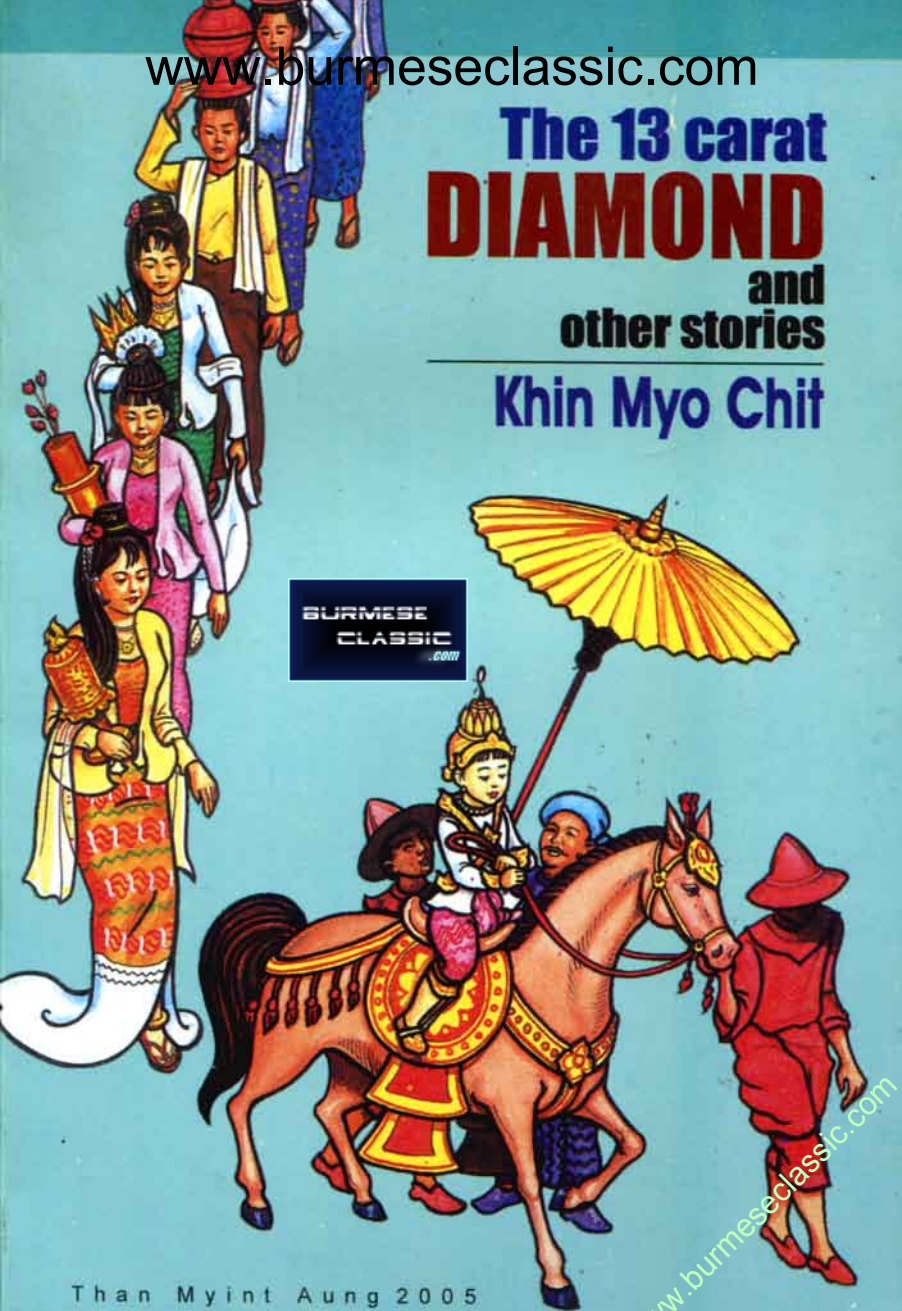


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The 13 carat **DIAMOND** and other stories

Khin Myo Chit

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Than Myint Aung 2005

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Our three main national causes

- ✦ Non-disintegration of the Union - Our cause !
- ✦ Non-disintegration of the National Solidarity - Our cause !
- ✦ Perpetuation of National sovereignty - Our cause !

People's Desire

- ✦ Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views
- ✦ Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation
- ✦ Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State
- ✦ Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy

Four Political Objectives

- ✦ Stability of the State, community peace and tranquility, prevalence of law and order.
- ✦ National reconsolidation.
- ✦ Emergence of a new enduring State Constitution.
- ✦ Building of a new modern developed nation in accord with the new State Constitution.

Four Economic Objectives

- ✦ Development of agriculture as the base and all-round development of other sectors of the economy as well.
- ✦ Proper evolution of the market-oriented economic system.
- ✦ Development of the economy inviting participation in terms of technical know-how and investments from sources inside the country and abroad.
- ✦ The initiative to shape the national economy must be kept in the hands of the State and the national peoples.

Four Social Objectives

- ✦ Uplift of the morale and morality of the entire nation.
- ✦ Uplift of national prestige and integrity and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national character.
- ✦ Uplift of dynamism of patriotic spirit.
- ✦ Uplift of health, fitness and education standards of the entire nation.

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Parami Books
USA Myanmar

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13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories

Second Edition, 2005 October, 1000 Copies

ISBN 1-933570-52-0

Copyright Khin Myo Chit

Cover Design Than Myint Aung

Cover Permit No. 5010450509

Manuscript Permit No. 5004170504

Publisher U Kyaw Oo(03990), Parami Sarpay, No. 230.

29th Street, Pabedan Township, Yangon

Printer U Aung Htet(08003), Aung Parami Offset,

Room 3, No. 127, 52nd Street, Pazundaung, Yangon,

Myanmar

Parami Bookshop

No. 230, 29 th Street, Yangon(Ph. 095-01-253246)

No. 2/4, Kabaaye Pagoda Entrance, Yangon,

Myanmar

E-mail parami.bookshop@gmail.com

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Preface To The Second Edition Of 13 Carat Diamond And Other Stories

by

Dr. Khin Maung Win

When "The 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories" came out for the first time in 1969, the author Daw Khin Myo Chit came just enough to regain the cost of publication. Knowing these conditions, even the artist U Ba Kyi who designed the cover and drew the illustrations, refused to accept payment for his services. In other words, the book was financial failure. It however ranked her name among great writers like U Tet Toe, U Khin Zaw, Daw Mi Mi Khine, as one of the Myanmar writers who write in English Language.

Thinking in retrospect, the first edition came out at the time when I was too young and too stupid to appreciate the true value of my mother's work. I thus missed the chance to write a preface for the first edition.

Each story, in one way or another, depicts a part of her life_ be it her own experience, or her recollections on a certain event or her feelings and views on a subject or her own version of a well-known tale.

"Homecoming" may be classified in the category of movies like "Ghost" and "What Dreams May Come", the only difference being that the events in "Homecoming" are true. Indeed, the feelings of the 'homecomer are described with such vividness that could only be done by one who had actually gone through such an experience.

"The Golden Princess" describes a typical happening of her childhood and the opinion that her parents had of her. Such happenings in childhood made a blot on her life which remained to the end of her days.

"The 13 Carat Diamond" and "Of Mice and Men" describe her own experiences in war-time Myanmar.

In "Till the Hair Rots and Falls", the author gives her version of a historical event.

The story of the man who twirls his beard has been heard many times in family gatherings. My uncle U Ba Thaw who wrote his memoirs under the simple pen name 'a police officer' described the man so well as if he knew him personally that I was under the impression that he must be a real person.

However, the only common factor in my uncle's version and my mother's is the final conversation between the son-in-law and the father-in-law. According to my uncle, the man who twirls his beard was a young man who lived next door. Seeing the young man twirl his beard in deep thought during his high school days, through his university career to the day he was married and became a family man led to the final conversation which is the climax of the story.

This collection of stories and sketches will give the readers entertainment, pleasure, glimpses of her life, as well as information on Myanmar Culture which the author is so proud of.

Dr. Khin Maung Win

The 13-Carat Diamond

It was during the day of the Japanese occupation in Myanmar. We had been married only two years and we were beginning to settle down. Ko Latt had a nice job, but our dreams of a bright and happy future were shattered by the war. We found ourselves without a home, without jobs, in fact without anything except a mischievous toddler who was always hungry. We were lost in the great maze of wartime life.

At that time many people who had never been in business before turned petty traders and seemed to do well. Some kind friends tried to help us by giving us goods to be sold on a commission basis. Easy money, no doubt. It seemed like child's play. But look what happened. A customer would come to our roadside stall and go over our wares with critical eye as if she would not take them even if we gave them away for nothing. With a look of contempt she would ask, "How much are you asking for this laundry soap?"

"Five cakes for one *kyat*."

"What a price! Let's see, how about giving me six

for one *kyat*, ten *pyas*?"

It made my head swim. I pressed the mental accelerator but it refused to budge. I blushed and stammered, "Yes" If I sold at a loss, I could'nt help it. Even then my troubles were not over. The customer went on bargaining.

"What about five for eighty *pyas*?"

"Yes, yes, take them, take as many as you like!" and I added a few strong words under my breath.

Our business career seemed to be made up entirely of similar scenes. Let me not go into humiliating details. Suffice it to say that we got into all sorts of scrapes. Our wares were pinched. The day's figures would not add up right. Only our son enjoyed the fun. He took the rags used for packing, wrapped himself up in them and ran along the pavement dancing with glee. We had to laugh at the little rascal in spite of ourselves.

It is easy enough for people who are well off to sing of poverty, love in a hut, and so on. We who have gone through it have no sentimental illusions. "The worm in the ground knows every tooth of the harrow. The butterfly above preaches patience." Poverty, to say the least, is very uncomfortable.

After a while we managed to get employment in one of the government offices. By that time Allied air-raids had begun and we had to shift from one place to another, losing some of our few belongings with every move. At last we settled down in a ramshackle shed in the suburbs. It was close to our office building so I could work and still keep tabs on our son at home. When the air-raid sirens

sounded, I would rush home and take him to a safe shelter.

In spite of the raids, we were happier because we were no longer unemployed. We had the dignity of being government servants although our joint salaries barely paid for the daily necessities. It was difficult to believe that we had to live on the edge of starvation. Could such things really happen in Myanmar, a land flowing with milk and honey?

We had rice, but cooking oil, a product of Upper Myanmar, could not be secured. It became so scarce that we had to be content with animal fat. How I hated that abominable grease floating on my curries! After passing through stages of impotent fury, rebellion, and frustration, I resigned myself and invented various ways of cooking eatable dishes with leaves of sweet potato and roselle. Ko Latt was wonderful. He took things like a philosopher. When we sat down to meals, he would look at the steaming dishes and say, "Yum yum, it smells delicious." He always had something nice to say about my cooking. This braced me up and I went on creating master pieces.

As for clothes... bed sheets, tablecloths, and even curtains had to be made into something to wear. Our son had his shirts made from old napkins.

The war raged on and things went from bad to worse. Japanese paper money flew like dead leaves... only it did not fly our way. Yet petty traders, merchants, commission agents were flourishing. I saw them with stacks of money, spending like mad.

One day I ran into a woman who had once been

my servant sitting at a little stall. She looked prosperous, much fatter and darker than when I had known her before. She did not see me at first as she was busy with her customers. When she recognized me, she could hardly hide her surprise at my shabby appearance.

I writhed under her stare and mumbled something about dried fish which I had no intention of buying. Too late I realized I could not afford it and I blushed as I fumbled with my purse. The woman composed herself quickly and asked me where we had been all the time, and how was our little son. Before I knew what was happening she had made me a present of a package of dried fish. I was too embarrassed to say anything. I just handed the bundle back to her, but she laughingly pushed it into my basket. On the way home, I shed tears... enough for those dried fish to swim in.

That night it rained heavily but we were glad that we did not have to worry about air-raids. Our roof leaked but we managed to find a dry corner for the child. He slept soundly, surrounded by tin cans into which the rain leaked in musical drops. I lighted our ancient kerosene lamp and Ko Latt lit up a cheroot. After taking a few luxurious puffs he opened an old book of humorous stories and began to read aloud. But I hardly heard; I was brooding over the morning's incident and a wave of self-pity came over me.

Ko Latt read on, but he must have sensed what was going on in my mind, because I listened silently without comment, without chuckling. As he shut the book, I broke out, "Why don't they ever come our way? I mean

the Jap banknotes. This morning I saw our old servant woman. She's making lots of money. She's now fat and covered with jewels. You would hardly know her... you'd take her for a maharaja's elephant."

Ko Latt laughed. "Well, thanks for warning me, I might have tried to ride on her back."

But his joke fell flat. I was too depressed. Ko Latt peered at me through his horn-rimmed spectacles, with one lens cracked. "I know how you feel, dear, but remember this can't go on forever. We have to do without many things but we still have each other and we have that little rascal," he said, pointing at our sleeping son.

I felt ashamed. "I'm sorry I can't take things as bravely as you do. It just seems heartbreaking to live like this when other people are rolling in money. Look at those brokers and agents. Most of them can't even write their own names. They don't have any capital either. A broker just goes around asking people if they want anything and if he, the broker that is, gets it, whatever it is, for them, that is the ones who want something, then he, that is the broker, gets a commission."

Ko Latt laughed. "You're talking like a character in that book."

"Can't help it, I'm such a goof about business. What I mean is some people make piles of money that way. And the ones who get it know that the Jap notes are mere scraps of paper, so they are buying gold and diamonds at any price."

He looked puzzled. "What has that got to do with

us? We have no diamonds or gold to sell.”

Sometimes Ko Latt is a bigger goof than I. I explained to him patiently, “If we can find someone who wants to sell gold or diamonds and someone, I mean another person, who wants to buy, we might get a commission that would be five or six times our joint salaries. We could get a good tin of sesamum oil with the money.”

My good man smacked his lips. “Oh, for a taste of real sesamum oil! I’m so sick of the smell of lard. But where can we find someone who wants to buy diamonds and another who wants to sell?”

I was glad I had driven home my point. I just smiled, and said: “Leave that to me.”

I shall always remember the look in his eyes as he said, “I know I can always rely on you.”

So it began. I discussed the matter with my office mates, who were as hard up as we were. Ko Ba Than, who worked at the next desk, encouraged me. “Don’t lose heart. You have only one child and I have three. My family couldn’t possibly live on my pay. It’s my wife who does it. You know her. She hasn’t had a college education like you... she just writes enough to sign her name... but she’s amazing. The other day that neighbour of ours, the fish-woman, wanted to buy a pair of diamond bracelets. She told my wife she would give up to one lakh for them. My wife found some one who wanted to sell jewelry and made a bargain for ninety thousand. She took the bracelets to the fish woman who gave her the whole lakh.”

“So your wife made ten thousand out of it!” I cried.

Ko Ba Than smiled. “More than that! She also got a 25 per cent commission from the seller. Just a day’s work. Child’s play” I’m no good at figures. $10,000 - 25/100 \times 100,000...$ I struggled and gave it up. If I was to do this kind of business, I must have pencil and paper.

Ko Ba Than continued, “You can do this sort of thing, too. If my wife can do it, why can’t you? You are much cleverer. With an intellect like yours... there is nothing you cannot do.”

I was flattered. Ko Ba Than was a wise man, a good judge of Homo sapiens. Next day I called on his wife. She was a simple, unassuming little woman, whom I liked very much, partly because she gave me a feeling of superiority. She seemed to be very glad that I, who belonged to a higher intellectual level, had condescended to take an interest in such mundane matters. She gave me all the information. “It is very easy, Ma Ma, not so difficult as working in an office. Many people have asked me to get things for them. One wants a 13 carat diamond. He will give one lakh per carat with 25 per cent commission. If you can strike a bargain with the seller for less, you can keep the difference.” I reeled. Even without the extra money the commission would come to $25/100 \times 100,000 \times 13$!!!

Ko Ba Than’s wife was as cool as a cucumber. She was used to this kind of thing. “Just try to get a 13-carat diamond, Ma Ma. If you get it, please contact Mr. Ebrahim.”

That night I discussed the matter with Ko Latt and we were full of hope. We planned the campaign. First we

would go to Thingangyun to see a lady who dealt in jewelry. There was no bus service and Thingangyun was five or six miles away. This did not matter, for we owned a two-wheeled mechanism... a bicycle by courtesy. Its fore-bears were distinguished. We could trace their genealogy as far as an auspicious alliance between a kingly Raleigh frame and aristocratic Humber wheels... but decadence had set in with intermarriage with mongrel spoker.

The tires had been worn through so we had to put pieces of raw rubber round the rims. These were called "solid tires," good in their own way. . no need to pump them up, no punctures, and they last a long time. They also got stretched now and then so that we had to cut them shorter and fasten the ends with a piece of wire. This was easy for a handyman like Ko Latt. He could fix anything with a pair of pliers, a hammer, and an interesting oration in strong language. I played an insignificant role in such great undertakings, standing by with absorbent cotton and iodine, at the same time improving my vocabulary.

On Sunday morning we got up at dawn and began our journey. I sat on the rusty rear-fender rack with my son on my lap. Ko Latt pedalled along on the bumpy road with a song on his lips. I hummed the tune and the child was agog with excitement. "The lark's on the wing: the snail's on the thorn; God's in His Heaven... all's right with the world!" It was a nice ride.

Fortunately, the lady... let's call her "Auntie"... was at home. We explained our quest, promising her a share of the commission if she could find us the jewel. Auntie seemed

to be interested at once. She could certainly get it, she said, and told us to come again the next Sunday. She gave us a disquisition which might easily have been entitled, "How to get rich quick." She emphasized her points by waving her big hands and shaking her head a great deal. Her bracelets jingled and her diamond ear-rings sparkled. I watched her fascinated, although the child was bored to tears. Ko Latt had to take him outside and try to interest him in the marching Japanese soldiers. At last neither father nor son could stand the boredom any longer: they came in and cut short the juiciest pep talk I had ever heard.

Business being over, we hurried home because it was an unusually fine day, an ideal day.....for bombers. We were only a few blocks from home when the air-raid siren wailed. Ko Latt pulled the brakes suddenly and three of us rolled into the roadside ditch. Luckily, we were not seriously hurt. My son, used to this kind of thing, did not even cry. As it happened to be only a reconnoitering plane, we had time to get into the shelter before a big formation of bombers followed.

The week wore on with the usual air- raids and meatless meals. I went about in an arithmetical haze, wording ort sums. Even when I shut my eyes, multiplication signs flew to and fro.

We sallied forth again the following Sunday. Auntie was smiling happily. She had found it. She knew a person who had a 13-carat diamond to sell. She told us to bring Mr.Ebrahim the Sunday after that. This was all we wanted that day, but I would have liked to listen to Auntie's how-

to-get-rich-quick talk. Ko Latt gave me his you-do-no-such-nonsense look and led me firmly away.

We came home full of high spirits. How nice it was to have such a lucrative job to do on Sundays. Each weekend brought us nearer to fabulous wealth. If everything went well, we could even resign from our jobs and devote all our time to big business. We were rudely shaken from these rosy dreams by a distress signal from the bike. The next moment, we found to our dismay that the bare rim of the wheel had parted company with the solid tire. Ko Latt got off the bike, and I ran and picked up the poor tire, scorned and despised, yet so useful! I held it in my hands like a snake and cried, "Look, it has stretched! What are we going to do?" Ko Latt examined it, and like an expert pronounced the verdict. It was a hopeless case, since we had no tools, not even a knife to shorten it. We did not want to risk our teeth, for they must be preserved for the plentiful days to come. There was no time to waste since bombers might come any minute.

We put the child on the bike and pushed along the road. He at least enjoyed the ride, playing snake charmer with the tire.

This incident had a bad effect on Ko Latt's morale. His temper did not improve even when we go home. He was fed up with the whole things. I tried to brace him up as best as I could.

"Next Sunday will be the last day of our quest. We shall do business with Mr. Ebrahim and come home with bags full of money. Of course, Ko Ba Than's wife must

get a share. She is the informant, a sleeping partner. Oh, everyone will be on velvet. I know we shall succeed..." I would have gone on with my talk, shaking my head, waving my hands like Auntie, if Ko Latt had not curtly told me to get the tools so he could repair the tire. Since no bracelets jingled and no diamond earrings sparkled, my words did not carry much weight. Once the bicycle was repaired Ko Latt was his amiable self again. We sent word to Mr. Ebrahim to come to us the next Sunday.

Somewhat to our surprise, Mr. Ebrahim arrived at the duly appointed time, also on a bike. Ko Latt happily told him how we had managed to locate the diamond and Mr. Ebrahim looked impressed. He listened silently, stroking a beard so luxuriant that no one would have suspected the presence of a mouth had not a cigar stuck out of the foliage.

So the two bikes rolled out along the road. When we got to Auntie's place, she had two young men with her. One was her cousin Sonny, a youth in the early twenties, with a long Valentino crop of hair. His face was conspicuously powdered and he wore a pink shirt with gold studs and an imitation silk longyi... a gaudy affair, also pink. He sat smoking a cheap Japanese cigarette, talking only a little, as if we were all not worth the bother. So much for Exhibit A. The other was a Sino-Myanmar with a pale, dissipated appearance. His name was Ko Set Khwan. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and long pants. On his nose was a pair of rimless spectacles. He looked prosperous with his diamond studs, rings, and a heavy gold watch chain. He was stand-

ing beside his bicycle which was properly fitted with real tires. He must be owner of the diamond.

After the introduction, Mr. Ebrahim asked Ko Set Khwan to exhibit the diamond. But Ko Set Khwan asked him explicitly if he were the buyer. I cannot remember the details of Ebrahim's answer, which was of a lengthy nature. I was filled with admiration as I listened to him and wondered why he was not a leading diplomat. But Ko Set Khwan was not at all impressed; he just kept demanding if Mr. Ebrahim himself were going to buy it. I was awed by the man's strength of character... a strong silent type, this Ko Set Khwan.

Mr. Ebrahim's diplomacy gave way to unconcealed annoyance and he moved his head so vigorously that his beard rose and fell like a cataract on his chest. At last he could not avoid the issue; he had to admit that he was not the buyer. It was a friend who wanted to buy the diamond. Ko Set Khwan firmly asked to be taken to the said friend. Mr. Ebrahim tried to evade this request but at last he had to give in.

Auntie's face was a study. She must know the details of this business. As she could not come along, her cousin Sonny would accompany them. It became clear to us that we must also go along with them or we would be left out. The four bicycles... Mr. Ebrahim, Sonny, representing Auntie, Ko Set Khwan, and Ko Latt with me and the child on the rack... made a fine procession as we rolled along the road studded with bomb craters.

As we passed a teashop where four or five men

were talking rather loudly, we heard one of them say, "Can't you get business done without these damned brokers? To hell with them! One is bad enough and now you have half a dozen of them..." That was it, but I didn't care. I was set on the royal road to Xanadu.

We reached an imposing house and Mr. Ebrahim alighted. We all followed his example. They all went up, but my son and I stayed downstairs to watch over the bicycles.

A few minutes later, they all came down again, muttering in consternation. My eyes eagerly sought Ko Latt's but he looked away. My heart was heavy. I dared not ask, because as in ancient Greek dramas, scenes of tragic intensity should be suggested rather than represented. Our friends were speaking loudly and wildly, each of them talking at the same time, so I could not make out what they said.

As we prepared to get on our bikes, Ko Latt muttered something about the mistress of the house still not being the buyer. She knew someone else who knew.... Our eyes met and saw in each other's depths the long trail leading into the bottomless stomach. Then Ko Latt shrugged his shoulders.

We gave up the trail and, somehow, we have lived to tell the story. Still, I feel sorry that I never held in my palm a 13-carat diamond in flesh and blood.... or rather, carbon and whatever it is.

Home-Coming

Khin woke up with a start and her eyes fell on the un-earthly whiteness around her... pale deathly white it was. The walls were white and so was the bed on which she lay. "Where am I? What has happened? Why so white like a hospital?"

Hospital! She was jerked back to remembrance. Of course she was in hospital, because she had been ill, very ill. She closed her eyes again and her mind went back to the day it happened.

It was on a bright summer day that they had arranged to go to the Zoo. Khin saw her husband Ko Ko putting magazines and old newspapers into his Shan bag. He checked the lunch basket she had prepared, saying, "Are you sure you have everything? napkins, thermos, cakes, puffs, etc. etc... carry the whole house on your back... yes?" His eyes were teasing and she pouted. Their five year-old son tugged at her longyi (skirt) impatiently,

saying, 'Are we going now, Ma, I mean, now...?'

At long last they were at the gate. Khin was a few steps ahead holding her son's hand. Ko Ko, with the lunch basket on his arm, was closing the gate behind him. Khin opened her sunshade, the red silk one Ko Ko bought her a few weeks ago. As the sunbeams fell on the sunshade, the painted landscape suddenly came to life. She gazed at the stretch of green paddy fields with a small footpath leading to a wooded hill with a golden pagoda on its top. Khin smiled at the memory the picture awakened in her. Long, long ago Ko Ko had given her a card with a picture somewhat like this one. It was not the picture that mattered so much, but the lines underneath that meant so much... just two lines of an old couplet...

ရွှေပြောင်ပြောင် တောင်ပေါ်ကတူရာ၊
မယ်နှင့်မောင် သစ္စာထားတယ် ပေါင်ရေစေသာ။

It was only a simple prayer of the two lovers plighting their troth at the foot of the golden pagoda on the hill.

"Hey, move on, day-dreaming again...." he heard Ko Ko say. She blushed and turned the silver handle of her sunshade in embarrassment. As she gazed, the picture moved round as in a magic lamp show, her eyes grew dim and things began running in circles. Everything became dim....

She heard her Ko Ko's voice calling her name from far, far away. She pursed her lips to answer his call. She wanted to say that she was all right, just shamefaced being caught day-dreaming. Why didn't the words come or had Ko Ko gone deaf all of a sudden?

He was calling her again and again as if she were not there. She wanted to tell him that she was there. Surely he must know that she was there, because she felt his arms around her. Her eyes were still closed, she knew. She had closed her eyes to avoid Ko Ko's gaze. That foolish memory had made her unaccountably shy. She opened her eyes but she could not see. Why this uncanny black-out? Had the sun gone down all of a sudden? She felt a thick pall of darkness falling over her. She could not move. She seemed to have no body at all.

Ko Ko's voice became fainter and she seemed to be slipping farther away. The huge mass of darkness enveloped her and she felt she was falling into a fathomless depth. The speed was terrific yet the descent was so endless that she felt she would never reach the end. As she sank lower, it became darker. She could neither cry nor move. This slipping, falling and sinking seemed never to end. She felt helpless and frightened. She tried to cling to something, yet there was nothing to cling. As the colossal murkiness closed upon her, a deep sense of despair and hopelessness filled her heart. Then she knew no more.

Now she had woken up and found herself in this strange place. She sat up. She felt strong and fit. She had been very ill no doubt, but it was all over. She was well now. But how many days had she been in hospital? She looked around hoping to see a calendar on the wall, but the pale blank whiteness glared back at her. She must have been here for days. Her heart twisted with pain at the thought of her Ko Ko and Sonny lonely and helpless at

home.

She could not imagine how her loved ones could get along without her. Ko Ko's office lunch box would never be perfect unless she prepared it. The napkin must be fresh and clean, the small aluminium carrier must shine like silver and the food must be delicious. The *Htaminchinthok*, which Ko Ko liked so much, must be carefully prepared to the smallest detail. Rice must be properly cooked and mixed with finely minced chicken meat, a small quantity of tamarind pulp and crisply fried onions and a spoonful of cooking oil in which pounded chillies had been fried. It had to be done carefully so that it gave a beautiful red colour to the rice but did not make its taste hot. Ko Ko could not stand hot spicy food, but he disliked the colourless ones. And Sonny must have his milk and banana pudding everyday, he would never take a substitute.

"No, they can't do without me. I must go home. Where are the doctors and nurses?..." Khin cried out desperately. Perhaps it was better that they were not around. They usually made a fuss over such matters. Ko Ko might come and take her home, but when? She looked out of the window and saw that it was barely morning. She felt the eerie stillness around her. Scarcely a breath of wind blew through the boughs. Everything seemed dull and lifeless and cold. And no birds sang.

Suddenly the sound of a brass triangular gong cut through the uncanny silence. Its sweet echoes lingered and everything seemed to become alive. Khin remembered the old lady living next door. Every morning at dawn the old

lady struck her triangular gong to begin her morning devotions. It was a signal for Khin to get up and go about her household duties. She would put the kettle on the stove and snatch a few moments to put fresh flowers in the household shrine. She had not much time for her devotions like the old neighbour, of course. But offering fresh flowers and reciting a few verse in praise of Buddha started her off to face the day's duties. But how could Ko Ko get along without her? He was so helpless, so impractical around the house. He could not get the simple kerosene stove work without burning his hands. Even if he managed to get the kettle boil, he could not make coffee properly. She used to tease him as he fumbled and blundered through the simple tasks when she was laid up in bed with cold.

The thought of her Ko Ko fumbling and blundering with Sonny wailing at his heels made her jump out of the bed. Even before she knew she was on the road running like mad. She thought her clothes were dull and nondescript and her hair flew about her shoulders as she ran. Her body seemed to be as light as feather and she felt as if she were treading on air. She thought she heard her Ko Ko calling. "Come home, my dear, we are waiting." She did not care about her appearance. Only one thing mattered: Ko Ko wanted her, he needed her.

So she ran along the road, a pale ethereal figure, her jet black hair flying in the wind. She did not feel tired at all; may be because she was so happy going home. She met people on the road but they did not seem to see her. She ran without stopping until she came to the street where

her home was.

Her step became lighter and swifter as she entered the street. She was somewhat surprised to see cars parked in front of her house. As she came closer she got a glimpse of yellow robes by the window. So it was that. Ko Ko was having monks in the house to pray for her recovery. It was very thoughtful of him. But who was looking after the cooking, feeding and all the things if she was not there? Monks had to be served with food and she could not imagine how her dear helpless Ko Ko could organise the occasion.

She heard the monks reciting the *Paritta* (Pali prayer texts). A strange joy came over her, her lips moved to repeat parts of the recitation. She still knew some of these texts which she had learnt in her childhood. She had forgotten many of those as her adult life became more and more filled with other interests. But she always recited some of them whenever she felt unhappy or frightened. They always gave her calmness and comfort. She should have remembered them before, she must have been very ill indeed to have forgotten to recite them.

She stood near the door, undecided. Perhaps she should not go in since she was not properly dressed. She saw her Ko Ko and Sonny crouched in front of monks. They must be praying fervently for her. She saw a roll of yellow robe standing in a steep lacquer cup. Five sprays of lotus flowers were stuck on the top. She remembered her plans for her son's Shin-pyu ceremony. Ko Ko and she would take their son to the monastery to be ordained as a

novice. It was the sacred duty of the parents to give their male child to the monastery as novice for a few days. She was looking forward to the day when her son would be seven years old. She was going to have yellow robes neatly rolled up and decorated with lotus flowers for this occasion.

Khin turned back from the door not wishing to disgrace her family by her bedraggled appearance. She would go into the house by the back door and come out properly dressed. When she entered her room she saw her red silk longyi with beautiful zig-zag patterns spread on the floor. She barely had time to be annoyed by the discovery so she picked it up to wear it. Strangely enough, the longyi did not tuck properly. It kept on slipping as if she had no flesh at all. She must have gone very thin indeed. Then she heard someone calling, "Come, come, come and share the merits of this occasion."

So Khin ran into the room where the monks and the loved ones were. She sat close to Ko Ko and whispered, "Ko Ko, I am home. Aren't you glad to see me?" But Ko Ko did not seem to see her. He just picked up the half-sleeping Sonny and hugged him. Khin saw that their faces were wet with tears, "Ko Ko, I am home. Why don't you speak to me, are you angry with me because I ran away from the hospital?" But he did not hear. Slowly he coaxed Sonny to get up and put the roll of yellow robe into the child's hands. Sonny, with the yellow robe in his hands, moved slowly towards the Sayadaw (the head monk). Khin

smiled lovingly at her son. She thought of the day when Sonny would don the yellow robe.

The boy put the yellow robe into the Sayadaw's hands. The old monk smiled kindly, "Will you become a Koyin (novice)?" "Yes, Sir, when I am seven years old," the boy answered promptly. He too knew his parents' plans for his Shin-pyu ceremony. The old monk said, "Good boy, now you have made the offering of the yellow robe, call upon your mother to share the merit." The boy obediently recited, "May May, come and share this merit with us," three times.

That moment Khin realised what had happened, but her heart was so filled with the ecstasy over her son's action that she was neither shocked nor frightened. She was rapturously happy to see her son so good and benign in the presence of the venerable monks. Her lips moved to say, "Sadu, Sadu, Sadu" (Well-done).

The next moment she became free like one whose bonds had been loosened and had fallen away. She felt as happy as a bird borne above the airy regions.

The Golden Princess

Now that she was back with her parents, Ah Nyo was left very much to herself. They had taken her away from Grand-dad, a long way up the river and over the rolling hills. She missed him in this lonely house where Mother was always busy sewing or receiving visitors. Father was away at office the whole day. Ah Nyo often peeped at the pretty ladies who visited Mother, for she loved to hear their silvery voices. Everything had been all right until Mother called her and asked the ladies to have a look at her "ugly mite". Ever since then, Ah Nyo had heard no end of remarks on her high wide forehead, her deep-set eyes, her snub nose and her dark skin. How could such a lovely mother ever have had such an ugly child?

When she was staying with her Grand-dad, she was constantly hearing bits of conversation about her having been a disappointment to both her parents; a disappointment to her father because she was not a boy, to her

mother because she was ugly. "I would not have minded her not being a boy, but a girl, and with such a face... What's the use..." she heard her mother say. These things made Ah Nyo think that she must have been given to her Grand-dad because nobody wanted her. She was not unhappy about it, for she enjoyed following him about the plantation, helping to pull out weeds, cut dry branches and pick fruit. And then there were his wonderful stories of Kings and Princess and Fairies.

One of the stories she liked best was the story of the Golden Princess who lived in the clouds. She was very good and very kind and helped those who were in trouble. One day the Princess had seen a lonely child crying because nobody loved her. The Golden Princess was sorry for the poor child, so she made a little doll that looked just like herself and gave it to the child. The child was pleased with the doll and became very happy. One day the Golden Princess came down in a golden ship with golden sails and a miracle happened. The Princess and the doll became one and stayed with the child for evermore. Everyone then loved the child because she had such a beautiful Golden Princess for a friend.

Ah Nyo asked her Grand-dad to tell her the story over and over again. Every time she heard the story she felt happier than before. One day she asked Grand-dad if the Golden Princess could help her too, "Yes," said Grand-dad, "if you are good." Ah Nyo was distressed because she knew she was not good. Mother always said she was the worst child in the world, always having tantrums, tear-

ing her hair, rolling herself on the ground. No scolding or beating helped. Ah Nyo made up her mind to be good at all costs. It was so easy to be good when she was with Grand-dad. How different it was with her parents.

Ah Nyo had once tried really hard to win her mother's love. She had made up her face with her mother's face powder, eyebrow pencil and all, and had dressed herself in a big trailing silk *longyi* and a long scarf. She then sailed into the parlour where mother was talking to visitors. The effect was terrific, but not in the way Ah Nyo had expected. Before she knew what had happened she was pushed back into her room with a hasty smack. She was in disgrace for a week. Over and over again, she heard her mother say, "I don't know what I shall do, I am so ashamed of this brat." A few days later, she was sent to Grand-dad's because "she is too much for her mother, who isn't too well...."

Ah Nyo was so happy with her Grand-dad that she forgot her disgrace. She began to take her stay as permanent. She was therefore shocked when one day her parents came to take her away. Her father had been ordered (by people called "the Government") to a faraway place up the river. Ah Nyo tried to protest, clinging to her Grand-dad, crying that she would never leave him. At first her parents tried to coax her, but soon they lost patience. They scolded her saying that she had been spoilt by her Grand-dad. There were high words between her parents and Grand-dad and for some time, it looked as if Ah Nyo was going to win.

That same afternoon, Grand-dad took her to the Great Pagoda up the hill. As she knelt in front of the huge image of Buddha, Granddad lighted five candles and put five big red roses on the altar. "You are five years old today. Now bow your head." Ah Nyo raised her palms in the form of a lotus bud, shut her eyes and bowed down. Her heart became filled with a strange joy, like having a dip in the cool sparkling waters of a mountain stream.

On the way back they walked down the great stairway, on each side of which were stalls full of wonderful things such as drums, bells, cymbals, lacquer trays and boxes, puppet dolls and masks. It was a fairyland on earth. Ah Nyo wished the stairway might never end. It was then that Grand-dad had found the Golden Princess. Of course, she was not alive, but in her dress of red and gold, she looked real. Grand-dad had put the Princess in Ah Nyo's hands saying, "Dear little one, now the Golden Princess will look after you when you are away me. Be a good girl and stay with your Mummy and Daddy."

Ah Nyo realised she was not going to stay with her Grand-dad at all. She wanted to cry but she would not. She just shut her eyes commanding the tears to sink back into her eyes. She clasped the Golden Princess to her heart. "You are a big girl now. You'll be going to school...the Golden Princess will look after you." Ah Nyo was comforted. Wherever she went, she would have the Golden Princess.

When they got home, her mother said, "So you've bought her a puppet doll. You're spoiling her, father." Ah

Nyo gritted her teeth. How dare anyone call her Golden Princess a puppet doll! Bought her, indeed! How could anyone buy the Golden Princess! Ah Nyo and Grand-dad had wandered in the glittering fairyland and he had chosen the Golden Princess to be her friend and guardian angel. Grand-dad was a hero, he had to deal with grinning green-faced demons, huge monster birds, before he could get the Golden Princess. Glittering crested gods and goddesses had escorted the Princess as she descended into Ah Nyo's arms. But it was hopeless to explain things to grown-ups.

So Ah Nyo had come away with her parents to this town up the river. She could not understand Grand-dad the day they left. He was so stern and he seemed to avoid her. She thought he too hated her and she wanted to die at the thought. She hugged the Golden Princess hard, whispering, "Golden Princess. Please make Grand-dad love me. If he doesn't, there is no one, absolutely no one..."

The whistle blew and the train began to move. She felt the brush of Grand-dad's wrinkled cheek against her own and before she knew it the train was puffing out of the station and Grand-dad walked away. Why didn't he look back? Why did he bow his head? Was he still angry with her? Ah Nyo put her hands to her cheeks. They were wet but she had not cried because it would have been so shameful. Why were her cheeks wet? Once again, she remembered her Grand-dad's farewell kiss. Was it possible? Ah Nyo felt strangely elated. Grand-dad had cried because he did not want her to go. He loved her!

School was still some months away, so Ah Nyo

stayed at home all the time. Now that she was with her parents, the Golden Princess was her only companion. She believed that one day, the real live Golden Princess would come down the river in a golden ship and everything would be all right again. She would become beautiful and good, and everybody would love her, even her parents.

All day, Ah Nyo played with the Golden Princess and waited for the great day when the real live Princess would come. She sat by the window and looked down the river. She watched the boats and steamers go by. She was sure the Golden Princess would come sailing down the river but not on those ugly smoking steamers. She would come in a golden ship.

She often plucked up courage to ask her parents when the ship would come. Of course she could not say "the golden ship" for the grown-ups would never understand. Perhaps she alone would know that it was a golden ship. Everyone else would see only an ugly smoking steamer. "When is the ship coming?" she kept on asking. One day her parents took her for a stroll down the river-side. "Will the ship be there?" she asked. Yes, they said, there would be plenty.

Ah Nyo grew excited. She walked between her parents, jumping and running along, eager to see the golden ship. When they reached the river, she was disappointed to see only steamers with black funnels. But Grand-dad had told her that the golden ship would be disguised as an ugly steamer. Only the gifted few would see it for what it really was.

Ah Nyo then saw the steamer. She knew for certain it was the golden ship. They all went aboard and looked around. Ah Nyo was not at all interested in the huge engines because she was looking for the Golden Princess. They walked past the cabins and Ah Nyo was certain the Princess was in one of them. She explored the cabins one by one till she came to the one that was locked.

Ah Nyo knew the Princess was in that cabin. As in Grand-dad's stories, some wicked demon must have locked her in there. Ah Nyo tried to push open the door. She beat on the door with her small palms, crying. "I must go in....I must go in there!" Her parents were bewildered. "What is the brat up to?" At first they chided her gently. But Ah Nyo stuck to the door, crying, "I want to go in there!" As usual, her mother lost patience. She smacked Ah Nyo hard, and tried to pull her away. Ah Nyo resisted and her mother nearly lost her footing. Father became angry and pulled her away from the cabin. Mother got herself a bamboo stick and gave Ah Nyo a few lashes on the shin. Ah Nyo did not care. She had to open the door and find the Princess. She fought like a wild animal and people gathered around to stare. This made Mother ashamed and even more angry. Father dragged her, while Mother lashed.

Once ashore, Ah Nyo tried to run back to the steamer, crying, "The Princess ... the Golden Princess ... She is there ... let me go back." Father took her up bodily. It was not easy for Ah Nyo struggled hard. Several times, she got free and tried to run back to the steamer. When father pulled her back, she rolled on the ground. Mother

was almost hysterical. She rained lashes madly on the distraught child.

Ah Nyo got home covered with dust and hurting all over. She was hoarse, but the words, "The Golden Princess...the Golden Princess," still hung on her lips.

The next thing she knew she was being put to bed in fresh clean clothes. Her body was still shaking with sobs. Now there was no hope. She would never find the Golden Princess, she would remain an ugly brat, unloved and unwanted all her life.

Then she remember something. She sat up and took her own Golden Princess from her toy box. She placed her arms around the little form and said. "Do not lose heart, my dear one, one day I shall find the real live Golden Princess and we shall both be happy. No one shall call you a puppet doll and I shall no longer be an ugly brat...Now we stand together....let's wait, shall we?..."

Soon Ah Nyo was fast asleep.

Electra Triumphs

Looking down from the window of the thatched bamboo house, I felt happy and relaxed, far away from the hub-bub of city life. Long sojourn in the city had taken away from me the leisurely ways I was used to as a small town girl. Anyway I was going to enjoy a free and easy life during my holidays here in this village.

The moon beams frisked and jumped on the flapping banana leaves slipping every now and then on the grassy ground. By the banana grove was a large dais about three feet high, the undulating bamboo flooring smooth and shining browned with age and use. I remembered how I had in my younger days lain on the dais letting the soothing coolness of the bamboo sink into my young body.

This bamboo dais had been a rendezvous of young and old who gathered in the twilight of the evening to talk over pots of plain tea and seasoned tea leaves and, of course, the inevitable cheroots. My host, an elderly man of

seventy, looked as robust as any man in his prime. I saw him now sitting on the dais alone with his tea pot. His white hair was done in a small knot on top of his head. His cotton *paso*, the nether garment, was tucked to his waist. The bold yellow and black check pattern of his *paso* could be seen from quite a distance in the moonlight, a signal to his neighbours that he was ready for evening gossip. His upper part of the body was innocent of clothing as it was a very hot night. His eyes under the bushy eyebrows were calm and serene.

The old man looked as if he had not a care in the world. I wish I had some of his calmness. He seemed to have found the answer to the riddle of life, without moving a step from the wooden dais. With a restless longing for something which would give me peace and quiet, I wondered how the old man could be so calm. He had had the lion's share of life's sorrows.

He lost his wife just before the war. When the Japanese came, his eldest son was forced into the labour corps and taken to work on the Thai-Myanmar railway, where he died. His second son joined the Myanmar Army and served through the resistance and survived. Today he was one of the brass hats in the Defence Services. He came home only once after the war to assure his old father that he was alive and well. After that he was so busily occupied that items in the news paper and a stray letter or two were all the old man had of his son.

His only daughter died in child-bed during the war. What a theme for a grand melodrama, even trag-

edy, but how could I put that benign, calm and serene face in that kind of setting? He sat there by the banana grove on the bamboo dais, more like an old ship weathered by storm than a tragic wreck he should well be. Suddenly he looked up to the window and called, "Hey, *lon-ma-lay* (lassie) do come down and have tea. Don't you feel lonely upstairs? They will be here soon." "They" were the neighbours who came every night to sit on the bamboo dais and talk over the pot of plain tea. The tea pot was an earthen pot as black as the Prince of Darkness. The tea was poured into the small cups and taken in accompaniment with jaggery, to toasted dry fish and pickled tea leaves.

I went down and sat near him. He handed me a lacquer bowl of tea leaves with toasted sessamum grains, fried garlic crisp and groundnuts. He looked at me closely and said, "Find a bit dull here? You used to play and prattle when you were a little girl. You've become quiet now." He sighed and went on, "Of course, you are grown up... a great lady with English education and all that... a *sayamagyi* (schoolmum)." I laughed, "Oh, no, I feel the same little girl who came down here with my parents for holidays..."

So we sat sipping tea together and soon there was a patter of feet and the bamboo dais was full of people laughing and talking; tea was passed round and they talked and smoked their big fat cheroots. I found their talk exhilarating like the breeze coming over the paddy fields.

It was during an interesting gossip about a young gallant from town trying to win the village belle, when my host cut in. "By the way tomorrow is pre-sabbath day, have

you got rice grain ready for the nuns?" As was the way with the village folks they dropped the gossip and went on discussing the alms they would offer to the nuns who came for their alms-rounds every week.

I was exasperated, because they had left the hero of the story waylaying the girl as she went to draw water from the well. The girl was walking down the shaded lane with a water pot on her head, the long tresses of her hair swinging on her shoulders. I wanted to know what happened when she passed the bush where the gallant lay waiting.

"I have some good jaggery for the nuns... poor dears like it" said Daw Mi, a kindly lady of sixty summers, mother of many children and a granny many times over.

"I hope Ma San Dar will come along with the nuns," said Ma Pu, a spinster of uncertain age, "She seems to be very happy with her nuns's life."

The talk turned to Ma San Dar, the nun. I was not interested in her; I only wanted to hear what happened to the village belle and her waylaying swain. My host asked me, "You remember Ma San Dar.... that's her new name as a nun.... her name used to be Ma Lay. The young girl who used to come and play with you in those days. "I nodded vaguely not wishing to hurt others' feelings.

Daw Mi spoke again. "I feel very sorry for her. Anyway it's better so. She is alone. It's a pity she did not marry. What a waste of good-wife-material."

Ma Pu the spinster was mildly ruffled. "I think hers is a good life. She has no cares, no burden of a family. She

has peace, perfect peace. How I wish I could be like her.”

“Pray, do not go and become a nun yourself, I beg of you,” laughingly said U San, a stalwart widower in early fifties. Daw Mi winked at him and said, “Well, why don’t you do something about it?” Ma Pu shyly gave her a pinch in the arm. “Well, well, I think being unmarried is such a waste....” insisted Daw Mi rubbing her pinched arm with one hand and giving a return with the other on Ma Pu’s massive hip.

U San the eligible widower suppressed a chuckle and went on, “Poor Ma Lay.... I mean Ma San Dar. I think it’s her mother who made a mess of everything. I never saw such an unnatural mother. She just hated her own daughter....I simply can’t understand.”

Daw Mi took a deep puff of her big fat cheroot and spoke, “You men never understand. It started before Ma Lay was born. Ever heard the talk of Ma Lay’s father having a love affair where he had gone to work?”

My host poured tea into his cup and said, “You mean that talk about the man’s dead sweet-heart being born as his daughter. Oh, you women, you believe in any superstitious nonsense.”

I was instantly alerted by the smell of a good story. The whole group became alive arguing the probability and possibility. Ma Pu asked, “Is it not possible for the dead girl to be reborn as a daughter in her lover’s family?”

“I do not say it is impossible,” my host replied gently, “but you cannot be sure. You women talk as if you saw the dead girl going into the tum of her lover’s wife.”

“Well, Ma Lay’s mother actually saw, in her dream, the girl coming to sleep in her arms. She believed that it was her husband’s sweetheart born again,” insisted Ma Pu.

My host said in his usual gentle way, “Well, my dear, such things might happen. It is neither strange nor unusual. We are all creatures moving in this cycle of birth and death. We move along the unending cycle as humans, animals or devas (celestial beings) according to our merits. We meet other beings as we move along hating or loving one another. Each of us had had countless existences previous to the present, and more to come, after this life is over. We have met, loved and hated, parted and then met again in this cycle. So what’s strange in the man’s sweetheart being born again as his own daughter? It is the Law of Karma.”

“Of course it’s the Law of Karma,” mumbled Daw Mi, “but it spells tragedy to the family.” The company remained silent perhaps sharing the knowledge of what had happened. I could no longer bear to be left in ignorance, so I asked what happened to Ma Lay and her parents...It was not at all a strange story as my host said. Ma Lay adored her father and he doted on her. He would not suffer so much as an unkind look even from her mother. Mother became jealous being constantly reminded of the dream she had and the gossip about her husband’s love affair.

“I think the woman was just unreasonable. Even if Ma Lay were her husband’s sweetheart reborn, she had then become his daughter. There should be no cause for

jealousy," said Ma Pu the spinster.

U San promptly supported her. "Yes, sister, you are right. The woman should remember that the two were father and daughter, regardless of what they had been in the previous existence. We all go along in this cycle that way, who knows you and I might have been brother and sister, or father and daughter, or...er...you know what I mean." Ma Pu swallowed her tea the wrong way and spluttered.

Daw Mi bravely tried not to smile and picked up the thread of conversation, "Yes, you are right. We move along this cycle of rebirth. We met one another as friends, relatives or enemies as we go along. Ma Lay might have crossed her father's path once as his sweetheart. She did not seem to care much for her mother. A slight cough or sneeze from her father sent her fussing. Her mother abused her and even beat her. Father and mother fought over her and Ma Lay had to bear the brunt of it."

Daw Mi rambled on describing the quarrels in detail. Her account was lengthened by the contributions from the audience. If she began on a fight on a sabbath day during Lent, someone would remember the one on the New Year Day, so on and so forth. Since everyone knew the story's end no one was in a hurry. As the night was getting late, my patience was running out.

"Where are Ma Lay's parents now?" I asked at last.

Daw Mi answered, "They were both dead. Her father was stricken by paralysis and her mother left him

and took herself a new husband. She died a few years later. Her father, bed-ridden though he was, lived on for quite a long time. Ma Lay stayed with him to the end. She sold vegetables and did odd jobs and looked after her father. She seemed happy and contented having her father to herself. Long before her father died she had already made plans to become a nun if she were to survive him. She nursed and looked after him for twenty years. He died in her arms. She accepted his death without bitterness, having decided what to do in that event. She had found peace at last.

"But you thought it is such a waste of good-wife material, didn't you just now," I asked playfully.

Daw Mi smiled and winked at Ma Pu. "Oh, it is not the way I meant. Ma Lay's life is a good one. She's all right for herself. But she had so much good in her that some man might make good use of. Some man might be made very happy if only he were not blind and foolish. Men can be such fools. They do not see the good qualities in a mature woman."

She looked meaningfully at U San, who looked wistfully at the moon. Daw Mi would have gone on with her homily on the pleasures of having a good woman as wife, had not my host cut her short.

"Well, Daw Mi, everything happened according to the Law of Karma. Love, hate and sorrow come and pass away like storms. You can always find peace and quiet if you wait patiently enough. Ma Lay suffered but she found peace in a nun's life...at last."

Everyone assented. Ma Lay, in spite of her sufferings, was the triumphant one. She had her adored father to herself to the end. With her duty done she found peace as a nun.

My host poured the last dregs of plain tea into his cup and said, "It's getting late. Ma Pu, my lassie, don't you feel frightened going home by yourself. That big tamarind tree is said to be haunted; U San, will you see her home?" So the company dispersed.

Once in my room I sat down on my bed to think hard. Was Ma Lay her father's sweetheart reborn? A shaft of moon-light fell on the wall. There hung my photograph I had sent to my host on the occasion of my graduation. An all-knowing face with cap and gown looked down at me with patronising amusement as if to say, "The girl, Ma Lay had Electra Complex."

"Electra Complex, My foot," I muttered, "Stop talking through that darned scholastic cap of yours. Why can't you accept things like the simple folk...the Law of Karma and the cycle of rebirth?"

I got up and looked out of the window. Down the village lane half hidden by trees, I saw U San and Ma Pu walking side by side. They kept a decorous distance. I watched them with interest as they approached the haunted tree. All of a sudden something crashed through the boughs. I saw Ma Pu run into the arms of U San and soon the couple faded into the dark shadows.

Before I could recover my surprise I heard a discreet chuckle among the banana grove and saw a glimpse

of black and yellow checked figure under the leaves. Suddenly two brown hands shot forth again with a catapult in action and another crash sounded on the haunted tree. I giggled happily and retired leaving the elderly cupid with his remarkable missile.

The Ruse

Thein Maung gazed at the steel plate barricades surmounted by rows of barbed wire and realised how desperate the situation was. He could see the bayonet spikes gleaming in the pale moon light. Behind each spike was a stumpy form of a Japanese sentry, sloppy and bedraggled, the uniform chequered with patches.

Stealing a glance at the flat yellow face under the dull khaki cap, Thein Maung thought how like an ogre it was, snub nose, wide mouth, protruding teeth and thick lips. Not that he had ever seen a real ogre, but this was the kind of face that gave him nightmares. He shuddered. Much as he wished to tarry, he dared not, but his legs lagged at the thought of his dear one behind the barricade.

At last he sat down at a tea shop on the other side of the street and perfunctorily ordered a cup of tea. His gaze remained intent on the barricade as he gulped down his tea. He heaved a deep lingering sigh and suddenly realised

that he was very hungry. He had not had anything since early morning and he heard the sentry strike the hour of eight. He sighed thinking of his wife, his bride of seven days. A lump rose in his throat at the thought of her lonely and frightened. How could he get to her with those steel plates, barbed wires and spiked bayonets between them?

"Plain tea, Sir...very good tea made from the tea leaves from Shan States." a pleasant voice said. Thein Maung looked up from his gloomy reverie and saw a young man putting a pot of plain tea and small china cups on the table. His heart warmed at the hospitable gesture. "This is my country, the beautiful Myanmar. War may tear her to pieces, but teashops still offer free cups of green tea." Gulping down the tea he felt better enough to notice his surroundings.

The shop was only a make-shift affair of bamboo and thatch with a few tables and chairs scattered about. An oil lamp shed its discrete light through its green shade. No one was in the shop except Thein Maung and the young shop-keeper who took a seat beside him and poured green tea into the cups.

Thein Maung regarded the young man closely. He looked a friendly fellow. "Anything troubling you, Sir? My name's Kyin Sway. I keep this shop not merely to sell tea. I can help you in many ways, if you know what I mean," he invited. He was a fair skinned man and his hair was wavy. He was not exactly handsome, but pleasant looking and his voice was kind.

Thein Maung scratched his head and wondered if

he should confide in this young man. He knew him by sight as he had always dropped in the shop to get cigarettes and matches, but he had never spoken to him. He had seen him laughing and joking with customers who seemed to like him. Sociable fellow!

"Can I get you something to eat, Sir? I could get you a plate of noodles from the next shop." Thein Maung thought he had better fill himself before further action. In no time the repast was before him.

Drawn by the delicious aroma of fried noodles, Thein Maung rattled his chop sticks and took a mouthful. He pointed at the barricades and asked casually. "How long do you think this will last?"

Kyin Sway answered unconcernedly, "You never know, Sir. Sometimes it lasts about six or seven months."

Thein Maung choked and spluttered. He groaned and said something strong and spicy, "Take these darned plates away, Khin Sway. Bring me a bottle of Sakai"....he ordered placing a wad of Japanese currency notes on the table.

A few moments later they were talking over the bottle of Sakai. Thein Maung was blubbing his sad story.

"Look here, man, only a few weeks ago I went down to my home town and brought my bride... sweet simple girl, not used to the evil ways of the big city with this war going on. I had promised to look after her, stand by her and protect her...now look what happened. This morning I left home to go to work meaning to come home early.... which I did only to find these damned things around the

place. I was told that the place was quarantined. No one must go in, nor any one come out. As you said, such things go on for six or seven months. Oh, what am I going to do?"

Kyin Sway was all sympathy. He said, "It's useless to sit and moan, Sir, we must do something."

"Do something ---do something ---what damned something could I do with all the blasted things around? Is it all you have to say? Young clout."

"Easy, Sir, easy - I was going to suggest something. By the way, where do you work? I mean, do you have to go to work every day?"

"Of course, I go to work every day. What do you take me for? How do you think? I got all this money in this bulging bag? If only you knew how hard I had to work to earn it. Today I made ten thousand kyats, my dear young man, ten thousand. It's my share of brokerage on the sale of Emetin Powder. I could have made a hundred thousand, only I had to share with others..."

"Ten thousand is still a lot of money, Sir, if I may say so."

Thein Maung waved his hand in disgust nearly knocking down the Sakai bottle, which Kyin Sway, fearing for the much loved nectar, hastily removed to the next table.

"You call this paltry sum of ten thousand big money? These inflated currency, what is their worth? As I was saying, I should have made a hundred thousand, if I had not to share with other brokers. Young man, remember all brokers are cheats, blood sucking lot and an honest fellow like

me has no chance against the damned lot of them. Just see what happened in this Emetin Powder business. I should have the lion's share as it was I, who first got the scent. One chap working at a Japanese hospital whispered to me the information that the authorities there were paying fabulous sums for the powder. So I made enquiries. An Indian trader told me that he could get it for me, if he could have a share of brokerage. He took me to a Chinaman who knew where it was available. He too demanded a share. He took us to a woman who kept a stall in the market. She knew where the stuff was kept. On the similar agreement, she took us there, but the key of the storehouse was in the hands of...."

Kyin Sway cut short the rigmarole saying, "You still have lots of money and believe me it could work wonders." Thein Maung dumped his money bag on the table and cried, "How the hell is this money going to take me to my beloved wife?" He then laid his aching head on the table and sobbed.

He did not know long he lay in that state. As a whiff of exotic scent wafted about him he lifted his heavy eyelids to see Kyin Sway talking to someone. As he rubbed his eyes to get a clearer vision, he saw a young woman of generous proportions. Her profusely made up face looked like a mask under the dim light of the kerosene lamp.

Kyin Sway, seeing him awake, came to him and whispered in his ear. Thein Maung's eyes were opened wide enough to take in the vital statistics of the young per-

son. He nodded approval and fished out a thick wad of notes from his bag and handed it over to Kyin Sway, who went back to the girl. Thein Maung stroked his chin and looked on as some kind of negotiations took place between the girl and Kyin Sway.

Kyin Sway had a hurried talk with the girl. He pointed to the sentry post at the barricade. He then thrust the notes into her hands. The girl nodded and went towards the sentry post. Kyin Sway came back to Thein Maung and said, "Don't you worry, Sir. She'll take care of everything. Tomorrow you'll be inside the barricade, back home to your wife..."

Thein Maung was jubilant. He gave his new found friend a hearty slap on the back and cried, "My dear man, you've done it...how could I pay back ... you're a wonderful guy...now bring another bottle of grog..."

Morning found Thein Maung sprawled on the table. He had but scant idea of what had happened. He woke up with a burning sensation in his stomach and his nerves seemed to be torn to gossamere shreds. So frail and wraith-like he felt he almost suspected he had died in his sleep. He dared not open his eyes fearing the action might crumple his head. The sound of footsteps and talking pierced into his head like needles.

Suddenly he felt something cool and nice round his head and life became sweet again. "Feeling better, Sir?" he heard Kyin Sway ask. His eyelids fluttered like the wings of wounded bird and snapped tight again as a shaft of light cut through them. He shaded his eyes with one hand and

peeped at Kyin Sway, his administering angel, who was holding an ice bag close to his poor cracking skull.

"Take this, Sir, you'll feel better," said Kyin Sway handing him a glass of sizzling water. Without one word Thein Maung did as he was told and the world was back on its axis. He sat straight on the chair and felt his pockets. His intuitive friend put a cigarette between his lips and lighted it.

"You don't worry a bit, Sir. The girl will talk to the authorities and everything will be alright."

Thein Maung stayed in the shop the whole day and learned many things about Kyin Sway and his shop, both as versatile as could be imagined. "One has to live even though the war is on," Kyin Sway said, "one does not know when Japs'll go and even if they do, what more could we hope under the British-Americans? I don't know about politics and couldn't care less, for, whoever comes, I live by the sweat of my brow. I opened this shop and you see how it is..."

Thein Maung saw how it was. Kyin Sway's tea shop extended its service in more ways than one. He was going to say somethings to that effect when the girl of last night came in. Kyin Sway and she conferred in one corner for some time. When the girl went away, Kyin Sway came back to Thein Maung shaking his head regretfully.

"No luck, at least for the time being, Sir. The sentries can't openly let you in. But they promised to turn a blind eye, if we could think of a ruse, an eye wash..."

Thein Maung was furious. "A ruse, what damned

ruse could we think of? Is it all I get for my money?" He exploded into an oration of picturesque profanity. Kyin Sway tactfully let him go on until he became exhausted. Then he laid a feast of some delicious Chinese dishes, which Thein Maung did justice to. By that time, he had realised full well that it was no good being miserable on an empty stomach.

As he was enjoying a smoke after the meal, his attention was caught by some noisy excitement near the sentry post of the quarantine area. He craned his neck to see what it was and to his surprise saw a funeral cortege stopping right there. The whole procession seemed to be bottle-necked at the guarded entrance of the quarantine area.

"Hey, Kyin Sway, look, What's wrong with the funeral procession?"

"Nothing's wrong, Sir. The cemetery is included in the area, so the funeral cannot go in without a special permission."

Thein Maung was absorbed in watching the unusual event. The solemnity had worn off. The mourners and friends were broken into groups and they seemed to be at a loss to know how to behave at such a juncture. Some stalwart youths scaled the fence to bawl out to the people inside. Others talked to the guards trying to get passport for the dear departed. There was a lot of talking, shouting and bawling. A few urchins came and examined the hearse and they had to be shooed away as they tried to pick flowers from the wreaths.

It was some time before the coffin was transported over the fence while friends and mourners remained outside. Few and short were the prayers they said and they spoke not a word of sorrow.

Thein Maung felt like laughing in spite of himself. "I thought of going in there together with the procession as one of the mourners," he told Kyin Sway.

"No Sir, you can't. You've got to be the *corpse* yourself...why.. Sir ..I've got a wonderful idea.....why not? Oh, why didn't I think of this before...."

Even before he realised Thein Maung found himself arranging his own funeral. The coffin, the hearse and wreathes. He would have all the trimmings for he had always wanted to go in style. Death certificate and papers were ready....thanks to Kyin Sway and his fair colleagues.

Thein Maung was to *die* at night and his *funeral* was to take place the next day. He had a faint cold fear down his veins that almost froze up the heat of life! For his beloved wife, he had to bear this ordeal. He entered the coffin, feeling like Juliet on the night she drank the sleeping potion.

Everything was under control. Word was sent to Thein Maung's wife to save her the shock of her husband's strange home-coming. People inside the quarantine area were also taken care of by Kyin Sway and his 'contacts'.

Things worked out as planned. Thein Maung got inside the area, back home to his wife.

Life went on as usual....no, not quite. For, one morning during his morning stroll, Thein Maung saw that

the steel plate barricades had been extended. His further investigation showed that the vicinity of Kyin Sway's tea shop had been added to the quarantine area. He hurried to see how his friend was faring. He found him as cheerful as ever.

"Sir, 'it's' cos of you. After you've gone a batch of health officers came and asked about your sudden death. Naturally they took the cause to be cholera. So....you see how it is."

"I'm sorry, Kyin Sway, I'm sorry. What about your business? Will it suffer?" Thein Maung's sympathy was expressed by a thick wad of notes for which his friend was thankful.

"Sir, don't you worry about me. Business as usual...even better. Here, people can't go out and get what they want. I, with my 'contacts' and influence on the authorities can get them anything they want. You have seen for yourself how things can be accomplished if you just know how... Thank you again, Sir, drop in anytime you need anything, not that I think you will....you know what I mean."

The Bearer Of The Betel Casket

"Who's going to be the bearer of the betel casket?"...

This seemed to be the burning question. "If someone says that again, I'll do something desperate."

So saying Ko Ko Tin knocked the ash of his pipe with undue vehemence. "Why must they make a fuss about this novitiation business, which is only a matter of religious duty concerned only with the family? All they need to do is to send the boys to the monastery with sets of yellow robes. The monks will shave the boys' heads and invest them with the yellow robes. Lo and behold they are novices! Why do they want to make a gala affair with music troupes, and procession, and horses, and what not."

Ko Ko Tin had no choice but to talk to himself, for no one would listen to his 'sensible' talk. He had been an odd man out since his first day back in his home town, a small but thriving town surrounded on all sides with paddy fields. His relatives, simple country folks, welcomed him

with their usual warmth and affection. And yet something seemed to have gone out of the carefree jollity he used to possess in his younger days.

"Things have changed," he complained. But he knew he had himself to blame. His folks were the same open-hearted men of the soil as charming as ever. Only he was no longer a school boy, eager for the simple pleasures the beautiful countryside could give. He was someone who had returned from abroad with a string of degrees added to his name, a promising lawyer who was out of place in small town activities like novitiation.

Ko Ko Tin had come down from the big city, because his uncle had written:

We all wish you could come down for the novitiation of my sons, your cousins. Old grandfather wanted to see them don the yellow robe before his eyes were dimmed with the shadow of death. We know you must be busy since your return from abroad, but we have seen so little of you. This novitiation ceremony is to be a family reunion. If you could come down, Grandfather will be pleased and you might, if you had time enough, be ordained. You must remember in our family, novitiation of the young boys is celebrated along with the ordination of an older boy. It's a pity none of my boys have reached the age of twenty so that he will be eligible for ordination. As far as we can see you are the only candidate. We all hope to keep up the family tradition. It will be interesting to

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see who is to be the bearer of the betel casket this time. Your Aunty Hla is agog with excitement.

Ko Ko Tin had come down with the memory of his own novitiation fresh in his mind. His uncle had been the one who was ordained. It had been a grand affair with music troupes and processions. A bevy of young maidens walked in the procession carrying rolls of yellow robes and gaily decorated packets of gifts for the monks. The most prominent among them was the bearer of the betel casket, for the most beautiful of the local belles was chosen for the honour.

He remembered with a chuckle how the young men in the music troupe had sung snappy songs throwing broad hints how the pretty bearer of the betel casket must be feeling as her sweetheart was going to be ordained and would have to stay in the monastery for a week. What, if he meant to stay the three months of the lenten season? At such a suggestion the music burst out in a terrifying boom as if to match the turmoil in the girl's heart. Someone in the music troupe cried, "Ho, ho, do not drop the betel casket!"

It was fifteen years ago. His young uncle who was then ordained had married the pretty bearer of the betel casket, now his aunty Hla. Once again a combined novitiation and ordination ceremony was to be held in the family. He knew that the function was of considerable interest to the whole town as a social highlight of the season. He had not, however, realised that the choice of the bearer of the betel casket would kindle more interest than the Miss Universe contest. Little by little it dawned on him that the

The Bearer Of The Betel Casket

choice meant not only the local beauty queen but also the bride of the family.

It was all right for the men of the previous generation who carried on with the work on the paddy fields, their proud heritage. The belle chosen to be the bearer of the betel casket would certainly be the girl they grew up with and later learned to love. Unlike his uncles he had been sent to school in the big city where he spent most of his life, except for short spells of holiday leisure.

It was not that he had grown too big for his home town, he told himself indignantly. When far away in foreign lands he had carried the cherished memory of his home town held dear to his heart...the pagoda festivals when all the people from nearby villages came in bullock carts and when the countryside burst forth into a pleasure ground of music and dances.

Ko Ko Tin sighed, taking a few puffs of his pipe. He never thought he would be so embarrassingly involved in the doings of his folks back in his home town. Did they expect him to make a bride of some unknown girl, just because she was chosen to be the bearer of the betel casket in the procession?

"Anyone you wish to carry this in the procession?" he heard his Aunty Hla say. She was polishing the red lacquer betel casket with a silk rag. It stood on a gracefully carved stem and the lid was crested with ornate figure of a mythical bird. It was a thing of beauty that deserved a beautiful bearer.

The last bearer of the betel casket was certainly

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an image of health, beauty and maturity. Her eyes were soft with memories. Ko Ko Tin said gallantly, "You look even more beautiful than you did on the day you carried the betel casket in the procession."

His aunt blushed with pleasure, "Thank you, dear, but you haven't answered my question. If you had someone from city....er....a girl friend, why don't you bring her down and...."

Ko Ko Tin raised his hands in horror. "If you think any girl from city will walk down the streets of this town carrying the betel casket, with all the teasing and boisterous music, you are much mistaken."

"Why should any girl mind being the bearer of the betel casket? It's a great honour, you know."

"You don't know, Aunty Hla, they no longer go in for such things. It's just...." Ko Ko Tin stopped not knowing how to justify the ways of the city girls to his aunt.

"The dress I wore is as good as new," she said taking out the silk skirt. It was a rectangular piece of shell pink with a black top to be worn tucked round the waist. The main piece was profusely embroidered with gold and silver thread and sequins. The lower end of the skirt was soft white silk with very fine thin black horizontal lines.

Ko Ko Tin remembered how his Aunty Hla, slim and fair had walked gracefully with the betel casket in one hand and the tip of the soft white end of her skirt in the other, so that it hung like a kite's wing over her red slippared feet which scarce stole like a mouse out of the drapery. Ko Ko Tin wanted to laugh when he thought of the painted toe-

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nails and high heels...which at once brought into his mind Maisie, his girl friend from city, "Lord! she is due to arrive any time today!"

Why in the world did he ask her to come down to this place reeking with mildered traditions? "It's not that I am ashamed of my own folks," he muttered to himself angrily, "It's just that Maisie would be a square in the merry-go-round of old world activities." He wondered how to break the news of her impending arrival to his aunt. The hardest thing to explain was that there was nothing between him and Maisie.

Ko Ko Tin did not like to think of the moments he had to tell Aunty Hla about Maisie. He stuttered and blundered as he tried to make clear that Maisie was a Myanmar girl all right...but modern...a lawyer like him...a colleague, no, not old, but young, no, not married either...coming alone.....no chaperone...not his sweetheart or anything....just friends...drove her own car all the way....you see young woman of today.....able to look after themselves...

Aunty Hla smiled and nodded as if she understood, but then Ko Ko Tin knew she had got everything wrong. "My God, I shall ruin my career if I speak like this in the court room," Ko Ko Tin thought gloomily.

Mercifully Ko Ko Tin was spared the grand entrance Maisie made into the quiet sequestered life of his folks, for he was away at the monastery to make endless arrangements for the novitiation ceremony. When he came back the saucy red car was at the door. Maisie was sitting

near Aunty Hla who was busy polishing the numerous lacquer caskets, silver goblets and all the white elephants taken out for the occasion. Long pointed predatory nails painted red, hair permed for wind swept effect, complete with the cigarette dangling from carefully lacquered lips, Maisie was oozing with glamour and sophistication.

As she eyed the things with polite interest she said, "I can hardly wait to see the novitiation procession the old-fashioned style. We had processions in city, but then they have to rush along in cars, not so leisurely and graceful like here with the boys to be novitiated riding on horseback and young men and women walking on foot." Ko Ko Tin thought, "She surely knows what to say." He felt that Maisie was a bit patronising. He seethed with impotent rage. He had himself to blame. He was a fool to bring Maisie down to his home town.

Ko Ko Tin did his best to play host. He took her for a long stroll round the paddy fields to watch the winnowing. Maisie was delighted like a school girl. "It must be a nice change for her," he thought. He showed her the monastery with its wide precincts, cool and shady with mango and guava trees.

Sitting on a bamboo dais under the banyan tree he told her how the men of his family were novitiated as boys and ordained when they came of age in the same monastery. True to the Buddhist tradition his family had laid great importance on initiating the sons into the Buddha's Order. To don the yellow robe as a novice when a boy and to be ordained when he comes of age meant reaping the highest

honour of manhood.

He told Maisie that he was the one to be ordained this time. He would have to stay in the monastery for a week, so would she mind going back alone? Maisie chewed a straw and looked pensively over the stubble plains touched with the rosy hue of the soft dying sun. "It's nice being here," she said softly. That moment Ko Ko Tin wanted to ask her to stay till he came out of the monastery back to lay-life. Even before he did, Maisie looked at him amused and said, "What a sight you will look when you come out of the monastery as a layman. With your shaven head and layman's dress!" She then started to hum a pop tune and walked away briskly along the half-reaped furrows of the field.

The following days Ko Ko Tin had little time for Maisie as he and the men of the family were busy with the preparations. She was put under the wing of Aunty Hla, and Ko Ko Tin was full of misgiving. He felt Maisie must be laughing up her sleeve to hear about the moth-eaten traditions. "She had the cheek to think Aunty Hla motheaten!" He became indignant at the very thought. He felt guilty at the same time for neglecting Maisie. If ever he had a ghost of a chance with her affections this was surely the death knell. Bringing her down to his home town and neglecting her was no way to woo a woman like Maisie.

Ko Ko Tin was not surprised, therefore, when his Aunty Hla handed him a note from Maisie saying that she had been unexpectedly called away to town. He had been away from home the whole morning. The note was full of

apologies, diplomatic blah blah. She had left the car as she felt she could not trust the engine. Would he please see to it and bring the car back on his return?

Aunty Hla was very sorry indeed. "Poor girl was enjoying herself," she said. Ko Ko Tin's feelings were mixed up. He felt free not having to be apologetic to Maisie, at the same time he was indignant at the way she ran away. Perhaps he should even be thankful to her for so tactfully backing out.

Ko Ko Tin threw himself into the busy preparations. He even took interest in the choice of the bearer of the betel casket. He saw his Aunty Hla surrounded by local belles helping and joking with her. He feasted his eyes on fresh country girls with their native charming ways. What a refreshing change from city girls like Maisie. He would show her how a sweet flower born to blush unseen in his small home town could grace the metropolis.

The day of the novitiation ceremony dawned bright and clear. The procession was to start while the sun was still mild and gentle, so that they had time enough to walk slowly down the streets until they reached the monastery which was their destination. A colourful throng had gathered in front of the house. A retinue of young men dressed in old time military grandeur of the monarchical days stood waiting with saddled horses for the boys who were to be novitiated. A red liveried man stood by each horse with a long-stemmed golden umbrella to shade over the boys as they rode along. The maidens were busy with rolls of yellow robes decorated with lotus blossoms, silver goblets of

flowers and packets of offerings so that each might carry one as they walked in the procession.

At long last they were quite ready to start. Someone cried, "Here comes the bearer of the betel casket." Only then did Ko Ko Tin remember the important participant in the procession. He thought it would not be a bad idea to cultivate the friendship of the one so honoured.

With great interest he looked in the direction on which everyone's attention was focussed. There, Aunty Hla was leading the bearer dressed in old Myanmar court dress, her hair upswept into a chignon, with an alluring fringe on the brow and a pair of tresses curled round the ears. With downcast eyes she walked with one hand holding the tip of the white end of her skirt so that it hung like a kite's wing over her red-slippered feet. Aunty Hla was carrying the betel casket which she would hand over when the bearer took her place in the procession.

Ko Ko Tin gazed in wonder. "Surely never lighted on this orb a more delightful vision. Such is the beauty of womanhood, inspiring and ennobling men, not challenging and defying like Maisie, a hard boiled career woman." Ko Ko Tin stepped forward, for he felt he should hand the betel casket to her, who had brought out the best in him.

Aunty Hla smiled at him pleased. She handed him the casket as if she understood his wish. Ko Ko Tin looked full into the face of the bearer and stopped short. "It's you, Maisie," he cried angrily, "How could you do this to me!"

Maisie retorted, "Don't you shout at me! who did what to you? I've always wanted to be the bearer of the

betel casket. I've always wanted to walk in the procession like the beauties of my mother's day. I was going to ask you of this favour, but I knew you'd laugh at me. I am really disgusted the way you behaved; going about with a long face as if you were ashamed of your own folks. I never had a chance to drive into your thick head how delightful this charming old world was, and how nice your folks were... Only Auntie Hla understood, so..."

"You and she conspired to make a fool of me.." Ko Ko Tin finished for her, "Here's your casket, do you know what it means..." the rest of his words were drowned in the crescendo of music.

Someone in the music troupe burst into a song about the girl waiting with a sky-hued *pasoe* she had woven for her lover to wear when he came out of the monastery back to lay life. As he led Maisie to take her place in the procession, Ko Ko Tin managed to ask, "Will you wait for me with a sky-hued *pasoe*?" Without batting an eyelid Maisie whispered, "No, not with a sky-hued *pasoe*, but with a flashiest suit and a dressiest tie and how ridiculous you'll look with your shaven head... a far cry from Yul Brynner!"

Ko Ko Tin walked away to his place in the procession chucking to himself. He did not know if his family ever had a shrew for a bearer of the betel casket.

The Egg And I

The life of a house-wife is not so dull as most people imagine. It is far from being monotonous. It has its own thrills and excitements like any other job. It is worthy of a place of honour in the galaxy of topics for shop-talk. House-keeping is, indeed, a many splendoured-thing, especially in war-time.

I was only two years married when the war broke out. I had entered the holy state of matrimony armed with scrap-books of recipes, household hints, and what-not from women's magazines. Now all my scrap books are lost and it is better so. What earthly use is it to know how to remove gravy stains on clothes, when there is no gravy and much less clothes?

Anyway, there was not much housework to do in those days. There were only a few clothes to wash and not much to cook. It was rather tragic, because I had just learnt to cook properly. Now I could no more show off my culinary arts on those almost non-existent rations. However,

creative instinct was strong in me. I learnt to make the most of a teaspoonful of cooking oil, half a wrinkled onion, a stale yellow garlic clove, three or four pale limp shrimps which must have died in the concentration camp, and a heap of freshly picked water cress leaves. Looking at my achievement, I felt as proud as Lucifer. Gauguin must have felt something like that when he painted the picture of the brown girls on the lid of the barrel.

It took a mighty genius to bring the people of Myanmar, "where plenty cheered the labouring swain" to the border of starvation. Prices were exorbitant. Then the ruling gods hit upon the idea of price control. They issued orders that such and such a commodity must be sold at a controlled price. No sooner had they done so, then the said commodity was no more to be seen. Cooking oil, onions, garlic, chillies, fish-paste, all the essentials went one by one, as under the wand of a magician. The ruling gods went on relentlessly with their acts of legerdemain.

I cursed the moving finger that wrote the price control orders, but it wrote on; nor all my piety nor wit could lure it back to cancel half a line.

Of course, we were supposed to get the rations from the licensed shops, with our ration tickets. How it helped us may be seen in the episode of 'The Poor Fish'.

Fish was a delicacy. It sent my heart fluttering. I got up early in the morning and left home full of high spirits. I promised my family a nice dish for lunch. It was, therefore, a bit of flop to see a mile-long queue at the shop. I braced myself. Nothing was going to daunt my 'noble rage'

and 'freeze the genial current of my soul.' I stood in the queue with my chin in the air and soon there was another mile of shoppers after me.

I could have written a book on 'How to pass your time on a queue.' First I stood firmly glaring at those who were in front of me. I looked stealthily at the faces of the shoppers, trying to attach some scandal, secret sorrow, even crime to each of them, I collected data on each case, filed the documents, indexed them and wrote lengthy reports. Then I fell to the age-old custom of looking at my own nails. By that time my knees were giving way so I had to sit down as many of the shoppers had done. I looked at them with distaste. They must have been there long before dawn. The gluttons! In no face was there a trace of spiritual light. I could see in each face that the soul was dead, 'drowned in the lump of flesh'. I gave them the evil eye hoping they would go home, ashamed, thinking higher thoughts such as giving up their place in the queue to some one in need. They could never have heard of Sir Philip Sydney's famous 'Thy need is greater than mine'. May be I was expecting too much. The trouble with me was that my ideals were too high. Few people could live up to them.

I had lost the idea of time but not of space, because the space between the counter and me was getting narrower. To cut the long queue short, my turn came late in the afternoon. When I finally got home, the only thing I could do about the poor fish was to give him a decent burial. Poor fish!

From that time on, we existed on vegetables. The

most attractive vegetable-seller at the market-place was an old sinister-looking chinaman, with a few strands of white hair on his otherwise bald head. He sat behind his vegetable basket, with a blank stare in his small watery eyes. He was not much to look at, but women beamed on him as if he were Gregory Peck. His stall was always crowded with jostling shoppers. Then, I found out his secret. He sold eggs!

Some one whispered to me this secret. I could hardly believe my ears. "Eggs? What eggs? You mean... eggs?" I murmured stupidly, "You mean to say the egg things we make omelettes with?" Yes, indeed, the Chinaman sold eggs. It was a great risk to buy things from the black market, because both the buyer and seller would be punished. It was easy, my friend told me. She did business by signal. The first step was to buy or pretend to buy vegetables from him and give him a meaningful look, just a meaningful look. He would thrust a packet of eggs into my hands. He would then signal the price with his fingers. It sounded easy except 'the meaningful look'. How was I to do it? Should I give him a wink? Should I raise my eyebrows? My friend was rather vague on this point. "Just a meaningful look," she kept on saying.

Since my friend did not deign to make this point clear, I had to depend on my own imagination. Should I give him a soulful glance? Should I look at him the way damsels in distress looked at their knights? Should I just look into his watery eyes and will strongly---EGGS?" And a terrible thought struck me. What would others think, if

they saw me giving strange signals to the old Chinaman? I played the scene several times, and every time it was something short of perfection.

As in the case of all great actresses, the call came when I was not quite ready. I looked more like a tragic mouse than Melpomene when I wormed my way through the market-place to reach the old Chinaman's stall. I bent over the vegetables trying to catch his watery eyes. I tried all sorts of winks and grimaces with no effect. I was just going to give up when the old man thrust a packet under the vegetables and gave me a meaningful look! He signed with his fingers and I gave him the money. I hurriedly pushed the packet together with the vegetables into my basket. They all went in without much ado.

As I trotted home, I dared not look into my basket. The packet lay snugly, well hidden among the vegetables. I thought I would never reach home. My feet seemed to be manacled, I wanted to be home. I wanted to see if the packet contained eggs or not. The Chinaman might have given me bad eggs or even no eggs at all. No, he could not do this to me! Then I remembered the police might search my basket on the way home. In that case, I prayed that the man had given me no eggs at all. I trudged on, with my head bowed, 'like one that on a lonesome road, doth walk in fear and dread,' I felt the frightful fiend of a Japanese policeman might close upon me tread.

I was nearing home. I came near a small wooden bridge running across a ditch. I could see my husband with

our little son perched on his shoulders, waiting for me at the gate. At the same time I heard the thump of hob-nailed boots behind me. Terror clutched my heart. The Japs were after me! I saw my son wave at me. The sight of my loved ones gave me courage. My steps became firm and quick. The thump of the hob-nailed boots faded away. It was only an unsuspecting soldier. I was saved!

My husband waved. My little son gave a squeal of delight. I took a short cut keeping clear of the bridge. Coming near the ditch which was only two or three feet wide, I gathered my skirt above my ankles, and with the basket over my arm, I jumped. All at once I saw the sky and trees above me move like things in a kaleidoscope. I landed on my back in a muddy puddle.

Ko Lat knelt beside me. "Are you all right? Your spine may be broken; do not move as yet," he said anxiously. "No, my spine is all right. It can't break. Mother Nature has taken special care with my spine, because she knows what lies ahead," I told him grimly. He helped me to sit up and my little son threw himself into my arms. I hugged the little soft warm body and giggled. It was so good to be home.

Then I remembered the eggs! They were nowhere to be seen. There was a deafening din of caw-caws and a formation of crows swooped down on the ditch. There lay my basket, the eggs rolled out, all broken with their sunny sides up. I pointed at the crows feasting on my precious eggs and sobbed out the story of the egg and I.

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I Believe In Miracles

I believe in miracles and I do not see why I should, not when they are happening under my very eyes. I cannot understand how some people's soul should be so dead that they do not know a miracle when they see one.

I do not have to go and stand on the pavements of U Visara Road at a certain hour of the night sneezing my head off in the cold and gaze at the majestic Shwedagon and wait for some miracle to happen, for is not the noble edifice itself a miracle?

Everyday on my way to office and back home I gaze at the Great Pagoda ablaze in the morning sun or sombre in twilight, and I wonder every time what I have done to deserve to witness such a miracle.

It is not that I have to soar to such spiritual heights, to see miracles, for even in the most down-to-earth moments, I find them close to me, like the time I clutch a lump

of black earth and sodden leaves; for that moment I feel the life-giving vigour tingling in my fingers... a promise of fertility and fruitfulness. That I hold in my hand something that gives life and beauty, without which the world would be a poor place... if this be not a miracle I would like to know what is.

Every morning when I go round the garden, each plant welcomes me with a new bud, leaf or a flower; there is a sickly plant recuperating under my green fingered care; there is that dull patch on the lawn growing into a new jade-coloured carpet; there are crotons flushed with new colour specks, the tell-tale evidence of the sun's kisses; if all this be not a miracle, I do not know what is.

That tall stately silver oaks tree is the queen of the garden. Bejewelled with stars on a clear night, she stands with the silvery moon beams flowing around her, a strange awesome beauty; early mornings, draped in white robes of dew and spidery webs, a pensive nun, devout and pure; moments later I see her, a golden girl robed in sun beams, ready and inviting. If such an infinite variety be not a miracle, pray tell me what is.

Whoever says there are no more fairies? There are many in my garden, but people do not call them fairies, they call them hibiscus. How could anyone find such an ugly name for such colourful, fairy like creatures I do not know. Their frilly petals opening out in many hues give them a beauty that belongs not to the earth from whence they sprung, but to the rainbow clouds they should have fallen from. If, that such ethereal beauties should grow out

of this earth is not a miracle, do let me know what is.

So much for queens and fairies that play on this panoramic stage at our very door step, but what of the backdrop, the skiey regions with all their varying moods?

When dawn set alight the foot lights with the background music of the birds, I wake up to look upon the miracle of another day. When the

Golden sun begins his state

Robed in flames and amber light

The clouds in thousand liveries delight,

my heart leaps at the thought of how the first people on earth must have felt when they saw the sun rise for the first time. In recalling that sense of wonder, I feel base and poor in spirit to have taken such miracles for granted.

I like to recall the story of how the first people on earth, frightened by the darkness cried out and wished for light and the sun came out and they called it Suriya, because it gave them courage. Even though the grown-up mind in me has rejected the verity of the story I am still impressed by the great things the power of human mind could do.

I still love the story of how the rains came. It tells us how the gods of the skies waged war upon one another. Of course I know how the sun brings forth the vapours from the oceans and how they are carried by the wind over the mountains, et cetera, et cetera. I would not be dim enough to write the story of war among the gods in my geography paper even though I think it will enliven things. The point is that I may be a dull piece of goods in this

work-a-day world, but I can still understand the sense of wonder the first people on earth might have felt when they saw the rain clouds sailing over the hills.

A little dose of sense of wonder should do no one any harm. Having fantasies of a girl falling into the rabbit hole and meeting all kinds of adventure did not cloud a great mathematician's brain.

Many of the discussions the Curies made during the hard years of working to discover the radium are said to range from the sublime to the ridiculous. 'I wonder what colour it would be!' says one, and the other replies, 'I'm sure it'll have a beautiful colour.' Even the coldest of scientific minds cannot do without a sense of wonder, which is often defined as seeing things with the eye of a child.

It is the dull soulless way of taking things for granted that robs us of our sense of wonder and makes us blind to miracles.

Beverly Nichols once wrote of the rose-geranium cutting he planted: "Do you realise the whole thing is miraculous? It is exactly as though you were to cut off your wife's leg, stick it in the lawn, and be greeted on the following day by an entirely new woman, sprung from the leg, advancing to meet you. Surely you would be surprised if, having snipped off your finger, and pushed it into a flower pot, you were to find a miniature edition of yourself in the flower pot a day later? Even if you were prepared for it, your wife would think the whole thing highly suspicious and might institute proceedings for divorce."

Even without growing new women from the old

one's legs there is no dearth of miracles. Every ray of the sun, every beam of the moon, every raindrop, every pearly dew is a miracle...a gift of life or of GOD, if you want it that way.

And human life that begins as a tiny speck that grows into heroes and villains, saints and sinners, is itself a miracle. From the very first day we were pushed out into this world with a blinding light piercing our eyes and a frightened cry of wah-wah on our lips, we are destined to see miracles if only we were not too blind to see them.

For, as Chesterton says, the miracle about miracles is that they do happen.

Of Mice And Men

People say 'a cat has nine lives', but I often wonder how many lives we humans have. When I look back on all the years I have lived through I find it really amazing how human life endures.

Time the great healer has cleansed away many of the painful memories and some diverting incidents stand out clearly against what was once all gloom. It is strange how these recollections come to me. Just because I heard some students discussing 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' Of course their discussion was all about rats.

Rats! The rats I knew did not kill cats or stop women's gossip. They were a money-making commodity. Rat-catching was one of the means by which people earned their living in war-time. It is like this.

The Japanese had a horror of epidemics, plague and cholera having taken many away during the first months of their occupation in Myanmar. The cold season came

Of Mice And Men

and rats began to die of plague and spread the disease. Warnings to keep houses and grounds clean and free from rats were quite usual. The rodents were caught in traps and done away with.

The Japanese were very diligent and enthusiastic in their fight against epidemics. It was not enough that people were warned and instructed to do away with rats. They saw to it that everyone joined in their campaign.

Every household was supplied with a mouse-trap with instructions to catch at least one rat every week and bring the rat or rats to the health centre.

On the appointed day, you could see men queueing up at the health centre each with a mouse-trap in hand. In the mouse-traps were.

"Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats, brown rats, black rats, tawny rats"

The man had to wait quite a long time to see the health officer, so they usually spent their time discussing their catch. It was interesting to hear them brag, mock and argue.

"You ought to see the real one-footer I caught last week."

"I once bagged one as big as a cat."

"The one that got away had a tail three feet long."

"Oh, really, the one that never came near me had a head three feet high."

One by one they surrendered their catch to the health officer who duly recorded everything and gave out

tickets certifying that such and such a person had caught the quota of rats for the week. Then the officer handed the rats to another officer whose sacred duty was to throw the rats into a vat of boiling water kept ready for the purpose.

But suppose a householder could not catch a single rat for the whole week? Well, he would be in for a bad time. The Japanese health officer would come on his inspection rounds and ask the house-holder to produce the ticket which certified that he had not failed in this duty. If he could not produce the ticket, he would be taken to the health centre and cross-examined.. "Why don't you catch rats? Do you want the Nippon soldiers to die of plague? So you don't want to cooperate with the Nippons? Are you a British spy?" They often punctuated these questions with vigorous slaps on the face. When their tempers were particularly sweet, they might take him for a ride to some god-forsaken suburb and leave him to walk back home.

This was how rat-catching became an honourable profession under the Japanese regime. For the benefit of those who could not catch rats for themselves, there were the enterprising people who earned their living by catching and selling rats. Rat-catching was boosted as if it was part of the plan for the East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. Many public lectures were given at street corners and woe be-tide those who passed by the vicinity. They were stopped and forced to listen to the lectures regardless of the hurry they might be in.

Once a friend of mine dressed up in his best was on his way to a fashionable wedding. Clouds hung low and the sky was overcast with threatening rain. As he was hurrying to save his precious finery, he carelessly rushed in where angles feared to tread. He was stopped by armed Japanese soldiers on duty at the rat-catching lecture. The wedding guest, he might beat his breast, yet he could not choose but hear. He was held by the glittering bayonets. The lecture was unfortunately a long one and no wonder. The Japanese officer delivered the lecture in Japanese. The interpreter translated it into Myanmar and this was followed by a Hindustani version given by the Indian interpreter. Rain fell in torrents but no one could move. Rigid military discipline was enforced. The poor wedding guest went home bedraggled, a sadder and a wiser man.

In those days life was all papers and credentials. No one could go, breathe without them. Everyone had to carry papers about - papers testifying who he was, what he did, where he lived, and many other particulars. One of the most important papers was the inoculation certificate.

People were inoculated as part of the anti-epidemic campaign. A batch of hastily trained medical men were placed at the street corners, with instructions to stop anyone and inoculate him. After that he got a ticket which was valid for the whole month. No one dared go without that ticket because he might be inoculated every time he crossed the road. Most people were scared of being inoculated by these ill-trained personnel. So another profession was born. Many sturdy people got themselves inoculated as often as

they could and sold the tickets.

The Japanese had peculiar ways of doing things. When a person died, and contagious disease was suspected, the whole area was quarantined. It was fenced off with thick steel plates, barbed wire and put under guard. The period of quarantine lasted for three or four months during which no one was allowed to get in or go out. The people had to exist on the victuals which the Japanese 'masters' supplied in their great concern for the poor quarantined people. Once a cemetery was included in such an area. Funerals were conducted in the most unusual manner. The procession would go solemnly by until it reached the barbed wire fence. Then the mourners and friends would break into groups wondering how they should behave at such a juncture. Some stalwart youths would scale the fence and bawl out to the people inside. Others would talk to the guards trying to get a pass-port for the dear departed. There would be a lot of talking, shouting and bawling. A few urchins would come and examine the hearse, and have lots of fun picking out the flowers from the wreaths. It was always some time before the coffin was transported over the fence to the people inside, while the mourners and friends remained out-side. "Few and short were the prayers we said, and we spoke not a word of sorrow." But these incidents are nothing when compared to the one I have almost withheld, out of sheer delicacy. But I feel I shall not be true to myself if I let this one go unrecorded. "Truth is beauty," so sings the poet. Here is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

The Japanese health officers were even more vigilant on steamers and trains. Everyday they would go round and inspect the travellers. Stool tests were made everyday. Each traveller had to give them the specimen which must be ready at hand when they came on inspection. Many old people were so frightened that they could not produce the required stuff. But the official demand was so insistent and severe that they had to go a begging for the much needed portion. Even then, their troubles were not over. If the officials found a hint of contagious disease in the stool the person concerned would be taken away to be quarantined. It meant being torn away from fellow travellers and breaking the journey. So the old people had to be very careful from whom they took the stuff or they might be punished for something which was not of their own making. All this is hard to believe, and blessed are they who cannot believe a word of it.

Sweet Airs That Give Delight

I was launched into the world of letters reciting (အ အ ဣ ဤ ဥ ဦ ဧ အဲ ဩ ဩော် အဲ အား) for this string of sing-song words was the preamble to the learning of the Myanmar alphabet. And once the little student mastered these twelve accentuations, the rest was easy. The varying cadence of the sounds was so much like a chant that it inspired my lyrical soul to seek expression with the vocal chords. Strong objections from the unmusical folks around me repressed my 'noble rage' and put me to silence..... a mute inglorious Maria Callas.

Even though I had lost my chance to dedicate myself to the service of Euterpe (perhaps sparing many ears), there is nothing to hinder me from being a devotee of literature.

After learning the alphabet, I was promoted to Mangala Sutta, a series of four line pali stanzas which I had to memorise. I am not sure what education experts

will say about making a child learn things by heart. Anyway, this hardly matters, for the experts are always saying different things at different times, and more often than not, coming back to the same old things. It would do a lot of good, if laymen stopped listening to them and resorted to 'doing what comes naturally.'

Committing stanzas to memory and reciting them comes naturally to me after I had begun with the Mangala Sutta, and it was a joy to do so. Even to this day, in certain moments, I mumble (အသေဝနာစ တလာနံ) meaning, 'Consort not with fools', adding a few commentaries of my own, like, "Oh Lord, why couldn't you be more specific about fools? Why do I have to find out this way?"

Poetry recitation seemed to be an important item in the school curriculum, for beginning with the lowest primary class recitation was done every day in the class. I remember reciting Ledi Sayadaw's (သုံးလူ့ရှင်ပင်၊ ကျွန်၊ ထိပ်တင်၊ သောင်းခွင်စကြဝဠာ) on the life of Lord Buddha every school-day, first thing in the morning. We chanted, our fresh morning faces beaming with joy, for in our hearts shone the simple faith that our little addition and subtraction sums could not go wrong on a day that began like this. Most of the lines are now faded from the memory, but I can still recall relevant parts here and there whenever someone asks, "What is the significance of the Full Moon of Kason?" After a few mumblings I got the right answer.

We had to recite at the end of the class too. When the first bell rang, we all stood up, hands busily shoving books and things into the bags, and shouted lustily,

*The boy stood on the burning deck,
Whence all but he had fled:
The flames that lit the battle's wreck,
Shone round him o'er the head.*

The timing was such that we came to the end of the poem with the second bell when we all jumped out, sometimes with the last line on our lips.

We started reciting English poems from the second standard. With the teacher telling the story of the boy Casabianca who would rather die than leave his post, we all loved reciting the poem. With the exhibitionist trait showing in those early years, I indulged in a few theatrical antics when I recited the action-packed lines.

In the third standard, "King Bruce and the Spider" was a pleasure to recite, our young spirits warming to the story, it also brought home the moral:

*If at first you don't succeed
Try, try, try again.*

The succeeding years at school were filled with U Ponnya's *Taydats* and plays and letters written in rhymed prose. By the time I reached middle school, the vast realms of gold had already opened out for me. It will not be true to say that I memorised some of U Ponnya's writings, for his words, so alive and vigorous, just found their way into my heart and stayed there. The same is true of Sayagyi Kodaw Hmaing's poems. It sheer force of his double-barrelled wit that made his poems remembered.

I must confess that I was often moved by an ulterior motive in learning U Ponnya and Sayagyi Kodaw

Hmaing. The two great masters, when up against their adversaries, had but few equals in word-play, biting wit and sarcasm. Whenever occasion arises to tell people off in no uncertain terms, why should I worry about coining words, when U Ponnya and Sayagyi Kodaw Hmaing had done better than anyone ever hoped to do?

English Poetry texts prescribed for the three years in between the passing of middle school and matriculation were Gray's *Elegy*, *The Lady of Shalott*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. This was the National School syllabus.

I spent many a twilight, chanting to myself the familiar lines from the *Elegy*, as solemn as the 'moping owl' in her ancient solitary reign.

The magic of bizarre entertainment featuring the bright-eyed Ancient Mariner, long, lank and brown, as is the ribbed sea sand and the ghostly crew, surpassed all the thrills afforded by any horror film.

The delightful romance of the Lady of Shalott is reminiscent of the sweet ethereal beings of the woodlands who flitted about in the colourful Myanmar folk tales. When we came to the end of the poem,

*He said. "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."*

we could not help adding,

Oh Sir Lancelot, is it all you have to say....?

With the stories of the Myanmar royal harp, the *saunggauk*, still fresh in my mind, I took the Minstrel's

Lay to my heart. From being a wretch concentrated all in self, I was moved to feel the fires of patriotism by these powerful lines:

*Breathes there the man, with soul dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own; my native land!*

I remembered our country's state of colonial subjugation, feeling the words as applied to me and the land of my birth.

Looking back, I felt a deep sense of gratitude to the National Council of Education that prescribed the texts of National Schools in those days, for all the delights and aspirations I had. And last but not least, I bowed my head in deep respect to my teachers, who shall be nameless, for all their kind represent the teacher, one of the Five Blessed Beings we hold in love and high esteem. It was their inspiring presentation that has made us love the good and the beautiful.

Fortune-Telling Is Fun

If everything fails, I might become a fortune-teller. It is an interesting job and if I am clever enough (of course, I have no doubt about that), there is money in it.

Fortune-telling is still very much alive in this modern age. One of the reasons, I think, is man's undying interest in his own self. In the hands of the fortune-teller, a person becomes a mystery to be unravelled. The stars, the planets, the signs which were in the ascendant at the hour he was born will be calculated. Then comes the most interesting part, the interpretation. It is like being under a spiritual X-ray, the secret self revealed, the unknown future drawn within sight as in a telescope. Visiting the fortune-teller often, a person can have lots of fun with astrological terms. If you go to a psychiatrist you get to know the complexes. It is extremely interesting to discuss your secret self in terms not known to laymen. Instead of saying, "My mother and I are great pals", you say "May be I have an Oedipus complexes. In the field of astrology you can har-

vest an even richer crop of terminology.

When I was still in my teens my father gave me lessons in astrology. Himself a considerable scholar, steeped in the traditions of the past, he wanted me to know our ancient arts. This was not all. He wanted to protect me from unscrupulous swindling fortune-tellers. "Women are credulous and gullible. If you know the tricks of their trade they cannot swindle you." This was what he said.

Astrology is quite a wide subject. I had to learn the terms and names and formulas. I had to work lengthy sums and read up the textbooks of predictions. Most of these books were written in verse, some of them beautiful pieces of literature.

I worked hard, because I wanted to tell fortunes, especially my own. I learned to read the mysterious signs of my horoscope, (we still have our horoscopes written on palm leaves) and work out the calculations. It was like gazing into a magic mirror where I could see my secret self.

Then my father told me that most of the fortune-tellers were humbugs. Their knowledge of astrology was negligible, but they knew the "psychology of the individual." The psychology of the individual, it seems, is all they know on earth and all they need to know.

My father suggested I should go and test the fortune-tellers myself. Fortune-tellers are plentiful in Myanmar. No pagoda platform is without those benign gentlemen sitting in their cubicles. They usually sit behind the low writing desks scribbling signs and figures on a slate. The fees

range from two kyats to twenty or even more according to the reputation of the astrologer. If your stars are particularly low, he will "prescribe" ways and means to avert the evil forces. This means extra fees.

One day I went to the pagoda with a friend. I made a bet with my friend that I was going to have my fortune told without paying a fee. We went to a fortune-teller and asked him to read my future. The astrologer asked the year and the day of my birth and started scribbling on his slate. Before he began to tell my fortune, I asked, "Aren't you going to work on my horoscope?"

"Where is your horoscope, do you have it with you?", he said.

"No, I have left it at home, but I remember the planets, please give me your slate...."

I took the slate and drew the cabalistic squares and planetary signs. The astrologer stared at me.

"You know astrology, I see."

"Not much, why should I come to you if I knew....? Please read my horoscope."

The astrologer scribbled on the slate and peered at me.

"I see your stars are pretty low. Saturn is ruling you, it brings misfortune...", he began.

I was not perturbed. "But this is only one of the variations of Saturn, there are many others," I told him, "don't you see the position of this particular planet on my horoscope? Count clockwise, you will see what I mean. What you say is only a very rough generalisation, please

work it out a little more in detail, will you?"

This was only a prelude to the third degree grueling I gave the poor astrologer, who at last admitted that there were many things he did not know in astrology. He would not accept the fee and even asked me to come again to discuss some of the prediction texts with him.

My friend was awed by my success. She spread the news among our friends that I could tell fortunes. I became popular overnight. I read their horoscopes, worked out the formulas and referred to the prediction text-books. I told them plainly that I just did the calculations and told them exactly what the prediction texts said. I do not tell their fortunes, only what the texts said. In this way, I disclaimed responsibility for any incorrect predictions. When they turned out right I got the credit. Since I did not accept fees, they treated me to teas, lunches and cinemas.

Once my reputation was established I could do marvels. One day I went to see a sick old lady. She asked me to read her horoscope. What I read in her horoscope was not important but I saw her bed was placed in a dark cheerless corner. I scribbled a few signs on a piece of paper and said in my best beside manner, "There is nothing really wrong, aunty. Everything will be all right. I see... This corner you are staying is under the influence of the evil stars. You should shift your bed to that corner over there. Please put a vase of white roses on the left side of your bed as an offering to your guardian gods."

Needless to say the old lady got well in the cheerful atmosphere of the sunny, airy room. She became my

ardent admirer. I became a welcome guest to her 'board and fee'.

Personally I do not take fortune-telling seriously but it is good to listen to the astrologers' pep talk now and then. I no longer bandied arguments having been severely admonished by my husband. "It's time you stopped pulling other people's legs....it's time you grew up and started being a respectable *sayagadaw*. What would my students say if their saya's wife...etc, etc.?"

In spite of everything, it is really fun to go to an astrologer. When you are feeling low there is nothing like hearing him read your future. We went to an astrologer during the first months of the war. We had lost our bearings in the strange maddening crowd. We just looked around, our eyes wild with horror, like trapped animals. Something had gone out of our lives. It was then that someone suggested we should go to an astrologer.

So Ko Latt and I went to the astrologer, a venerable gentleman of sixty, distinguished looking, with his long hair done up in a top-knot and bound in a pink turban. He was dressed in white, which was rather unusual in our colourful land. As usual he scratched on his slate and began his famous speech.

"In both your horoscopes, I see the stars are not unfavourable. On the contrary they are very, very good, especially yours my son. (Here he gave a smile at Ko Latt). I see you will have children, lots of them. (We told him we had but one son). Oh yes but I see many coming. You will have twins very soon. Your son is a lucky fellow. He is

beloved of the gods. He will have things in plenty. (He gave a horse-laugh). I see he will even have two mothers, thanks to his father. You (he looked meaningfully at Ko Latt) are such a guy.... a lady-killer. It is just fate, the stars under which you were born. You cannot help it. Women take to you, don't they...? By the way, what happened to the girl you met when you were nineteen?"

Ko Latt looked embarrassed. He looked guiltily at me. I knew the fortune-teller was an old hand at the game. I could hardly repress my laughter. I just looked serious as if I were taking everything in.

The astrologer went on. "Well, never mind. Let bygones be bygones. There is more in store for you in future. In a month's time you will get an important appointment. You'll have a nice big house, a car and plenty of money. Women will swarm around you. But for you, my daughter, (he looked at me) your stars are pretty low. You may be robbed of what you hold most dear. I see a rival, an enemy, a woman. Ah I see she is young, beautiful..... so seductive..... she will sweep him off his feet. But do not lose heart, you can still vanquish her... I can help you. I can prepare offerings to the gods for you. I can call upon them to help you...It won't cost much.....a hundred rupees would be enough. Come back tomorrow. I can arrange everything for you. Once you have made these offerings everything will be all right."

On our way home, Ko Latt looked puzzled. "How can we raise the hundred rupees?" he asked. I came out of

my reverie. "What for?" I asked.

"Well, you heard what the astrologer said."

"Good heavens! don't tell me you believe all this nonsense."

"Well....I don't, at least not very much. But there may be something in it. You see, the girl I met at nineteen...."

"Never mind her. The astrologer is just an old bluffI know his kind. He just understands the psychology of the individual."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that, Lady-killer, the girl you met at nineteen...these stock predictions never misfire with the likes of you. Even if they do, you like being told these things, don't you?"

"But why did he tell you that you would have twins....Again the psychology of the individual?"

"Oh yes, don't you see he knows I am kind, warm, generous big-hearted, loving, maternal... a good wife and mother who lives with no other thought than to love and be loved who would sacrifice everything for her loved ones..."

"Oh, stop, this is more than I can bear. Let me ask, are you going to grudge a hundred rupees to save your hearth and home?"

"No...no... if the old fool thinks I am going to spend a pice on this dratted foolery..."

"Lady, mind your language."

"I am no lady. I repeat I am not going to spend a pice on this dratted foolery. I would rather comb the whole town to get myself a set of Max Factor make-up. Even if I get only a lipstick in some tantalising shade I shall feel equal to fighting my rival."

Ko Latt looked thoughtful. "I don't think a lipstick when be of any use," he said quietly.

I glared at him. "Why not?"

"Well, I do not see how you can put on any lipstick when your thin shrewish lips are always in motion."

So he had the last word. Life went on. I must add that I never had the twins or any more children. As for Ko Latt, well, he remains a faithful husband.... to all appearances.



The Late Princess Mindat

Princess Mindat, the only surviving daughter of King Mindon, the second last Myanmar King, died in her 101st year.

It takes simple arithmetic to see that she was twelve years old when King Mindon died and the bloody execution of the princes followed the ascension King Thebaw. And among the ill-fated princes were Princess Mindat's own brothers.

Living through the years of history in the making, she had not only seen the pageant of events but lived and taken part in them.

To meet someone who could give a first-hand account of historical events, as seen and lived by the Princess herself should be any scribbler's dream, but it happened that I came across such opportunities when I was too young and stupid to appreciate them.

Stories of how my paternal grandfather and his family were taken along with Queen Khunnaywa, the

The 13-Carat Diamond and Other Stories

Princess's mother, down to Yangon, soon after the annexation, and how they spent their days in internment were lost, while I was too busy munching toasted toddy-roots and teasing younger children by the fireside.

When I came to stay at the Princess's home, she was in her late sixties, frail, soft, but indomitable. She had an affectionate heart for all her kin, no matter how many times removed. She took an instant liking to me, because she found that I could read aloud to her the old court dramas like *Einaung*, written by Mingyi U Sa, the soldier poet of the nineteenth century.

Ein-da-wuntha, written by the Crown Princess Hlaing, who was Princess Mindat's own aunt, was my favourite and hers too; and we spent many enchanted hours reading them aloud with spicy commentaries of our own.

One night, getting bored with the heroics of the court dramas, I introduced the writings of Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, which were a great success with the Princess who enjoyed the Grand Old Man's wit and humour.

Life at her place was like living in a fairy tale. The family still had a few old retainers and a strict protocol was observed, as if they were still in the Mandalay Palace. The Princess's room was set apart from those of her children and other members of the family, who had inevitably changed their old ways. Only she lived in her faded little world like in the days of yore, with a few to attend to her needs.

I slept with her two young grand-daughters in a room next to hers, and the nights were spent in playing

The Late Princess Mindat

card games, reading aloud the classics, and of course, talking of the old times.

After all the years, putting together the fragments that I picked up from my grandfather's yarns and the Princess's anecdotes, I have but a few isolated pieces of the story of the last century. If only I had not been too young, too stupid and too blind, what a colourful picture I could have woven!

As it is, all I could get was that Queen Khunnaywa was one of King Mindon's early loves, since the days when the Lion Throne of Myanmar was but a far-off dream. The princess spoke of the details of court life, the protocol, the ceremonial dresses, insignias, that varied with the respective status of the queens, princes and princesses.

She spoke of her eldest brother prince Thonze with admiration and as I contributed the snippets of information I gathered from my grandfather, the personality of the Prince who had become a legend in his own time, emerged.

Prince Thonze was a man of great physical strength and it is said that he could make coconuts fall from the bunch by giving one punch with his fist. He often called his younger brothers to try their strength and when they failed, he pounded them on the backs with his elbow saying: "How would you hope to beat the white *kalas* you ninnies". (They called the British white *kalas*.)

When I ventured to ask the Princess of the hectic days following King Mindon's death, she said she was dazed. She wept only because her mother wept. The ex-

perience must have been too deep for tears.

With the ascension of King Thibaw, all the queens and children of the late king had to leave the palace and take up quarters outside, more or less, an internment camp. Before they left, they were commanded to surrender jewels to the officials.

Many tried to smuggle out the jewels, but they were found out at the gate. Queen Khunnaywa would not allow herself, or her children the indignity of being searched: she gave up all the family jewels to the tiniest trinket. As she prepared to leave the palace, the King sent the jewels back, probably as a mark of respect for her integrity.

The Queen put all the jewels on a tray and made her maid carry it openly and went through the gate where the officials, not knowing the exemption, confiscated them.

Later, the tray of jewels was returned to the Queen at her new place of abode, with due apologies. The Queen indignantly pounded the jewel ornaments to pieces with a stone and threw them into the moat.

The Princess remembered how her sorrowing mother took the execution of her sons with stoic calmness that befitted a queen, and how in the privacy of her chamber she lay for hours with her chest bound with a scarf. I told the Princess what my grandfather told me: how the queen to the last day of her life, had a memorial almsgiving every year on the anniversary of the tragic execution, how she lay all alone in a thickly curtained room... alone with her sorrow.

Since there were four daughters left Queen

Khunnaywa had to be brave. She taught her daughters to take refuge in prayer and recitation of *Parittas*, their only hope and stay. Months later, they were recalled to their proper position and they lived in King Thibaw's court until the annexation.

Princess Mindat, like most of her kind, was conversant with Pali literature and classics. In happier circumstances she might have made good use of her creative talents. She wrote songs and court dramas after the style of *Ei-naung* in old exercise books and I often read them aloud putting up a one-woman show playing the different roles to the Princess's delight.

One of the things she loved to show me was a big roll of white cloth with pictures pasted on them. The pictures were cut out from English periodicals, mostly society journals; but what made the whole thing distinctive was that the figures wore dresses in the style of old Myanmar court.

The Princess explained to me how it was done. First she wrote a play, for example the story of a princess imprisoned by a bad powerful ogre and the prince came riding a flying horse and fought the ogres. He won the battle with his magic sword. And the prince married the princess and lived happily ever after.

Next, the figures were cut out from the magazines and dressed up in pieces of silk, satin and lace; with pieces of coloured paper and tinsel the background scenes of the royal palace were created. Lastly, the figures and scenic effects were pasted in the sequence of the story on the

white cloth.

Looking back, I wonder how many such rolls the princesses of the those days might have made as it was their favourite pastime and the chances are that one might come across some documentary pieces like Bayeaux Tapestry, that would tell the posterity some important event in history.

As I walked along with the white-clad, bare-footed mourners on the Princess's last journey, I saw crowds of curious spectators gazing at the ceremonial fans, umbrellas, banners and the two troupes of funeral music, one preceding and the other following the cortege. Many of the spectators might not know that they were witnessing the passing of an age that would never return.

I came home, a stranger even to myself in white weeds, with a deep sense of futility and frustration, thinking how close I had been to a living treasure-house of memories and that I had been too dim to appreciate the chance. No doubt, it is like crying over spilt milk, but then to have the memory of such milk was at least something.

Why Writers Write

"Nothing to wear...I've got nothing to wear...." I moaned.

What I am mourning is that I have gone bankrupt of words and expressions. I am clad only in my threadbare cliches and I stand with eyes downcast amidst the illustrious company, among those scintillating with wit and humour, poor me with nothing to wear!

Like all bad workmen I quarrel with my typewriter, who like the *belu* (ogre) in Shin Ottamagyaw's *tawla* (poem), bared his teeth and said, "Nobody loves you and I don't blame them. You are one of those who should never be allowed to handle anything that sets down in black and white. The moment you touch the keys you rattle away with as much restraint as a runaway Diesel. One of these days, someone will take out the gold watch from his pocket and...."

"And give it me as reward for serving the cause for my country?" I asked hopefully.

"No, nothing of the sort," retorted the type-writer, "Someone will take the gold watch out of his pocket and time the lashes he gives you on your impudent back."

"Shut up..." I cried and banged down the cover on his sneering face and sat glumly muttering to myself: "Even the dearest and nearest have turned against me." I took out my fountain pen from my cluttered desk and began cleaning it with undue vehemence.

Even my fountain pen was against me, for they no longer make fountain pens the good old way. In my younger days I just unscrewed the top and filled the body with ink straight from the pot, because practice had made my technique so perfect that I do not even need a filler tube. Today, I squeeze the built-in filler many times making bubbles in the ink pot and I have no way of knowing how much of the stuff gets into it.

Anyway, I thought it would be a good change to scribble after having to face the sneering type-writer for such a long time. Changing tools however did not help much. I began to find fault with the ink which being bought from where it should not be bought, was an imitation in spite of the price I gave. Serve me right, breaking the state's laws encouraging the black market. What I should have done was to re-read Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* and get the recipe from the prisoner in the Chateau'd' if.

The association of ideas provoked by the thought of the Chateau'd' if being far from pleasant I felt like retiring to some "ivy mantled tower" and mope in my "ancient solitary reign."

That is what I need, and what writers need...to be left alone. Like the 'Miller of the Dee', writers do not wish to care anybody or wish anybody to care them. A writer becomes a writer because he wants to write....in peace, if possible.

Why did anyone become a writer? Some may have good answers thoroughly acceptable for any appointment interview today, but I know no better one than that I became a writer because I wanted to write.

The urge to write came during one summer holiday after my eighth standard examination. The days were long and dreary and there was nothing for me to do in the dry dusty small town except read volumes of classics. And there were many old exercise books with blank pages lying about.

After enjoying the swashbuckling adventures of D'Artagnan, King Richard, Wilfred of Ivanhoe and many others, an insatiable curiosity came over me; it was "How will these novels read in Myanmar?" Since my readings included plays of U Ponnya and Princess Hlaing, well known for her songs, I thought that many of the expressions and vocabulary of the Myanmar classics would fit beautifully into those historical romances.

So I began to smear the blank pages of my old exercise books with translations or rather Myanmar renderings of episodes from *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Ivanhoe*, and *Talisman*.

I then took my masterpieces round to my long suffering friends and read to them; I am not ashamed to admit

that I bribed them with promises to stand treats in teas and snacks. My friends listened to me and foretold greatness in near future and I was very happy.

Since then, I realised that I not only wanted to write but I also wanted others to read what I had written. I wanted my scribblings to be read by others because I wanted to share with them the joys and thrills I experienced from those novels. In those days seeing my efforts in print was a far-off dream and I was content to have my "works" read by my friends.

Years and reams of scribblings later, I began to see my writing in print and the same principle held, namely, that I wrote because I wanted to write, and I wanted my writing to be read by others, and because I wanted to share with others what I had experienced in books and life.

Today, looking back, when I ask myself why I write, I still have no better answer; I write because I want to write; because I want my writing to be read by others, and because I want to share with them what I know and feel.

I still enjoy reading books, and I want to share with my fellow humans my pleasure so gained. I enjoy looking at life, listening to its throb, feeling its touch against my heart, inhaling its aroma, tasting its sweetness as well as its bitter dregs....and I want to share with my fellow beings what I have seen, heard, felt, smelt, and tasted from life.

I believe life is enriched when it is shared. When I give away what I know and feel in my writings, I feel like Juliet:

"The more I give the more I have."

For, even though my knowledge may not be as infinite as the sea of Juliet's love, my curiosity to know life is as insatiable as the sea and my desire to share with my fellow beings is as boundless as humanity itself.

Looking over the penned draft, I felt happy enough to open the typewriter again and the tapping of the keys sounds friendlier. They seem to say: "There you are. You no longer sigh for what you could never be. You say what you feel, you express what you know. That at least is honest. Remember, it is honesty that matters most in a writer."

A Writer's Prayer

I am one of those people who believe in prayer....that is, a prayer is always answered even though the answer might be no. So I have made a list of things I would like to have as a writer.

My list does not include things like fountain-pens or white typewriting paper, for I am too spiritual to care for mundane things. I only want things that will improve my mind.

First of all I want to be blessed with the eyes of a child to find everything new and wondrous, so that I shall never be too old to enjoy simple things including children's illustrated papers and follow the adventures of my favourite characters with interest.

May I also have the kind of curiosity that will lead me though the 'realms of gold', the unending rows of bookshelves, where I may be allowed to wander and browse and perhaps steal a few books, if I may.

The next on my list is a particular brand of memory

that will help me remember all the things I want to remember, like for instance, what Shaw said or from which play that Shakespeare quotation comes, but forget unimportant things like dates for social obligation.

I wish for a magic stationery store where I can choose from different coloured sheaves of writing paper, so that I can use the particular colour to suit my mood, such as green, when I am seething with jealousy for those who write better than I do, and red, when I am raging, so on and so forth; the store will have clips of all shapes and sizes, file covers, ball point pens, cello tapes and pins, among which I shall spend enchanted hours as a woman might among *batiks* and laces. Of course I shall not buy much, but to be in the fairyland is good enough for me.

May I have a huge casket with a thousand secret springs and compartments, wherein lay multicoloured words and expressions of variable shade, so that I can pick and choose as a goldsmith might his gem. And may I have the strength and integrity to reject, before the nasty editor does, any word or expression however much I like it, if it does not fit into my pattern of composition.

I do not long for a swelling bank account, but I would like to have a stock of gilt edge securities of thoughts and sayings, handed down by the great masters of the past, so that I can cash them any time I go bankrupt in writing business.

I need a night-time pillow full of dreams that do not tarnish by day-light; and I shall dream of the great masters of literature like Shakespeare and U Ponnay, and the

poets of old, smiling indulgently on me..... the little pirate who lifted their passages with unwarranted effrontery.

I shall not want my life to tick away with the clacking of the type-writer, but I want to go about with a background music of praise and admiration, not too much to make me vain, but just little bits like "You can write", or "I like your latest", or any cheery word of encouragement, enough to keep me happy for days and give me strength to go on trying.

From my relatives and friends, I would like to get only this, namely, an essential understanding that writing is a form of working and that even my non-writing moments are working hours too; and patience and tolerance for the poor fragile creatures who have to live on nerves.

I wish for as many sets of shoulders and tearwipers, as could be had, so that I can run to them by turns any time the throes of creative fever rise to the highest pitch without fruitful results. I pray that I may be endowed with inspiration to handle imperial themes and a lot of humility to go with, and that my occasional fits of inferiority and inadequacy shall egg me on to try harder.

May there be an automatic reminder to tell me when I feel discouraged, that writers who had made their mark had to suffer years of neglect and loneliness. Such an automatic could always ask me, "How much have you given to the task of writing to expect such success?"

The automatic reminder should have accessories to dole out similar admonitions and anecdotes about the early struggles of famous writers. Here are some I would

like to hear often:

that I should not have tried to be a writer unless I am a genius or I would die if I had to live without writing; that Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), after working as if possessed for five months, had the first volume of his major work *the French Revolution*, destroyed by accident; he had no notes or drafts, as they had been thrown away; but he began all over again saying; "God wants me to do better," so, if I have no maid servant who would use my manuscripts to light the fireplace, as in Carlyle's place, I should do so myself, so that I shall do better;

that many writers went on writing for years long before they were published: and that they took any odd job to keep themselves, not only whitecollar jobs but manual ones, so that they could keep on writing;

that no outside power is going to provide me with time to write, so I shall have to find time myself; that a real writer will always find time to write whatever the circumstances: and if I excuse myself with a "if I only had time," I do not deserve to be a writer; what about the time you spend, talking..talking..talking;

that I stop wallowing in self-pity and blaming others for my failures, and have a good look at myself honestly and ask, "Do I deserve success as a writer?" and go on trying.

Last, but not least, may I have a few extra sets of nerves, so that I could replace the frayed ones that are now beginning to give shocks not only to the whole system, but also to those who have the misfortune to live with me;

and may I also have a set of tools so that I can tighten many of the screws that had become loose in my poor skull, and a special lotion for the soft parts, which to say the least are many.

The Man Who Twirls His Beard

Once upon a time there was a rich man who had a beautiful daughter. Like most rich men of his time, he was worried about his wealth to which he clung like a leech. He was a shrewd man, this rich man, ever conscious of the changing times. He knew only too well he had to move with the tide, which at that time was threatening to sweep away his riches.

The rich man pondered over his problem and at last he thought he had found a solution. His most valuable asset, he remembered, was his beautiful daughter. If only he could get a young man, wise and clever, one, whose wits could match anyone who threatened his wealth, the rich man thought, he would have no more worries.

With this object in mind, he turned down many of his daughter's suitors whom he thought not wise and clever enough. One day his wife, anxious of the daughter's future,

said: "My good man, it's high time you did decide who should marry our lass. It's better for her to gather rosebuds while she may. Please do not tarry, or our lass will be a faded old maid..."

The rich man replied: "Don't you worry, wife. I'm biding my time. Today is the age of workers, only those who think that only those who work are highly placed in society."

The wife was mortified: "Do you mean that you'd marry our lass to one of those rough brawny workers of the fields or mines? How could you think of such a thing!"

The rich man replied: "Forbear, wife. Surely you're not one of those stupid people who think that only those who wield the hammer or the sickle are workers. Don't you know that those who live by the effort of their brawn of brain are workers. I'm going to find a brain worker or an intellectual worker for our fair lass. An intellectual worker, a wise and clever one, I am going to have for my son-in-law."

The wife was pleased thinking how wonderful it would be to have a man of intellect for her son-in-law, a rare specimen to show off to the less fortunate neighbours. She urged her husband to be quick in his search.

The rich man worked diligently. Every morning he went to the market place where people from all parts of the country gathered. For days he could not find anyone that looked like a man of intellect.

At last, one day he saw a young man sitting on a way-side rest house. This young man did not do anything

but sat leaning on a post, his fingers twirling his beard as if in deep thought. The rich man was struck by the grave demeanour of the young man and watched him for some days.

Day after day he saw the young man sit on the rest house twirling his beard. The rich man was now convinced that he must indeed be a man of intellect. So he took him home and gave his daughter in marriage.

The young man, now the son of the house, went on twirling his beard every day as if in deep thought. The rich man thought that it was time to ask him what his innermost thoughts were and what wonderful plans for the future he was contemplating. So he said: "My son, every day, you sit in deep thought twirling your beard. Pray tell me what made you contemplate so hard. I'm your father, tell me what social or economic problems you are concentrating on."

The son-in-law gazed into space and twirled his beard extra hard and said: "Oh, my father, for a long time I'd been concentrating on this problem: from whence does this beard spring? Is it from the scalp or from the moustache on my upper lip?"

Chit Pe The Lunatic And Money

Not long ago, for it happened not quite long ago, there was a man called Chit Pe. He was known as a lunatic, for he had not a pya of money and what was even crazier was that he did not worry. How did he live, one might ask. Being a lunatic he lived only for the present. He never thought of food until he felt hungry. When he heard the impatient groanings from his tummy, he just ran to one of the big houses and asked, "Shall I pull water from the well? Shall I mow the lawn?" He always found some odd job or other waiting for him. People in the big houses liked Chit Pe, for he was such a good worker. They always gave him food after he had done his work.

To Chit Pe there was no dearth of work. He helped women with their heavy shopping bags; he dug in the gardens; he swept the ground; he cut firewood; in fact there was no household in the whole town who could do without Chit Pe's services.

Chit Pe never accepted money. He just asked for

what he needed for the moment, a meal, a cigar or a cup of tea. Being human, though a lunatic, he sometimes yearned for fancy food sold at shops. Looking wistfully at the noodle shop his mouth watered for a plate of fried egg noodles. At such times he at once went to the shop keeper and offered to wash the dishes; the shop keeper knew him enough to give him the job and of course, the plate of noodles too. Helping the draper pack up his wares at the end of the day earned him a nice *longyi*. All his needs were so supplied.

Chit Pe was ever ready to help anyone, but he would not accept anything when he was not hungry, "Why, my tum's full. What's the use of eating when I'm not hungry." When people insisted he waived away, saying, "No no, do not give me anything I do not need. If you must, give me your loving kindness...." People often reminded him that he should have something for the rainy day, what would happen if he fell sick? Chit Pe smiled and said; "I've lots of loving kindnesses put by for my rainy day. Whatever I do, I do it not merely for my meals, I put all my loving kindness into my work. This will take care of my future..."

One day a group of merchants prepared to sail abroad in a ship. They put on the ship all the goods and wares to be sold in faraway lands. They thought it would be a good idea to take Chit Pe along with them, for he was such a useful person and cheap labour too. So Chit Pe went aboard the ship with the merchants.

The trip was a success. The ship sailed home

with merchants bringing back lots of money. One day they were caught in a storm. The panic was terrible to see. People clutched their money bags and jostled each other into the life boats which became extra heavy because of the money bags. Chit Pe tried to shout, "Throw away your money bags", but no one listened to him. Instead, they even tried to rob each other of the money bags. Each clutched his money bag close to his heart refusing to let it go.

At last the life boat, overloaded with men and the money bags, capsized. Even then, the men held their money close, unable to swim properly. Chit Pe tried to save one of his friends as he swam, but he soon found it impossible to tow the man encumbered by a heavy load of money.

Chit Pe, with nothing to hinder him, swam till he reached a desert island. There alone, he rested himself on the warm sands looking at the luxuriant growth of fruit trees. Even though there be no more big houses with people needing his services, Chit Pe knew there were plenty of things to give him food, clothing and shelter.

He then looked towards the vast rolling sea, the burial place of his friends who might have been alive to enjoy the fruits of this beautiful island, if they had not clung to their big money bags. Chit Pe felt sorry for them and said to himself, "Oh, what lunatics these people are."

Till The Hair Rots And Falls To The Ground

(The Origin of the Myanmar Idiom : ဦးဆေးဆဲဖြည့်)

Once upon a time, long long ago, never mind how long, there was a king who was beset with worries, as kings usually are. One day he sent his trusted servant on an important mission. Day after day the king waited in dire suspense. Sleep forsook his royal couch and he spent his nights watching the deep rolling sea from his window.

So much depended on the success of the expedition.

Moreover, the king was also aware of not too discreet whispers of his courtiers who did not quite agree to his decision to send the aforesaid servant on that mission. Difficult and dangerous though it was, many of his other servants coveted the honour of being the royal choice for such an important task. When the king's servant took a

long time in coming back whispers became louder, predicting a disgraceful failure. This once, they said, the king was wrong in his judgement. Many fingers were itching to point at this royal error.

For days and nights, the king sat alone at the window of his royal palace to watch for the incoming ships. It seemed that his ship would never come. At long last, one night he saw the ship come in and at the top of the mast was flying the king's own glorious colours.

So joyous was the king that he could hardly wait to hear the good tidings. He instantly sent one of his courtiers to go and meet the home-coming hero and bring back the news. The king paced up and down the room feeling as if the last grains of sand in the hour glass would never run out.

It was indeed no small shock for the king to see his messenger totter into the room bruised and broken, blubbing like a beaten wretch. When asked what the matter was, messenger, between moans and groans, reported how the king's servant had beaten him. Furious, the king ordered that the home-coming servant be excuted at the very palace gates which he would not be allowed to enter.

The king's rage was at its height when the servant, bound hand and foot though he was, broke away from his captors to lay at his king's feet. The king shouted "Avaunt my sight, traitor..."

The servant begged the king to hear him even if it be for the last time. The king, with his arms folded on his breast, gazed on his servant in grim silence. The servant

said:

"I beseech you, let not this man's report come current for an accusation between my love and Your Majesty. When I was dry with rage, and extreme toil, breathless and faint, leaning upon my sword, came this lord, neat and trimly dressed, fresh as a bridegroom and perfumed like a milliner. With many holiday and lady terms he questioned me what prize I brought from afar, what jewels, what pretty concubines, what slave-girls for his pleasure...I then all smarting with my wounds being cold, to be so pestered with a popinjay, out of my grief and my impatience answered him in the only way I knew how...He made me mad to see him shine so brisk, and smell so sweet..."

The king saw his servant ragged and yet bold and manly beside the foppish tearful courtier who huddled in the corner like an animal licking his wounds. The king let his servant go on with the report of the success of the expedition and his anger turned to deep sympathy for his trusted servant, whose appearance bespoke the ordeal he had been through. As the servant paused for breath the king asked, "Is it all: what more do you have to say?"

The servant answered: "No, my lord, but only this." So saying he removed his ragged turban.

The king gasped. Silence fell on the whole court. For along with the rag that he called his turban, chunks of hair, rotten and soiled like an ancient forgotten bird's nest, fell at the feet of his beloved king.

Khin Myo Chit (1915 - 1999)
La Grande Dame de la Myanmar Writing
by
Dr. Khin Maung Win

Very few people know that her real name is Ma Khin Mya. Her close relatives and friends call her by her real name. Young people call her Ma Ma Mya or Aunty Mya. Older people call her Ma Khin Mya. But to most people she was known under her pen name, Khin Myo Chit.

She was born at the time when people generally had low expectations of women, when no parent would hear of a young respectable lady entering a profession and a humanitarian education may be permitted, but only to be able to write B.A. under one's name and make impressions on people. "What a pity she's a girl" that's what she always heard people saying all the time.

Her grandmother had been a maid of honour at the court of King Mindon. Many times she recounted to her the events leading to the mass execution of King Thibaw's royal relatives by the Queen Suphayalatt. "It's a blot on our history." she used to say. She then related to her how the great warrior princes like the Prince Kanaung,

the Thonsaire Minthagyi (literally translated the great Prince Thirty, so named because he could climb up a wall of thirty yards in height using his bear hands and feet) and many others were executed during an internal intrigue. "We lost all the great warrior princes, so that when the British marched to the capital city of Upper Myanmar, there was not even one person to throw a stone at the invaders."

She asked, "Do you mean to say, grandma, that if these warrior princes were there, Upper Myanmar would not have fallen under the British Rule?" "No," said her grandmother. "We would still lose the war, for, at that time, no one could stop the rising of the British Empire. But at least The battle of Upper Myanmar could have earned a place in the annals of war like Hannibal's fight against Rome, or King Arthur's fight against the Saxons, or King Harold's fight against the invading Normans."

Her literary career began in 1932 when she translated a poem of Sir Walter Scott and sent it to the Yangon University magazine. But she didn't put her name, being kind of shy to do that. The poem was about Patriotism and when it was published, the editor put the pen name - Khin Myo Chit (meaning lady who loves her country or Miss Patriot).

That was how she made her debut in the literary field, and earned her pen name. But all was not well at home. With her father's obstructiveness and her mother's disapproval of 'clever girls', things got from bad to worse. She was not allowed to do any writing in peace. Her mother scolded her more and more. Her father threatened to burn her papers. She had to hide them and do her writing when

everyone was in bed.

I shall not dwell too much on the story of her unhappy childhood and her escape from the tyranny of her father. It could have made something torn from the pages of a Dickens novel and could have earned her a nick-name like 'Female David Copperfield'.

Regarding her meeting with my father, U Khin Maung Latt (1915-1996), whom she referred to as 'Ko Latt', she wrote in her autobiography as follows:

"He was the boy next door. He had left college, an undergraduate, not being able to continue his studies because of the decline in family fortunes. He was having a short lull at home while looking for a job.

He was a voracious reader and we shared the same interests in books. I read the books he recommended and he returned the compliment. We read 'Little Women', one of my favourite books and he called me teasingly 'Jo'. We had a fine time talking of books. It seemed that we had launched on a long and timeless talk which could lead to one thing - a life-long alliance."

Regarding her political involvements of 1937 and afterwards, she wrote:

"Had this even tenor of our way gone on for a few months or so, Ko Latt and I might have slipped quietly into married life. My rosy dreams of the future during the interval of a few months before our marriage turned out to be a nightmare of stormy incidents. It was the fate of the country that swept most of our dreams away. By a cruel trick of fate, we became part of that mighty tidal wave which we were but a tiny ripple."

She recounted the part she played in the demonstration of 1938 as follows:

"Three girls and I happened to be in the front line right after the standard bearers. It was a rude shock when we found ourselves confronted by baton wielding policemen, some mounted on horseback. All of a sudden like a sequence on a cinema screen everything became a confusion of horses' legs and batons. To my horror, I saw girls falling in pools of blood. As I tried to pick them up, blows fell on me."

She lived through the stormy times of the British Regime; the Japanese Regime; the Struggle for Independence; sharing the joys and sorrows of the political figures.

Also in her autobiography, she recounted a difficult phase of her life in the following way.

"Now, I have come to one of the most difficult chapters of my life, for it was then that my misadventures strayed into the realms of faith and religion.

I was prejudiced against meditation or any religious practice which I took to be only for people who had nothing better to do or those who wanted to put on airs of holiness or those who had no courage to face life...I thought."

The story of how her meeting with two monks changed her outlook and made her regain her faith in Buddhism cannot be told here, for that alone would have made treatise on Buddhism.

She became a mother-in-law in 1967, a grandmother of twins, a boy and a girl, in 1968. In an interview with a writer, Alex Wood, in 1970, she said, "I am proud of

being a good grandmother and housekeeper, but I have never let this interfere with any of my cultural interests. I am glad that I rediscovered the art of Myanmar *Zatpwe* (a kind of a mixture of play, concert and opera) in time to stop me from becoming an interfering mum-in-law and an over doddering granny. Friends rubbed their hands when the twins were born and said it would be the end of my freedom. But of course, it wasn't. I'm organising myself better and writing more than before."

The landmarks of her literary career may be summed up in the following way:

- 1932 : Patriotism (a poem that earned her pen name)
- 1936 : College Girl (a novelette for serialization in 'The Sun' a daily paper.)
- 1945 : Three years under the Japs.
- 1955 : 13 Carat Diamond (short story published in The Guardian magazine, later included in 50 Great Oriental Stories in Bantam Classics.)
- 1963 to 1968 : Heroes of Old Burma (Myanmar) : Quest for Peace (an autobiography) (Both serialized in The Working Peoples' Daily.)
- 1969 : 13 Carat Diamond and Other Stories.
- 1970 : Her Infinite Variety (a prize winning short story in the 'Horizon' magazine short story competition.) : The Four Puppets. (included in 'Folk Tales of Asia' UNESCO) : Anawrahta of Burma (Myanmar) (publication of 'Heroes of Old Burma



- (Myanmar)' which was later re-printed under the titles, 'Anawrahta' and 'King Among Men'.)
- 1976 : Colourful Burma (Myanmar) (a practical and poetic guide for the visitor who wants something better than a tourist view of Myanmar, later reprinted under the title 'Colourful Myanmar'.)
- 1977 : Burmese (Myanmar) Scenes and Sketches.
- 1980 : Flowers and Festivals Round the Burmese (Myanmar) Year : Kyaikhtiyo (a short history of Kyaikhtiyo Pagoda, published in the Asia Magazine.)
- 1981 : A Pagoda Where Fairy Tale Characters Come to Life (a tale-like description of Mai La Mu Pagoda in the outskirts of Yangon, published in the Asia Magazine.)
- 1984 : A Wonderland of Burmese (Myanmar) Legends (published by the Tamarind Press in Bangkok. later reprinted in Myanmar under the title 'A Wonderland of Pagoda Legends'.)
- 1995 : Gift of Laughter (on the picturesque speech of the people of Hla Daw, a village in Central Myanmar, selections of which have been published in the 'Pyinsa Rupa' magazine.)

Conclusion

During the last years of her life, debilitating and disfiguring arthritic pains made her spend most of her time in bed. Regarding her fight against the spasms of pain, she remarked. "Sometimes I lose, sometimes they win". Quite surprisingly, compared to what she suffered, she died in peace.

Khin Myo Chit, Writer and Journalist,

born: 11, May 1915, died: 2, January 1999.
Husband: U Khin Maung Latt(1915-1996).
only son, Dr. Khin Maung Win,
Retired Professor of Mathematics:
and daughter-in-law, Mi Mi (a) Shwe Yi Win.
twin grand children :
boy-twin Maung Maung Win (a) Maung Yit.
girl-twin Mi Mi Win (a) Junior Win,
one grand daughter-in-law, Mya Than Htay.
one great grand daughter, Pwint Phyu Nanda.



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Each story in this book, in one way or another, depicts a part of the author's life - be it her own experience, or her recollections on a certain event or her feelings and views on a subject or her own version of a well-known tale.

The stories and sketches will give the readers entertainment, pleasure, glimpses of her life, as well as information on Myanmar Culture which the author is so proud of.

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The 13 carat **DIAMOND** and other stories

Khin Myo Chit