

Her Infinite Variety

and

Other Stories

Khin Myo Chit

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First Edition, 2004 March, 1000 Copies

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Cover Design Than Myint Aung

Illustrations U Ba Kyi, Than Myint Aung

Cover Permit No. 94/2004(1)

Manuscript Permit No. 503/2003(4)

Publisher U Tin Shein (03763) San Yaung Shein Sarpay,
4/177 May Kha Road, Waibargi. North Okkalarpa

Printer U Kyaw Thinn(05829)Than Lwin Oo Offset,
148, 51st Street, Pazundaung

Price 700 Kyats

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Preface

by

Dr. Khin Maung Win

When Frank Capra, a famous movie director and winner of several awards was asked what advice he could give to the future generation, he said, “Do not follow trends. Make your own trends.” It was the advice that Daw Khin Myo Chit followed and the trend she made was the publication of *Colourful Burma*(now Myanmar) in 1976.

Since then her stories and sketches have earned a place unprecedented before her, unrivalled in her time and still without successor after her in presentation of Myanmar Life, Thought, Culture and Custom, for the general reader, especially the outsider.

This is the second volume of short stories and sketches after **13 Carat Diamond and other stories**. It is also a response to the readers' interest stimulated by the publication of **Colourful Myanmar**, which Bronwen Hammet of UNESCO features calls 'a practical and poetic guide for the visitor who wants something better than a tourist view of Myanmar'.

It is said of Jack London that 'he was one of those rare writers whose actual lives matched the excitement of their fiction.' The same may be said of

Daw Khin Myo Chit and many of her stories, which give glimpses of her life and times, in one way or another, be it her own recollections, or her observations, or conversation pieces, or tales woven out of some facets of Myanmar Culture.

Her Infinite Variety is drawn from her childhood memory. It is not difficult to see that the girl in the story is the author herself. The tale of lost love is a true story of the old puppeteer recounted by himself. Talking about the old puppeteer, the author once remarked, "Now that I think of it, I don't think the old man would have married her even if he had a chance, for I really believe that he was more in love with love for the girl than the girl herself. Yes, I think he really enjoyed mooning over her in that way. He was a real romantic, that one."

Yet another story involving puppets is **The Four Puppets**, a tale of a completely different nature. It is a tale woven out of the four mythical figures of Myanmar theatre: a deva, an ogre, a Zawgyi and a hermit. Written in the form of a folk tale, it is actually an allegory, each figure representing a virtue or a vice.

The deva(heavenly being) represents wisdom and judgement.

The ogre(giant) represents cruelty, strength and villainy.

The zawgyi(a demi-god with a magic wand) represents glamour, power, vice and mischief.

The hermit represents purity, peace, tranquility and guidance.

When the story was published in 'Folk Tales of Asia', a UNESCO publication in 1976, it puzzled a cer-

tain scholar who was doing some serious research on the origin of folk tales. After a long research, he concluded, rightly that this particular tale was the author's own invention. On receiving a letter from the scholar to that effect, the author remarked, "I could have told him that, if only he had asked me."

The Shinlaung's Father deals with a part of the religious life of Buddhist Myanmar. It is about the all-important novitiating ceremony where Buddhist boys are ordained as disciples of the Buddha. The ceremony ranges from a simple one with the boy concerned, a monk and the boy's parents or guardians, to one celebrated with great pomp

There are also three more stories: Po Tay the Performing Ghost, Come Live With Me, and Marriage, Divorce, Myanmar Style. It is hoped that this collection will give the readers entertainment and pleasure, as well as information on Myanmar Culture, Custom and the Buddhist way of life.

PO TAY
THE PERFORMING GHOST



Po Tay was a ghost. There was no doubt about it. He lived on the burial ground outside the village of Tamarind-Stump.

Po Tay's habitat was a spooky place with century-old tamarind trees, all knotted and gnarled, the serpentine roots wove fantastic patterns on the green grassy billowy ground dotted with cairns.

The place gave him the creeps; for he had not been a ghost long enough to get used to the dark shadowy hole. Po Tay was a human being in his previous life. He was a hearse maker.

"No, no you shouldn't be afraid." Po Tay told himself, "This death place was your living, before your death, and you lived off this place; now that you're dead, you'd better be living on it." He did not quite understand what he meant, as he got death and living all mixed up.

One good thing about being a ghost was that he had no need to be afraid of being haunted by ghosts. But then, he had not made many friends in the ghost

world. He missed his friends of his former life, especially Ba Khin, who was his partner in the hearse-making business.

It was the custom of the village to make hearses only when needed. The base was a bamboo raft, big enough for a single bed; a rectangular frame of the same size was put over it to hang flowers and trimmings. Hearses were left on the burial ground.

Po Tay and Ba Khin were a good team. They went into the woodlands to cut and collect bamboo and it was a laborous task. Later, Po Tay suggested that they should pick up the left-over hearses from the burial ground. Ba Khin thought it was a wonderful idea. From then on, they went to the burial ground and picked up the hearses, dismantled them and took the good parts home.

Of course, they had to make a pretence of going into the woods before they entered the burial ground by stealth. People of the village were rather particular in their insistence on brand-new hearses.

Apart from this lapse of professional integrity, Po Tay and Ba Khin were good craftsmen. They made exceptionally beautiful hearses. The kith and kin of the dear departed were so impressed that they promised them more business in future, that is, far future (hopefully), of course.

"There's no one within a thousand miles, who can make hearses like we do" said Po Tay one day. Ba Khin read the pathetic wistfulness in his voice and assured him, "Don't you worry, dear friend, I'll make you

a hearse, the best and the most beautiful one when the time comes, and you do the same for me. It's a deal, yes?"

Little did Ba Khin think that he would have to fulfil his promise so soon. It happened during the season when they went fishing for eels in the marshes. Po Tay scoured the swamps with his bare hands probing into the corners where there were thick clumps of water hyacinths. Soon Po Tay caught his prize.

Unfortunately, there was a slight misunderstanding; Po Tay thought it was an eel, but the thing in his hand insisted that it was a snake. Po Tay lost the argument when the thing put his fangs deep into his wrist.

Ba Khin who was with him at that time could do nothing but plan to create a beautiful hearse.

Po Tay had hoped to see Ba Khin who might come to collect the left-over hearses as they were wont to. But Ba Khin never came. So Po Tay could do nothing but play games with the left-over hearses.

At first, it was purely for his own amusement. He kicked the hearses up into the air and caught them as they fell and kicked them up again. Later he improvised variation of the theme, as a clever juggler might with his cups and plates.

It was not long before his fellow ghosts came and watched him. They liked his performance and cheered him. They applauded him with many encores. Even before he realized, Po Tay found himself a star performer in the ghost world.

Po Tay wanted to share his joy with his friends

especially Ba Khin. It was a pity, he thought, that humans were debarred from enjoying what he considered to be the best entertainment.

He could not very well put up a show in the village for the benefit of his human friends much as he wanted to. It involved miles of ghostly red tape getting permission from the guardian spirits of the village. Those guardian spirits considered themselves superior and they were a pompous and officious lot.

Po Tay, therefore, decided to do the next best thing, which was to perform for those who came his way. There were many. The cemetery was just a few yards off the main road that led to the entrance of the village. In the early hours of the morning, villagers went out to the nearby market town to sell their farm produce. Some went in bullock carts and others on foot carrying baskets of fruits and vegetables on their shoulders.

Po Tay chose the afternoon for his performance when the villagers were on their way home, after a hard day's work. Then they would welcome entertainment. Moreover, his antics were more effective in the darkling when the lofty trees lengthened their shadows on the green grassy billows of the burial ground.

There was a massive tamarind tree in between the road and the cemetery. It was a fearsome thing, gnarled and knotted and it had a dark deep hollow. Its foliage was thick and luxuriant with overhanging branches which swayed and creaked in the wind.

Po Tay nestled himself among the myriads of

giant roots that curled round the foot of the tree and waited for his audience. As he had never before performed before the human audience, Po Tay was feeling jittery, not quite sure how he would be received. For the upteenth time he mentally went over the programme.

First, the overture; he would make the tree shake violently as if it would unroot itself; this was to be accompanied by a long drawn howl, spelling the words, 'I'm Po Tay, the ghost performer.' This cry, so eerie and wierd was his masterpiece, the wonder of his friends of the ghost-land. 'No one could work up such a demoniac effect as you do,' they said.

Now for the grand entrance: he would let his gargantuan shadow fall in the path of the people and let them see him, a colossal figure as high as the coconut palm, his body covered with long grisly hair. Under his arms and in his hands would be flower-bedecked hearses.

The show must be nothing short of perfection. It must be breath-taking.

But the grand entrance was the only act Po Tay could finish. Even before he could go on with his juggling acts and show off his virtuosity and showmanship, the air became thick with the piercing screams of the villagers, and the bellowing of the cattle and the creak of the wheels as the carts were drawn unguided in all directions. People ran falling on one another, writhing and rolling in terror.

All this tumult and ballyhoo gave poor Po Tay such a fright that he stood for a few moments petrified

on the spot. There was nothing for him to do but crawl back to his place, his valley of humiliation. He felt that his career had come to an ignominious end. After this, he felt he could not perform for any audience, human or ghost.

Po Tay knew only too well that in show business, once you are out, you can never come back. He wallowed in self pity and stayed in the darkest shadows. Older ghosts told him that his show was a success. The effect on the audience was everything that any decent ghost could wish for. Po Tay should have gone on with his act instead of running away. But Po Tay did not want to frighten people, he only wanted to entertain them.

"You've made a hit. People are so frightened that they pass this way only in broad daylight....never in the evening, they're afraid of 'the ghost carrying hearses'." , they told him.

Po Tay broke into peals of mirthless laughter. Frightened of "the ghost carrying hearses", indeed, when the humans had scared him out of his wits. "I nearly had a nervous break down," he muttered gloomily.

Since Po Tay grew more and more depressed, his friends suggested that he should go away for a change of scene and air. So he went away, but not for long; because he was summoned back by a piece of devastating news. He rushed home to hear the worst.

Of late, the trendy thing at village festivals and celebrations was to put up a bizarre show called the "ghost dance". The main feature of the act was a man

wearing a hairy robe complete with a fearsome grinning mask; he carried hearses on his shoulders and did a lively dance, which was the delight of the audience.

The troupe doing the 'ghost dance' was so popular and so much in demand that bookings had to be made several weeks in advance. The troupe was always on the move as it had to go to the other villages far and near to perform.

Po Tay was greatly perturbed. To think that a mere human should steal his shows and (the shame of it all) made a greater hit! It did not make him feel any better to learn that the 'mere human' performer was no other than his dear friend Ba Khin. He felt abandoned and betrayed. "You too, Ba Khin" he moaned woefully.

One morning he saw Ba Khin and his troupe go out of the village in bullock carts. When they passed the burial ground, Ba Khin had the cheek to cry out, "Hey, Po Tay, I've to go elsewhere to put up a show. The village is without amusement for today. Why don't you go and stand in for me?"

Boys of the troupe laughed and someone blew the flute, whilst others beat the drum and cymbals to aggravate him all the more. A young boy waved the hairy ghost costume and shouted, "Hey Po Tay, here's a fright for you!"

Po Tay was outraged; this was indeed the most unkindest cut of all. Sure, he would stand in for Ba Khin and give the village a show, the greatest show ever. If it was his lot to frighten people, he would do so to the utmost perfection. By now, he was reconciled to

the motto: "When you're in ghostland do as the ghosts do."

Po Tay slipped in when the cattle grazing outside were herded back into the village at dusk. It was the best time for him, with darkness falling and the path shrouded with dust as the cattle scampered. Po Tay could easily dodge the guardian spirit of the village.

Once within the village, Po Tay, putting his supernormal powers to use, took the form of a young attractive woman of eighteen; with dark hair falling over the shoulders, dressed in a red sarong and white blouse and black scarf. Po Tay was indeed a phantom of delight.

In this guise, Po Tay walked demurely to the house where Ba Khin lived with his mother, who was at that time in the front yard. She was busy taking in the peas and beans that had been spread in the sun to dry. She was somewhat startled by someone, calling 'Mother' and no less so when she saw the apparition, a shy young woman with downcast eyes.

"I'm Mai Boke from yonder Bamboo Grove village. My parents are marrying me to someone I don't love. So I've eloped with your son. We've been in love for a long time." Ba Khin's mother was astounded at the words of the strange girl. She stuttered: "But, but...where's Ba Khin...oh, how could he do such a thing!"

The girl went on, "He...he's at the headman's house to report the matter. I've already made a state-

ment that I come of my own free will and that I am of age. He sent me ahead to tell you....and...and...you won't send me away...will you...oh please...don't send me away..."

The new mother-in-law was moved. "Of course, I won't...but that son of mine, how could he do such a thing...taking a girl without her parents' consent...that no decent man should...but,...well, go into the house, lassie, and rest. I'll wait for Ba Khin from here...take this match, it's all dark in there, you'd be frightened."

"Thank mother...but I'm not afraid of the dark ...I'm used to it, I mean...well, I'll take it any way..." So saying the girl took the match and the old lady felt an uncanny chill shooting down her spine as the girl's fingers touched her. They were fingers of ice.

The girl went into the house and the mother sat on the bamboo seat in front of the house and waited for her son. She lighted a long fat cheroot and puffed it with undue vehemence.

"This son of mine does have an eye for beauty," she could not help thinking. There was the problem of 'doing the right thing' for the girl; she must get the support and help of the village elders when she went to the girl's parents to offer an apology 'for the son's unseemly conduct'. It would be easy going for the next step which was to make a formal request for the girl's hand for her son.

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not see Ba Khin come. Only when he greeted her with his usual playfulness: "Why looking so glum. Ma,

worried about me?" did she start violently and left forth a barrage of colourful expletives, followed by indignant words: "You...you...how could you do that to me? A thing no decent man should...how am I going to face the girl's parents? Oh, I wish I could slice off my face for the shame of it all!"

Much as he was used to his mother's scolding which was often full of sound and fury signifying nothing, this was something new. He asked, "Well, what have I done to you, Ma?" This incensed his mother more.

"What have you done indeed. How could you be so cool. Think of the poor girl. She's in there, now perhaps weeping her eyes out, lonely and frightened in a strange house...how could you do such a thing?"

It took some time for Ba Khin to make sense out of the whole thing. "you mean I brought a girl here..I did no such thing...I brought no girl here... Where is she? she must be a cheat...or, worse...I'll go in and..."

The old lady held her son's arm to restrain him: "Don't be too hard on her, she looks genuine...". Ba Khin broke away and went in followed by his mother saying, "There must be some mistake, some horrible mistake."

It was not long before they discovered the horrible mistake which was a hairy monster lying on Ba Khin's bed. It got up and folded Ba Khin in his grisly embrace crying: "It's only me, your friend Po Tay."

What followed was an unholy pandemonium, Ba Khin yelling friendishly, his mother in hysterics. The uproar was further heightened by the crowd of

neighbours who had gathered round to see what was the matter. They saw what the matter was in the form of a hairy monster which shot up through the roof before their eyes and melted into the air. This brought more alarms. More people came and the more the noisier, the more the confusion, and of course, the merrier for Po Tay, who, by that time, was back at the burial ground basking in the admiration of his fellow ghosts. The turmoil in the village was indeed his hall mark of fame as a star performer. He had made it!

HER
INFINITE
VARIETY



"Now the daily ritual of an escape from heat, "I muttered to myself, as I dragged my feet towards the bamboo dais under the huge tamarind tree, only twenty yards away. Carrying a roll of mat under one arm and books in the other, I moved lethargically: the reluctance of the darn books to stay in the crook of my arm did not improve my temper.

At long last the palm leaf mat was unrolled on the bamboo dais. A young boy came out of the house with a tray and I breathed a prayer for my considerate host; nothing like hot green tea on such a blazing day as this. Iced drinks only made me feel worse.

I poured tea into the glazed earthen cup and gulped it down. Then I lay on my stomach and leafed through one of the books. My skin cooled while beads of perspiration drank in the soft breeze blowing from the river.

I rested my chin on the book, the right thickness for the purpose---nothing like the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*. I dropped my eyelids feeling the caress of the breeze against my cheeks. I did not know how long I lay like that. Suddenly I was jerked into consciousness by the sound of brass cymbals and castanets---chwin---chwin---chuck---chwin---chwin---chuck,

beating time to a rich mellow voice singing what is called *Myainghta*, a song sung by the male dancer in a duet dance:

Through the sylvan glades,
Where fall the crystal waters
From many a high crag,
Where hang the flowers
Jewel-like in medley hues,
Let us go forth....

As I listened, I forgot the blazing heat and I felt myself transported to the sylvan glades and literally carried away as the song came to a close with a powerful crescendo...

Tired, my dear,
Don't you worry.
This goodman of yours
Will carry you
All the way....

I sat up and looked. There he was, the old man I had seen in the marketplace. He was carrying the same marionette doll, the figure of a female dancer on his shoulder. I wondered how much he made this morning giving a solo performance. I knew his name, U Sein Khine, for I heard people calling him. He seemed to be friendly with everyone at the market.

"Uncle U Sein Khine," I called, "why don't you come and sit here a while and have a cup of green tea." He came and sat on the bamboo dais and I poured him a cup. "You're new here---haven't seen you before," he said. I told him that I was there on holiday staying with cousins.

"So you're from the big city. Feeling bored? No, don't deny it. None of your polite city bla bla. It is hot, dusty and there's nothing much to see here, and you don't care much for things like marionette shows. Of course not."

I told him that I was a small town girl myself, even though I had to stay in the city to earn my living, and that I liked marionette shows. "My grandfather used to take me when I was small. I still remember the dance of the animals at the beginning of the show---tigers, elephants, horses and monkeys."

U Sein Khine hung the marionette on the tree branch and asked, "Do you remember the dance of the *belu* (ogre) and the *zawgyi*(demigod)?"

"Of course I do. I was thrilled by the *zawgyi* resplendent in flaming red dress, jumping and flying. And the *belu*, dark green with fin-like crests on its head, shoulders and elbows fascinated me, and the music, the *nhe* ominously howling to the boom of the big drum beating. It gives me the creeps."

"You know the *belu* is half animal, half god. He is cruel, ruthless; he is also agile, strong and powerful. He is handsome, attractive, graceful like a panther on the prowl. You see all these beauties in the dance of the *belu*. He is meant to excite awe and admiration.

I said thoughtfully, more to myself: "My grandfather used to sit up the whole night at marionette shows. I wonder how he could do it. He wasn't too young when I knew him."

"Of course, you young people of today do not realize what marionette shows meant to the people of

those days. Tell me, what was it, do you think, that made your grandfather sit up the whole night watching the antics of the marionettes? What magic, what art?" He took a long white cheroot from his bag and lighted it. He took a few puffs and looked at the marionette hanging from the tree branch.

"Now, look at the *minthami*(prima donna). Perhaps she looks like a wooden puppet to you, dressed in rags and beads. I made her myself with guava wood. Feel her skin, see how smooth and soft. I polished her again and again for many days. You know how?" I shook my head.

"You know the seeds of tamarind fruits, hard black seeds. I rubbed the seed on the smooth stone slab pouring drops of water as I did so until I got a thick paste. I smeared the marionette with it and let her dry in the sun. This I did again and again for many days."

"You'd have to be very patient," I commented.

The old man did not reply. He took the marionette from the tree branch and propped her against my books. He gazed at her for quite a long time, while I looked at him more closely.

He must be nearly 70, I thought. He wore a *pasoe-shay*, a long piece of nether garment like the men of my grandfather's days. It was hard-woven cotton, chunky and knotted. His long-sleeved jacket was of the same material. His long hair, though streaked with gray, was still thick and it was done into a knot. This I could see, for he had taken off the old battered towel which served as a sort of turban. There was a certain dignity in his face though it was furrowed with

lines. His bushy eyebrows, black piercing eyes and broad forehead with clearcut hair lines somehow lent a regal look in spite of his shabby clothes.

Lost in thought, he gazed at the marionette and I tactfully stayed silent. He then took her on his knee tenderly as he might a child and undid her hair. I almost gasped. It was real hair, black and glossy. I found my voice and said: "It's real hair!"

U Sein Khine combed the marionette's hair with a tiny tortoise shell comb and tied it into knot so that the fringe hung gracefully on one side of her shoulder.

"Of course her hair's real. I should know; because it's my own hair. My hair used to be black and glossy in my younger days"

"Then you have had this marionette for many years?"

"Now, young lady, will you do me a favour by not calling my *minthami* 'this marionette.' She is every inch a *minthami*. I fashioned her with my own hands and gave her my own hair. She has my heart too."

He looked quite livid and I almost feared he must be crazy. As if he sensed my thoughts, he smiled and said:

"Don't be afraid. I'm not mad or anything of that sort. You see, I love her, for she is the likeness of the woman I once loved."

I was instantly alive. Now, for a good story---a story of the bygone days when marionette troupes travelled in big barges along the river. They were artistes

who brought entertainment, fun and magic wherever they stopped.

"I was just about fifteen when I got into the marionette troupe. I was the oldest in a family of six children. I had to help my family by selling tamarind leaves. I went down to the riverbank every morning and climbed the trees to collect leaves. One day I was up in the tree singing my lungs out. I just let myself go when I sang and I was so lost in the thrill of my own performance that I did not hear someone yelling at me from underneath. Only when I came to the triumphant close of my song did I hear someone calling: "Hey you, are you deaf? Don't you hear me calling? Come down at once."

"I was scared, for I thought it was the headman of our village. Only the day before, I had stealthily plucked some guavas from his trees. I stayed silent for a while and looked down at the ground. It was not the headman. It was someone I had never seen before. There was a big barge moored to the bank and I figured he must be one of the men from there. But why should he be calling me? 'Come down, young man, don't be afraid. I like your singing,' he called again. It was indeed news to me that anyone should like my singing. My stepmother always scolded me for waking the children from their nap and frightening the backyard fowls. 'Come down, I'm not going to eat you. I only want to hear you sing,' he called again.

"So I came down. Then sitting right under the tree on the gnarled roots that lay like coils of a huge serpent, I sang to him,"

That was how young Sein Khine got into the marionette troupe. The stranger who called him down from the tree was the leader of the troupe. He was the owner of the barge and props.

He was also an accomplished artist. He trained the members of his troupe. He himself took charge of the *minthami*: the leading singer, mimer and manipulator of marionettes. He wanted to train youngsters for the show. "My father, with too many mouths to feed, was glad to have me apprenticed to the marionette master," U Sein Khine said.

He paused to light his cheroot again and smoked for a while. I pushed the plate of jaggery sweets to him and told him to help himself. He took a small chunk and chewed it, chasing it down with a cup of green tea.

As he went on with the story of his life in a marionette troupe, I began to understand the magic that held audiences spellbound the whole night.

"There was no scenery on the marionette stage, only a white screen this high. You could see us standing behind the screen and manipulating strings. Nothing to persuade you that the marionettes were anything other than what they really were. Still they became real men and women acting in real life dramas. You know why? Because each marionette was possessed by the spirit of its manipulator. Take, for instance, my *minthami*..."

The marionette troupe travelled and gave performances for three quarters of the year and "rested" during the monsoon months. All the artistes went home

to their respective families. Young Sein Khine did not go home, for the maestro wanted him to make the most of his time in order to learn his art. And it was only during the "resting periods" that the maestro had time to coach him in singing and manipulating marionette strings. He was expected to know everything about the marionette art which included setting up the stage and knowing the basic principles of orchestra music. It was during his stay at the maestro's place that he met Mai Dwe, the maestro's youngest daughter, a maiden of thirteen.

"She was wearing her hair *sayit-waing*. You would not know what it is for one does not see such hairstyles these days."

I laughed. "I do know so well, for I myself wore the same style when I was small. I still remember the ordeal of waiting for the circular patch to grow. I felt stupid and ugly with my head shaved except for the circular patch on the crown. I felt like a beauty queen the day my hair was long enough to be done into a knot with a circular fringe of hair around."

"So you're not as ignorant as most of the bright young things of the city. Well, coming back to Mai Dwe, she played with me the first time I went home with the maestro. But the next time I was there, oh, she was wearing her hair *sa-dauk* style..you know that too, I suppose. The fringe was allowed to grow long and the two tresses were curled round the ears to frame the face---the mark of a grown-up young lady. Well, I didn't mind her wearing her hair that way, it was very becoming. But what perturbed me was that she would have

absolutely nothing to do with me. She didn't speak to me; nor did she come and play with the marionettes. She didn't even look at me. She looked away when I tried to catch her eye. I was quite indignant with her."

It was in his hours of loneliness and resentment against the rude behavior of Mai Dwe that he carved the marionette figure, a faithful likeness of the disdainful maid that he had learned to love. He stuck his own tresses of hair on the marionette styled in a *sa-dauk*. He polished and painted the eyes and lips and he was happy with the results.

Young Sein Khine was given a small hut, hidden on the spacious grounds of the maestro's residence.

"I had the place to myself, so no one knew what I was doing. I went into the maestro's house to take my meals and receive instructions but most of the day I was in my hut, learning songs or practising on the marionette strings. One day I dozed off while learning a song. As in a dream I heard someone come in and suddenly a muffled cry drifted into my ears: "You... you you're wicked...how could you do this..." I jerked up to a sitting posture and rubbed my eyes. There she was, Mai Dwe, weeping with her face hidden in the crook of her arm.

"I did not know what she meant until I looked where she was pointing. There, the marionette was hanging on the wall, stark naked. Hastily I threw a cloth over the figure and with a supreme effort I suppressed the waves of laughter rising within me. I said: 'Mai Dwe, don't cry. I meant to make it a present for you. Only I don't have any clothes to dress her up. And as for the...

er...er...you know...we marionetteers must make figures life-like...complete...er...with everything. That's the tradition, the custom. If you don't believe me, have a peek at your father's marionettes.' At this she picked up a stick of wood and threw it at me; and if I had not jumped I might have got a broken skull. 'You...you wicked...wicked...' Even as she shouted, she was giggling in spite of herself. The next moment we were laughing together, and in love."

Mai Dwe agreed to supply beads and sequins and pieces of silk and satin from her wardrobe so that the marionette should be properly dressed. That was how they came to love each other.

"We had to keep our love a secret. She was too young. I had no means of my own as yet, being only an apprentice. When it was time for our troupe to start on our travels, Mai Dwe told me to keep the marionette---her other self, as she called it---to keep me company. I kept the marionette in my box and no one knew I had her.

"One night we came to a town where we were to give a performance. I was left to watch the barge. Unable to sleep, I took her out and set on the prow and manipulated the strings to do the ritual dance performed at the opening of the show. I was so engrossed that I did not hear the maestro come up the barge and watch me. Only when I brought her down on her knees to close the dance did I see him."

Young Sein Khine was disturbed. He wanted

to run away. He thought he had revealed his love for Mai Dwe. It was as if he had been caught with the girl herself: He could hardly believe his ears when the maestro said: "Never thought you'd become so good. From now on, you take charge of the ritual dance."

That was the beginning. One night the maestro had a cold and he was asked to take the role of Ma Padar, a rich man's daughter who falls in love with one of her father's slaves. He had learned his part---all the songs, recitation, and lines---and he asked the maestro's permission to use his own marionette.

"The audience gasped when they saw the figure of Ma Padar, not the mature woman they were wont to see, but a teenager with a *sa-dauk!* I put my whole heart into the role---the role of a wayward girl infatuated with someone whose status would not allow her to declare her love, nor he, his."

In the course of his story, U Sein Khine sang and recited bits from the play. The songs expressed the uninhibited love of a child-woman impetuously thumping her feet this moment, bold and brazen the next, only to give way to tears of frustration. Then she rises again in the full fury of a woman scorned. He interpreted the varying moods and carried the audience with his sheer bravura vocalism.

"From that time on I was gradually allowed to take most of the maestro's roles. I learned the arts of a marionette prima donna---and wooing a reluctant swain is one of them---like in the role of Ma Padar."

U Sein Khine went on expounding the arts of a prima donna, illustrating his points with quotations from

plays. In playing the different roles, he recreated the infinite variety of his beloved Mai Dwe---her moods and tantrums, her loving tenderness, her child-like adoration.

"When I played the role of a girl longing for her lover, I played the role as I imagined Mai Dwe to be doing in my absence---talking to the paddy bird, for instance, and imploring it to fly to me with her message of love and longing. Even my fellow troupers were charmed by my marionette's naivete and moved to tears by her anguish that seemed to be too cruelly heavy for her young heart.

"The roles I liked best were those of the Four Virtuous Ones---Keinnayi, Madhi, Thambula, Amayar--you know them, of course."

I nodded. I knew them well, for their stories were among the first I had heard on my grandfather's knee. They represent the ideal figures of womanhood: Amayar, a helpmate and counsellor to her husband; Keinnayi, a faithful wife who scorned the advances of a king; Madhi, who braved the perils of exile with her lord; Thambula who shared the fate of an outcast with her leper husband.

"I particularly loved playing the role of Keinnayi whose husband lay on the ground in the throes of death, pierced by the arrow of the villainous king, who then thrust his unwelcome attentions on her. I played the varying moods, from deep grief for her husband, whom she thought dead, to the fury and shame of a noble woman wooed by her husband's murderer."

While U Sein Khine talked as usual with quo-

tations from songs, his hands automatically manipulated a string or two of the marionette sitting on his lap. I could hear her lash her tongue against the lascivious king. Then, from being a saucy little shrew, she rose to the dignity of a noble wife, loving and faithful till death, invoking the powers above to come to her aid. Such was the power of U Sein Khine's performance that I was thoroughly convinced that the powers above, whoever or whatever they be, would surely come to her aid.

Suddenly I remembered the most important point in the story. "What happened to Mai Dwe? Did you marry her?" I asked.

"During the following years, I could not go back with the maestro to his village for the 'resting periods.' My father was ill and my half-brothers and sisters, all still very young, needed help; so I had to go home to them. I helped my father with his little plantation---just a patch of land growing beans and corn. Mai Dwe and I hardly met. Only at the beginning of the season did I have any opportunity to go to the maestro's village. But then we were so busy that Mai Dwe and I hardly had time to talk at all. During the hurried meetings, I told her that I would ask her father for her hand after I had enough saved, which would be quite a long time---what with my father ill and my young brothers and sisters needing help. I begged her to be patient and to wait a while. She pouted and thumped her little feet. I tried to soothe her; she was still young: there was time enough for happiness. But she was impatient. What could I do

then?"

U Sein Khine paused and fingered the beads hanging on the neck of the marionette; he looked into her face as if remembering.

"Once, I stole a meeting with her before I left with the troupe. As usual, we argued and she raved at me for not loving her enough. She cried; I know you don't love me. You only love your wretched marionette; so long as you have her, you don't care where I am. You're content to have her with you because you can control her as you wish. You don't want me so long as you have her...she is everything you wish her to be..... Amayar, Keinnayi, Madhi...go with your wretched marionette...go...go...go away...out of my sight both of you...So crying she ran away leaving me stunned."

U Sein Khine took the jaggery sweets and chewed them. "Jaggery sweets go well with the pungent taste of green tea," I said rather irrelevantly.

"Yes, bittersweet, like young love. That season we played the story of Princess Welu-wadi, the wife of the king's younger brother; the king fell in love with her and sent her husband away on a mission in order to take her by force.

"The scene where the king forces his attentions on the princess was a favorite with the audience. It was a variation of the role of Keinnayi who, though placed in a similar predicament was saved by divine power. It was uncanny, prophetic, you might say. The same year, Mai Dwe was given in marriage to her brother-in-law, her elder sister's husband, a widower. It was done in order to prevent her sister's children from hav-

ing to live with an unloving stepmother. I never found out whether Mai Dwe was a willing party or not. I played Welu-wadi with great depth of feeling and people said it was my best role. I never married. It happened decades ago. Now, the troupe has broken up and she is all I have...she helps me earn my meals."

"What about Mai Dwe? Did you ever see her again?"

"No, I never went back to the village. I heard that she looked after her late sister's children well and added some of her own. She is probably living with lots of children and grandchildren. But I have this Mai Dwe, the prima donna, ever young and beautiful."

"Whom age cannot wither and whose life is ever changing, her infinite variety," I muttered under my breath.

I gave U Sein Khine a ten-kyat note.

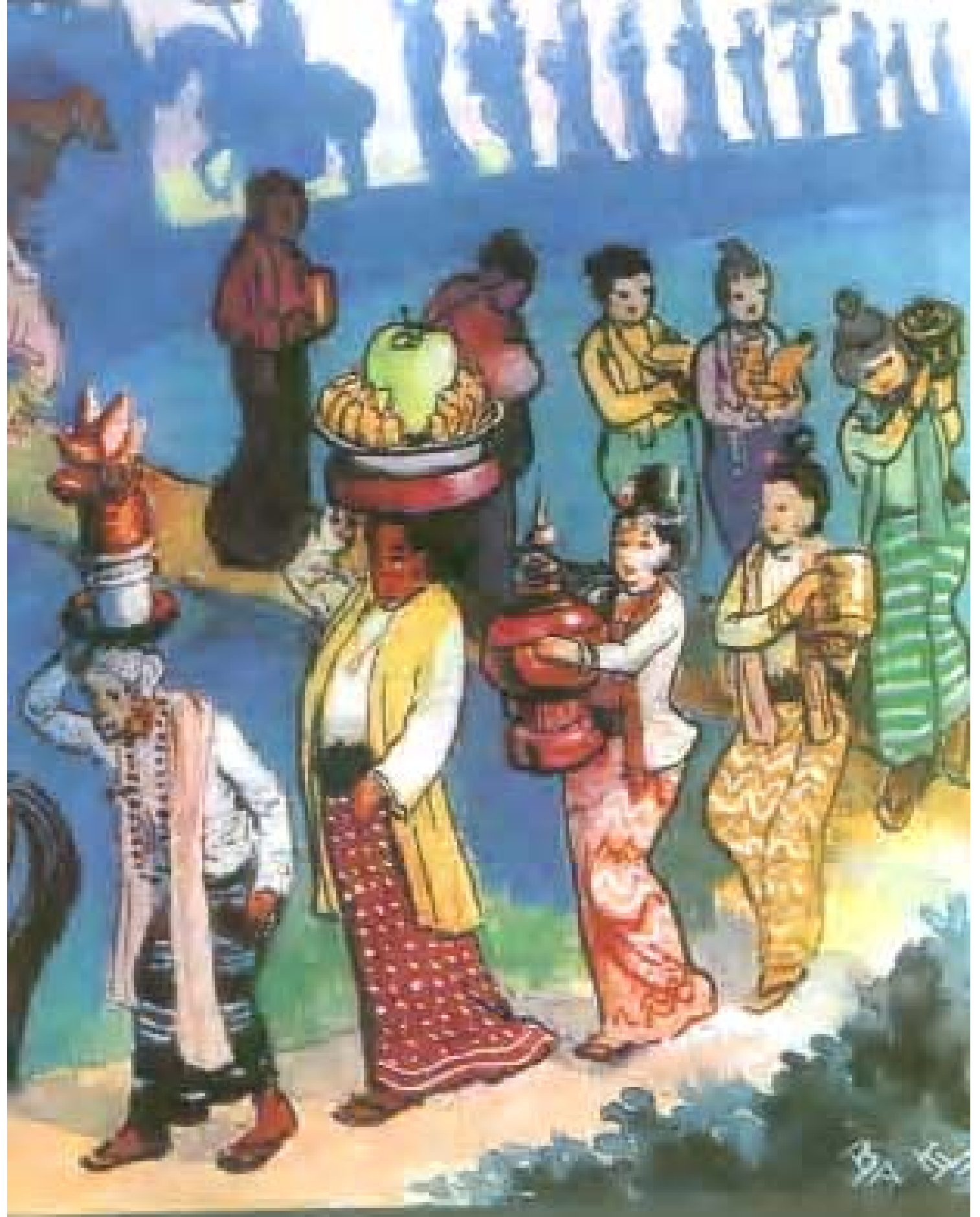
He put it in his pocket and tilted the chin of the marionette and looked into her eyes and said: "Mai Dwe, I'll buy you new silks and beads. I might be starving, but I'll keep you in style..."

He then took the marionette by the strings and flung her over his shoulder and waving his hand to me, he walked down the road singing...

Tired, my dear,
Don't you worry.
This goodman of yours
Will carry you
All the way...



THE SHINLAUNG'S FATHER



“She that’s neither maid, married, nor widow fits all men as a pot does it's lid ...oh!”

“Neither maid nor widow...” young man sang the refrain to the beat of the drums and cymbals as the bamboo flute warbled mimicking the words amidst merry laughter. More songs and limmericks followed. Most of them began innocently with a line about pots and baskets, but what followed in rhyme was so ribald that it had to be drowned in boisterous music. Most of the rhymes were so well known that each opening line was greeted with giggles and laughter even before the rest was heard.

“She that’s neither maid, married nor widow.” droned into Mai Sein's ears, mocking her state, as she washed the earthen pots to make ready for her afternoon chore of fetching water from the stream.

The way down the stream at this time of the year was cool and shady, for the *padauk* trees would be spreading their flowerladen arms over the grass-fringed lane. She might be sheltered from the blazing afternoon sun, but she would hear the din of *dho-bat* music and songs the young men of the village were singing....

“....neither maid, married, nor widow ..”

Of course no harm was meant to anyone, least of all to herself. She used to enjoy these lively tunes and music that heralded the New Year Festivities. She and the girls of village could never help giggling even as they blushed at the suggested ribaldry. It was part of the fun they shared with boys and girls she had grown up with. Only, things were different now, at least, for her.

The scent of the *padauk* blossoms mingled with the aroma of the sun-baked earth as it fizzled welcome to the first April showers. Then came the *dho-bat* music and of course, songs and limmericks.

“May May...guess what I've got today..”. Mai Sein nearly dropped the pot she was carrying as her young son's eager voice caught her unawares. In her present mood she wanted to shake the boy, but his face beaming with excitement wrung her heart.” With a sudden burst of affection, she folded him in her arms, and the next moment the seven-year-old chunk of outraged masculinity wriggled out and cried “But, May May, you said I am a big boy now”

Ashamed, Mai Sein smiled wanly and took his school bag from his shoulders and said: “Well, let's hear what you learned today at school.”

Po Tar took a few steps so that he could see the trees down the lane and sang:

Rose-apple's scent! Near,
Surely, is the New Year;
Look up the date.....

Padauk's showy gold
The date has told,
No need to look up the date.

“Very good, son, very good. Now let's go and see if the New Year's coming... ”.

Taking the child's hand, she ran down to the lane and pointed to the tree tops and said: “Look at the rose-apples, red as the sun going down west, and the *padauk* pouring golden showers on us. You know, *Thagyamin*, king of the celestials, will be coming down to us to bless us all.” Po Tar's reply threw her off the balance again.

“May May, our school closes today. Shall I be novitiated this season? All other boys are going to be. I don't want to be left out when they all go to stay at the monastery as novices. And another thing. If I am not a novice myself, I shall have to *shikho* them. Just imagine me kneeling down and bowing to them with hands clasped!”

“Now, Po Tar, how many times must I tell you not to say anything about this novitiation business. I'll have you novitiated when the time comes...now go and play. I'm already late for my water fetching.”

She walked quickly down the lane, the pot balanced on her hip and her arm conveniently slid under its up turned neck.

She half ran down the lane until she came to the beach by the stream. There, she sat down and dug a little hole in the sand. Soon clear fresh water filtered in and only then did she remember that she had forgotten the coconut shell cup used to scoop out the water

from the hand-dug well as it was called.

She would have to walk back for the cup or wait for others to come. 'Others'...of course they were others to her, those who used to be her friends, the young women of the village she had grown up with, for they were either maid, married or widow, not like herself....

"Hey, Mai Sein, you're early. These days, you're always ahead of us. Always on your own, like a maid off to keep a tryst."

It was Mai Aye who had come to fetch water. Mai Sein glared at her and said; "Don't mock at me, Mai Aye. I'm not a maid, nor widow." Mai Aye did not answer her but she put down her pot on the sand and said reproachfully: "There, your little well is filling. It will soon cave in." She took out her coconut shell cup from her pot and started to scoop out the water to fill her pot.

Mai Sein sat down and watched in silence. Mai Aye was of her own age, a year older perhaps, twenty-five or so and her little girl was a bit younger than her Po Tar. She was also one of her best friends but it was a long time since she had spoken to her.

Something snapped within Mai Sein and she cried: "How I wish that wretched Po Dan were dead and buried..". The vehemence of her voice started Mai Aye.

"Lord forbid, Mai Sein, you shouldn't be saying such things of your husband. You know it's better than being a widow."

"Better than being a widow, you say, ha, just

listen to what they say. Neither maid, nor married, nor widow, fits all men, and so on and so forth.....just listen!”

“Hey Mai Sein, you fool. The little well’s gone. If you must stamp your feet, why can’t you do it away from my well.”

“It’s not your well. It’s mine. I dug it before you came. Now fill your pot. Go home to your little girl and your...your man. And leave me alone...you hear what I said, leave me alone!”

Mai Aye was not rattled. She said: “Easy, my dear, it’s no way to speak to an old friend. Just because your man’s left you and gone, Lord knows where, you can’t cut yourself away from us all. It’s childish sulking like this ..”.

“I’m not sulking...it’s none of your business..”

“You are sulking and it’s everybody’s business because everybody loves you and cares for you. Why must you be like this, keeping away from us all, ever suspicious of some hidden ridicule in our innocent words and actions. Even the boys you’ve grown up with can’t sing old ditties without offending Your Highness. I’m quite fed up with your touch-me-not airs...we all are ...”.

“Why are you talking to me this long? Why can’t you go and mind your own business. Go..go away before I break this pot on your silly head.”

“I will surely go away and mind my own business, but not before I remind you of your duty to your son. It’s time for him to be novitiated.”

At these words Mai Sein rushed away and threw

herself down on the sand trembling with sobs. Mai Aye went after her slowly and sat by her in silence. She waited till her friend calmed down and extended her hand to smooth her dishevelled hair.

“Sorry to upset you, Mai Sein, but I have to reach you somehow. It’s no good your cutting us all. What ever happens, you’ve got to live your life and we all are part of it.”

“But I’m already dead, dead inside...no life for me to live now.”

“You may be dead, if that’s what pleases you, but your son is alive. You have no right to draw him into the pit of loneliness you’ve crawled into. If anything, you’ve got to live for him.”

“Whom do you think I’m bearing all this for? The shame, the humiliation of a woman whose husband had gone Lord knows where. Po Tar is the only reason I haven’t drowned myself. I live only for him.”

“Well, if you live for him, do your duty. Give him the yellow robe, the garb of the Buddha. Wearing the robe is the crowning moment of a boy’s life and for you, his mother, the highest privilege...that of the mother of a man-child. How I wish my little girl were a boy so that I can novitiate him!”

Something in Mai Aye’s wistful tone moved Mai Sein. She sat up and wiped her tears, ashamed of her self-pity.

Mai Aye went on: “Novitiation does not cost much and everyone will rally round, that is, if you allow them. You may not be too well off but you’ve made a good job of your little vegetable patch without a man to

help you. And there is Po Htu who is only too willing to help.”

The last words were said with a giggle and Mai Sein herself was tickled. She gave a playful rap on her friend’s back and said: “Don’t dare to talk about that brazen-faced lout.....shamelessly hanging around. If my Po Dan were here, he would be fisted right and left.”

Mai Aye laughed and said that it was time they should be filling their water pots. Both walked back to the place where they left their water pots and Mai Aye dug a new hole and began filling her pot.

“Well, Mai Sein, we shall talk about the novitiation later. Now help me to lift my pot onto my head.” Mai Sein lifted the water pot and placed it on Mai Aye’s head and she walked away.

Left alone, Mai Sein filled her pot and lifted it on to her head and prepared to go. A babel of merry voices filled the air as the village belles came down to fetch water. She met them on her way home. She braced herself to wish them.

“Hey, girls, you’re late. Here’s Mai Aye’s coconut shell cup. She has left it on the sand, Will you take it back to her and tell her I shall be at the monastery tomorrow to help her with the preparation for the new year feast.”

Mai Sein accelerated her steps, not equal as yet to engage in conversation with them. She could not however, walk quickly enough to miss their comments.

“It looks like Mai Sein’s old saucy self ..”

“It’s the first time she wishes us since Po Dan

went away with the rebel insurgents. He's gone nearly a year. He should take advantage of the amnesty order and come back to the lawful life."

The next day found Mai Sein and Mai Aye at the village monastery where people were gathered to make preparation for the new year feast. The villagers led by the headman and elders went round collecting contributions in cash and kind. Mai Sein, Mai Aye, and other women of the village swept the monastery grounds, filled the water pots and some cleansed rice grains, by tossing them in shallow bamboo trays. On New Year's day the whole village was going to have rice meal at the monastery. Mai Sein and Mai Aye belonged to the group assigned to the duty of cooking for the whole village.

It was a yearly custom to have a mass novitiation ceremony. They made a list of boys from seven upwards, who were not yet novitiated. The parents of the boys could contribute either in kind or in cash, but it was optional and those whose parents were too poor were taken care of. What made the mass novitiation attractive was that the ceremony could be performed with all the trimmings with the *shinlaungs* (boys to be novitiated) dressed in princely robes, crested head gear and all, riding on caparisoned horses with attendants shading them with golden umbrellas. All these things were hardly within the means of an ordinary villager, but every year, this was made possible by communal efforts. The *shinlaungs* were agog with excitement. It did not happen every day in a boy's life to "ride in triumph through Persepolis".

The Sayadaw, the presiding monk of the monastery, lent his spiritual guidance and he looked upon the ostentations with calm tolerance. He said; “The most important thing is to shave the boys’ heads and don them with yellow robes and let them stay at the monastery as long as they can as *ko-yins* (novices). You all gain merit by this deed. All these processions and music are not necessary, but you people want to have it this way....well, go ahead...”.

Three days of the water festival preceded the New Year, during which time children and young people had their fun throwing water on one another, and older people kept sabbath. Mai Sein kept sabbath not being in the mood to join in the watery revels. She gained a kind of tranquillity and looked forward to the day of her son’s novitiation with a quiet joy in her heart.

It was on the last day of the water festival that her son came home from his water throwing, all wet and laughing. Mai Sein was rolling the yellow robe Po Tar was to wear, and put it on top of the black alms-bowl and tied it up neatly so that it could be easily carried.

Po Tar watched his mother and said excitedly: “May May, is that the robe I’m going to wear tomorrow ...and I’m going to wear those beautiful costumes and ride on a horse with a golden umbrella over me.”

Mai Sein was happy too. She had contributed towards the cost of the yellow robes and the alms-bowl, which the Sayadaw said were all that mattered in the novitiation. “May May, who’s going to carry these robes and bowl in the procession? And who’s going to

collect my shaven hair?"

Mai Sein tensed at the words. Even though there was no religious significance in the ritual, it was an age-old custom for the *shinlaung's* father to carry the robes and alms-bowl in the procession and also to receive the shaven hair when the boy's hair was shaved.

"May May, who's going to carry"

"Now stop your questions. Go and change your wet clothes. You'll catch cold."

"But they say that Uncle Po Htu would be willing .."

Mai Sein felt like throwing things at the boy. So that was how the oat was talking at her back and people were encouraging him. It was different when Po Dan was there. She did not mind being teased how Po Dan had rivalled Po Htu for her love and how Po Dan had won and left Po Htu in a state of reluctant bachelorhood. But then, she was hardly in a mood for such kind of banter.

Mai Sein took hold of the boy and peeled off his wet clothes and pushed him into the house telling him to get into dry clothes. "Now, learn your lines for the novitiation ceremony. If you falter, the Sayadaw will scold you."

The boy changed into dry clothes and sat in a corner learning his lines. They are simple words begging the Sayadaw to invest him with the yellow robes.

Po Tar might have forgotten about who should carry the robes and the alms-bowl and receive the shaven hair, but the matter weighed on Mai Sein. Of course, she had uncles and male cousins who would

be glad to do the office. She remembered how widow Mai Pu wept at her son's novitiation when her elder brother, as man of the family, stood in for the boy's father at the ceremony. It was a poignant moment for all, when the heads of the *shinlaungs* were shaved with the music of the *byaw* drum droning toke.....toke toke...byone...toke..toke..byone. Mai Sein did not know how she would bear that moment.

The day dawned bright and clear and the whole village gathered at the headman's house, the starting place of the procession. *Shinlaungs* resplendent in princely costumes were mounted on the ponies, each with a man shading a golden umbrella over him. They were preceded by a *dho-bat* music troupe that consisted of drums, cymbals, bamboo flutes and youths in clownish clothes doing dance steps.

The *shinlaungs* were followed by venerable elders of the village and fathers carrying their son's robes and bowls. Po Tar's robes and alms-bowl were carried by the headman himself, an honour for the boy whose father was not present on the occasion.

Next in the procession were village belles carrying things to be offered to monks at the monastery, candles, incense packets, eatables and useful things like towels and napkins. The star of the procession was the bearer of the betel casket, a beautiful lacquer box decorated with mosaic work; for the most beautiful girl was chosen for the honour.

Mai Sein herself had carried the betel casket in those days that seemed hundreds of years ago. She willed back her tears at the memory and concentrated

on balancing the lacquer tray on her head. It would not do to stumble and let the things fall to the ground and worst of all, attract attention.

The procession moved at a snail's pace, as if reluctant to get to the monastery, where they would have to cast off their worldly revels and listen to the Sayadaw's sermon with staid serious faces. They stopped at shady corners as the music troupe performed their numbers and dances.

It was at the last leg of the journey that someone cried: "Hey, you young men, you think of dancing and singing only...and let the older people carry the loads. Some of you should relieve them."

Young men rushed to relieve the older people of their burdens. It was either chance or well-calculated manoeuvre that Po Tar's robes and alms-bowl should fall into Po Htu's hands.

Everyone knew they were Po Tar's, Mai Sein's son. There were good-humoured giggles and jokes and young men tittered. Mai Sein's face was red with shame. She felt like throwing down her tray and running home. She walked with her eyes cast on the ground. Mai Aye who walked close upon her whispered: "Mai Sein, please don't do or say anything foolish. They didn't mean to offend you. It's the spirit of the season ...".

Mai Sein did not know how she got through the rest of the journey. When the gate of the monastery was within sight, the procession stopped again for their last fling of music and dances. It took all the tact and persuasion of the elders to remind the young people that it was high time that they entered the monastery.

The company collected the remnants of sobriety and began to turn their sedate steps towards the monastery. Mai Sein was glad that her ordeal was nearly over. Once at the monastery, there were lots of chores to be done and she could get lost quite easily .

They were entering the monastery gates when an angry voice rang out: “What do you mean ..carrying my son’s robes and alms-bowl, who gave you permission ..who do you think you are ..?”

Mai Sein nearly upset her tray as she saw her husband Po Dan rush at Po Htu and get hold of the robes and the alms-bowl. There was a lot of excitement and people began speaking at the same time.

“Po Dan ...how...nice you’re in time”

“Hey Po Htu ..you keep away ..understand?..”

Po Htu’s sheepish voice mumbled, “I’m mighty glad that you came ...Po Dan. You know, I only want to ..help ...Believe me I’m mighty glad that you could come ...” .

There were cries of ‘Hypocrite’ ...and the head-man had to come and call for order.

Mai Sein did not know how she got into the monastery. She busied herself with the chores, laying tables for the monks who were to partake of the rice meal that morning. There were jokes and teasings and she dared not turn her eyes to where the menfolk busied themselves with the arrangement of offerings on the bamboo dais where the Sayadaw and the monks were to receive them.

Mai Sein’s ears pricked every time she heard Po Dan speak, but her eyes were downcast. She heard

how he had come straight to the monastery knowing that the whole village would be there on that day, and how he had learnt from the Sayadaw that his son was to be novitiated.

She wondered if Po Dan ever cast his eyes in her direction but how could he, with all the jokes and teasing all around. “Hey, feeling like a young bride.. ha..ha...”. It was Mai Aye, and Mai Sein threw a wooden ladle at her and Mai Aye jumped to evade this missile. All the women laughed repeating: “A shy blushing bride...that’s what she is”

“Here comes the groom..here comes the groom ...” trilled the young men, and Mai Sein ran and buried her face in her arms and thought the day would never end.

The day did end nevertheless, and in the afternoon *shinlaungs* were assembled to have their heads shaved. “Go, Mai Sein, take this white cloth to receive your son’s shaven hair ..”

Like one a dream Mai Sein went to her son’s side and help the white cloth to receive the hair: The *byaw* music droned “*toke ... toke ...byone..*” and the *nhe* piped up its mournful lingering note. Tears welled up in her eyes and she heard Po Dan’s voice, “No need to cry, Mai Sein, I’m here with you for keeps.....now let me hold the two corners of this cloth, you hold the other two corners.”

Shavings of the boy’s hair fell into the white cloth and Mai Sein could not stop the flow of her tears as the *byaw* music droned on keeping time to the joyful beatings of her heart.

COME LIVE
WITH ME



My...
2003

Mu Mu sat by the shuttered window and watched yellow leaves fly up in a swirl of dust as a gust of wind shook the trees. Suddenly the blazing sun was smothered in a mass of dark clouds but its beams mingled among the showering drops.

The wind whistled and eddied through the trees. The threads of rain slanted and got entangled with one another like hanks of wool in Mother's work basket. They did not make a big blob of tangled skeins that made Mother annoyed, but they flew up in the air like the tail of a beautiful mythical bird of Granny's stories.

Remembering Granny, Mu Mu felt her eyes sting and she furiously wiped her eyes even before tears dared to rise. It was a pity that Granny did not stay long with them. She only came to them for short visits. She lived so far away that she had to come and go in a big long railway train.

Mu Mu stood up and looked into the house that seemed almost empty. It was almost empty. Father was

at the office. Her elder sister Ma Gyi and brother Ko Lay, the inseparable pair both in games and fights, were at school. "There's only a year between them. They're often taken for twins...so alike are they in looks and both clever too. Both are in fifth standard. Ma Gyi's only eleven and Ko Lay ten."

When she thrust herself on their attention, it was always: "This is Mu Mu....she came so unexpectedly six years after Ko Lay...a strange girl. We can't quite make her out."

"Perhaps she'll be all right, when she goes to school next year." Father said. When Mu Mu asked when would be 'next year', she was told, "after a long time". She did not like it at all. Why should all good things be either 'far far away' or 'after a long time'?

"It's two o'clock, Mu Mu, come and have your tiffin." It was Daw Yin, the cook. The buxom woman about Granny's age, who had come to call her for her mid-day meal. Mu Mu followed her downstairs and had her coffee and biscuits. Mother had hers in the parlour with visitors and Mu Mu could hear their talk and laughter. Good, it would be some time before Mother was free.

Mu Mu wrapped some broken biscuits in a paper napkin and put it under her blouse and slipped out of the house. The sun had come out again and the garden looked fresh after the shower. Even the cacti bush formerly coated with red dust was now radiantly green.

She walked along the garden path until she came to the corner where the huge jasmin bush stood.

She sat on a stone and picked up a few blossoms and inhaled their sweetness. She peered into the bush for a long time. It grew on a mound of bricks which looked like the debris of an ancient pagoda, now completely hidden by the bush.

Mu Mu sat on a stone and took out the biscuits from her blouse and leaned close to the bush and called softly: "Goldie, come out, I'm here." She waited with bated breath and soon there was a low rustle among the leaves. Mu Mu leaned closer to the bush and said: "No, no, don't come out. They'll see you. Just stay there. Here, I've brought you some biscuits."

Mu Mu thrust her hand into the bush and a smooth glossy head rested on her palm. She touched the little green spot between the eyes and muttered: "I call you Goldie, because your body's golden. I'd know you any where with this green spot." She patted the slippery body as it coiled under the leaves. Mu Mu wished she could put her pal on her knee and let it coil round her neck like a scarf that mother wore when she went out on chilly evenings. But then people might see and there was no knowing what grown-ups would do when they saw little ones enjoying themselves.

Mu Mu talked to her friend of many things and it seemed to understand even though it could not speak a word. It nestled its head against Mu Mu's palms but he slipped back when she said: "No, no, people will see you..."

Mu Mu heard her mother's visitors come out and she hastily said: "Till tomorrow dear," and Goldie

slithered back into the hole under the brick mound. Mu Mu picked up a handful of jasmins and ran back to the house and went up by the backstairs.

She went straight to the household shrine, a niche where a golden image of the Buddha was kept. Three flower vases stood on a small table in front of the shrine and Mu Mu spread jasmin flowers on the table and bowed with her hands clasped. "Oh, Lord Buddha, please make my Goldie a little girl so that she can play with me, and no one will scold us."

She wished Granny were with her. She could tell her everything and Granny would surely know what to do. Granny told her wonderful stories every morning when Mu Mu helped her to put fresh flowers at the altar, ...stories of good boys and girls who said their *parittas* and did service at the shrine and how their wishes were fulfilled. Perhaps, if she put jasmin flowers at the shrine and prayed, Goldie would be changed into a girl.

For many days Mu Mu kept her tryst with her friend and she told him of the offerings of jasmin flowers at the shrine and her prayers. Goldie seemed to understand, for he nuzzled her arm and tickled her. Mu Mu giggled and told him to stop teasing.

The next day, it rained and she had no chance to go out to the jasmin bush. She was alone as usual playing with her crayons until Daw Yin came and sat by her. "This evening your Father and Mother are dining out and Ma Gyi and Ko Lay have gone to a friend's house, so you will have to eat alone, are you hungry?"

Mu Mu shook her head and looked at Daw Yin

closely. She must be Granny's age, so she might know what to do about Goldie. But then she could not confide in her right away. She must be careful.

"Do you know any good stories?" Mu Mu asked. The woman smiled and said: "Of course, I know several. Do you want to hear one?"

"Do you know stories of things, like...saybirds...frogs...sn..well you know...how they can be changed into boys and girls?" Mu Mu asked carefully.

"What a clever girl you are! Of course birds and animals are changed into...no...they are reborn as boys and girls, if they are good. Boys and girls too can be reborn as animals too, if they are bad," said Daw Yin.

The conversation led to Daw Yin telling the story of the old broken down pagoda now overgrown with jasmin bush. There used to be a treasure trove of gold nuggets she said as Mu Mu listened fascinated. One day it was discovered by a poor woman who came to pluck wild flowers. She cautiously took only one or two each time and years went on until only one nugget remained. When the woman came for the last nugget, she was gored by a wild buffalo. She died longing for the gold,...and as Buddhists believe such a thought was unseemly in one's last moments; she was reborn a snake and stayed right near the gold.

"Is the story true?" asked Mu Mu.

"Well, my dear, I heard it from my mother who heard it from her mother...everyone knows the story.

Some people say that they had actually seen near the jasmin bush a yellow snake with a green spot

between the eyes.”

“Will he...the sn...snake ever be reborn a boy or a girl?”

“I don’t think he will ever be, unless he gives up the gold nugget to someone, who will do deeds of merit like offering food and robes for monks, as your father and mother sometimes did.”

“Do you think the snake will give the gold nugget if someone tells him, nicely of course, that he’ll have to do this if he wants to be reborn a boy or a girl?”

Daw Yin smiled and hugged Mu Mu saying: “What queer ideas you have! You have a kind heart, I see, but, dear, sometimes you cannot always help others. That’s life.”

Mu Mu did not quite follow Daw Yin’s line of thought, but she knew exactly what she must do.

The next day, Mu Mu prayed for the rain to stop, but it did not. Only late in the afternoon did the showers dwindle away, but the ground was wet and muddy and it was nearly time for Father to come home. Mu Mu decided to take the risk. She had to go and talk to Goldie.

She ran there as quickly as she could and she lost her footing on the slippery ground and almost fell headlong into the bush. She caught hold of a twig to balance herself and looked into the bush to find Goldie already there. He had coiled himself comfortably under the leaves.

“Good, you’re here Goldie, I’ve very little time today. There’s something very important to tell younow listen carefully. Do you really want to be a girl

to play with me?...Yes?...Will you do anything to make that wish come true? Now, promise you'll do,yes? I know you love me and you'll do anything to be with me. Now, promise again, you'll do anything....”.

Goldie nestled closer to Mu Mu and rubbed his head against her toes and demonstrated with every twist and wriggle to say that he was willing to do anything, just anything to be with her.

“Now listen, there's one thing you must doyou must give up your gold nugget, so that I could do deeds of merit for you.....”

Scarcely had Mu Mu said the words than Goldie slithered away swiftly from her and lay full length in the depths of the bush and stared at her as if he were angry. He then reared his head and swayed to and fro.

Mu Mu was startled by the suddenness of Goldie's action, but she recovered hastily and said: “Now you're angry. You don't want to give up your gold nugget. You don't love me, you love only your gold. Well, have your own way, you'll never be a boy or a girl. You'll ever be a snake and stay in this bush for a long long time. I'll never come here again. I'll go far far away.....”

As Mu Mu prepared to go, Goldie swiftly coiled himself round her ankles and rubbed his head against her knees. Mu Mu was moved, but she said firmly: “Now, none of your loving acts. Go and get your nugget, there's no time...go quickly.” Goldie wriggled away and in a moment he was back carrying a gold nugget in his mouth. He dropped it in front of her.

Mu Mu took it quickly and held it fast in her fist

and turned to go. But Goldie coiled himself round her legs and slithered up to her waist and rested his head against her cheek as if he did not want her to go away. She patted his head soothingly and said; “Now, go. People will see you. Remember I’m going to do deeds of merit with your gold. You’ll be reborn a girl and we can have good time together, ..now, go.., to?”

She was so absorbed in her talk that she did not hear her father come in. The next moment screams of terror pierced through her ear and she felt Goldie hastily slip away and she saw her father and the chauffeur about ten feet tall towering over her, yelling unintelligible words. Terrified that her secret was discovered, she cried hysterically, her body shaking uncontrollably.

The last thing she knew was that she was carried bodily into the house. She gripped the gold nugget hard, refusing to give it up, crying: “It’s Goldie’s nugget. Don’t take it away. It’s for doing deeds of meritno...no...I won’t give it... I’ll give it only to Daw Yin...she knows what to do..Daw Yin..come come.”

Like one in a nightmare she screamed: “No, no, it’s Goldie’s, give it to Daw Yin...where’s Daw Yin? Come and take this gold nugget and do deeds of merit for Goldie...he wants to be reborn a girl and play with me...Daw Yin...oh, Daw Yin.” Then she knew no more.

When Mu Mu opened her eyes she saw Granny putting a cold sponge on her forehead. Then she saw Father, Mother, Ma Gyi and Ko Lay, all anxiously bending over her. They all loved her! Mu Mu felt her eyes fill and she said weakly: “So you’re not angry

with me for playing with Goldie? And where's the gold nugget?"

For a moment or two no one said anything; They stared at her. Granny found voice at last to say: "It's all right. It's with father. We'll do deeds of merit for your Goldie as you say, no don't worry, only try to get well."

Mu Mu closed her eyes. She heard Father and Mother go out to the next room and talk in whispers. She could not make out what they were saying but suddenly Father's angry voice rang out; "That all comes of someone telling the child silly stories. I've a mind to sack Daw Yin. It was she who put silly ideas into the child's head."

Mother said: "Shh...shh...". Granny joined them and said firmly: "Son, you can think what you like, but there's the gold nugget. You may be sceptical of the whole story, but you've seen with your own eyes that Goldie did not as much as harm a hair on the child's head. Whether you believe it or not, we're going to sell it and do deeds of merit with the money for Goldie. Let me not hear any more of your so-called rational arguments."

Mu Mu heard everything and knew she had won. Things had gone as could be wished. She was soon on her feet and the whole family lavished love and attention on her. They invited monks to partake of the morning rice meal and offered them yellow robes, candles and many other useful things.

Her joy knew no bounds when she heard the

monk recite the pali texts, at the end of which he said: "May Goldie the serpent also benefit by today's deeds of merit and may he be reborn as human being, in a higher existence."

Mu Mu knew that from that day on she did not have to go to the jasmin bush. She was content to play in the house with her brother and sister until the time came for her to go to school.

She did not forget Goldie. She just drew pictures in her drawing book and no one said anything. She did pass the jasmin bush often, but she knew that Goldie was no longer there. She just knew. Goldie was somewhere busy being reborn as a human being, perhaps as a girl. Mu Mu was sure that she would see her one day.

She thought that people were kinder and more indulgent to her. She was even allowed to go along with Granny when she went back to her home town, during the long summer holidays.

At the end of the holidays, when Granny took her home again she found the family full of excitement. Ma Gyi and Ko Lay were jumping with joy crying: "Just see what she'll say when she sees..." There was Daw Yin, her fat face wreathed in smiles standing with arms akimbo shooing away Ko Lay and Ma Gyi with the words: "Hey...you two...don't you go and spoil everything."

Father came out and swept Mu Mu into his arms and carried her into the house. "There's a surprise for you, dear," he said in a shaky voice.

They went into the room where they found Mother seated in a lounge chair nursing a baby. “A baby sister! How wonderful!”...she cried. Mother smiled and said: “Come and look, Mu Mu...look.” With one finger she pointed to the baby’s forehead. There it was, a green spot the size of a pea! Burying her face in the baby’s tummy Mu Mu burst into tears.



MARRIAGE, DIVORCE MYANMAR STYLE



Handwritten signature and date: 2003

DIVORCE! but it was the only thing to do exactly as the astrologer had foretold when their two horoscopes were read some days before the wedding. It is the Myanmar custom to have the horoscopes of the prospective bride and bridegroom read by the astrologer.

Of course, Ko Lay had scoffed at the idea. “What the heck is the use of asking the astrologer’s advice, because we are getting married anyway...even if he said our horoscopes do not match or whatever they say in those incomprehensible astrological terms.”

Kyu Kyu smiled. She loved him all the more when he pulled himself to his full height of five feet eleven, quite uncommon among the Myanmars, and expound his up-to-date ideas of modern living.

“But, dear, our parents must do things the good old way. So long as we are getting married anyway, as you say, why worry I do not believe in astrology; I am not superstitious...”

Ko Lay looked thoughtful. Did he sense something unsure and nervous when she said: “I am not superstitious”? But they belonged to the well-educated, well-informed generation quite removed from those who went to astrologers for advice.

Anyway, their marriage was going to work out fine. He was a lawyer with a growing practice, and she a senior school mistress. Of course, she would keep her job; no nonsense about career and home conflict. They had comfortable means, and lots of love to make up for the things that might be lacking. Not that either of them could think of anything lacking for the moment. Least of all, they were not going to be put off by the astrologer’s prediction that the marriage would last only a year, because their horoscopes did not match.

Their parents, of course, did not say that they could not get married, but they had to do all the things that the astrologers told them to do to avert the dire fate. A clever astrologer could suggest quite a number of things.

Among “Quite a number of things” were the colour of the bride’s dress, the kind of flowers to wear in her coiffeur. It upset Kyu Kyu because she had decided on pink but the astrologer said gold. They had already ordered a hand-woven silk *acheik* the traditional zig-zag pattern sarong in pink, so it meant a lot of talking and hurrying up the weavers and dress makers.

Kyu Kyu thought pink to be her colour and gold

would not suit her at all. She wanted to be perfect for Ko Lay. She wished her height would reach his shoulders, but he assured her that he always wanted a girl as high as his heart. She thought that she was a bit on the dark side, but Ko Lay quoted a few old songs that extolled the girl with a complexion smooth, and dark like emerald. She had, at least, sharp features that often came out well in photos, she consoled herself. The wedding pictures would be just fine.

Kyu Kyu groused about the colour of her dress, but Ko Lay said: "Never mind, dear, you will always be beautiful to me in any colour...in whatever you wear, even if...". He stopped; he almost said: even if you don't wear anything at all; it would not be in the best of taste, to say the least.

Whatever the aggravations, Kyu Kyu felt serene as she took her place beside Ko Lay, who looked unfamiliar but all the more handsome and distinguished in his silk turban and formal wedding attire. Not trusting her eyes, her gaze fell on the flower laden silver bowls. She breathed in the delicate scent of the roses and looked on the relief figures on the bowl in front of her.

How appropriate, she thought, to have her eyes right on the figures of *kinnayars*, mythical beings, half human half bird, creatures of grace and beauty, who haunted the woodlands living their life of song, dance and love. She remembered the tales she had heard in her childhood, how these creatures went about in pairs,

symbols of love and fidelity.

Following the instructions of the venerable gentleman, an old family friend, who was acting as the master of ceremonies, Kyu Kyu and Ko Lay, each with hands raised in prayer, bowed three times, to the Buddha, His Teachings, His Order of the Monks, parents and teachers. The old traditional way to start married life was by paying respect to those to whom respect was due.

If Kyu Kyu had any misgivings about her future life with her loved one, they were no more, as if cleansed by the scented water in the silver bowl, wherein their hands were placed. "Like water you shall never be sundered, like water you are one; like water your life shall be pure and serene, cool, and peaceful." The old gentleman's voice was rich with loving kindness.

The old gentleman then gave a short talk on the duties of married couples; he quoted a discourse given by the Buddha to a young brahmin householder. "The husband should always honour his wife and never be wanting in respect for her; he should love her and be faithful to her, should secure her position and comfort; should please her by presenting her with clothing and jewellery. The wife, in her turn, should supervise and look after household affairs; should entertain guests, visitors, friends and relatives and employees; should love and be faithful to her husband; should protect his earnings; should be clever and energetic in all

activities.”

“Why”, Kyu Kyu thought, “this piece of marriage counselling is twenty-five centuries old and it still holds good; I hope Ko Lay thinks the same.”

Ko Lay, with all his veneer of modern education and sophistication seemed to think the same. When they got back to the apartment which was their new home after the reception, Ko Lay led Kyu Kyu to the little niche, the household shrine with the image of the Buddha. They knelt down and silently prayed.

Together they gazed at the golden sitting Buddha amidst the flowers and coloured paper streamers. There in front of the Buddha image were three candles already stuck in a candlestick. Ko Lay fumbled in his pocket for the lighter and lighted the candles. They bowed down three times. Kyu Kyu felt that their love had risen from the earthy to the sublime. Nothing could go wrong with a marriage that began so well.

But the anticlimax of it all was that things did go wrong. The astrologer was right. Repeat, things went wrong with them; they who had everything, good jobs a comfortable place to live in, car, which might be small but just good enough.

Why, why, people asked and they shook their heads. Some said what could you expect, husband a lawyer ever out to win an argument, and a school marm wife. Have you not heard of the rhyme?

Don't ever a school-marm you adore,
Nor with finger tickle the sore.

If ever a school-marm you adore,
Hen-pecked you'll ever be.
And if with finger you tickle the sore,
Poison and infection will pursue thee.

Inevitably, relatives and close friends brought in the astrologer's prediction. Some amateur analyst said, may be it had planted doubts, fears and obsessions; but others said, a couple like Ko Lay and Kyu Kyu were no-nonsense people, they would rather try their best to work out, even if it was to prove the astrologer wrong.

No easy thing to diagnose where a marriage went wrong. There had been a series of quarrels, tiffs and sulks and reconciliations. But there was no real first class row that brought them to the stage where divorce had to be considered: and that row began with a lighthearted banter.

One Saturday afternoon, a young law student came in to discuss some points in the Buddhist Law, namely, a husband's right to take a second wife if she failed to have children. They discussed it and Kyu Kyu heard only a few snatches, because she was cooking the evening meal. They were going to the pictures after an early meal, so she hoped that the young student did not stay too long. He duly left, but Ko Lay was not yet finished with the subject even when they sat down to eat.

He expounded the theory of a man's right to take a second wife under the circumstances; because

he had to fulfil his duty to society; with such a custom there was no danger of mankind becoming extinct. Of course, modern Myanmar man rarely, if ever, takes advantage of this right, he went on, Myanmar marriage today is fairly monogamous. So Kyu Kyu did not have to worry: he would never have thought of taking a second wife even if she failed--

Ko Lay had no chance to finish the sentence, at least not the way he wanted to, because he let out an inhuman yell something like Woo....Oo....Ooo. Kyu Kyu was standing with hands akimbo angry but pleased at her handiwork; because before her stood the eloquent exponent of Buddhist Law all splashed over with chicken curry and the spicy gravies dripping all over.

It must be fate or something that Aunty Sann should arrive at that very moment; the dining room was a mess and Ko Lay stood garnished and flavoured ready to be served at the sultan's table, and very angry.

No use trying to explain the situation except by telling the truth; not only the whole truth of the moment but with generous flashbacks of the past quarrels thrown in by both sides. Aunty Sann, herself a mother and mother-in-law many times over, listened patiently.

Aunty Sann reminded Ko Lay, had he better not take a shower and change and why not Kyu Kyu clear up the mess on the table and the floor, before mice and cockroaches invited themselves to the ban-

quet. She then settled herself comfortably on a settee and lighted a cheroot and waited.

It was sometime before the bickering couple could join her. To get rid of the spicy smells and grease Ko Lay had to stay quite long in the shower. Kyu Kyu was worn out cleaning the mess on the floor and the table. Neither of them had much wind left to talk. So much the better anyway.

Aunty Sann took deep puffs of her cheroot and said; "So you've been this way for some time, yes? There is only one thing to do. Divorce." Kyu Kyu's heart missed a beat, but she recovered herself. She would show that she did not care. She glanced at Ko Lay: he was impassive: why could he not say no, oh, no...or something to that effect.

Aunty Sann went on: "It is exactly what the astrologer has said. The marriage will last only a year at most. Now it has come true."

"But, it is not because of the prediction, Aunty, it is just that he's impossible, he does not care..just not care...he wants to break up, that's all. If he wants it this way.." Kyu Kyu stopped hoping Ko Lay would say: "No, I don't want it this way..." not that. But he did not.

"If you want it this way yourself...I couldn't careless"....he said.

Aunty Sann said: "Now listen, what I mean is not real divorce, but a token one."

"A token one?" They asked in one voice.

"Yes, a token one. That is what we do when-

ever something goes wrong with a marriage. Because it is in your stars that the marriage must break up, it has to happen. Look at the way you've been bickering for months. I know a bit of astrology too, so I know something's wrong with you two; but I also know what to do about it. You two have a divorce: our Myanmar custom is free and easy. Just write down on paper that you have dissolved your marriage by mutual consent and sign: I shall be the witness."

"Then what do we do? Shall I leave her or she leave me?" It wrung Kyu Kyu's heart to hear him talk of leaving, but she bit her lip and looked at Ko Lay sternly in the face.

"No one leaves anyone" said Aunty Sann, "It is just getting round fate or whatever you call it. You draw up that bond of divorce and, you stay on as usual ...but..but..not..you see..as man and wife. One of you move into the guest room and you stay this way...now let me see...give me a piece of paper and pencil..what are your dates of birth...so, here they are good...let me work out the charts hmm....hmm ..the influence of Venus here...and Mars there .well, not too bad...things will be all right in one month or even less."

Ko Lay looked sceptical; he did not want to get into what he took to be a tomfoolery; but he was too respectful to the older relative to say so. He thought Kyu Kyu would feel the same. Oh .. all these astrological predictions.....why could they not work out their own marital problems without their benefit!

“You young people may not take these things seriously; but why not give this a chance. That is, if you really want to save your marriage; this little thing is of no great inconvenience to you. Don’t you want to try it? Aunty Sann’s face was full of concern as she put the question.

“Well, to tell the truth, Aunty, if you’ll pardon me for saying so, I do not believe that any good will come out of it. If the marriage is doomed well there it is...”

Kyu Kyu cut in: “That’s all right, Aunty, if he doesn’t care to make any effort on his part...well..no use trying anything, astrology or no astrology.”

“It’s not that I don’t care...” Ko Lay, began, his temper rising. Aunty stopped him and said; “Come on then, if you care enough, try this...give it a chance. Now get me a piece of paper. Ko Lay, write down the dissolution of your marriage and you two sign it and I shall sign as witness”.

No sooner said than done, the divorce was signed and witnessed. Aunty Sann went on to say how she had seen cases of this *yatayar*, as this was called in astrological term, working out well for couples. It should be well with Ko Lay and Kyu Kyu too.

As Aunty Sann took leave, Ko Lay stood up and said: “I’ll drive you home, Aunty.” and he went down to the garage to take out the car. Kyu Kyu was sore that her husband, oh no, her ex-husband did not ask her to come along. She therefore said no when Aunty

asked her to come, she had chores to do.

Kyu Kyu busied herself while Ko Lay was gone, thankful of the absence. She just could not stand him especially during these first hours of *divorce*. She shifted Ko Lay's things into the spare room and dumped the pillows, blankets and bed curtains on the bare bedstead. Let him make his own bed. He was no longer her husband, she no longer his wife.

But, she suddenly remembered what Aunty Sann said.....“Live like brother and sister.” This Myanmar expression had a certain depth and beauty. It often described the blameless relationship between a man and a woman who were not blood relations; also it was said in admiration of the married couples who either in their old age or in sickness stayed together in love and fidelity.

Well, like a sister she was going to be; so she would make beds and put his clothes and things in order. As she turned back to the bedroom, she remembered her usual afternoon chore at the household shrine, to put fresh water in the glasses and rearrange the flowers in the vase. She looked down upon the two small mats on the floor in front of the shrine; they were for them to sit on every evening when they said their prayers. Tonight, perhaps they would do the ritual separately. So she said her prayers by herself then and there.

Once back in the bedroom, she looked at the big double bed and told herself she would roll and roll to her heart's content. The room looked neat, dainty

and feminine, bereft of all the masculine things. How nice to be single and free again; she almost believed that she liked it that way. She was putting the finishing touches to her room, now to be her very own, when Ko Lay came in. He had in hand a green leaf packet tied with a bamboo strip. She knew it must be some snack from the Chinese restaurant, fried noodles or something. He put the packet on the dining table and without so much as a glance in her direction went into the spare room and banged the door shut.

Kyu Kyu felt like throwing the green leaf packet out of the window even at the risk of hitting somebody on the head. She settled herself in bed with a novel; but she could not concentrate on it. Not that her heart was broken or anything like that, but her belly was rumbling inside. She remembered she hardly had any dinner.

She thought wistfully of the chicken curry, so rich and succulent with thick spicy gravy, all gone making a big mess on Ko Lay's silk *longyi*, his favourite one too. A giggle almost escaped her lips. She was pleased, but it did not make her less hungry.

Her thoughts turned to the green leaf packet on the dining table. A packet of noodles on the table was worth many times more than the chicken curry spilled on somebody's lap. Pity that the noodles would be all spoilt in the morning. If he had brought it for her, why could he not tell her so and offer it nicely to her, she thought angrily.

Anger made her all the more hungry. If only Ko Lay could come and tell her to partake of the noodles with tender words, they would be reconciled then and there, like in those stories. Never mind the divorce and all that.

Kyu Kyu went on hoping that Ko Lay would make the first move, but she was getting hungrier as time wore on. She heard the clock strike ten. She got up and went into the dining room and sat at the table and opened the green leaf packet. She did noiselessly, because she saw the light in the spare room was still on. He must be reading or working on one his briefs.

She was enjoying the noodles when the door of the spare room opened a little and Ko Lay's head peeped out. He seemed surprised to see Kyu Kyu eating at the table. He hastily shut the door again. Kyu Kyu was indignant; if only she had waited a little longer, he was going to call her to come and eat the noodles. Now he had won; she had partaken of the noodles without his invitation or cajoling. How he must be gloating over his victory! But these thoughts did not in any way deter the pleasure of eating. She ate to her heart's content and went to bed.

The morning after was no better. Kyu Kyu got breakfast ready; cooked lunch and packed it in two carriers one for her and the other for Ko Lay to take to work. They were silent at breakfast, looking away from each other ; but their stealthy glances met only to turn away in embarrassment.

Ko Lay went into his room, dressed, and without so much as a thank you, he picked up the lunch carrier and went down the stairs. Kyu Kyu could not help taking a peep behind the window curtains to see him drive away. What was he thinking?

Kyu Kyu finished her chores and walked to the school which was close by. In the afternoon she was back home before Ko Lay and she had dinner ready. As they sat down to dinner, Ko Lay said : “You don’t get stomach upset, do you? It was rather late last night when you ate those noodles.”

He had spoken first, but it was just a disinterested enquiry about one’s digestion, without concern or tenderness. Kyu Kyu fumed inside. She said : “Oh that ...it’s all right.” The meal over, Ko Lay gathered the dishes and carried them into the kitchen, leaving her to clear up the table. He did his share of the chore, washing the dishes and she did hers, wiping and stacking them up, all in silence. It was peaceful, no more arguing, no more bickering, just pure peace. Good, but a bit dull? Never mind. Kyu Kyu told herself sternly.

As days wore on, they managed to maintain a cool, distant, polite relationship; just perfunctory remarks every now and then, doing the usual chores round the house almost in silence. Aunty Sann was a great help. She came over in the evenings and talked of the thousand and one clever things her grandchildren could do.

Under normal circumstances, she would be a

bore, but they both welcomed her: for it was easier with a third-party to keep the ball of conversation rolling. Ko Lay always offered to drive her home. He did not exactly ask her to come along, but he said something like: "You'd better bring your coat, it's a bit windy out there." or "We might drop in at the Chinese restaurant and have fried noodles." It was not the way she would have liked but it had to do for the time being.

Kyu Kyu had a unique experience of living under the same roof and *alone* with ex-husband: live like brother and sister, Auntie Sann said. But it was difficult. If he were a real brother, she could go into his room any time and do the chores; but now she had to wait till he went out. It was improper to go into the room of a man who was neither her brother nor her husband.

Come to think of it, Kyu Kyu muttered to herself, it was hardly proper to go on living with a strange man no longer her husband. She found herself on many occasions almost trespassing the bonds of propriety. Once she almost called out to Ko Lay to come and zip up her bodice. She blushed furiously at the thought of what might have been construed if she had called out. She had to be careful.

Ko Lay was nice to her always polite; he no longer upset her with his provocative arguments. He showed little attentions like bringing her favourite snacks on his way back from office.

Then there were his occasional trips out of town, when he had to appear at the courts at a particu-

lar place. They were short trips, usually a day long. Kyu Kyu always went along if they happened during her holidays. Now, her long summer holidays had started and she wondered what Ko Lay would say.

“We do not have to worry about taking our lunch on this trip, because I have a friend there; he will take care of that. I’ve already told him we shall be coming.” This was what he said after marking conspicuously on the household calendar some days ago: ‘Have to appear before the court at Bago: Leave home six morning.’”

Kyu Kyu was thrilled to hear Ko Lay use the words ‘we’ and ‘our’, because there seemed to be the same sense of togetherness as of old. But he never asked her to come along on that trip, not really. He just took her for granted that she would be only too willing to come; she fumed inside. But then, she could not quarrel with him, she had no right to, because he was no longer her husband. So she stayed silent, but she did go along anyway.

Ko Lay seemed to have more cases than usual out of town these days and Kyu Kyu went along on those short trips. It was a nice chance to be out of the city’s hub-hub for the whole day, and also it eased the tension to be with other people in a different surrounding. She had fun shopping in the country markets and visiting old pagodas. They were usually home late in the evening, so, there was not much need for them to find something neutral to talk about.

The out-of-town trips certainly made time go faster. It was particularly fortunate that it was long summer holiday time, so, Kyu Kyu was free to go along.

One evening coming back from one of the trips, they found Aunty Sann and their young cousins assembled on the stairway of their apartment, looking festive with their luggage of flowers and food baskets, ready for some kind of celebration.

As Ko Lay fumbled for the key to open the door, the young people barred it with gold and jewelled necklaces joined together as they did at the weddings. The bridegroom was expected to pay the 'bridal fee' before entering the bridal chamber..

Aunty Sann explained that it was the day their token divorce came to an end, so the younger members of the family were celebrating the day with all the trimmings.

Ko Lay dug into his pockets and gave them some notes and coins and they let him open the door of the apartment. Once inside, the young people were busy laying the table of refreshments. A young man was making ready to switch on the record player. But Ko Lay told him to wait a while.

Even before Kyu Kyu realised what was happening, he led her to the little niche where the household shrine was. Aunty Sann put some flowers in their hands and together they put them in the vases. As usual there were three candles in the candle stick and Ko Lay lighted them.

They both knelt down and with hands raised in prayer they bowed down three times. Then, Ko Lay helped Kyu Kyu to her feet and hand in hand they went into the dining room where the young revellers were waiting for them. The record player burst forth in song and music and they looked into each other's eyes and smiled. Everything was going to be all right, astrology or no astrology. Perhaps it helped.



THE FOUR PUPPETS

I

Once upon a time, there was a young man whose name was Aung. His parents, a puppet maker and his wife, named him Aung, because they wished him success in life.

One day, Aung felt that he had to leave home and seek his fortune in faraway lands, so he begged his parents' permission and blessing. His mother prepared foods that would stay good for a long time and his father gave him four puppets to keep him company and help him on his long journey.

Of the four puppets, the first was a figure of a celestial being, and his name was Deva. His robes of snowy white flowed down in folds like fleecy clouds and the edges rose in golden wisps and tendrils that ruffled in the wind.

The second was a figure of an ogre, named Yakkha. His body was sheathed in emerald green scales; from his shoulders and elbows sprouted gold spiky fins.

The third was a figure of a demi-god, named Zawgyi; his whole body was aflame with red and gold flecks and he carried a red wand in his hand.

The fourth and last was a figure of a hermit; he was robed in dark yellow and he carried a brown staff in his hand. His name was Khema.

Aung knelt at the feet of his parents and bowed down three times with his hands clasped together like a lotus bud. His parents blessed him and he began his journey. He carried a strong bamboo pole on his shoulder; on one end of the pole was a bundle of food and clothes; on the other end hung the four puppets.

II

On the first day of the journey. Aung reached a dark thick forest as the evening shadows began to gather. He looked for a place to spend the night. The huge banyan tree with thick layers of dry leaves underneath looked like a suitable place. Aung approached Deva, the first puppet and asked if he should spend the night under the banyan tree. He gazed in wonder as Deva came to life with the words: "Aung, my boy, you must use your eyes, and think for yourself,"

Aung looked around and saw foot-prints of a tiger. Even though the thick layers of dry leaves looked so invitingly warm, he climbed up the tree as high as he could and spent a none too comfortable night, because the branches were not evenly placed to make a good resting place and cold winds pierced into his bones all night. At the dead of the night, a huge tiger and his mate came and sniffed round the tree. With

the first rays of dawn the animals departed.

Once he was safe from the dark turking dangers. Aung got down from the tree and went on his journey.

III

He camped, one day, on a hill which overlooked a highway. Suddenly he saw a caravan of bullock carts drive into this view.

Aung knew that the caravan must be loaded with gold and silver from faraway lands. He wished he could have them all. So he approached the second puppet, Yakkha, to ask what he should do to get all the wealth the caravan carried. Yakkha answered, "My boy, what you wish for, you can have; nothing is impossible for anyone who has might and strength. Look!" With that he stamped his right foot on the ground and the earth shook like a ship in the storm. There was a din of terrified cries amidst the crashing of boulders and stones, as part of the hill crumbled down and blocked the highway. Aung stood like one turned to stone, as he watched the caravaners run helter-skelter in all directions.

Aung was jerked back to attention as Yakkha said; "There you are, Aung. All the wealth is yours; all the caravaners have fled."

Happily. Aung ran down to the highway. "They are mine, they are mine," he cried. He went from one cart to another often flinging his arms round the chests of gold and silver, satin and silks, rugs and carpets.

Suddenly he was halted in his tracks by the

sound of someone sobbing. Surprised, he looked: There, he saw a young girl crouching on a cart. She was Mala, the daughter of the owner of the caravan.

She was left all alone. Aung tried to comfort her saying that he would take care of her, but she said, "Take me, if you would, along with all the things you've robbed; but I'll never speak to you - a robber and thief!"

Aung was dumbfounded. He was groping for words to reply, when Yakkha said: "Boy, come along, you have no time to waste chatting with sobbing girls, Remember, firmness is one of the manly attributes, it is your strength and power, come on we have so much to do."

IV

It was true. There were many things for Aung to do. Once he had all the wealth he wanted, there were busy days ahead. He must not only maintain it, but also expand it.

There was Zawgyi, the third puppet to help him. "Now, let's see what you can do for me," Aung said.

In answer, Zawgyi leaped into the air waving his red staff. The magic of Zawgyi's wand unlocked nature's guarded secrets and all the elements were tamed and harnessed to serve Aung.

Aung should be the happiest man in the world only, he was not, because Mala did not speak to him. Aung showered her with gifts - all the beautiful things that came from the farthest corners of the land. But Mala remained scornfully silent and coldly distant.

V

One day, Mala did speak to him. She said that her father, the old caravaner had come. He was now poor and helpless.

Aung was filled with pity for the old man. Now that all the wealth had multiplied in his hands, he offered to return not only the original portion that belonged to the old caravaner, but also some of the profits. This would make the caravaner richer than he was before. He had only one favour to ask; would Mala remain with him?

That night, however, Yakkha and Zawgyi came to Aung and tried to dissuade him from his decision. "If you give in once, there'll be no end of it. More demands will surely come. Remember, in this world of wealth and power, it never pays to be weak, it never pays to give in."

At first, Aung tried to stick to his decision, but Yakkha and Zawgyi taunted him again and again for his weakness. Aung could not bear to be thought a weakling. Perhaps, there might be a way of getting round things. Seeing his indecision, Zawgyi suggested a plan by which he might put off the old caravaner's demand.

Aung was thinking how well the plan might work out for him, when a servant came to inform him that the old caravaner and his daughter had left. They knew of his plan which was nothing but a mean trick.

Only then did Aung realize that all the wealth and power in the world could not make him happy. He could not interest himself in Zawgyi's plans to increase

his riches. He only knew that he was very sad and lonely.

VI

Aung could no longer enjoy the things that money had bought him and he became more and more depressed. Only then did he remember the fourth and last puppet, Khema the hermit. In answer to his request for help, Khema said that he did not have a scrap of wealth or power, and could not care less; all he had was his staff and the robes he wore. But he did not know unhappiness; he was at peace with the world and therefore at peace with himself.

Aung decided to try the hermit's way of life. He wandered all over the land as a mendicant, living on the alms-food people gave him. Strangely enough he felt happier. The only thing he wanted now more than anything else was to see the old caravaner and Mala again and ask their forgiveness.

One day, he stood at the door of a humble dwelling, waiting for someone to come out and offer him alms. He heard steps approaching him and he kept his eyes on the ground. But, as the eyes fell on the hands that were pouring alms-food into his bowl, he noticed the white blue-veined tapering fingers that he had often longed to touch.

The next moment, Aung gasped, "Mala, look at me, you know who I am? I am Aung, your repentant Aung. Where is your father..?"

Aung was duly taken into the house. They talked over things, past and present and future. Aung

wanted only forgiveness and love. After a while, they prepared their journey home.

VII

As Aung and Mala and her father approached the gate of Aung's estate, they were welcomed by Aung's friends, the four puppets. Deva, resplendent in robes of white and gold said: "Welcome home, my boy. Now, you know what harm wealth and power could do to a man. They will not bring peace and happiness, unless you temper the might of Yakkha with wisdom, and sweeten the power of Zawgyi with loving kindness and humanity. Now, hear what Khema, the hermit has to say."

Khema, the hermit said: "Aung, my boy, you had had wealth and power, but you've seen for your self that they did not bring happiness. Now that the same wealth and power will be yours again, you will be happy, not because of them, but in spite of them. It only depends on how you use them. This insight will help you in your future life."

Aung thanked his friends, not excluding Yakkha and Zawgyi, because it was not their fault but his own fault that wealth and power had made him a bad man for a time. He decided, therefore, to use his worldly riches from now on for the good of humanity.

He built a pagoda where the statues of Deva, Yakkha, and Zawgyi and Khema the Hermit, were raised at the entrance. Pilgrims from far and near came to the pagoda and Aung and Mala gave them a warm welcome, and fulfilled their needs. In this way, they lived happily ever after.

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 like U Nu, Thakin Than Tun, Thakin Ba Hein, General Aung San, Dr. Ba Maw, U Kyaw Nyein, U Ne Win and others.

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 inter-

view 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: 1, 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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