



shell SHOCK

BY SGT. J. A. EVANS

IN the beginning the foxholes we dug in the half-cultivated area behind the village were really only a kind of shallow, muddy grave. A thing we could never explain was that the crabs thought they were dug for them. After dark it seemed that crabs of all sizes for chains round were trekking over the wet leaves towards them. They made every one jumpy with their rustling. Still, when the ack-ack began to woof overhead, and specially if a bit of shrapnel whistled down, we'd have jumped into a pit of writhing snakes. If you had a couple of crabs down with you, they'd wander round scratching at the sides of the hole as they tried to clamber up. Eventually we slung a bit of a roof over the hole, just leaves and dirt and stakes. I don't suppose it would have stopped anything, but it gave us what one of the officers called "psychological protection." One night when Mac and I had got down in a hurry, a crab dropped from the roof on to the back of his shirt, and clung there. Mac is nothing if not excitable, so for a while it was as though I were sharing that hole with a wild bull. It was pretty hard to account for the purpose of providence when those crabs were fashioned. They were smelly and repulsive to look at, and lived all their lives in the mud, and dragged filthy shells round on their backs.

Some weeks later we were breathing more freely, and one of the hobbies which we took on to pass the time was shell-collecting. It started when the Natives traded some with us for little odds and ends. The shells here were all new to us, and many of them were very attractive. We used to collect them in

the shallow water inside the reef, with live fish in them, because dead ones washed up empty on the shore didn't have the same glossy surface. The technique was to leave these shells out on the ground where the ants were, and they'd clean them out in a few days. Then they would be boiled up in soapy water, and you'd have a clean shell with a fine lustre.

Once Mac had a field-day out in the water, and came in with half a dozen real beauties. There was one big one which was jet black round the edge, and it faded away to a pure light orange on top. It had a lovely sheen, and the Natives chattered among themselves about it, and one said to Mac, "Very rare shell." He was very pleased with them, and put them out on a board back in the bush where the ants would go to work on them. Some days later he went very crook. He took us to see where he had put his shells. Not one of his beauties was left, but lying around the board were a few dirty old ones. He said pretty fiercely, "That's adding insult to injury! I didn't think there was anyone in the company low enough to pinch a fellow's shells, but to leave these stinkers in their place is rubbing the dirt in." He was so upset over losing his orange one that he nearly cried with rage. Certainly the fellow who ratted them must have had a wierd sense of humour.

Mac soon had a diversion, though—a beer issue arrived. In his wisdom the Major let it out in dribbles, a couple of bottles at a time. However, by a supreme effort of will-power Mac saved all his up until he had the whole issue intact. We kept a fair bit, too, then one