddy soon showed a lasting curiosity and love for all things wild. The vicarage was ideally placed, in woods running down to the River Caldew, swift-flowing through meadowland on a bed of rock and gravel. He collected birds' eggs and butterflies, and tadpoles. Sophie Dewick taught him the names of flowers and birds, and their characteristics. His father had left books on natural history for him. He did not totally abandon his boys, sending them postcards of the animals of western Canada. Raughton Head was a backwater, but the child's mind was open to all its creatures and to the wider world beyond.

When the Rev. Dewick was appointed to a new parish, they moved to Lindale, between Lake Windermere and Morecambe Bay on the coast. The vicarage was larger if not so handsome as Raughton's – it is used for holiday lets now, whilst the Raughton vicarage, also sold off by the Church in this less godly age, sits grandly behind smart new gates with a security camera to vet visitors – and its garden tumbled down to a gloomy church of dark stone. One of Freddy's earliest memories was of tobogganing down the long steep road that runs from the fells down through the village. His main interests, he said, were 'butterflies and wild flowers'. He was an independent-minded little boy, setting off down the valley to the River Winster with a butterfly net, a fishing rod and jam jars. By the water he caught the blue flashes of kingfishers, and the white bib of dippers, with sandpipers, oystercatchers, glimpses of the yellow underparts of wagtail, swallows, mallard, and, in the evenings, bats. The caterpillars he caught became peacock, tortoiseshell and red admiral butterflies.

It was as well he liked exploring, for he had to find his own entertainment. 'As my guardian had little time to spare from his parish duties, my elder brother and I were left much to ourselves . . . Every morning and evening we had long family prayers,' he recollected. 'Each Sunday, as far back as I can remember, my brother and I had to attend Matins and Evensong and listen to interminable and learned sermons.' Those sermons were peppered with quotations in Hebrew and Greek – Ernest Dewick was an Oxford classicist – and were above the heads of the

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adults in the congregation. It worried Freddy that he understood almost nothing in them. He was sure he was destined for hell. The only way to avoid damnation, he thought, was to learn by heart much of the Gospels. From the age of eight, he also recited long passages from Cicero and Tacitus. 'It seemed to me there was no possible escape from the flames of hell,' he wrote years later, 'and even now I cannot hear church bells without a sinking of the heart.'

His fears did not cow him. They made him more reliant on himself, and mistrustful of emotions, and the long hours passed in the dark church and the 'interminable learned sermons' taught him self-control. There were, also, advantages in being brought up in a parson's household. His elderly 'Unkie' and his wife instilled a decency and moral code that were to serve him well in the extremes to come. He developed, too, respect for knowledge and the ability to apply it to the world immediately about him – the accurate identification of such plants as the primrose, wood stitchwort, meadowsweet, cranesbill, sweet cicely and balsam that grew around the house – that was to make him an explorer-naturalist in the classic sense. So, as a small boy, on his expeditions from an Edwardian vicarage steeped in books, he began to absorb a tradition that goes back to the voyages of the *Endeavour* and the *Beagle*, to Cook and the late eighteenth century, to Joseph Banks and Charles Darwin.

His schooling was assured by a legacy left under his mother's will, which escaped the bailiffs. He had a tutor until he was eight, who took him once on the pillion of his motorcycle to climb Helvellyn by way of Grisedale Tarn. It was a tremendous walk for a small boy and he was moved by the vastness of the Lake fells. 'It gave me an impression of beauty, immensity and physical exhaustion,' he wrote. He had a 'disastrous' term in a kindergarten at Kendal. He was very much his own little boy – the Dewicks sometimes called him 'Frederick the Great' – and he found it difficult to fit in with others.

The First World War began. Frank Chapman volunteered for the Canadian army, though at forty-two he had no need to, and visited the boys briefly in 1915 on leave from France. It was the first time they had seen him for six years. Freddy was now sent over the Pennines to

Yorkshire to board at Clevedon House, a prep school in a large old country house of grey stone. Above it, a cart track leads up to the heathered wastes of Ilkley Moor, and the great rock outcrops called the Calf and Cow, out of bounds to the boys, and thus doubly attractive for them to scramble on. In front of the school, a balustraded terrace stood above a steep shrubbery that gave way to flower beds and lawns and magnificent views over the Wharfe valley. The gardens were large enough for a swimming pool and a nine-hole golf course. Below, down a long hill, was the village of Ben Rhydding, to which the boys were marched to church, and the mill town of Ilkley.

Freddy remembered the headmaster, 'E.W.', Edward W. Stokoe, as a 'man of infinite kindness and understanding'. E.W. was an enthusiastic entomologist, and he encouraged Freddy's wanderings on the moor, his 'happy hunting ground' for oak eggar and emperor moth caterpillars. Glass-fronted cases in the classrooms were filled with local and more exotic butterflies, and E.W.'s love of nature studies was reciprocated by the boys. The headmaster also had great fortitude, never complaining or snapping, despite being in constant pain and near crippled by arthritis. Freddy would reflect that endurance, too, in body and spirit.

In his second term, Freddy wrote to his father – 'Dear Father' he began in sadly formal but affectionate terms to a man he hardly knew, signing himself 'With love from F S Chapman' – about his enthusiasms. 'I am very interested in three main things – astronomy, nature and all about butterflies and caterpillars and moths,' he said. 'I learnt a lot about butterflies and caterpillars from two books from Jennings, who is second top of the second class.' He also begged his father for some of his regimental buttons. 'PLEASE SEND SOME OF YOUR BUTTONS to me. Some of us here collect buttons and badges. I hope you are getting on well.'

The letter was dated 16 March 1916. Six months later, his father was killed at Ypres. Freddy was ten. He had been an orphan, in practice, since he was born, and now he was one, formally. His father had great charm and character, he was still a private when he died, but his commanding general wrote to the boys, speaking of his grief for 'a brave comrade and a loyal friend', which served only to hurt Freddy the more.

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He said later that his father 'had lost interest in life', a cruel phrase, and his own sense of duty was magnified by his father's apparent rejection of his responsibility to his sons.

He threw himself into things physical and natural. Another boy told Freddy's first biographer Ralph Barker (1975) that he was 'the most unwashed and independent boy in the school . . . His pockets were crammed with birds' nests, caterpillars and any natural specimens he happened to fancy . . .' He loved walking over the Ilkley moors, listening to curlew songs, watching for ring-ouzel and merlins. As a greenkeeper, he kept cows off the golf course with accurate strikes from his catapult. He learnt swimming by being thrown in at the deep end. As a boxer, he did not bother with defence. At night, he sometimes clambered out of his dormitory window and went climbing on the rocks. The boys were allowed out before breakfast to collect poplar leaves for their caterpillars. Freddy, though, would be out at 4 a.m. in summer, alone on the moors, finding the nests of grouse in the heather, and once, to his great joy, a merlin's nest with its purple-brown eggs.

Wherever he was, he liked to have a secret hideout, under the eaves of the Lindale vicarage roof, in the shrubbery below the school. The childhood skills of camouflage and concealment were to serve him well as an adult. He shot his first bird here, a blackbird, with a home-made bamboo bow and arrow, and smoked cigarettes he made of beech leaves rolled in blotting paper. He climbed trees, for conkers and birds' eggs, and was caught by E.W. at the very top of an immense holly tree that sheltered a goldfinch's nest. 'I have always been fascinated by danger,' he admitted. 'It led me into more scrapes than any other boy in the school.' He thought organised games were 'a waste of a fine afternoon', and lessons were to be 'avoided by all means, fair or foul'. His mother's legacy was enough for school fees, but not pocket money, so he became an expert finder of golf balls, and dived for pennies from other boys in the school swimming pool. On visiting days, parents tossed shillings and sixpences into the deep end for him. He was adept at trapping moles and curing their skins with alum and saltpetre before selling them for ninepence a piece. The fear of penury was lasting: worries over money never left him.

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Looking back years later, a former schoolfellow thought that the 'future Freddy' was already emerging. He disregarded pain and discomfort, he disliked being part of a crowd, and he was ferociously determined when his interests were aroused, 'anything to do with animals, birds and bugs'. His father's death, the school friend recollected, accentuated another of Freddy's traits: he was developing 'a sort of armour against loneliness and was learning to go it alone regardless of the consequences'. He bred himself to endure. 'I remember boys banging Chapman over the head with cricket bats to see how hard he could take it,' another schoolmate told Barker. 'This was not bullying, he egged them on. He was proud of his toughness.' 'Completely fearless,' a master reported, 'no regard for danger, but careless too of the safety of others, always doing something to place other lives in jeopardy as well as his own.'

He was beaten frequently, as was then the norm for bad behaviour, but to little effect. Mostly, this was for breaking bounds, but his acting ability also got him in trouble. Irritated at being made to field in the deep during an open-day cricket match, he ate acorns to relieve the tedium. A group of parents were worried at this. The food at the school was so bad, he assured them, that it was fill up on acorns, or starve. The master in charge was not amused. Even the end of the war got him in another scrape. When all the factory and mill hooters in Wharfedale sounded when the armistice was declared, Freddy was in the school sick-bay with flu and a high temperature, with strict orders to stay in bed. He rushed to fling open the window when he heard the hooters go. 'Chapman!' E.W. roared as he came in. 'It *would* be you!' And yet this tough and rebellious little boy was made head gardener, responsible for the school's elaborate rock garden, and was thrilled to grow pansies and lobelia from seeds in his own little plot. When he went on to his public school in 1920, at thirteen, he said he left with 'a good knowledge of gardening and a vast enthusiasm for all forms of natural history'.

By now the Dewicks felt themselves too elderly to cope with two teenagers. Freddy and his brother were passed on to another clergyman,

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Sam Taylor, the vicar of Flookburgh. This was not far from Lindale, an old fishing village on the Cartmel peninsula. The railway line was close to the vicarage, with the large church and railway cottages next to it, a drab grey Victorian house. But it was close to Morecambe Bay, vast and shallow with prodigious sands and quicksands at low tide. Here he passed the holidays, wild-fowling and bird-watching. His ear picked up all the bird notes as he lay in his hide in the mudflats on summer mornings, 'the soft purring of dunlin, the thin querulous whistle of widgeon, the distant swelling chorus of thousands of curlew, oystercatcher, lapwing, ringed plover and redshank at the tide's edge'. In the winter, he was in his hide with his gun before light to shoot duck and geese. He thrilled at the sounds of their wings, as distinctive as their cries, the teal beating a muffled throb in the air, the golden-eye a 'sibilant whistle', geese launching themselves with 'clear clarion cries'. The flash of the gun, the splash as the body falls on the mudflat: 'nothing can be greater than the thrill of one's first goose.' As he waited for a flight, he learnt poems by heart: the whole of Omar Khayyam, 'Ode to a Nightingale', Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

His new school, Sedbergh, dominates the small Cumbrian town of that name, set in a bowl of the Howgill Fells that reach 2,000 feet. It is an old foundation, 1525, and has something monastic in its cloisters and stone towers: in its discipline, too. It was tough, even by the harsh standards of the time, a place where days started with cold baths, and often ended with a beating. Freddy joined his brother in Lupton House, black-and-white gabled, in which fifty boys were crammed. It looks out over the playing fields, in which Freddy had no interest. Behind it, though, is the long mountain slope of Winder, green, then growing in severe and rocky browns as it climbs. This was what Freddy loved – 'it was possible to run for twenty miles there without meeting another human being' – and it was celebrated in the school song:

'Tis the hills that are stood behind us,
Unchanged since our days began,
That make the Sedbergh man.

His brother, a gentle and simple soul, was nicknamed 'Sheep'. Freddy inevitably became 'the Lamb', a misnomer, since he was always in trouble. 'Poaching, breaking bounds going into the town or slipping out at night, missing call-over, going to cock-fights, keeping ferrets . . .' a school friend said of him. He loathed the 'monotonous bell-regulated routine of school life'. In particular, he could see no point in spending every afternoon 'hitting or kicking a leather-covered ball', though Sedbergh was renowned for its cricketers and rugby players. In his first summer term, he was beaten by his head of house four days running for refusing to play cricket. His housemaster – 'luckily,' Freddy wrote, 'a wise and sympathetic man' – was impressed by his grit. If he really felt so strongly about it, he said, he would be excused cricket, as long as he did not waste his time.

'And,' Freddy said, 'I did not waste my time.' He had three half-days a week. By taking a sandwich with him, or doing without, he was free from lunch time until prep at 7 p.m. He could average six miles an hour on the fells, so those six hours gave him a vast swathe of country to explore. He tested his nerves climbing down to ravens' nests on Coombe Scaur and Cautley Spout. 'Often,' he wrote, 'my life depended on a root of mountain ash or bunch of heather, and the screes I ran, in gym shoes too, were steeper than I would choose to run nowadays even in boots.'

He was always a hunter – and he was already one of the best shots in the school officer training corps – but he was an early conservationist, too. He won the school nature study prize with essays on pairs of birds that he observed over months, with sketches of them in water-colours, and maps of the moors. He described spotting a peregrine falcon's nest on a treacherous crag of rotten rock, tipped off by the bones and feathers of their prey – curlew, grouse and carrier pigeons. He climbed down to the ledge where the nest was protected from falling stones under an overhang. The four eggs were 'rufous and light red, marked with a deeper red', close to the edge of the ledge. He noticed aluminium rings, from the legs of carrier pigeons, which the peregrines had broken off to be able to take the rings, and wondered if peregrines shared the same fascination for bright metal as magpies.

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It was difficult to photograph the eggs, since he was trembling, partly from excitement, 'and partly, I confess, by the sight of the screes about a hundred feet vertically below me'. Sometimes he took eggs, but not now. He climbed away before they could get cold, and hid himself to watch the female circling suspiciously before returning to the nest. It was a great pity, he wrote, that little could be done to protect 'such magnificent remnants' of the larger birds of prey. 'Protection laws do, I know, exist; but too little money and effort is spent on enforcing them.'

His hours on the fells gave him self-reliance: 'I could forget myself in the rhythm of tired muscles, in the fascination of following a compass course over the hills in thick mist, in the determination to go just one more mile before turning.' When he was fifteen, he went to stay with a friend in North Wales and learnt the ancient arts of poaching. He found it gave 'more scope for skill and excitement than anything I had known before'. He 'guddled' for trout, feeling for the fish by the bank or under a stone, tickling it until it was in his hands and then throwing it out of the water. He set snares of horse-hair for grouse, and learnt how to recognise game tracks whilst leaving none of his own. He and his friend dug pellets out of their backs with a penknife after an angry gamekeeper fired at them as they fled.

'When I was 16 or 17 I used to disguise myself so as not to look like a schoolboy,' Freddy wrote later, 'and spent enchanted nights ferreting and netting salmon.' He spent an hour hiding beneath the bank of the River Lune, freezing in the water with only his head above the surface, when a beck-watcher spotted him netting for salmon, and methodically searched to and fro with his dog a few feet above him. When another keeper chased him, he swam the river with an egg in his mouth. He had poaching friends in the town. His favourite was the local blacksmith, who had a cockpit in his barn, and Freddy would climb out of the dormitory window and down a drainpipe to watch cock-fights.

His shortage of money meant, a fellow Sedberghian recalled, that he did 'practically anything for half a crown'. Mainly, he was bribed for boyish japes against masters, putting mice in their bags, and so on. He

kept ferrets in a hutch in bushes next to a games court and took them up to warrens on the fells where he caught the rabbits in nets as the ferrets drove them out. In the snow, when they could not move fast, he caught them with his hands. He skinned and cleaned them, and sold them to the butcher in the town for a shilling each.

On another summer holiday, he went to Somerset with the Dewicks. His first love was Mary Swainson, 'Bee', the daughter of the vicar of the neighbouring parish. They met when he was fourteen, and she a year younger, and they knew each other until he went up to Cambridge. They rode ponies or walked through woodland and heath. Years later, she recalled to Ralph Barker how they explored together, walking up the shallows of the River Tone towards its source, Freddy climbing trees with a long-handled spoon to collect eggs: 'he always took only one egg'. Her clearest memory was lying with Freddy by the river as the mist began rising from it one evening. He taught her how to 'freeze', remaining completely still, 'inwardly as well as outwardly', scarcely breathing, becoming so much a part of the landscape that rabbits came and nibbled close to them. On rainy days, they laid up in a hay-loft and talked and talked. Her mother was duly suspicious – 'what have you been doing up in the hay-loft all morning?' – but they were both at single-sex boarding schools, and had an innocence that was yet to vanish. There were cats beneath the loft, and she had studied their language as a young child. Bee taught him all the different sounds of cats calling their kittens, milk-time, warnings of danger. Sometimes he would read poetry to her 'until shivers went down my spine with the magic of it'. James Elroy Flecker was his favourite – 'he seemed committed to making "the Golden Journey to Samarkand"' – and when he discovered Omar Khayyam he bought her a copy of the *Rubaiyat*, to the moral outrage of her English mistress at school.

Bee was perceptive. She found that Freddy 'felt his orphanhood very much indeed'. He didn't get on with his brother, whose temperament was very different to his own, and he was alone. He felt 'rootless', despite his homes with the Dewicks and the Taylors. 'I have often wondered to what extent his lifelong craving for exploration was partly a search for a true home,' she said, 'or, to put it the other way round,

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how far he had to be relatively rootless in order to lead the life he subsequently did.'

His father's death in action made him eligible for a Kitchener scholarship to Cambridge, where Sedbergh had a long connection with St John's College. He gained his award, to read Natural Sciences and Mathematics, and left Sedbergh in July 1926, under a characteristic cloud. He had stayed out all night on the last night of term, drinking rough wine with a night-watchman, and was barred from visiting the school for a year.

He was now ready for Cambridge. His parameters, though, were already fixed: an utterly English childhood – vicarage, moorland, fells, falcons, ferrets – but with an orphan's guilts and fears, reckless risk-taking, love and knowledge of the natural, wild world, fierce independence, and the instinct to wander so characteristic of Defoe's English, that 'ill-bred amphibious mob'. And he was already deeply attractive to women, the looks of a Rupert Brooke blending with an orphan's sadness. A sudden lost look that came on him, when he cocked his head on one side, and stared ahead with 'heartbreaking wistfulness', they found devastating.

Everything about him as a boy pointed to a gift for survival, but at Cambridge, an ill-omen, he had bouts of depression. 'I really am in a very serious condition. I have no principles, scruples or morals whatsoever, I have bad health as a rule, I have no money, I am getting into debt, worst of all I have no brain.' He thought that 'no one realises what an utter rotter and dud I am'. It was a recurrent state. 'I do feel depressed, I hope it will soon pass over,' he wrote. 'I really shall shoot myself soon.' He associated these fits of melancholy with bilious attacks: he could not sleep and he could not eat.

Relief came from risk-taking. He joined the Cambridge Mountaineering Club, bought an old motor-bike and sidecar for £8, and went rock climbing in North Wales and the Lakes and Scotland, with some snow and ice in the Alps. Coming back from climbing in the Dauphiné, he was stung by a hornet whilst riding at speed, fainted and hurtled off the road unconscious. He was more fortunate than Lawrence – killed crashing his motorbike in 1935 – and picked himself up and rode on

to catch his cross-Channel ferry in time. He also went night climbing, a rage at between-wars Cambridge. It was, of course, forbidden for undergraduates to clamber over the roofs and pinnacles and towers of colleges and chapels. That added to its natural appeal. The boyhood poacher and rock scrambler had now to avoid the 'Roberts', as bobbies on the beat were called, the college porters, and the roaming proctors and bulldogs, the dons and their enforcers who patrolled the Cambridge streets looking for errant undergraduates.

He learned the tricks of avoiding detection. The best time to start a climb was between midnight and 2 a.m. It gave enough time to complete the climb before the dawn betrayed the climber. Noise had its own rules. A loud, bold noise in the darkness was difficult to locate and often passed unnoticed. It was 'soft, half-stifled sounds', low scratching noises, that were dangerous. He was almost caught when a length of tarry line, falling with a small smacking sound from the roof of King's College Chapel, alerted a policeman, who flashed his torch upwards. Yet two climbers at the top of different pinnacles on the chapel had shouted across to each other, without anyone taking notice.

'We did it partly to keep in climbing trim,' Freddy wrote, 'and also because it provided some excitement in the routine of academic life in the fens.' He hadn't far to go, for his college had some of the best climbs in Cambridge. The Main Gate involved drainpipes, a six-inch ledge and a corner turret. The Bridge of Sighs linking the two halves of the college across the Cam was a delicate traverse for the connoisseur. St John's Chapel was so fearsome that climbers were recommended to 'write their own epitaphs' before attempting it. Freddy was foiled when he tried his first ascent on his last night at Cambridge. 'Unfortunately at about 2.30 a.m. it came on to rain,' he wrote, 'and the overhang was of such severity that it could only be climbed under ideal conditions.'

He was indebted – now, and in extraordinary circumstances, again in 1944 – to a Japanese prince, Hashisuka, for his first expedition after he graduated in 1929. Hashisuka was a fellow-member of the Cambridge Bird Club where Freddy heard a talk the prince gave on how little was known of the birds of Iceland.

JUNGLE SOLDIER

It intrigued him, and he set off from Leith for Iceland with two medical students on 19 June 1929, planning to spend six weeks away and no more than £30. They were to collect plants for Kew Herbarium and research bird life for the Bird Department at the National History Museum of South Kensington. They sailed steerage on an ancient steamer, all sea sickness, salt cod and sweet sago soup. Then they took a small coastal boat as close as they could get to Cape Horn, its precipitous bird cliffs falling 1,000 feet into the sea at the north-west corner of Iceland. They planned to live off the country, fishing and shooting birds. Even so, Freddy's pack weighed over ninety pounds at times, slung with fishing rod, gun, ropes, ice-axe, blankets, sleeping bag, primus stove, paraffin and a flower-press and bird-skinning tools. A skinned back and exhaustion taught him to travel lighter next time.

The short Arctic night was warm with the colours of sunset in the west merging with the dawn's first bands of pink and gold. They walked through the night, making camp when the sun rose before 3 a.m. Then they cooked and ate, and laid out their sleeping bags in the open, and slept through until noon. Freddy stalked harlequin drakes in the streams with his .410 shotgun. They ate eider and guillemot eggs, boiled if fresh, scrambled if they had been brooded on in the nest for any time. Icelandic farmers fed them great helpings of roast mutton, and *skyr*, made of milk and rennet and eaten with sugar and cream.

Countless thousands of guillemots, razorbills, fulmar petrels and glaucous and Iceland gulls packed the bird ledges of Cape Horn, high enough to escape the spray flung up when storms battered in from the ocean. The nests of ptarmigan, golden plover and purple sandpiper lay in the tussocks and clumps of grasses. It was too wind-blasted for trees. Wild Whooper swans swam on the lakes, and Iceland falcons made ferocious excursions from the crags. Then, on a boat with a cargo of stinking cods' heads, they transferred to Melrakka Sletta, the peninsula in the north-east. He found Great Northern Divers and grey-lag geese nesting, and they walked for scores of miles on winding pony tracks, and across badlands of black lava and sand. He felt that a trip like this was a benefit in itself. It was 'of incalculable value' for any young man to break away for a few months – 'even *one* month' – between 'finishing his school

A VERY ENGLISH BOYHOOD

or university days, and being tied down for the rest of his life to the daily round . . .' He thus perfectly anticipated the Gap Year.

In November 1929 he went out to Davos to ski. He thought vaguely that he might then teach, or enter the Sudan civil service, but on the slopes he came across Gino Watkins, a friend from Cambridge who had led a Cambridge expedition to Spitsbergen two years before, and already had a brilliant reputation. He was just back from Labrador. Freddy recalled their conversation:

'Hullo, Gino. How's Labrador?'

'Hullo, Freddy. How's Iceland? What are you doing here? Come with me to Greenland.'

'Right you are. Why?'