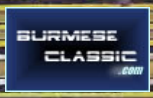

BURMESE SCENES & SKETCHES

By

Khin Myo Chit

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Anawrahta of Burma

Colourful Burma

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IT'S ME FOLKS!

PRESENTING BURMA

BURMESE SCENES AND SKETCHES is a collection of stories and articles most of which have already been published in newspapers and magazines here. It is also a response to the readers' interest stimulated by the publication of COLOURFUL BURMA, which Browen Hammet called in UNESCO FEATURES, 'a practical and poetic guide to Burmese culture'.

In the present volume, some of the articles in COLOURFUL BURMA are included so that relevant information on the given topics may be more complete.

It is impossible to present Burma without her festivals; it would be like dancing without music. All festivals have one thing in common: they are celebrated with alms-giving, paying respects to the Buddha, His Law, His Order of Monks, Parents, Teachers and elders.

Part One deals with the description of seasonal festivals and their meaning. Part two gives the reader a taste of Burmese cuisine with highlight on off-beat foods and tasty snacks. Part Three deals with fruits and vegetables whose stories are often as luscious as their flavour.

Stories and articles in Part Four describe life during World War II, when Burma had her share of all the ugliness and harrowing experience of invasion and occupation. The reader is, however, spared all

that, and is given a glimpse of only the lighter side of things.

The articles on the ancient city of Pagan give an account of the writer's own feelings as an ordinary Burmese who loves and treasures the heritage.

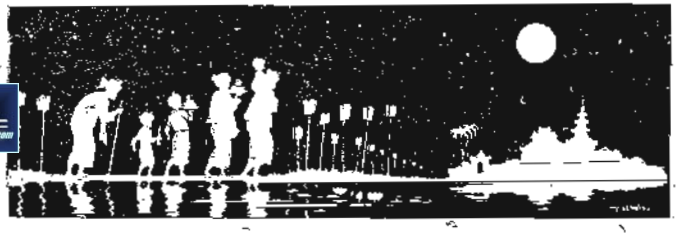
A Buddhist Childhood, Shinpyu and Women in Buddhism throw light on a way of life as lived here in Burma. Daily devotions at the household shrine, alms-giving, trips to pagodas and the monastery are still very much part of the daily life pattern today as it was long ago.

In the last part of the volume, the writer slips in a few touches that create an impressionist profile of herself.....as if the picture of Burma would not be complete without that. If those sketches are superfluous, the writer only craves the reader's indulgence.

—o—

PART ONE

FESTIVALS



Burmese New Year falls in the second week of April. It is celebrated with three days of water throwing. Thagyarmin, King of the celestials, comes down to the human abode to bring in the new year.....

HAIL TO THEE, THA-GYAR-MIN!

Once, again, we welcome Tha-gyar-min, King of the Celestials, who, as the legend says, comes down to the human abode to bring in the new year.

Every new year, we read the *Thingyansar*, a single sheet hand bill, a kind of oracle which gives the information on what to expect in the coming year. It tells us how Tha-gyar-min is coming down; on what animal he will be riding, and what he will carry in his hands.

People foretell the future from the paraphernalia that he carries about him.

Tha-gyar-min is one of the celestials who are very close to us. We kind of believe in him like people believe in Santa Claus. Never mind if he is someone borrowed from Hindu mythology. We have made him our very own. He is very much alive in folklore and Buddhist parables.

Tha-gyar-min is regarded as the custodian of the Buddhist teachings; he is responsible for seeing that people live in accordance with the Buddha's Way. He must see that justice is done; he must save the good and let the bad get their deserts.

He must switch his attention to the human abode as soon as his downy couch hardens, which is a kind of reminder that someone down here needs

help. In stories and plays, whenever the hero or heroine calls for help, SWISH! he comes down in the form of a human being, a good samaritan.

So, when you stand in the blazing summer heat waiting for transport, getting more and more desperate to see crowded buses pass by, be sure to call upon him. Of course he may not appear to you in his glory, but some good-hearted friend with a car may offer you a lift. Remember, the ways of the celestials are strange.

U Ponnya, our poet and dramatist of the last century left for posterity a series of *taydats* eighteen line sonnets, calling upon Tha-gyar-mln to cast his watchful eyes upon this human abode and do something about the state of affairs. The poet did not mince his words in chiding the King of the Celestials for his seeming neglect of duties. Here are some of the excerpts:

> *"Oh, thou, who wouldst not come, even though thy couch hardents ten times over.*
>
> *"What? Drunk deep in pleasures sensual? No, this simply won't do!"*
>
> *"Whatever happened to thy eyes that number a thousand? Have they all gone dim? In that case let me present thee with a pair of diamond lens."*
>
> *"Whatever happened to thy high-powered thunder bolts? Are they in the workshop being repaired or serviced?"*
>
> *"Oh, Tha-gyar-min, thou lazybones, as inert as thy own likeness we have there sculptured on the flagpole near the pagoda!"*

These sodnnets keep Tha-gyar-min closer than ever to us. Many legends of pagodas have him as a

central character, like for instance, the story of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

According to the legend, Tha-gyar-min, as the custodian of Buddha's teachings was responsible for the founding of the city of Dagon, as Rangoon was called in those days, and also for the building of the great pagoda, wherein the Buddha's relics were to be enshrined.

King Okkalapa, the founder and king of Dagon, was the son of a girl called Me Lamu' who was born of a flower.

The story begins as with folklore; a hermit in the forest. One day he saw a huge flower and brought it to his place. Out of that flower a beautiful girl was born. She was reared as his own daughter. One day, Tha-gyar-min, reminded of course by his faithful couch, saw her and knew that she was destined to be the mother of a great king, the founder of Dagon city, and also that the son was to be sired by no other person than himself, the King of the Celestials.

So, Tha-gyar-min came down to the human abode in the form of a handsome young man and asked the hermit for the hand of Me Lamu.

King Okkalapa was born of the union, and his name lives today as the name of a satellite town in Rangoon. There, today, an old pagoda has been restored and it is called Me Lamu pagoda, and it was believed to have been built by Me Lamu.

Tha-gyar-min's influence on Buddhist thought and action is considerable. He comes down to bring in the new year; he has with him two parchments, one of gold and the other, a dog-hide. He puts the names of good people on the gold parchment, and those ofthe bad on the dog-hide. Let's hope we have ours on the gold!

—o—

The Burmese New Year is a season of giving—the solemn occasion however is not allowed to go without the trimmings of music, dance and processions...

A SEASON OF GIVING

These April days, there is music in the air; wherever you go, you see pandals by the roadside; inside them are sets of yellow robes, black alms-bowls, umbrellas and leather slippers laid out amidst flowers and coloured paper streamers. Right at the entrance a notice board announces that a mass novitiation ceremony is to be held during the Water Festival, and that your contribution in cash or kind is welcome.

Such pandals are centres of activity during the water festival; each centre is organized either by the people of the locality or by those who are in the same profession like stall-keepers at a market, trishaw men, taxi-drivers or bus-men. They pool their resources to do deeds of merit like novitiation.

Novitiation is of vital importance in a Buddhist family; boys are sent to the monastery where they stay as novices for a week or more; their heads are shaven and they wear the yellow robes, go on alms rounds with their black bowls and keep precepts.

Parents consider it a great privilege to novitiate their sons, that is, in fact, giving their own flesh and blood into the Buddha's Order of the Sangha. Those who do not have sons of their own novitiate other people's sons, so that they do not miss doing such a great deed of merit.

It is also a meritorious deed on the part of the one novitiated, for he gives himself into Buddha's Order; he gives up the worldly pleasures and lives a life of austerity and discipline even if it is for a short time.

No man's life is considered complete and fulfilled unless he is novitiated; it is a must for a Buddhist man. Parents consider it to be an act of most neglectful omission, if they fail to novitiate their sons. It is a fervent hope of grand-parents to see their progeny novitiated and also to contribute some thing towards the celebration.

That is why people are ever ready to help those of limited means to novitiate their sons; and one of the new year communal activities is to organize mass novitiations when everyone comes forward with whatever contribution he can afford either in cash or kind.

A novitiation ceremony can be very simple. The parents send the boy to the monastery where a senior monk will shave his head and invest him with yellow robes, which the parents usually provide.

However, with the Burmese love of fun and music, such an occasion is rarely allowed to go without the trimmings of music, dance andprocessions. Of course people also like to give alms to monks to mark the event—which, in fact, is optional.

The boys to be novitiated are dressed in princely costumes resplendent in silk and sequins. They ride on caparisoned horses shaded with golden umbrellas; the parents and family members carry sets of yellow robes decorated with lotus flowers; then come a bevy of damsels carrying offerings in lacquer trays; the prettiest girl has the honour of carrying ornate betel box: followed by music troupes and dancers.

In cities like Rangoon, the procession has lost much of the traditional grandeur because the participants usually ride in cars and buses; but the golden umbrellas and music troupes are still there.

Such processions are reminiscent of Prince Siddattha's renunciation of his home and family and royal splendour on the fateful night he rode out of the palace grounds to take to the woods, where he spent the next six years practising ascetic virtues until he gained wisdom and became the Buddha, the Enlightened, the One who could teach the way to end all suffering.

Buddhists, as a first step towards following the Buddha's teaching, do acts of *dhana* or givings; giving their time and money for the communal novitiation of boys; the boys on their part give themselves into the Buddha's Order, into the life of discipline and austerity.

This is the season of giving; giving alms to monks; giving respects to parents, teachers, and elders; snacks of glutinous rice, jaggery and coconut are made at home and distributed among the neighbours, Shampoo mixture, a concoction of vegetable fruits and brine of tree barks is given away freely.

Even the poorest will do their good deed-fetching water for old people to bathe and shampoo. Such are the deeds of the April season, when trees are laden with golden *padauk* blossoms and the scent of the star flowers fills the air. All these are done in accompaniment to the sweet sounds of the drums, cymbals and flutes. A Happy Water Festival to you all!

—o—

The Full moon of Kason, which falls in the first week of May is a three-fold anniversary, namely the birth of Prince Siddatha, who later became the Buddha, his gaining of Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and his passing into Nibbana.....

THE DAWN OF HOPE

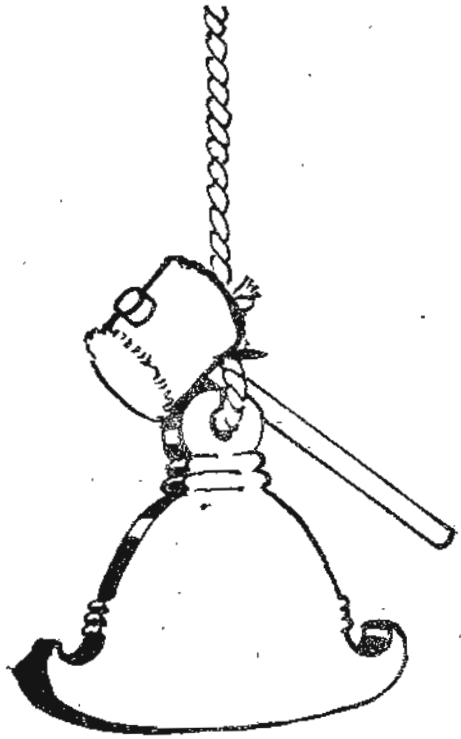
Burmese new year begins with sprays of cooling water showering on friends with loving kindness and goodwill. Come Kason, the second month of the year, and once again water is poured, this time on the sacred tree, the Bodhi tree, the tree of Enlightenment.

The full-moon of Kason month, is a three-fold anniversary: the birth of Prince Siddatha, the Buddha-to-be, His Enlightenment at the foot of the Bodhi tree, and the passing of the Buddha into *Nibbana*.

Such episodes in the Buddha's life live on to this day, after 25 centuries in poems, songs, plays, paintings, sculptures, and last, but not least, in the hearts of the Buddhists. Most emphasis is naturally laid on paying respects to the sacred tree in remembrance of the Buddha's Enlightenment. That particular day brought to all beings, hope of deliverance from Suffering.

On that morning, there was nothing but peace and beauty. Flowers unfolded their soft petals and threw open their treasure chests of sweetness. The air was filled with the song of birds. Far and near, into the homes of men, there spread an unknown peace. All evil hearts grew gentler.

The Buddha sat under the Bodhi-tree, radiant rejoicing and strong, and from His lips poured forth the words beginning *Anekajatisangsarang*. It was a glorious moment. He had, for many lives sought 'who wrought these prisons of the senses, sorrow fraught.' On that morning, He could declare: "I know thee, never shall thou build again these walls of pain."



Triangular brass gong

After 45 years of teaching the Truth. He had found, the Buddha passed away to *Nibbana* on the full-moon day of Kason. His last admonition to His disciples was: "Always be mindful: never let yourselves slip into negligence and forgetfulness".

Buddhists celebrated these anniversaries in various ways, according to the Buddha's teachings. They give alms, or keep precepts, or practise meditation. The Buddha's teachings are remembered in all the meritorious deeds. Since such deeds are done mostly communally, the custom of going to local pagodas in groups is observed for many generations.

Men and women of all ages go to local pagodas in processions to pour water on the sacred tree. Young women carry water pots on their heads, none too heavy, but just enough to lend them a Balinese grace as they walk along. Red earthen pots topped with green banana leaves give a picturesque effect, especially with flower-bedecked chignons hanging down maidens' napes.

The processions, as usual, are attended by music troupes. The Burmese folk music troupe consists of simple instruments, namely, the drum, cymbals, bamboo clappers and flute. With one or two mountebanks dancing to the snappy tunes, one can have all the fun and merriment. One does not have to be specially talented to be able to play these instruments, nor anyone to be a Nureyev to do those dance steps. Anyone can join in.

The songs usually run something playful and teasing like for instance.

Come along my pretty maid
I'll take thee right to Nibbana
For it's the goal I'll strive
For thee and me, for thee and me

Thou art all goodness and virtue
Ever bent on doing deeds of merit.
Oh, look, thy beauteous face all damp
With beads of perspiration, oh,
Do not strain so much my dear,
Let me help thee—let me carry the pot for thee

This is one of the idiosyncracies of Burmese ways and customs. The Buddhist religion teaches negation of all worldly desires. Here, the ardent swain is asking his maid to come along with him to the Goal of *Nibbana*, the Cessation of all desire.

Of course, *Nibbana* is the goal for all Buddhists to strive for; but it is still a long, long way to go. There is a-plenty to enjoy on the way to the Goal. Naturally one wants a helpmate and companion for the long journey through the cycle of rebirths. The Buddha-to-be had Princess Yasodhara to share His many lives until He attained Buddhahood.

That is why Burmese love songs often contain affirmations of love and faith that shall last the long journey through *samsara*, or the round of rebirths.

"We will cross over this infinite samsara
Together, until we reach the peaceful shore of Nibbana."

So shall many lovers make a wish, as they pour water on the sacred Bodhi-tree.

How can anything go wrong on a day in the lenten season that begins with the tinkling of 'doo-wei-wei' of the brass triangular gong and the rich sing-song voice announcing, "Dear friends, good and pious, our companions-in-doing-meritorious-deeds, please do wake up and prepare alms food for reverend monks....."

LENTEN MEMORIES

Now that it is Buddhist lent, I should perhaps fill my hours with holy thoughts, as a self-respecting woman of my age should. Easier said than done.

Rummy (as those Wodehouse characters say), whenever I try to think good and pure thoughts, I always go back to the days when the world was fresh and young and nothing could ever go wrong.

How can anything go wrong on a day in the lenten season, the day that began with the tinkling of *doo-wei-wei* from the brass triangular gong and the rich sing-song voice announcing. "*Oh, ba-wun-taw* good friends, our companions, companions-in-doing-meritorious-deeds, please wake up, do wake up and prepare alms food for our reverend *sangha*, wake up, please, good friends.

The announcement was couched in poetic prose with well known familiar pali words like *ba-wun-taw* (good people) thrown in for style and elegance.

With the tinkling of the brass triangular gong in your ears, you roll in your bed from one side to the other murmuring, 'So, the sabbath day has come again, oh. You listen to the lingering notes and

pull yourself up to go down to the kitchen to prepare alms food.'

It is still in semi-darkness, but not all gloomy, for the air is filled with promise of the coming day. It is lovely to be waken up by the tinkling of the brass triangular gong and recitation in a sing-song voice. It is far more pleasant to be jerked up by the blaring of loud-speakers, that inspired only colourful epithets that would not help to go through the gates of celestial regions where you hope to go in afterlife.

How aptly are the organizers of these benevolent activities called *neik.ban-saw*, ushers into heaven. They are the members of the communal groups called *wut-thins* or service groups and they play an important part in the life of the community. Such wut-thin activities, although rarely seen nowadays in cities like Rangoon, are very much alive in small towns. In cities like Mandalay, where old customs and traditions are still very much in evidence, *wut-thins* with all their paraphernalia still operate.

The members of the *wut-thins* wear all white suits, white jackets and white longyis. They go round collecting alms for monasteries or pagodas. Some carry silver bowls to receive coins. To receive alms food there are large three-legged lacquer trays with sets of small bowls; they are beautiful things with red domed covers. Each tray is suspended from cords attached to the yoke. With the tray hanging in the middle two men shoulder the yoke at each end. Sometimes the yoke is painted red and splashed over with gold and glass mosiac patterns.

The procession is led by a man blowing the conch. Next comes the huge brass triangular gong suspended on a pole carried by two men, one of them striking it in tune to the chanting, a none

too easy feat. The carriers of the three legged trays follow. Sometimes, the procession is accompanied by a music troupe of drums, cymbals and flute. It is still twilight, the stars blinking even as dawn begins to steal on the horizon. The air is filled with music with intervals of singsong chanting and the tinkling of the brass gong. Lights shine through the window panes and people come out with their alms, which are respectfully deposited in the lacquer bowls and receptacles.

Wut-thins also go on their rounds in the afternoon, the day before sabbath day, in the same grand manner to collect dry goods like rice and such necessities for the monastery.

Living in Rangoon, we do not see *wut-thins* and the ushers-in-to-heaven, at least, not often. What shall I do without them? Who will usher me into the celestial regions?

—o—

Music and songs fill the air as the clouds roll away and sunny days are back again--then the city blossoms forth in a thousand lights.....

THE SPIRIT OF THADINGYUT

"Only a few days to Thadingyut, and the skies are still hanging low with dark clouds." Such is the thought that hangs over us as the end of the lenten season draws near.

We have had enough of the torrential rains and the accompanying hazards, like colds and influenza. Forgotton are the days when we prayed for showers aswe were scorched by the blazing April heat. We longed for rain then, as if we never knew that the beautiful drizzle scintillating in the rays of sunshine would later be a murky sheet of torrents that confronted us almost every day for four months.

Now, we long for days warm and dry with lots of sunshine, when our mildewed clothes will have an airing. Perhaps, I should not be too wrapped up (both literally and figuratively) in mildewed clothes and too pre-occupied with the thought of turning the house inside out for cleaning; for it is the time women do the 'spring' cleaning, or rather Thadingyut cleaning."

I do try my best to raise myself from such mundane thoughts. "Forget your damp mildewed things for a while," I told myself, "just think how it must have looked on the Full Moon of Thadingyut, twenty-five hundred years ago."

It was when the Buddha, after spending the lenten season at the celestial abode, preaching to his

mother, now reborn a celestial being, came down to the abode of the humans. Attended by an entourage of celestials, the Buddha descended by the bejewelled ladder, as the heavenly music mingled with the boisterous gusto of the drums and flutes that the earth bound humans played to welcome the Buddha.

This self-same scene is re-created during the Thadingyut festival when we have illuminations all over the cities, small towns and villages. There will be a lot of festivities with music, songs and dancing, for here in our land everything goes with music. The colloquial idiom, which may be rendered in English as, without the benefit of the orchestra (ဆိုင်းတေ့ဆို) is used to describe any event that is uninteresting, unheralded and not properly enhanced.

The Skies begin to clear and hope springs in my breast, as sunbeams spill out of the clouds. Silver embossed cards pour in. "Weddings, weddings, and more weddings," I muttered happily. How young lovers must have welcomed this season, for marriages are tabooed during the lent.

Of course, many modern young people try to ignore the custom and insist on getting married during the lent. After all, this taboo originated from social and economic conditions of the by-gone days, when communications were difficult during the rains, and people were busy in the fields, so it was prudent to wait till Thadingyut.

Even then, weddings during the lent are still rare. Most lovers would rather wait till Thadingyut than risk raised eye-brows at the uncommon hurry to get married during the lent.

Anyway, it is more fun to begin one's married life amidst festivities. Illuminations, music, songs and dancing will be all over the town. In some quarters, people collect donations to decorate their streets

with festoons of electric lights. Amateur dancing and music troupes are organized to give free entertainment to the spectator.

Personally speaking, I think Thadingyut is more fun in small towns and villages, a partiality perhaps, since I hailed from a small town myself. Living here amidst the blare of amplifiers and electric lights, I often long for the *see-mee* lights; they are small earthen saucers filled with sesamum oil wherein pieces of cotton are used as wicks. Little tongues of flame quivering in the breeze lend an uncanny beauty to the scene steeped in the silvery beam of the full moon.

Festivities in small towns and villages are more friendly and intimate. The entertainment troupes may not be star-studded, with film stars and well known vocalists taking part, but, there is a lot of love and appreciation. The girl with all the make-up and sequinned costume, pretending to be a prima-donna, is the snub-nosed girl next door. You think she is wonderful, even if she sings a little off key and her dancing not exactly professional.

In small towns, you are personally involved in the festive celebrations, you care a good deal, because everyone is your friend. In big cities, however, you can hardly feel that it is your festival, there is too much noise and glare and you do not know who is who in the celebrations.

Perhaps, I am just a complaining old fogey, but I can hardly see the spirit of Thadingyut in the noise, gaudiness and ostentations of the city festival.

There is a silver lining, though. Towards the close of the day before the twilight deepens into night, groups of young people and children can be seen walking with candles and gifts in their hands. They are going round to pay respects to their grandparents

or elderly relatives and teachers. Thadingyut is also a season of remembrance, a *kadaw* season.

I cannot think of an English equivalant for the Burmese word *kadaw*; it is more than paying respects or doing obeisance. One raises clasped hands to the forehead and crouches humbly at the feet of the parents, elders and teachers, in the same way as one does to worship the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. This is to *kadaw*,—to be humble and reverent, remembering with gratitude all that one owes to parents and teachers, and what is more desiring to be purged of all the trespasses that might have been committed by word, thought or deed.

The reverent posture of crouching with clasped hands raised to the forehead should not be mistaken for servility for it is not something that is forced or compelled. It is a voluntary honour to whom honour is due. This is the true spirit of Thadingyut.

—o—

Thadingyut is not only a season of lights and rejoicings but also of remembering those to whom we owe gratitude—to make peace or ask forgiveness, if needs be, and also to forgive with loving kindness.....

SEASON OF LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

The Burmese calendar month of Thadingyut (October) is the month of lights festival. Some twenty-five centuries ago, the Buddha came back from the abode of the celestials to the human abode; he was attended by the goodly company of celestials who created a pathway of starry jewels; and the humans on earth illuminated their houses and streets to welcome the Buddha.

Among the celestials up there was the one who was reborn after she died giving birth to the child who later became the Buddha. It was the Buddha's gesture of gratitude to his mother that he spent the three months of the monsoon there and taught his Law, to the *devas*.

Thadingyut, therefore, is not only a season of lights and rejoicings, but also of remembering those to whom we owe gratitude. For the Buddhists, the Buddha, His Law, His Order of the Sangha, Parents and Teachers are the first to be revered; next come those who are older and those to whom we owe gratitude.

Those who no longer have parents go to elderly relatives or friends to pay their respects. It is usual for a senior citizen in the street or residential quarter to receive respects from the younger people of the community. Such practices are much more evident in district towns than in cities like Rangoon.

In cities like Rangoon, people try to keep up the tradition in spite of the rush and haste of city life, by organizing communal ceremonies.

In schools 'paying respects to the teachers during the season is organized; all contributions in cash or kind are voluntary.

On the three days of the lights festival, namely the day before the full moon, the full moon day and the day after, young people go round to the homes of their teachers and elderly relatives to pay their respect; so it means 'Open House' for many homes. Older people usually have some snacks ready for their young visitors, sometimes they distribute small cash for children to spend during the festival.

Young people usually bring gift but it is not necessary; paying respects (*kadaw*) is accomplished by bowing down with humility in front of the older people. Children go to their elders with a bunch of bananas or packet of candles, they may go without anything, but the gesture of (*kadaw*) is no less appreciated.

The custom of (*kadaw*) is rooted in the Buddhist acceptance of the *samsara*, the round of being born and reborn; all beings, humans and all, go round meeting one another in amicable relationships or otherwise; there would be love and kindness, but there could be hate and enmity as well. There are surely wrongful actions committed consciously or unconsciously to one another in this present life.

When Buddhists do the ceremony of *kadaw* to anyone, their parents, teachers, or elders, they not

only pay respects with the gesture of gratitude, but also ask forgiveness for any wrongful action they might have done in this life and many many lives before.

The elders not merely receive the respects, they, in their turn, ask forgiveness of the young people for any wrongful action they might have done in thought, word, or deed. This reciprocal action is often called 'erasing the slate'' which is the same as burying the hatchet so that one can start life again with a clean 'slate.'

Well, come to think of it, I want to start this Thadingyut asking my friends and readers to forgive me for any offence or trespass I might have done unwittingly or intentionally, and wish them a happy Thadingyut.

—o—

On such a night as this, Ummadanti, a beautiful woman scorned, had her vengence on the king by driving him mad with desire for her unattainable charms..... On such a night as this King Ajatasatu, a remorseful patricide, found solace in the Buddha's words.....

THE TAZAUNGDAING FESTIVAL

It's lights and festivals with a vegeance, since the monsoon months have come to an end. Close upon Thadingyut festival comes the Tazaungdaing with more lights and festivities. Many households leave the decorations and lanterns on so that they do not have to put them up again in three weeks' time.

We all know that people hang out lighted lanterns in honour of the anniversary of the Buddha's descent from the celestial regions. But, why again the illuminations in the following month?

I used to think that some people wished to go on with the celebration as the Thadingyut festivities are often spoilt by rain. It is hardly so, although I strongly suspect that to be the reason with most of the merry-making folk. This festival seems to date back to the pre-Buddhist days.

Psychological Warfare ?

Tazaungdaing festival is, in fact, called Kattika feast. We find many references in the Jatakas, the Buddha's birth stories. This month is supposed to be the time thieves ply their trade; astrologers say that certain signs of the Zodiac are in the ascendant so that many people's thoughts are bent on mischief,

It is said that kings declared feasts to be held so that all the jollity and merry-making would take the people's mind away from mischief, a kind of psychological warfare.

It is the wont of the youths to steal things like flower-pots and clothes and pile them on the cross roads. In small towns and villages, where people know one another, this is done in the spirit of fun.

Whole nights, young men go about stealing women's skirts which they hoist at the top of a pole. Sign boards would be put at the door of privies. In the morning, everyone has a good laugh. No serious harm is done and no one is offended. Of course it is different in cities where people are not so close to one another and such things are done more in mischief and even malice.

Illuminations are more elaborate than in Thadingyut. Jataka stories lend romantic and sometimes diverting touches to the celebrations. If you go down the lighted streets you may find a tableau or a play in progress: a young maiden, resplendent in jewels, throwing flowers at a magnificently dressed regal person on a chariot.

Lady Ummadanti, the beauty scorned

This is the story of a maid named Ummadanti whose name itself is synonymous with dazzling beauty. She was born of a rich and noble family. One day, the king sent fortune-tellers to read the lineaments of her body, so that he might marry her.

The fortune-tellers, on seeing her became so intoxicated by her beauty that they made a mess of the food offered to them. Ashamed of their own behaviour, they made a false report to the king that she was not fit to be queen.

Ummadanti was given in marriage to the king's general. She never forgot the slight and with the rage of a woman scorned, she waited to take her revenge. On the day of the Kattika festival, the whole city was illuminated and adorned. The king, in his royal splendour, was to ride the streets on the full moon day.

The general, before he left home to go on his duty to guard the city on the occasion said to his wife: "My dear, tonight the king will ride through the city and he will come to our door. Please do not show yourself for he will not be able to control his thoughts."

Ummadanti made a noncommital reply. As soon as her maid, according to orders, came and informed her that the king's chariot had come to the door, the lady went to the open window.

From the strategic position, the beautiful Ummadanti threw flowers at the king. When he turned his eyes to her, she smiled with the charm of a sylph. The king could not contain himself. Ummadanti, seeing his agitation, withdrew to her chamber. The king, no longer able to continue his triumphant tour, bade his charioteer go back to the palace, where he lay on the couch moaning in agony.

The general's strategy

The general soon knew what had happened. With his wisdom, he made the king see the folly of his passion. Like a loyal subject, he offered Ummadanti to his king who was deeply ashamed of himself. Cured of his infatuation, he went on with his just and fair reign.

The story is a favourite with strolling professional troupes and during the Tazaungdaing festival, the amateurs would enact the scene, where the lady

threw flowers at the king. The dramatists, ingenuity would make the lady and the king bandy wits. The king's part is often clowned to the great enjoyment of the audience.

There are yet solemn associations with this season. It was on the full moon day of this month that King Ajatasatu, tortured with remorse for having killed his royal father who was good and virtuous sought refuge in the Buddha's counsel.

Ajatasatu had followed Devdatta, the Buddha's arch enemy and it was at his advice that he had committed patricide. Devadatta plotted against the Buddha's life and he was swallowed up by the earth to roast in hell. The king feared a like fate for himself.

The remorseful king

He wished to go to the Buddha and to be reconciled to Him, and to ask his guidance. However, he could not bring himself to go to His presence, so great had been his transgression.

So, when the Kattika festival came round, and by night Rajagaha was illuminated and adorned like a city of the gods, the king sat on his golden throne with the lords of his realm in attendance. Jevaka, one of Buddha's followers, sat among the lords. The king thought it would be a good idea if he asked Jevaka to take him to the Buddha.

Still it was difficult for the king to make this request. So he diplomatically led on the conversation, first praising the beauty of the night; "How fair, sirs, is this cloudless night! How charming! How delightful! How lovely! What sage or brahmin shall we seek out, to see if he may give our hearts peace?

The ministers, each in turn, recommended the sages they followed. The king listened in silence, waiting for Jevaka to speak. Jevaka, suspecting that the king wished him to speak, waited to make sure.

The king asked him why he had not spoken. Only then did Jevaka rise from his seat and with his hands clasped in adoration towards the Blessed One, cried, "Sire, yonder in my mango grove dwells the all-Enlightened One with the Brethren; unto Him the Blessed One, let the king repair, to hear the Truth and put questions.

The king immediately ordered the royal elephants to get ready and went in royal state to Jevaka's mango grove, where he found in the perfumed pavilion the Buddha amid the Brotherhood.

Peace and tranquillity

All was tranquil as the ocean in repose. Look where he would, the king's eye saw only the endless ranks of the Brethren. He bowed low and spoke words of praise. Then, saluting the Buddha, he seated himself and asked Him the question: "What is the fruit of the religious life?"

And the Blessed One gave utterance to the Samaphala Sutta. Glad at heart, the king made peace with the Buddha at the close of the Sutta and departed with solemn obeisance.

One important rite associated with the season is the offering of the yellow robes to the monks. This offering is considered one of the most meritorious deeds. The robes so offered are called the *Ka-htein* robes. The offering is made communally with all the trimmings of music, folk dances, processions and refreshments.

The highlight of the *Ka-htein* offering is the weaving of the non-stale robes...so-called because the

robes are not allowed to go stale, that is to say they are woven within the space of the night.

In rural areas, people organize the ceremony of this weaving. This ritual, apart from gaining merit, glorifies the common labours of the rural folk.

The weaving of robes

The weaving of the non-stale robes is a gala celebration enjoyed by the young and old. Young men would play drums and flutes as the lasses go into the cotton fields to collect the bolls. All through the night they beat, dress and spin to be ready for the loom. All these are done within the night so that the robes would be ready for offering at dawn.

Often there were contests among neighbouring villages. Moonlight, music and dances must have made their toils cheerful and happy. It is a great honour for a maid to win the contest of weaving the robes, for in villages it is essential for a maid to be good at weaving.

The tradition of weaving the non-stale robes is still carried on even in the city of Rangoon amid the glare of neon lights, through which moonbeams have hardly any chance.

An annual weaving contest is held on the platform of the Shwedagon Pagoda. Of course there could be no actual picking of cotton from the fields but the young ladies weave the robes the whole night. There would be music and dances as benefits the joyous occasion. The centuries-old tradition is thus kept alive in the truly Burmese spirit of fun and laughter.

—o—

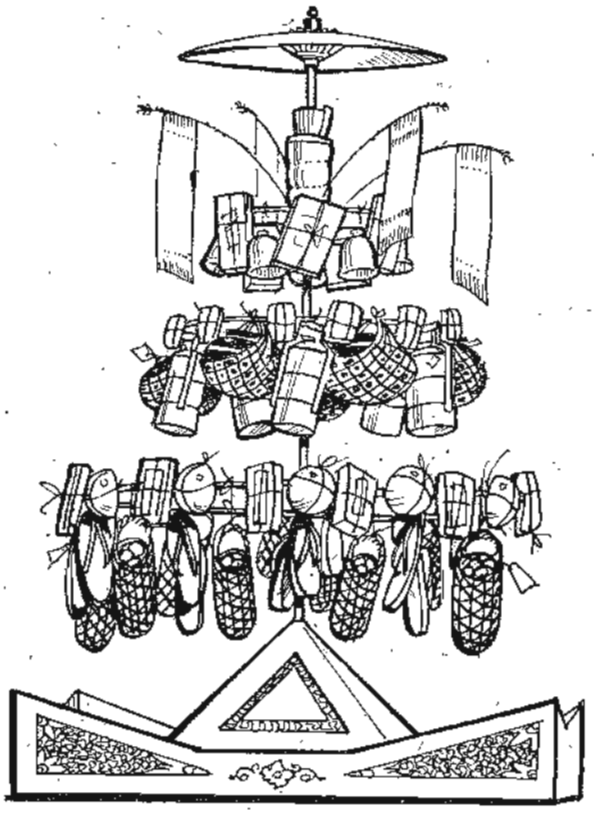
Everything you could wish for grows on a Padetha tree, everything is yours for the taking—only, you must not take more than you need.....

THE SEASON OF PA-DE-THA TREES

One of the best loved stories I heard in my childhood was the story of the *Pa-de-tha*, the wonder tree that bears all the things that the human heart could wish. If you feel like eating a succulent dish of noodles, you just go to the Tree and pluck it. If you want a dress for your important date, there you could have your choice from the most exotic creations from the Tree. The Tree would give just about everything you wish for, you only have to go there and pluck.

The Tree grew at the beginning of the world and later it disappeared. It happened like this, I was told. One rule the humans must observe was that no one must take more than he could use at one time. The humans, however, mistrusting one another, began to pluck more than they needed and stocked things in their homes. When one began, others soon followed suit. Quarrels and fights followed and the Tree was destroyed.

The word *Pa-de-tha* in Burmese is synonymous with plenty, and inexhaustible wealth. In this season of Tazaungdaing festivals, we can see that the *Pa-de-tha* Tree is back. Go anywhere in town, in streets and markets, you will see preparations for the *kahtein* offering of robes to the *sangha* in progress. There standing in front of the decorated pandals are wooden triangular structures, hung with things like



Pa-de-tha Tree.

packets of yellow robes and other gifts, like a Christmas tree.

They are the *Pa-de-tha* Trees to be offered to the *sangha*, who after staying in the monasteries during the lenten season, may be going to their home owns or on their missions, once the ban on travelling is lifted at the end of the lent. It is the time when they will be in need of robes and other articles of use.

Even though the robes could be offered to the *sangha* at any time of the year, this seasonal offering is considered more meritorious. The offering of *kahtein* robes at this season is an important date in the Buddhist calendar.

One of the beauties of the *kahtein* offering is that it is a communal offering, everyone contributing whatever he can, however little. Even the poorest can be a donor. Contributions in money or in kind are accepted. Any chance passer-by can gain merit by putting a 'fruit' on the *Pa-de-tha* Tree, be it one Kyat note, or a napkin, or a small tea cup.

Last but not least, it is an occasion for songs, music and dances. What more could you ask with all the fanfare of music and songs, people enjoying themselves, as if there had grown real *Pa-de-tha* Trees of olden times. Perhaps, because they have done meritorious deeds, they would be reborn in the land where such Trees grow.

There are stories of how the act of *dhana* (giving) bears fruit, and the *Pa-de-tha* Tree often plays an important part. Go to any pagoda and when you put a coin in the donation box, the man sitting with a triangular brass gong accepts the gift striking the gong and intones a prayer for you; and amongst the good things he wishes for you, he will say, "May you have a *Pa-de-tha* Tree on your doorstep, and may you never have occasion to hear the word, 'want' or 'no more'."

Never to hear "want" or "no more"

I like especially the story of the man who, after doing an act of *dhana*, wished that he might never hear the word, 'want' or 'no more'. He was

reborn a prince, and one day while he was playing with his friends, his mother sent him some eatables which, naturally, were shared with his friends. The prince sent for more but his mother sent word that there was 'no more'. The young prince, not understanding the word, asked his mother to send the said 'no more' to him. The mother sent him an empty hamper, but the *devas* (gods), because of the deed the prince had done in the past filled the hamper with the choicest of delicacies. From that day on the young prince and his friends declared 'no more' was the best they ever tasted.

There is the story of a poor man who offered his one and only nether garment to the Buddha; he was later reborn a rich man with a *Pa-de-tha* Tree that blossomed forth clothes, right on his door-step. One is simply thrilled at the idea.

The *Pa-de-tha* Tree cannot be planted by a green-fingered expert, but it can only be nurtured by acts of *dhana*.

Today during this season, it is heart-warming to see lots of *Pa-de-tha* Trees growing among festivities. They represent the spirit of *dhana* and people's unswerving faith in Buddha's teaching and also the trust and kindness among the people in the community. All these go to make the annual *kahtein* offering a great joy.

It is a nice feeling that you too could contribute to the planting of a *Pa-de-tha* Tree, by simply hanging a kyat note or any small gift on the Tree. Perhaps, you too might have a *Pa-de-tha* Tree right on your door-step and if you have done it in the right spirit, you shall never hear the word 'want' or 'no more'.

It would be a blessing indeed.

—o—

The month of Tabodwe (February) is the harvest festival; all the products of the farm and garden go in to make 'htamane', a concoction of glutinous rice, sesamum seeds, peanuts, shredded coconut, flavoured with ginger and mixed with cooking oil.....

THE HARVEST FESTIVAL—THE 'HTAMANE'

Respect for top priorities

Come Tabodwe (February), the eleventh month of the Burmese calendar, we have the harvest festival and the making of *htamane*, a concoction of glutinous rice, coconut slices, sesamum seeds, peanuts and generous amount of cooking oil.

Among the Burmese, there is a tradition to observe a custom which is called "top priority for those to whom respect is due."

In small towns and villages rice is still cooked in an earthen pot with a humped lid, so the cooked rice has a peaked shape at the top. This crown of rice is reserved for the shrine and monks. If a Burmese comes by a rare delicacy, he would set aside a portion for 'top priorities'. The rarer the thing the more care he would take to do so.

Among the agrarian people in the country, it is the custom to set aside the first and choicest products of the farms for alms-giving. Hence the tradition of making *htamane*, which includes most of the fruits of the farms and orchards.

Htamane feast is either celebrated communally or done just in the private circle of family and friends. The nature of the feast is such that, in whatever

way the feast is celebrated, it means a big gathering because many hands are needed. In a communal feast people come around with contributions of glutinous rice and other ingredients. It is an option though; one can just give his service, if not anything else.

The joy of doing the chores

There are lots of things to do. Girls usually do the winnowing of the rice grains and sesamum seeeds. This is done with flat circular bamboo trays. Each girl has a tray with a heap of grains in it. She holds the tray in both hands and with an expert movement she tosses grains up in the air. The grains fall into the tray while most of the dust and trash are blown away.

The next thing is to 'roll' the grains moving the tray in circular motion, so that all the dust and trash will separate from the good ones. This task is an art that calls for the highest form of virtuosity.

Boys and men tear away the fibres of the coconut until the shell inside makes its appearance. This also calls for dexterity, strength and experience. The shell is broken and the milk inside is shared by the deserving workers. The kernel is taken out and sliced on a carpenter's plane.

Girls shell the peanuts; the seeds are put on a flat tray and a fair-sized bottle is rolled over them to remove the thin husk. Meanwhile a giant concave iron pot is put over the fireplace, a pit dug for the purpose. Cooking oil is sizzling and shredded ginger is the first to go in, and then the glutinous rice which has been soaked in water.

"Sprinkling sesamum seeds"

A large cauldron of water is kept ready to be added to the glutinous rice cooking in the pot. When the rice is soft enough, the pot is removed from the fire and two stalwart men, each with a huge wooden ladle, begin to stir the rice crushing it between the ladles. Even as they stir and crush, the glutinous rice gets stickier and they have to use not only their strength but their skill to make the coagulate mass yield to their ladles.

After some time of vigorous stirring and crushing, people come round to add sliced coconuts and peanuts to make the whole thing a good mixture. Sesamum seeds are added last. This last does not call for strength, but it needs skill, so they say. While the men are pitting their strength to stir and mix the glutinous rice, coconuts and peanuts, the one who spreads sesamum seeds' sits by, sprinkling the seeds by handfuls at regular intervals. The blend and the flavour of *htamane* depends on the sesamum seed sprinkler, it is said.

'Sprinkling sesamum seeds' is a Burmese idiom, not meant, I am afraid, to describe some commendable work, but to disparage something done by some one only after others have already done the dirty work.

Come to think of it, I am perhaps, doing the same thing. Whatever participation I have in the festival is my appreciation of *htamane* and the production of the creed. I am sprinkling sesamum seeds, figuratively, by writing this article. This goes to show that the pen is mightier than the giant ladles that stir the *htamane* pots.

—o—

PART TWO

LIFE & CUSTOMS

"Lips reddened and breath sweetened with betel juice—" so sings the love-struck poet of yesterday before the advent of cosmetics. But it takes practice, training and above all, art to make betel quid and much skill to chew daintily.

THE ART OF CHEWING BETEL

For most betel addicts, the little shops at Rangoon street corners, where they sell ready-made betel quids, leave them cold. A fastidious connoisseur must compose his quid to suit his own individual taste, and chew it in his own sweet time, as he lets the world go by. But, one can hardly do so in these days of rush and hurry. One has to be content to stop at a stall, buy a quid and shove it into his mouth and rush.

If something is not done and done quickly, this gentle art of chewing betel will be irretrievably lost. Betel chewing is meant to be done in a leisurely and relaxed manner. It is definitely not for the restless and the hurried. Take, for instance, a lady of my grandmother's day: she would sit with her legs decorously tucked in, on a finely woven mat, edged with an inch-wide red velvet. She had before her all the paraphernalia of betel chewing.

The circular betel-box, at first glance, looked solid, until the lid was removed and the bowl inside uncovered. The top of the bowl was fitted with two swallow trays, one on top of the other; on the upper tray were four little cups and a brass pistil. In the cups were the ingredients for making betel quid, namely, betel nuts, cloves, cutch, anise seeds, shred-

ded wild liquorice or sweet creeper (*nwe-cho*). In the brass phial was lime, soft and pure.

In the tray right under the first one was a layer of dried tobacco leaves, only when the tray was taken out, the main bowl with green fresh betel leaves was revealed.

The lady first shredded the betel nuts with a small nut-cracker; she then took a betel leaf and with her dainty fingers, removed the stem and the edge of the tail-end and smeared it thinly with lime.

She then put a little each of shredded betel nuts, anise, cutch and tobacco leaf and folded the edges to make a neat compact quid and secured it by sticking a clove into it.

It took practice and training, and above all, art to make the betel quid and much more skill to chew it daintily, so that the lips were reddened like rubies. There are many love songs praising the 'lips reddened by betel juice and the sweetness of breath.'

Reddened lips with betel juice...a mess!

In my younger days, in the small town where I grew up, no one, if any, had heard of things like lipsticks. For 'dressing up' occasions we girls were given a betel quid each to chew and redden our lips with. Many did it charmingly. But I was not among that 'many'. I only succeeded in making an awful mess. With my best white muslin jacket stained with betel juice, and streaks of red juice running on my chin. I did not come anywhere near being the belle of the party.

Anyway, it was fortunate for me and also for all concerned that I was not born in the age when ladies were expected to sit on a finely woven mat with red velvet edgings, making betel quids. With

my two left hands, I would never manage to make a quid. The task of putting those ingredients on a green crisp betel leaf and packing neatly was not for me. To be sure, all these shredded betel and anise seed things would fall out even as I tried to stick a clove to secure the edges.

The chances are that I would upset the betel box and there are few things in the world as chaotic as a betel box upset. By that time, the quid I was chewing would be dripping with red juice and the whole thing would be a masterpiece of slovenliness.

Supposing courting swains were present, what chance would I have? Perhaps, I might worm my way into someone's heart by this show of helplessness. A forlorn hope this. This manner of helplessness would hardly conduce to the blossoming of romance. No swain would ever queue up for the favour of getting a betel quid from the likes of me. So why should I bemoan, after all the decadence of the gentle art of betel chewing?

The Burmese put a great importance on the hair. A King's hair must not be done except by his chief queen. A warring prince once wrote to his wife from the battlefield that he had kept his hair-knot wrapped up in a silk scarf, because he could not suffer his wife's handiwork to be touched by any other hand.....

MEN'S HAIR STYLES

These days we see youngmen with long wavy hair, the trendy style of the day. Most of the older people do not like it at all. It is unfortunate that this hair style is associated with the road devilry, heroin and such unsavoury activities. Otherwise long hair should not be objectionable.

There is no hard and fast rule that men should wear their hair short; there never had been. Burmese men of yesterday had long hair and they sported a handsome top-knot. Men of the occident too wore their hair long; look at the Laughing Cavalier, the Merry Monarch, Bonnie Prince Charlie, to name only a few. They were the heart-throbs of their time.

The Burmese put a great importance on the hair. It is disrespectful to touch someone's hair; and one does so only after saying *Kadaw*, which means with due respect to you! With the royalty the rules were strict. The king's hair might not be touched except by his chief queen.

It was one of the most prestigious tasks of a queen to oil, comb and twist the king's hair into a top knot. When King Mindon's chief queen died, the king wrapped his top knot in a silk scarf and never suffered it to be touched by any of the lesser queens.

But, one moment please, we need not be dewy-eyed about the king's love for his dead queen. If he let any of his ladies do his hair, it could mean that she had been promoted to chief queen's place. Nor was this all; it could also mean that the son of the lady would be his heir apparent. The chief queen had died childless.

The king did not wish to commit himself as to who should succeed him, as it would cause strife and intrigue. So his action had nothing to do with sentiment; it was only a political strategy.

By the way, have you, who read European languages, read any love songs that refer to the image of the lover by his hair style? From what little I have read I have not found any. There are many love songs in Burmese in which the love lorn girl refers to her lover as 'this maiden's beloved who wears his top-knot lop sided.'

A village maiden who lives on the other side of the stream that cannot be forded in rainy season tells her lover: "Oh, my loved one with hair twisted into a knot, please do not come. I am afraid you might be drowned."

"The one with lop-sided top-knot" or "the one with hair twisted into a top-knot," such expressions are also epithets for the beloved man; among the Burmese of those days, it was considered cold and unaffectionate to call the loved one by name. In a love poem written in the 15th century there is a line.

"Out into the open came forth from my lips the childhood name of my beloved, as I fervently made a wish....." It meant that it was the only time he referred to the girl by her name.

A warring prince wrote to his wife from the battle-field that he had his top knot wrapped up in

a silk scarf, because he could not suffer his loved one's handwork to be touched by any other hand. It reminds me of Shakespeare's Coriolanus, who says on seeing his wife after long years of exile.

Now, by the jealous queen of heaven, that kiss
I carried from thee, dear, and my true lip
Hath virgin'd it e'er since.

To catch hold of a man by his hair knot was the worst insult and the law courts would award compensation for the injured party. Among royalty even those who were to be executed were spared of this indignity. Setting of the top knot was one of the rituals given in honour of the princes and princesses.

It was after the British occupation that Burmese men wore their hair short-cropped like their conquerors; it is called *bo-kay*. Love songs of those days refer to the beaux and swains as *Ko boh-kay*, the man with the English crop. I still have to find out from today's pop songs what the girls of today call their boys.

Well, coming back to the long-haired ones of today, it should be all right. With proper care and prinking, the boys should remind us of the swashbuckling heroes of Alexander Dumas and Raphael Sabatini. If they want to be accepted, I think they should dissociate themselves from undesirable elements and prove that they are as good, nay, even better than any short-cropped guy.

—o—

A Burmese gaungbaung (turban) is never meant to be put on like a hat ready made; it must be modelled by one's own hands to suit one's own individual taste.....

TURBANS AND HEADGEARS

Back in the colonial days many Burmese had pictures that reminded us of the days when Burma was a free sovereign state like portraits of King Mindon, King Thibaw, and his queen, the last to rule Burma, and also pictures of General Bandoola who lost his life defending the country against the British. We, as growing children, learned our history even before we learned to read, from those silent memorials.

Among the memorabia, there was also a picture of three strange looking gentlemen in European dress suits, wearing silk Burmese *gaung-baungs* or turbans. They were Prince Mingun and his sons; the prince, a son of King Mindon, had to flee the country and seek asylum with the French, after an unsuccessful attempt to seize the throne.

It is remarkable that the Burmese prince retained his headgear even though he had to don the European style dress. *Gaungbaung*, as the silk headgear is called, is still worn on formal occasions, but sad to say, it is only a parody of what it used to be.

Gaungbaungs today are mass produced, which is what should never be; because this headgear is individualistic in style, each man choosing his own, not only in size or shape or model, but also in colour and pattern. Today, they are produced in a variety of colours, but only plain, not patterned. The shape or model is stereotyped.

People say that it is so convenient, not involving all the trouble of making it yourself; one just puts it on like a hat. Well that is the whole trouble; one puts it on like a hat. A Burmese *gaungbaung* is never meant to be put on like a hat; it must be modelled by one's hands to suit one's own own taste.

A Burmese man of yesterday would not go out without his *gaungbaung*, which was part of his personality. In any gathering, one saw Burmese men from twenties up wearing *gaungbaungs* of various colours, patterns and shapes. In those days there were still men who wore their long hair done into topknots,

Some men left the topknot, sleek and shining, uncovered; to make the *gaungbaung* they folded the silk peace diagonalwise into a band of three or four inches wide; then they wound the band round the head, covering half of the forehead and tucked the end on one side leaving a triangular edge to hang over the shoulder. The length of the triangular end varied from a little 'rabbit's ear' to something that nearly reached the shoulder.

Some men covered up the topknot and swathed the silk piece round the head to achieve something haphazard and yet so full of dignity, with the inevitable triangular edge on one side, either short or long. In those days no two *gaungbaungs* were made alike, each was a work of art, created by the wearer to suit his own personality.

Not only plain coloured pieces were used for making *gaungbaung*, but also flowered patterns, polka dots and scrollwork motifs, and each *gaugbaung* is done in a distinctive style. Many well-known personalities were known by the style of their *gaungbaungs*. Dr. Ba Maw a veteran politician, wore his, lopsided,

covering half of his forehead and this feature was the delight of the caricaturists of the day.

There must be something in the Burmese character that does not like uniformity—in dress particularly. Take a gathering of men in western style dressed alike, they are often compared to a flock of penguins in their shirts and tails. Burmese men even today with or without *gaungbaungs*, still express themselves in their choice of *longyis* (sarongs). I wish they revived the old art of self-made *gaungbaungs*.

In the days of the Burmese kings, silk pieces from abroad (probably India) found their way through Bassein, a seaport town which was recently hit by the storm. So the pieces were called Bassein scarves. Bassein scarves often feature in love songs. The princess sat by the window waiting for her lover to come with his 'Bassein silk turban' aloft.

The Burmese *gaungbaung* is not merely for utility it is for ornament, prestige and most important of all, for the upholding of man's dignity and mystique.

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Cheroots come in all sizes—a gift of cheroot rolled by the lady's own hand meant to the courting swain that he had a good chance to win her.....

CIGARS AND CHEROOTS

Everyone knows the Burmese cigar—cigar, as the trusty dictionary says, is 'a tight roll of tobacco with pointed ends for smoking.' But what do we call the other kind, the *Say-baw-leik*, or mild tobacco cigar, as the word implies? We call it cheroot, but it does not tally with the description given in the dictionary: 'cigar with both ends open'. It has only one end for lighting and the other end has a filter, a small roll of dry corn-husks.

For lack of a better word,—if there is, it has not yet come to my notice—let me call it cheroot anyway. It is not a tight roll of tobacco leaves. It is a roll all right; the outside is dried leaf of *cordia myxa* (*tha-nat-phet*). The insides are a mysterious mixture of bits of dried wood and crushed tobacco.

Cheroots come in all sizes, the smallest ones are only slightly bigger than cigarettes; the big ones are about six to eight inches long with a half-inch girth. The strength varies depending on the portion of tobacco put inside.

Ladies of my grandmother's days rolled their own cheroots to suit their individual taste. Ingredients for cheroot rolling, namely, *tha-nat* leaves,

dried and flattened, bits of dried soft wood seasoned with tamarind pulp, crushed tobacco leaves. dry corn-husks cut to make filters, a skien of silk or cotton thread, a left-over from the family loom—all these were put in the red lacquer basket fitted with trays and compartments.

This tobacco basket, like the betel box, played an important part in the family. A gift of cheroot rolled by the lady's fair hands meant to the courting swain that he had a good chance to win her.

There is a love song, well known even to this day, that tells of the gift of the cheroot from a maid to her lover 'who had gone to the golden city of Ava'. The girl said she did not buy the *tha-nat* leaf from the market, but plucked it green and fresh from the tree; she put the leaf under her bed, partly because she could not face others asking 'for whom' and partly because she would rather let it dry by the warmth of her young body than by the heat of the sun or fire; since she could not afford a piece of silk thread she tied the end with a white cotton thread. A humble gift but rich in love and tenderness.

Cheroots are as varied in size as in quality. The poor of the villages use dry corn-husks, the same material as the filters, in place of *tha-nat* leaves. The mixture put inside is basically the same.

Kun-thi-phet-say-leiks, those big, long stately white cheroots, rolled with paper-thin sheet from the frond of betel nut palm, are the aristocrat of the species. They are used as take-away gifts for guests at weddings and novitiation ceremonies. They are

decorated with bands of red foils at the filter end and put in ornate silver bowls. A bevy of girls welcome the guests, offering each a cheroot.

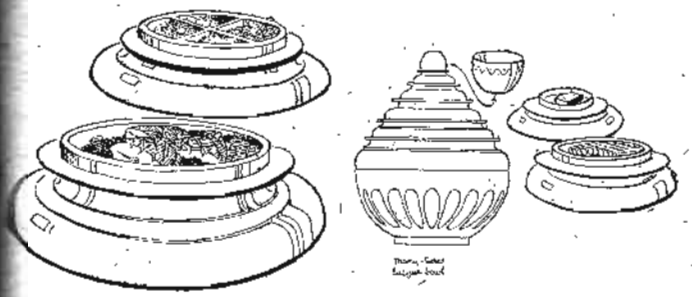
Perhaps, one does not see white cheroots too often here in Rangoon even on gala occasions, but in places like Mandalay and towns in up-country they are part of the trimmings of a celebration.

Recently I have developed an interest in cheroots, because I have taken up smoking, something I missed in my mis-spent youth. It is never too late. I am also inspired by the example set by a lady, a distinguished Gallic beauty, who is partial to Burmese cheroots, which she smokes fitted to her long ivory holder—a picture of chic and glamour. So far, any chic or glamour I may have achieved seeps out of the little holes I make on my jackets and *longyis* (skirts).

—o—

PART III

BURMESE CUISINE



The art of taking a Burmese meal is in itself an ART— because it calls for leisure and relaxed state of mind...

A BURMESE RICE MEAL

The Burmese take two rice meals a day, that is, not counting the 'breakfast, rice he takes with boiled peas and a dash of sessamum oil. It does not count, because it is not taken with curries as accompaniment.

The simplest rice meal is boiled rice with a sprinkling of oil and salt; infants are initiated to solids with soft boiled rice, a few drops of oil and salt. This simple fare can be tasty especially with long-grained Bassein rice.

Young mothers sing as they tenderly feed the children with morsels of rice:

Oh Moon, king of the skies,
Give my child rice sprinkled with oil,
Dished on a solid gold tray!

Children pick up the song and they sing to the moon at night with their hearts full of hope for tomorrow when they will have a plate of hot steaming rice with a mouth-watering aroma of sessamum oil.

A simple fare of rice and dish of salted fish roasted on open fire again with a dash of sessamum oil is a welcome sight to theconvales cent who had had to lead a blameless life of liquids for days.

The main rice meal of the day can be elaborate. Soup, thin and clear with green vegetables thrown in, is a must; a dish or two of fish or prawns or meat or poultry, depending on the mean

of the family and of course, on the mood of the cook, as well.

The art of taking a Burmese rice meal is in itself an ART, because it calls for leisure and a relaxed state of mind. One cannot do justice to a rice meal if one is in a hurry, or if one's mind is not wholly on the business of eating.

All the dishes are put on the table. The Burmese table is circular and only ten or twelve inches off the floor. People sit on small mats round the table.

Respect to the seniors

Younger members of the family put a little token morsel of rice and curry in the dish of the senior members as a sign of respect. Then each takes a helping of rice and heaps it on the plate. A spoonful of soup is taken to whet the appetite. Then follows a bit of curry just enough to mix with a little rice which is daintily carried with fingers to the lips. Soup acts as a chaser.

Small portions of rice are mixed with the curries in such a way that each portion tastes different. One can try many variations; just a little bit of fish and a few bits of vegetables for this time, and then another with a generous helping of gravy from the curry, so on and so forth. The more there are different dishes, the more varieties one can try.

One of the most enjoyable rice meals I ever had was the one I had at a vegetable farm on the outskirts of the town. There, under the cool shade of a gourd creeper pergola from whence hung gigantic gourds, we had our rice meal.

An unforgetable rice meal

Rice was steaming hot, so was the prawn soup into which slices of freshly picked gourd were thrown

in with a flavouring of ginger. The star dish was *nga-pi-yay-gyo*, fish sauce. It is a special kind; varieties of fish are salted and packed in jars for a specified length of time. The fish retain their shape but they are so seasoned tender that all the bones fall apart when boiled in a cup of water; the sauce is thick and it gives out such an aroma that one feels like gulping it down like tea.

The sauce is put through the sieve so that it is free from bones. There are some ingredients to be added. Even as the sauce is boiling, dry chillis are put through a skewer and toasted on open fire; care must be taken not to burn them black. Cloves of garlic, an onion or two are toasted just enough to take away the rawness. Green chillies may be added if one likes it extra hot.

The chillies, garlic and onions are pounded into a paste and added to the fish sauce. By the dish of fish sauce is a large plate of *tow-sa-yar*, vegetable snippets to be dipped in fish sauce. On that occasion, I remember, there were no less than twenty varieties; celery, lettuce, long beans, water cress boiled in tamarind pulp, young mangoes and lots of roots and fruits I could not name.

I put one of the vegetable snippets on my rice portion and top it with a large spoonful of fish sauce. In went the rice down my throat, hot and spicy. I made noises—shee—shee—shoo—shoo—: I gulped down a spoonful of soup and sighed happily.

I tried different vegetable snippets with each mouthful of rice. There were no social graces; the air was thick with the noises of shee—shee—shoo—shoo and glug—glug.

It wns a rice meal I shall never forget!

—o—

There are foods that are available only in a particular locality—many times the Burmese themselves are surprised by unfamiliar foods.....

OFF-BEAT BURMESE FOODS

Local specialities

Burma, as any other country, has many varieties of foods. Things grow freely and easily and there are products that are only available in particular locality. Many times, the Burmese themselves are surprised by unfamiliar foods.

People often speak rather vaguely of "Upper Burma' foods and 'Lower Burma' foods. Roughly, the areas round Mandalay, Sagaing and Pagan are considered Upper Burma, and Rangoon and delta towns are Lower Burma.

Food stuffs of Upper Burma, rich in products like sessamum, groundnuts and beans, have an entirely different character from those of Lower Burma, where fish and prawns are plentiful.

Though born in 'Upper Burma,' I spent a good many years of my growing up indelta areas. I am more accustomed to the cuisine of fish and prawns.

It is therefore a treat for me to have a taste of local delicacies on our trips to Mandalay. They awaken happy memories of childhood, like for instance, peanut crispies, *phee-gyan* bananas, those with corners fried soft and tender in cooking oil—the never-fail goodies I often saw in my grandmother's many-tiered lacquer casket, she carried on her head on sabbath day trip to the monastery.

Sessamum curd sour

My one favourite food is *hnan phut-chin*, sessamum curd sour. It is made from lumps of oil cakes left over after cooking oil has been extracted. It is allowed to ferment with a dash of rice-water to give a sour taste.

This curd or paste is served with onions, garlic celery and lemon leaves, all shredded fine and a sprinkling of cooking oil. Green chillies may be added if you like it hot. This dish goes well with thin vegetable soup.

Once, on one of our trips to Mandalay, I expressed a wish for this dish to my brother who was our host. He was surprised that I should care that much for 'that common plebian food, poor man's fare.'

I had with me a dear friend, an American lady at that time, and to everyone's surprise, she enjoyed the dish. Then only, I learned from her that a similar kind of food is popular in Middle East countries; they do not put as much sessamum and the stuff is mostly been curd with only a flavouring of sessamum.

"Ours is hundred per cent sessamum, richer and tastier," I cannot help remarking with a glow of smugness.

How to make sessamum curd

Since this delicacy is not available in Rangoon markets, I had to prise out the recipe from the people up there. It is simple, fool-proof. Even I could do it!

Oil cakes are sold at any dry grocery store. They are heaped on baskets, and you can have them by the ton, if you like. They do not particularly look attractive, those black misshapen lumps. The

shop-keeper stares at you, wondering why an elegant well-groomed lady should want them.

You will feel even worse when the shopman asks, "Do you keep cows? These are cattle-fodder." You buy them all the same, thanking him for his unwelcome information. Now comes the actual preparation of the nectar.

Put the cakes in a sieve and pour boiling water over them, and lo and behold, they are white and clean like driven snow! Put them in a basin and again pour another kettle-full of boiling water and let soak for an hour or so until the water cools off.

Now using your hands, stir it thoroughly crunching any lumps there might be. Sift out by handfuls, letting the stuff go through the water, so that any dust or particles may be washed away. This action is often compared to the 'sifting' of gold in Northern Burma areas.

You have the paste or curd; put it in a cloth bag and let the remaining water seep through. Some let it ferment by leaving it overnight but you may not care for the flavour. So, just add some lemon or lime juice to taste and mix with finely shredded onions, garlic, celery and lemon leaves and a dash of cooking oil.

This dish is frankly plebian-made from cattle fodder. People call it *na-phut chin* which means 'cattle fodder turned sour instead of its real name *hnan-phut-chin*, sessamum curd sour.'

At any rate, the rose by any other name will smell as sweet and this dish is simply delicious!

—o—

There are special kinds of foods that need cultivated taste—the kind of food that often makes the uninitiated forget social graces and wrinkle her nose at the funny smell'.

MORE OFF-BEAT BURMESE FOODS

High status delicacy...to some

All countries have special kinds of food that need cultivated taste. That is to say, it is the kind of food the uninitiated may forget the social graces and turn away from wrinkling her nose at the 'funny smell'.

In the West too, there are certain foods, a high status delicacy to some, but to others, well...er...not quite. Such foods usually involve too much preparation for wide scale commercial production and too perishable to travel. Consequently they stay strictly within the circle of local gourmets, not well known to 'outsiders.'

One of the delicacies of Lower Burma or delta regions is fish sour and prawn sour. This food like Coulommiers Demisel and hundreds of soft cheeses will not travel and therefore it is best eaten on location.

The season for this 'sour' is the last weeks of the monsoon and throughout the cold season. 'Prawn sour' is often preferred to 'fish sour,' because the taste and quality of the latter depends on the kind of fish it is made of.

Many varieties of fish-sour

There are may varieties of 'fish sour'; one of them the common and the most available kind is made of small fresh water fish. It is mixed with boiled rice and made into big lumps or packed in leaves. The big lumps are sliced and sold by the weight. The packed ones are favoured by the fastidious and hygiene-conscious people.

The best kinds of 'fish sour' are *nga-phe* and *nga-gyin*. *Nga-gyin-chin* is made of chunks of white fish. *Nga phe-chin* is tastier and it needs a more complicated process.

To make *Nga-phe-chin* the flesh is scraped from *nga-phe*, white fresh water herring and the stuff is pounded to right consistency; it is then mixed with boiled rice and a dash of salt. The mixture is then moulded into 'cutlets' and packed in green banana leaves.

In Rangoon markets, especially those near the waterfront, fish sour and prawn sour come straight from the steamers plying the delta towns, They are usually fresh and nice.

Fish sour and prawn sour are also available in Pegu, an hour and a half drive from Rangoon. They are neatly packed in green banana leaves and they have labels to tell you the date when it will 'ferment sour' enough to be eaten.

Can be eaten raw

One of the beauties of this kind of 'sour foods, is that they can be eaten raw, garnished with shredded onions, garlic, celery and lemon leaves and a dash of cooking oil.

If liked, they can be 'fried,' that is, simmer shredded onions and garlic in heated oil over the fire and add fish or prawn sour. Serve immediately with the usual garnishes of celery and lemon leaves. Green chillies may be added if you like it hot.

It is a pity that the best kind of 'fish sour' and 'prawn sour' are not easily available here in Rangoon. If you have relatives or friends in one of those delta towns, you just cajole them into sending you packets of this delicacy periodically.

Fish or prawn prepared in a special way is eaten raw in other lands too. Japanese and Scandinavians have similar foods. From the little I know of them, one thing is certain; one has to cultivate the taste for them, especially their smell!

Anywhere in the world, this kind of food, though enjoyed in the family circle is not the dish a girl wants her mother to offer her new swain at the table. Chances are, however, that the boy might become a devout fan and things work out well for all.

Come to think of it, appreciation on good things come only through assiduous study and cultivation. Once you achieve it, you step into the enchanted land of gastronomical delights.

—o—

The best relish recipes come from drinkers or their women—the relishes are often so tempting that drinking meets often lay down a rule: 'No relishes to be taken without drinks''—hard on teetotalers.....

"AH-MYEES" OR BURMESE RELISHES

To go with hot green tea

The Burmese are very fond of snacks and relishes and there are many varieties. They are called *ah-myees* and they are usually taken with plain green tea often called Shan tea, or any other drinks.

Even though the Burmese have adopted the habit of taking coffee with sugar and milk, green tea or plain tea is still a standby in many homes. A set of Chinese tea pot encased in an upholstered cane box and egg shell tea cups often graces the living room of Burmese homes.

A gulp of hot tea is a welcome drought in hot as well as cold weather; perhaps I should say especially in hot weather; because contrary to what most people think, hot plain tea works beautifully much better than iced drinks.

The simple and the most easily available relish to go with plain tea is jaggery and sugar-cane molasses. Taken at the end of a meal, it clears the palate and helps the food to settle.

An item in cultural life

Of course one cannot leave out *laphet*, tea leaves plucked tender and pressed in bamboo containers. It is an important item in Burmese cultural life. The Burmese idiom, 'to offer betel, tobacco and *laphet*' means hospitality and welcome.

In olden days litigants, after the settlement of the case at court, 'took *laphet* together,' which means that they accepted the decision and bore no ill will to each other.

In rural areas any invitation or announcement of a betrothal or marriage or a wake or housewarming or a new baby is accompanied with a packet of *laphet*; it is considered courteous and also an auspicious thing for happy occasions.

Laphet may be taken plain with a dash of sessamum oil and finely shredded raw garlic. The dish can be elaborated with toasted sessamum seeds, peanuts, garlic crispies. In many homes a lacquer salver filled with *laphet* and the accompanying savouries are ready for the visitors.

Finely shredded ginger seasoned with lemon juice often goes with *laphet* and it is crisp and crunchy, neither hot nor biting and it balances the pungent taste of *laphet* with a mild touch of acidity.

Varieties of salted fish, toasted or deep-fried also serve as *ah-myee* relish, not only with the plain tea but also with stronger drinks.

Relishes at drinking meets

Country yokels take dry fish relishes with toddy sizzling in coconut shell cups. City folks soak bits of toasted dry fish in tomato ketchup and chase it down with more swanky drinks.

The best relish recipes come from drinkers (or their woman?); one of them is fresh water fish salad. A fair size fish is washed but not scrapped off its scales and it is encased in clay and baked in charcoal fire. Then the white flesh is extracted and crushed and mixed with shredded onions, sliced cucumbers and sprinkled with lemon juice. Green chillies may be added if you like it hot.

This same salad, they say, is a never-fail pick me up for those with a hangover. It is supposed to have saved many lives, but I am sure it must have saved the loss of many working days.

Such relishes are so tempting that drinking meets often lay down a rule: "No *ah-myees* must be taken without drinks." I think it is not fair. Why should teetotalers be debarred from the niceties of life just because they do not have a stomach for strong drinks?

—o—

Roselle is easy to grow and it is 'poorman's fare'; it is a well liked dish anywhere, be it a poor man's table or a grand banquet.....

FOOD FOR LOVE

Lovers, they say, live on love and fresh air; maybe, that is why one rarely, if ever finds reference to food in love songs. Poets often do not sing of food; poets too live on poetry and fresh air, perhaps.

Scott's Minstrel sings in his *Lay*:

O'er capon, heron-shew, and crane,
And princely peacock's gilded train,
And o'er the boar-head garnished brave,
And cysnet from St Mary's wave;
O'er ptarmigan and venison,
The priest has spoke his benison.

But then, there is hardly anything about love in the poem, except that the banquet is in honour of the wedding of the lovers united after long years of separation.

Food in love songs

In Burmese pastoral songs and madrigals, there is quite a number of references to food. The Burmese swain in calling his maid to 'come and live' with him, does not sing of the pleasures of the hills, valleys, dale and craggy mountains; he does not promise her 'beds of roses', but only a coverlet of cowhide and thick cotton blanket to wrap her up tenderly and lull her to sleep with the music of his bamboo flute.

To her swain's invitation, the maid responds with a promise of a meal she would cook with roselle buds and land crabs, shells and all, and a dish of field mouse sweetened with white pumpkin; she said she would spread the royal banquet before her man, as the sun rises high in the cool drowsy weather; so that he will doze off in a luxurious nap after the meal.

Roselle leaves in folk songs

Roselle leaves feature in many of the Burmese folk songs. Roselle leaves are the most widely used vegetable in the Burmese kitchen. The leaves make good soup. There are two ways to prepare soup: one is to put the leaves in any thin soup prepared with fish or prawns; the other is to make thick soup. Fry crushed onions, garlic and a little bit of chillies in a tablespoonful of cooking oil and add the leaves; add a little water and stir until it is thoroughly crushed; then add water enough to make a thick soup. Bamboo shoots may be added.

Roselle leaves pulp so prepared can be eaten without adding water: it is called *chin-baung-kyaw*, fried roselle leaves. It is delicious with rice. The dish may be elaborated with prawns, bamboo shoots and a flavouring of celery leaves, and green chillies.

Young roselle fruits make a fine flavoured jelly and preserve; some say that it is a good substitute for craneberries. The Burmese living abroad often long for forroselle leaves: the nearest they can find is rhubarb, they say.

Roselle leaves in history

During the years of the 18th century, when the unification of Burma was being achieved under

Alaungpaya, a native of Shwebo, a town north of Mandalay there was a folk song which ran.

> *"Let not the crowning buds of Shwebo roselle be broken, never be broken..."*

The song was in praise of Alaungpaya and his descendents, who hailed from Shwebo, famous for the roselle.

Country folks sing:

> *The glorious roselle leaves,*
> *Would I trade them for chicken curry?*
> *Oh, no, oh no,*
> *Nothing like roselle leaves!*

Roselle is easy to grow and it is 'poor man's fare'; it is a well-liked dish anywhere, be it a poor man's table or a grand banquet. Thin roselle soup goes well with butter rice or coconut rice; its sweet-sour taste balances well with rich oily foods.

There is a Burmese saying: roselle soup often helps the chicken curry to be scraped to the bottom of the pot.

Roselle, so humble and yet so tasty, is a stand-by at a typical Burmese meal.

—o—

Roselle leaves feature in many Burmese folk songs. Leaves make tasty soup.....well liked anywhere be it on a poor man's table or at a grand banquet. Roselle soup goes well with butter rice or coconut rice.....it balances well with rich oily foods.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Talking And Writing, Not Cooking

I never did realize the truth of the saying, "He who can does: he who cannot teaches", until I started writing articles on food. Before it is too late, I must confess that I only like collecting recipes and enjoying the dishes others cook and of course, talking and writing about them.

Next to eating, talking or writing about food is one of the most enjoyable pleasures of life. I like to inspire people to create toothsome delicacies by telling them how tasty a certain food is, and how easy it is to make.

Don't you dare say, it is propaganda; because it takes a consummate artist to make mouths water by picturesque description of the goodies and make people run to the market to buy the stuff and to be back in the kitchen to cook.

One thing about the Burmese rice meal is that it can be simple.....just cooked rice and a dash of sessamum oil and salt or a sumptuous one with curries and relishes. There is a way for lazy cooks to arrange a makeshift meal: just cook the rice and run to the street corner and buy gourd fritters or *ba-yar-gyaw*, peas soaked in water and pounded into paste and fried deep in hot oil.

Fritters And Crispies

These fritters and crispies are sold together with lettuce leaves, spring onions and a sauce made of tamarind pulp and crushed chillies and garlic. You dip a bite size bit of the crispie in the sauce and put it in the morsel of rice and top it with lettuce leaf and spring onion. Then chase down the mouthful with hot plain green tea.

There are two varieties of *ba-yar-gyaw*.....the one made of yellow lentils and the other made of matpe, small round peas. The matpe crispie is much tastier than the one made of yellow lentils.

Matpe crispie is an Upper Burma product and some years ago it was not available in delta towns like Rangoon. Even though it is sold in crispie kiosks here, those of Upper Burma towns like Mandalay are far more tastier. (That's an Upper Burman speaking!)

To me this matpe crispie is associated with happy memories. Decades ago, long before the Ava bridge was built, we made a boat trip from Sagaing (the town on the other side of the river opposite Mandalay) to Mingun, where the great bell is.

We left in the small hours of the morning when heavy November mist hung low on the wide brimming waters of the Irrawaddy. We huddled in the *sampan*, a flat-bottomed boat and dozed. As the sun's rays broke through the mist, we saw small sandy islets interlaced with rippling waters.

On some of those islands we saw palm-leaf huts crested with curls of filigree smoke; and what is more, the smell of deep frying crispies stole into our nostrils.

Snacks On The Sandy Isles On The Irrawaddy

By unanimous consent our boat was moored to the sand bank. We had fun paddling in the shallow

water, it was just deep enough to reach our knees. It was wonderful to be able to have a paddly pool right in the middle of the wide river. We played until grown-ups called us to have our morning meal.

We had, of course, matpe crispies straight out of the sizzling oil, and there was *yei-mohn*, which is a kind of pan-cake made by spreading rice batter over the heated griddle. It was sprinkled with peas and shredded spring onions. These pan-cakes go well with crispies.

By the way, you might see similar pan-cakes here in Rangoon, but not exactly the same; they are fried crisp. The real *yei-mohn* is not fried; it is just spread over the griddle and pasted with oil so that it is soft and pliant like a piece of cloth. It melts in the mouth.

I wonder if they still have those huts on the islets which festooned the Irrawaddy river in the months of November, December. Much as I wanted to, I never have a chance to go boating along the river and have a go at paddling on the sand pools this time with my grandchildren, and enjoy those crispies and pan-cakes.

The matpe crispies here are not as good as those sold on the sandy isles. Something is lacking, maybe, it is those palm leaf huts, paddling in the pools, and all the things that once went with the crispies. Maybe, let's face it, it is YOUTH, that is sadly lacking!

—o—

You dIp a bite size of crispie in tamarind-garlic-chilli sauce and top it with lettuce and spray of spring onion—then chase it down with hot green tea.....

CRISPIE GALORE

If someone were to ask me to speak on our national institutions (no one has, so far), I would begin with *bu-thee-gyaw* (gourd fritters), which no Burmese can do without.

These sunny days, you walk along any road; you will see on the wayside a little thatched hut where a woman sits by the blazing fireplace on which is placed a large *dai-oh* (frying pan) half filled with sizzling oil.

The *dai-oh* can hardly be called a frying *pan*, though used for frying all right; it is no flat pan but a huge iron pot concave in shape. A dugout fireplace makes a good seat for its curved base.

The *dai-oh* can take a lot of oil and the women while waiting for the oil to heat up prepares the gourd fritters. Young tender gourd is used; pieces are cut into fingers and soaked in batter made of rice flour. As wafts of smoke rise from the surface of the heated oil the gourd finger are put into it. They are fried till they become golden brown.

(Note: It is always a woman who runs the show; even if you see a man around remember he is only second in command. Burmese women are always in charge of important things like crispie shops and they leave the less important things to men).

Around the hut are a few low tables each laid with a pot of plain tea, tea cups, plate of lettuce and

corriander leaves and small dish of sauce. This sauce is a real appitizer; it is a concoction of hot chilli pulp, a dash of garlic and tamarind juice.

You sit on one of the low wooden stools around the table and gulp down a cup of hot plain tea and bawl for a plate of gourd fritters. If you are early you wait drinking plain tea, which is free of charge, and watch the gourd fritters swim in smoking oil as the fire underneath crackles and blazes.

Perhaps some unbidden and unwelcome thought might come to you a reminder of the cautionary tales you had heard in childhood, those tales of hell and fire. You try to switch off those thoughts by nibbling green lettuce with chilli sauce.

At last the *bu-thee-gyaw* fritters would come right out of the sizzling oil. It is a favourite Burmese snack. It is taken with lettuce, corriander leaves and chilli sauce and with hot plain tea as chaser. In the same shop you can also get other varieties, crispies made of shredded onions, bananas, potato chips to name only a few. All these are made with rice flour batter and fried in oil.

Glutinous rice flour, jaggery, peanuts and sessamum seeds also feature in some of the varieties: The most well known is *mon-see-kyaw* flat pancake. The basic mixture is glutinous rice flour sweetened with jaggery; the batter is ladled out into hot oily griddle; as the batter begins to thicken and crinkle at the edges, sessamum seeds, peanuts and coconut shreds are sprinkled on the surface. When it is golden brown it is put on a bamboo seive to drain.

The other kind of crispie not as elaborate as *mon-see-kyaw* is *mon-let-kauk* or bracelet crispie; it is shaped like a bracelet, something like a dougnut. It is a doughnut anyway only it is made of glutinous

rice flour. The dough is kneaded and rolled and made into bracelets and deep fried. It is unsweetened and it is taken with jaggery syrup.

One can hardly speak of Burmese crispies without mentioning the *ba-yar-gyaw*, one of the commonest kind. Dried peas are soaked in water overnight and pounded into paste and deep fried; it is seasoned with onions, garlic and chillies. There are several varieties of peas too and each tastes different, but all of them good.

Crispie shops are a-plenty on festival grounds which is often filled with the aroma of deep frying. Why get yourself a splitting headache by just taking in the smells, better enjoy your favourite crispie and give yourself a good time with the inevitable headache and a stomach ache as a bonus. One thing about crispies is that it is not fun taking them home to eat: they are best eaten right at the shop with all the paraphernalia and aromas. They are worth all the things you suffer the morning after.

—o—

Glutinous rice, never used for full rice meals, is a favourite snack.....plain steamed dish goes well with hot coffee at breakfast.....it is sold at markets, steamed in banana leaves..... another variety is baked in hollow bamboo sticks.....

IN PRAISE OF GLUTINOUS RICE

My heart leaps up when I behold hot steaming glutinous rice heaped in a bamboo basket lined with fresh green banana leaves; the aroma, blended with a whiff of banana leaves, is something that goes straight to my heart and down into the stomach, making my mouth water.

Out comes my twenty-five pya coin and quick follows a transaction with the woman sitting behind the basket. Now I have in hand a green leaf packet of steamed glutinous rice complete with a generous sprinkling of shredded coconut and sessamum seeds.

I always take the opportunity of enjoying my favourite snack when I do my shopping for the family meals. There is one problem though, I cannot wait till I get home; it is too much for my resistance. I open the packet, balancing my heavy shopping baskets in the crook of my arm and nibble the contents of my precious packet, a none too easy feat, but not the kind of performa ce that will win any prize for propriety.

Glutinous rice, never used for full rice meals, is a favourite Burmese snack, especially for breakfast; plain steamed dish goes well with hot coffee. It may be taken with boiled peas soaked in sessamum oil. There are two kinds of rice, white and black; the black kind has a racy flavour and more crunchy.

There are many varieties made out of this rice. It is cooked in oil and taken with fried chicken or fried fish. When I travel by train along the Rangoon-Mandalay line I always look forward to the stop at Pegu station where hawkers sell this bill of fare.

Glutinous rice is also steamed or baked in packets; banana leaves are mostly used for packing; but in some localities today palm leaves are used. Such kind and those baked in hollow bamboo have a pleasing flavour. Once the moonsoon is over, there will come pagoda festivals, with their mile-long rows of stalls, a gastronomical wonderland and gourmet's delight.

One of the features of pagoda festivals is a bazaar of stalls with mountainous heaps of *mohn-lay-pway*, large circular wafers, made of glutinous rice flour, paper-thin, light as air, as its name suggests and very brittle. They are crunchy and munchable; they are sold strung on a bamboo strip. You buy them in bunches of fives or tens and jostle in the crowd showering on your fellow beings bits of white flakes as you chew them.

Mohn-phet-htoks, small pyramid shape rice flour cakes, packed and steamed in banana leaves (a kind of ravioli) made a good sweet dish with their stuffing of shredded coconut and jaggery. It is interesting to know that the same kind is part of the trimmings in the ritual of solemnizing a Malaysian wedding ceremony, as demonstrated at Mrs. Dani Kassim's residence some time ago, for the benefit of the International Cultural Group.

The Chinese style glutinous rice packets have pork or chicken stuffing; and the circular cake fried in oil, one of the items of the Chinese New Year feast is also made from glutinous rice flour.

At Christmas, the Burmese Christmas community make dol-dol, a concoction of black glutinous

rice flour, sugar, coconut and a sprinkling of peanuts, very rich and tasty. I think it is a variation of *htomohn* from Mandalay where a similar thing is made in white rice flour instead of black.

From Bassein comes a kind of *halawa*, perhaps a Burmanization of the famous Indian sweet, the main ingredient is glutinous rice flour; it is sweet, nice and tasty; it goes well with plain green tea.

Of course I cannot leave out *hta-ma-ne*, the concoction of glutinous rice, coconut, peanuts, sessamum seeds flavoured with ginger which is part of the harvest festival in the month of *Ta bo dwe* which falls somewhere in February.

Well, why doesn't someone compile a book of recipes featuring glutinous rice? No, not me. I only like to eat and talk about them. As for cooking it takes a genius to be a true artist of the kitchen.

—o—

PART IV

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

"Leave my jackfruit tree out of it"—is a common idiom. The story of its origin is humourous, spicy and worthy of Chaucer or Rabelais.....

LEAVE MY JACKFRUIT TREE OUT OF IT

All the nice things that could be said of trees have been said by poets. The only thing I, a poor wretch, could do is to quote or misquote them.

The temptation to say things like, "Never saw a poem lovely as a tree," or "Poems are made by fools like me but God alone can make a tree,"– is very strong. But then, no amount of repetition can tarnish the beauty of those words.

Perhaps it is old sayings and stories that keep our love of trees alive. For instance, whenever I behold a jackfruit tree, my heart does not exactly leap but 'my intestines become ticklish' this is a Burmese expression which describes, not what one gets after eating too many jackfruits but the ripples of laughter that rise from one's insides.

Seeing a jackfruit tree always reminds me of a story, one of adultery, murder and deceit, a story worthy of Chaucer or Rabelais. It runs something like this:

Once upon a time, a man coming home from a journey found his wife with a lover. He killed the rival and the couple was faced with the problem of disposing of the body.

It so happened that there was a monastery nearby; it was right in the midst of a thick jackfruit grove. The layman who acted as a watchman

guarded the trees by shooting clay pellets from his catapult when the night prowlers came to steal the fruits.

So the main and his wife carried the dead body and left it propped up against a jackfruit tree. The watchman saw them prowling, so he let forth a barrage of clay missiles from his trusty weapon. The guilty co ple got away leaving the dead body under the tree.

When the watchman came out to look, he was shocked to find a man dead. He thought that his shots had killed him. He reported the matter to the monks. After some discussion, they decided to pretend that it was a visiting monk who had died overnight.

This meant shaving away the dead man's hair; it was quite a job, for, in those days, men wore their long hair done into big topknots. They dressed the body in monk's yellow robes and went on with funeral arrangements.

Villagers came round to help and the woman could not resist going to have a last look at her unfortunate lover.

It was the custom in those days to have mourners at monk's wakes; they were usually women who could sing or recite some old songs or poems. The woman, playing the part of a mourner, sang a few verses and after some time, she slipped in something of her own:

"Last night so handsome with a sleek and shining topknot."

Now shaven clean and bare.

Just because you'd been left leaning against a jackfruit tree!" Of course, no one knew what she meant, but the watchman did. He came near the woman and scolded her in her ear, "Hush, woman, hush. Cry, if you must, for your paramour, *but leave my jackfruit tree out of it!*"

This expression, *Leave my jackfruit tree out of it*, has become an idiom to express an unwillingness to get oneself involved in any affair.

Dear beautiful jackfruit tree that gives such luscious fruits and still more luscious chuckles, what more can anybody ask?

—o—

It is quite a job trying to bring down jackfruits, eight or ten pounders from a height of 20 or thirty feet.....it is an exciting day in the garden, swarms of ants crawling on the climber's body, crows pecking at his bald pate as they defend their nests, children dancing with glee as if the whole performance is exclusively for their benefit.....

JACKFRUITS AGAIN!

Jackfruit is one of the early monsoon fruits very much liked. The trees grow into the height of twenty to thirty feet. The fruits are huge, two feet, or more in length, almost spherical. They weigh seven to eight pounds.

The fruits are covered with warty rind, green when immature but turning brown on ripening. It is quite a job to get the enormous fruits down from the tree and the presence of ants' nests does not make things any easier.

The day we take down the jackfruits is a day of great excitement. The family, from the grandparents down to the *littlest tots* are out in the garden as the tree climber makes his ascent. He has a long knife and a coil of strong rope. He has his body annointed with kerosene: to discourage the ants.

Once the man gains the required height, he puts the rope on the croft between the branches and tries pulling it to and fro. If the old man Archimedes' principle of lever and the pulley still holds good, the big fruits should come down safe and sound.

By this time, everyone is shouting orders and no one really listening: Is the branch strong enough? Hey, that fruit is not ripe enough, better take the one on your right.....on your left I mean.....'stupid;' Hey, careful, you'll drop your knife.....hey twins..... come away, don't go too near the tree."

We all make an unholy din and scarcely notice the formation of crows, nor hear their raucus caw-caws. Not until the man on the tree let out a yell HELP! There on the man's bald pate are the crows pecking angrily while others perch on his bare shoulders.

Again we shout orders. Quick, quick, get a catapult.....shoot.....Be careful, you'll hit the poor man's head.....just shoot anywhere to frighten away the birds. Hey you dirty birds.....we're not doing anything to your dratted nests.

The twins danced with delight as if the whole thing were staged for their benefit.

At long last, the fruits are down, one by one, with minimum scratches, let us hope on the climber's body. He went away taking his share. He muttered something about never doing it again. Never mind, we all know he will be back the next season, by which time his skin will be smooth and fine again.

Having got the fruits down, however does not bring us anywhere near to enjoying the fruits. There is still one hurdle, a tough one too.

First an incision is made on the warty rind with a sharp knife and the fruit is halved. The flesh inside is made up of fleshy receptacle inflourescene and their many seeds each embedded in a yellow sheath.

Now the sticky part, to rescue the golden juicy sheaths from their trap. The man in charge soaks his fingers in the bowl of cooking oil and takes out the seeds, one by one and places them on a plate kept ready.

The trouble is that he cannot keep up with the swiftness and the dexterity of the people around whose sole interest is to snatch up the seeds and chew up the yellow sheath. There are ohs and ahs of appreciation. They are impatient when the extractor of the seeds ventures to put one or two into his mouth.

The plate kept ready to receive the seeds is never allowed to be full; most of the time it is empty except for the discarded white seeds. In no time there is nothing left but the white fibres and warty rinds all littered around. It takes a lot of nagging and scolding to get someone clean up the garbage.

P.S. I am glad the jackfruit season is over.

—o—

Once a year, I appear, ...I who would be king, ...With the royal white umbrella overhead, ...Who am I?

YOU'VE NEVER TASTED THEM UNTIL.....

The fruits do not yield their true flavour to the purchaser of them, not to him who raises them for the market. There is only one way to obtain it, yet few take that way "So said Thoreau in WALDEN.

To me no truer words are ever spoken. It is vulgar to suppose that you have tasted things like mushrooms, bamboo shoots, if you have not plucked them yourself. The best bamboo shoots and mushrooms I ever tasted were those we youngsters plucked in the midst of woodlands decades ago.

The day was cool and cloudy with occasional sprays of sunshine that flitted over the greenery around like a golden spotlight. "Come on, let's go mushroom gathering....." it was the war-cry that brought out of doors the young andn ot-so-young armed to the teeth with baskets and trowels.

We followed the sandy path which was a stream bed. On rain days it welled with surging waters that flowed right into the river. We took off our slippers just to enjoy the cool soft touch of the golden sands which looked good enough to eat.

The sandy path was fringed on both sides with clumps of bamboo. Suddenly someone cried: "Look, bamboo shoots." There they were at the foot of the bamboo stalks, white pointed things that looked like miniature white pagodas.

The shoots were at most a foot or so high and even as we got hold of the base which is nine to ten inches in circumference, they practically melted into our hands, so soft and tender they were. Poets often liken their ladies to 'buxom, yet soft and tender bamboo shoots'.

If we were lucky we might find mushrooms. They were usually found in old ant-hills and mounds. The kind that had the shape of the atomic bomb explosion was easy to spot. But the other kind, the white round buds that peeked out of the earth with the whole length of their stems buried underground, needed careful searching.

Those white buds looked like caps and they were answer to the riddle. Who are those that come out wearing white caps, after rainshowers. We had to be careful to get the white buds and their stems in good shape. It meant careful digging, without letting the excitement of discovery overcome us.

Mushroom gathering is still a pastime in the villages. There is a Burmese simile: "face beaming like one who has an armful of mushrooms."

Mushrooms also symbolize good luck gifts and money: if you had a dream in which you saw mushrooms, it means that some good fortune is on the way. The appearance of mushrooms in your garden also means good luck: that is if you do not eat them without verifying whether they are poisonous or not.

The Burmese are great mushroom eaters, but poisoning cases are rare; in rural areas it is almost unheard of. Perhaps people are guided by their native instincts and traditional knowledge.

The Burmese housewife know that mushrooms must always be cooked with watercress leaves, a dash

of green chillies, not too much to make the dish hot, but to give flavour and sprinkling of lime or lemon.

Watercress, green chillies and lemon juice each or altogether, would serve as an antidote to food poisoning. This is a matter of common sense which has been handed down to us.

Mushroom is a delicacy; it is also venturesome-eating. One is often haunted by the fear of poisoning. In Sacha Guitry's Memoirs of a Cheat the hero of the story survived when the rest of the family was killed by a dish of mushrooms. But it was only because he was not allowed to eat the dish as a punishment for his misbehaviour. So the story is not much help in giving us hints on how not to be poisoned by mushrooms.

—o—

Mealtime companion when young, bed-fellow when grown up, who is she? So goes a Burmese riddle. She is not what you think she is...

MEAL-TIME COMPANION WHEN YOUNG.....

There is a Burmese riddle. "Meal-time companion when young, and bed-time companion when grown up...who is she?"

Can you guess? Please check any indelicate thought that may arise in your mind. She is only Bamboo. Young shoots make a good dish for rice meals; and big stalks make good flooring for houses and bedsteads as well. They also make head rests, a sort of hard "pillows"; they are ideal for catnaps on hot days.

With the first monsoon showers, bamboo shoots are seen in abundance in the markets. They come already boiled and shredded into thin strips; some are bright red and some yellow. You buy them and boil them again and strain off and cook with prawns or fish or pork or poultry. You need only a small portion of meat. It is an economical dish and it is wholesome.

Bamboo shoots may be made into a salad with onion crispies, sessamum seeds, bean powder and a sprinkling of lemon or lime juice. They may be cooked with other vegetables or fried with boiled beans.

There is also a special kind of bamboo shoots, the fermented kind. They come in big chunks soaked in brine and they smell. They are called sour bamboo

shoots. They belong to the group of controversial foods whose taste is something that has to be cultivated.

A hot pot of sour bamboo shoots with pork or fish with a lot of vegetables is a favourite with many gourmets. This dish can be as elaborate as one wishes. Shark's fin, hard boiled pigeon eggs and such delicacies are often added.

Hollow bamboo sticks are often used as food containers. Tender tea leaves are picked and pressed into them; sour bamboo shoots are carried in huge hollow bamboos. Glutinous rice is packed into hollow bamboos with water and baked and sold in market places. Here, you find one of the cleanest and most sanitary food packing ever invented. Glutinous rice has a special flavour when it comes out of the bamboo, cylinder shaped with a thin film of bamboo around it.

So much for being a 'mealtime companion.' In rural areas, most houses have flooring made of split bamboos. There is a special kind called *wa-bo*, big, thick and strong; when split they are four or five inches wide. They are strung together with cane strips.

On hot summer days one of the pleasures enjoyed by the rustic folk is to lie on the clean cool smooth bamboo floor and feel the caress of the breeze that steals through the slits of the floor.

There is a folk tale that tells of a rustic who became a king and who longed for 'the cool smooth touch of the bamboo floor and the gentle breeze that came through the slits'.

In central Burma, houses have, in their backyards, spacious movable platforms called *kan-pyits*. The frame is hard wood and the flooring is bamboo.

On hot summer nights, it is a meeting place for the family and friends and there is the pot of plain tea, jaggery and pickled tea and crispies to go with all the gossip and talk.

Those bamboo *kut-pyits* are memory haunted heir-looms. The bamboo flooring becomes seasoned with time and constant touch with humans. They have a beautiful 'polished' look which only time and nature could give.

Bamboo is abundant in woodlands; they are yours for the taking. For Burmese Buddhists who love to do meritorious deeds like building *zayats*, public rest houses, they are a standby. One may not be rich enough to donate a concrete and steel affair, but one can just go into the woodlands and cut bamboo and build a platform under a spreading tamarind tree.

Such bamboo platforms, with a stand for one or two earthern pots of drinking water, give a welcome rest to the tired traveller. They are as much a part of the Burmese scene as pagodas and toddy palms.

You can rest yourself on those platforms, have a snack glutinous rice baked in hollow bamboo sticks, or drink sizzling toddy out of green, freshly cut bamboo cups, or rest your head on a head rest and meditate. Well, it takes all kinds.

o—

The tamarind tree is an important feature in Burmese life—tender leaves for salad and soups, young fruits pounded into pulp and cooked with a flavouring of garlic, chillies and onions, ripe fruits to make cool drinks—and interesting games to play with seeds.....

NEVER A POEM LOVELY AS A TAMARIND TREE

With the first showers, young tender tamarind leaves are in season; they are used for soups and salads. Thin soups with leaves thrown in are liked for their sour taste.

Tender leaves, mixed with shredded onions, dried prawn powder, and sessamum oil make a good salad. Sometimes boiling water is poured over the leaves to take away the rawness and sifted and mixed with sessamum seeds and a generous amount of fried onion crispies.

As children, we plucked and ate them raw. We first packed the leaves in banana leaves and buried the packet in the ground and jumped on it praying to the goddess of the earth to pour oil over the leaves.

After the ritual of dancing and stamping on the ground; we unearthed our treasure. I still remember the thrill of unwrapping the layers of banana leaves to discover the tamarind buds wet with 'oil'. We took mouthfuls fighting each other for an extra portion. Never mind what the grown-ups say, all this being humidity that made the thing wet.

Tamarind tree is an important feature in Burmese life. As children we climbed the tree taking foothold on the gnarled knotted branches. Sometimes the crotch of an old tree afforded a spacious tree-house for us. Tamarind fruits serve the Burmese through all stages of their growth; young tender fruits may be pounded into pulp and cooked with a flavouring of chillies, garlic and onions and fish paste. The dish needs a generous amount of oil to make it really tasty.

Then there comes in the life of the tamarind fruit, an adolescent period, when it is neither ripe nor green. The seed inside is not yet hardened and the outer shell is just beginning to separate itself from the kernel which is still soft and creamy and whitish yellow.

In Upper Burma this tamarind, called *kyetsiu* is a favourite especially as it is available only for a few weeks before the fruit is ripe. It is cooked with salted fish, chillies, garlic and onions.

When the fruit is ripe, the kernel is dry and golden brown and the seeds are hard and black. The outer shell sheds itself even as the fruits are plucked The seeds are taken out and the dried kernel is kept in glazed earthen jars for further use. There is nothing else to do for preservation; it stays good for the whole year until the new crop comes in.

One of the uses of tamarind fruit is to make cool sherbert. Soak equal portion of jaggery and tamarind in cold water for an hour and stir it thoroughly so that they melt. Then sift the liquid through a thin muslin cloth. This drink, even without ices, is a good standby for hot days. It also acts as a natural purgative.

I cannot leave out the black shiny seeds, so smooth to touch; they gave us children many enchanted hours of pleasure. They are our medium of exchange when playing shop-keeping. We could be billionaires with bags of tamarind seeds!

There is also a favourite game of scattering the seeds near a little pit dug in the ground for the purpose and pushing them one by one into the pit. It takes a lot of skill (and some cheating perhaps) to jerk the tip of the thumb against the seed so that it falls right into the hole.

This game of seeds is exalted to poetic heights by U Toe, a poet of the early 19th century, in his *Rama-ragan* a Ramayana epic in Burmese. The picture of Princess Sita absorbed in her game of seeds her dress in sweet disorder, her tantrums at losing a game, the teasings of her maids, is one of the most beautiful passages in Burmese poetry.

Well, how could anyone ever see a poem as lovely as a tamarind tree!

—o—

PART V

LIFE IN WARTIME BURMA

THE 13-CARAT DIAMOND

(1)

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

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

"Five cakes for one *kyat*."

What a price! Let's see, how about giving me six for one *kyat*, ten *pyas*?"

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

"What about five for eighty *pyas*?"

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

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

(2)

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

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

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

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

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

(3)

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

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

I writhed under her stare and mumbled something about dried fish which I had no intention of buying. Too late I realized I could not afford it and I blushed as I fumbled with my purse. The woman composed herself quickly and asked me where we had been all the time, and how was our little son. Be-

fose I knew what was happening she had made me a present of a package of dried fish. I was too embarrassed to say anything. I just handed the bundle back to her, but she laughingly pushed it into my basket. On the way home, I shed tears...enough for those dried fish to swim in.

(4)

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

Ko Latt read on, but he must have sensed what was going on in my mind, because I listened silently without comment, without chuckling. As he shut the book, I broke out, "Why don't they ever come or way? I mean the Jap banknotes. This morning I saw our old servant woman. She's making lots of money. She's now fat and covered with jewels. You would hardly know her...you'd take her for a maharaja's elephant."

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

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

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

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

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

He looked puzzled. "What has that got to do with us? We have no diamonds or gold to sell."

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

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

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

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

(5)

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

"So your wife made ten thousand out of it!" I cried. Ko Ba Than smiled. "More than that! She also got a 25 per cent commission from the seller. Just a day's work. Child's play." I'm no good at figures. 10,000 + 25/100 × 100,000.....I struggled and gave it up. If I was to do this kind of business, I must have pencil and paper.

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

I was flattered. Ko Ba Than was a wise man, a good judge of Homo Sapiens. Next day I called on his wife. She was a simple, unassuming little woman, whom I liked very much, partly because she gave me a feeling of superiority. She seemed to be very glad that I, who belonged to a higher intellectual level, had condescended to take an interest in such mundane matters. She gave me all the information. "It is very easy, Ma Ma, not so difficult as working in an office. Many people have asked me to get things for them.

One wants a 13-carat diamond. He will give one lakh per carat with 25 per cent commission. If you can strike a bargain with the seller for less, you can keep the difference." I reeled. Even without the extra money the commission would come to 25/100× 100,000×13 !!!

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

That night I discussed the matter with Ko Latt and we were full of hope. We planned the campaign. First we would go to Thingangyun to see a lady who dealt in jewelry. There was no bus services and Thingangyun was five or six miles away. This did not matter, for we owned a two-wheeled mechanism... a bicycle by courtesy. Its forebears were distinguished. We could trace their genealogy as far as an auspicious alliance between a kingly Raleigh frame and aristocratic Humber wheels...but decadence had set in with intermarriage with mongrel spokes.

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

(6)

On Sunday morning we got up at dawn and began our journey. I sat on the rusty rear-fender

rack with my son on my lap. Ko Latt pedalled along on the bumpy road with a song on his lips. I hummed the tune and the child was agog with excitement. "The lark's on the wing; the snail's on the thorn; God's in His Heaven...all's right with the world!" It was a nice ride.

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

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

(7)

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

We sallied forth again the following Sunday. Auntie was smiling happily. She had found it. She knew a person who had a 13-carat diamond to sell. She told us to bring Mr. Ebrahim the Sunday after that. This was all we wanted that day, but I would have liked to listen to Auntie's how-to-get-rich-quick talk. Ko Latt gave me his you-do-no-such-nonsense look and led me firmly away.

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

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

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

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

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

(8)

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

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

After the introduction, Mr. Ebrahim asked Ko Set Khwan to exhibit the diamond. But Ko Set Khwan

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

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

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

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

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

(9)

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

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

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

—o—

The rats I knew did not kill cats or stop women's gossip...they were a money-making commodity.

OF MICE AND MEN

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

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

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

The Japanese had a horror of epidemics, plague and cholera having taken many away during the first months of their occupation in Burma. The cold season came and rats began to die of plague and spread the disease. Warnings to keep houses and grounds clean and free from rats were quite usual. The rodents were caught in traps and done away with.

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

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

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

'Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats, Brown rats, black rats, tawny rats.'

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

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

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

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

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

One by one they surrendered their catch to the health officer who duly recorded everything and gave out tickets certifying that such and such a person had caught the quota of rats for the week. Then the officer handed the rats to another officer whose sacred duty was to throw the rats into a vat of boiling water kept ready for the purpose.

When You Can't Catch A Rat

But suppose a householder could not catch a single rat for the whole week? Well, he would be in for a bad time. The Japanese health officer would come on his inspection rounds and ask the householder to produce the ticket which certified that the had not failed in this duty. If he could not produce the ticket he he would be taken to the health centre and cross-

examined. "Why don't you catch rats? Do you want the Nippon soldiers to die of plague? So you don't want to co-operate with the Nippons? Are you a British spy?" They often punctuated these questions with vigorous slaps on the face. When their tempers were particularly sweet, they might take him for a ride to some god-forsaken suburb and leave him to walk back home.

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

The Plight Of A Wedding Guest

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

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

Selling Inoculation Tickets

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

The Japanese had peculiar ways of doing things. When a person died, and contagious disease was suspected, the whole area was quarantined. It was fenced off with thick steel plates, barbed wire and put under guard. The period of quarantine lasted for three or four months during which no one was allowed to get in or go out. The people had to exist on the victuals which the Japanese 'masters' supplied in their great concern for the poor quarantined people.

Once a cemetery was included in such an area. Funerals were conducted in the most unusual manner. The procession would go solemnly by until it reached the barbed wire fence. Then the mourners and friends would break into groups, wondering how they should behave at such a juncture. Some stalwart youths would scale the fence and bawl out to the people inside. Others would talk to the guards trying to get a pass-port for the dear departed. There would be a lot of talking, shouting and bawling. A few urchins would come and examine the hearse, and have lots of fun picking out the flowers from the wreaths.

It was always some time before the coffin was transported over the fence to the people inside, while the mourners and friends remained outside. "Few and short were the prayers we said, and we spoke not a word of sorrow."

No Withholding Out Of Delicacy

But these incidents are nothing when compared to the one I have almost withheld, out of sheer delicacy. But I feel I shall not be true to myself if I let this one go unrecorded. 'Truth is beauty,' so sings the poet. Here is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

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

—o—

His gaze remained intent on the barricade—he heaved a deep sigh—how could he get throngh those steel plates and barbed wires ?....

THE RUSE

(1)

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

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

At last he sat down at a tea shop on the other side of the street and perfunctorily ordered a cup of tea. His gaze remained intent on the barricade as he gulped down his tea. He heaved a deep lingering sigh and suddenly realised that he was very hungry. He had not had anything since early morning and he heard the sentry strike the hour of eight. He sighed thinking of his wife, his bride of seven days. A lump rose in his throat at the thought of her lonely and frightened. How could he get to her with those steel plates, barbed wires and spiked bayonets between them?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(2)

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

"Look here, man, only a few weeks ago I went down to my home town and brought my bride... sweet simple girl, not used to the evil ways of the big city with this war going on. I had promised to look after her, stand by her and protect her...now look what happened. This morning I left home to go to work meaning to come home early...which I did only to find these damned things around the place. I was told that the place was quarantined. No one must go in, nor any one come out. As you said, such things go on for six or seven months. Oh, what am I going to do?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You call this paltry sum of ten thousand big money? These inflated currency, what is their worth? As I was saying, I should have made a hundred thousand, If I had not to share with other brokers. Young man, remember all brokers are cheats, blood sucking lot and an honest fellow like me has no chance against the damned lot of them. Just see what happened in this Emetin Powder business. I should have the lion's share as it was I, who first got the scent. One chap working at a Japanese hospital whispered to me the information that the authorities there were paying fabulous sums for the powder. So I made enquiries. An Indian trader told me that he could get it for me, if he could have a share of brokerage. He took me to a Chinaman who said he knew it was available. He too demanded a share. He took us to a woman who kept a stall in the market. She knew where the stuff was kept. On the similar agreement, she took us there but the key of the storehouse was in the hands of..."

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

(3)

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

Kyin Sway, seeing him awake, came to him and whispered in his ear. Thein Maung's eyes were opened wide enough to take in the vital statistics of the young person. He nodded approval and fished out a thick wad of notes from his bag and handed it over to Kyin Sway, who went back to the girl. Thein Maung stroked his chin and looked on as some kind of negotiations took place between the girl and Kyin Sway.

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

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

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

Suddenly he felt something cool and nice round his head and life became sweet again. "Feeling better, Sir?" he heard Kyin Sway ask. His eyelids fluttered like the wings of a wounded bird and snapped tight again as a shaft of light cut through them. He shaded his eyes with one hand and peeped at Kyin Sway, his administering angel, who was holding an ice bag close to his poor cracking skull.

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

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

(4)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thein Maung was absorbed in watching the unusual event. The solemnity had worn off. The mourners and friends were broken into groups and they seemed to be at a loss to know how to behave at such a juncture. Some stalwart youths scaled the fenced to

bawl out to the people inside. Others talked to the guards trying to get passport for the dear departed. There was a lot of talking, shouting and bawling. A few urchins came and examined the hearse and they had to be shooed away as they tried to pick flowers from the wreaths.

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

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

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

(5)

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

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

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

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

Life went on as usual...no, not quite. For, one morning during his morning stroll, Thein Maung saw that the steel plate barricades had been extended. His further investigation showed that the vicinity of Kyin Sway's tea shop had been added to the quarantine area. He hurried to see how his friend was faring. He found him as cheerful as ever.

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

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

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

—o—

House keeping is a many-splendoured thing especially in wartime.....

THE EGG AND I

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

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

Anyway, there was not much housework to do in those days. There were only a few clothes to wash and not much to cook. It was rather tragic, because I had just learnt to cook properly. Now I could no more show off my culinary arts on those almost non-existent rations. However, creative instinct was strong in me. I learned to make the most of a teaspoonful of cooking oil, half a wrinkled onion, a stale yellow garlic clove, three or four pale limp shrimps which must have died in the concentration camp, and a heap of freshly picked water cress leaves. Looking at my achievement, I felt as proud as Lucifer. Gauguin must have felt something like that when he painted the picture of the brown girls on the lid of the barrel.

Price control

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

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

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

Queueing for Fish

Fish was a delicacy. It sent my heart fluttering I got up early in the morning and left home full of high spirits. I promised my family a nice dish for lunch. It was, therefore, a bit of flop to see a mile-long queue at the shop. I braced myself. Nothing was going to daunt my 'noble rage' and 'freeze the genial current of my soul.' I stood in the queue with my chin in the air and soon there was another mile of shoppers after me.

How To Pass Time On A Queue

I could have written a book on 'How to pass your time on a queue.' First I stood firmly glaring

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

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

Eggs? You Mean Eggs!

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

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

The Meaningful Look

Since my friend did dot deign to make this point clear, I had to depend on my own imagination. Should I give him a soulful glance? Should I look at him the way damsels in distress looked at their knights? Should I just look into his watery eyes and will strongly—"EGGS?" And a terrible thought struck me. What would others think, if they saw me giving strange signals to the old Chinaman? I played the scene several times, and every time it was something short of perfection.

As in the case of all great actresses, the call came when I was not quite ready. I looked more like a tragic mouse than Melpomene when I wormed my way through the market-place to reach the old Chinaman's stall. I bent over the vegetables trying to catch his watery eye. I tried all sorts of winks and grimaces with no effect. I was just going to give up when the old man thrust a packet under the

vegetables and gave me a meaningful look! He signed with his fingers and I gave him the money. I hurriedly pushed the packet together with the vegetables into my basket. They all went in without much ado.

Walking In Fear And Dread

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

I was nearing home. I came near a small wooden bridge running across a ditch. I could see my husband with our little son perched on his shoulders, waiting for me at the gate. At the same time I heard the thumb of hob-nailed boots behind me. Terror clutched my heart. The Japs were after me! I saw my son wave at me. The sight of my loved ones gave me courage. My steps became firm and quick. The thump of the hob-nailed boots faded away. It was only an unsuspecting soldier. I was saved.

What A Fall!

My husband waved. My little son gave a squeal of delight. I took a short cut keeping clear of the bridge. Coming near the ditch which was only two or three feet wide, I gathered my skirt above my

ankles, and with the basket over my arm, I jumped. All at once I saw the sky and trees above me move like things in a kaleidoscope. I landed on my back in a muddy puddle.

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

Then I remembered the eggs! They were no where to be seen. There was a deafening din of caw-caws and a formation of crows swooped down on the ditch. There lay my basket, the eggs rolled out, all broken with their sunny sides up. I pointed at the crows feasting on my precious eggs and sobbed out the story of the egg and I-

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PART SIX

BUDDHIST WAY OF LIFE

A BUDDHIST CHILDHOOD

The Arcadia, that is Sagaing

The motor launch skimmed over the wide expanse of foaming waters of the Irrawaddy River. The city of Mandalay faded away in the distance. I turned my gaze towards the long range of wooded hills with golden and white pagodas embosomed high in tufted trees. I could see turrets of the collonaded stairways among the thick growth of neem trees. I was beside myself with excitement, for there was so much to see. All around the launch small flat-bottomed boats flitted over the surging waters like birds; and "birds" they are called in Burmese. The prow was painted to represent the beak of a bird. I nestled against my grandfather, whose patient replies could not keep pace with my eager questions.

The pagoda-crested hills loomed closer. Ba Ba Gyi, for this was how I called my grandfather, made me sit down and took my palms in his. I knew exactly what I should do. I put my palms together like a lotus bud and raised them to my forehead; and directing my gaze to the pagodas on the hills, recited.

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dhamma,
I take refuge in the Sangha.

Ba Ba Gyi smiled and said 'well done'. This ritual of saying prayers as we came nearer our home

town was a happy prologue to the glorious days I was going to spend with my grandparents.

My maternal grandfather lived in Sagaing, a large town in central Burma. As old city of monarchical days, she lies on the bank of the Irrawaddy River, opposite the city of Mandalay, the last seat of the Burmese Kings. My happiest memories are associated with Sagaing, where my parents stayed whenever my father managed to get a long leave from the police force in which he was serving as an officer. Whenever we came up there Ba Ba Gyi came and met the family at Mandalay, from where we took the ferry launch. It was decades before the handsome Ava Bridge, which now joins the two town was constructed.

Life at Ba Ba Gyi's place was quiet, peaceful and leisurely, being far from the busy streets. The house was an old-fashioned rambling affair built of teak and *pyinkadoe*, Burma's 'steel timber,' and the roof was *wagut*. bamboo slats woven like thatch which gave the whole house a cool air-conditioned effect. Ba Ba Gyi disdained the foreign-made corrugated iron roofing as unsuitable for the hot dry Upper Burma climate. The sight of the dear old home filled me with happiness and I fell into the arms of my May May Gyi (Grandmother) waiting for us at the gate.

Daily Devotions

The next morning. I lay on my bed gazing at the criss-cross pattern of bamboo slats and counting the tiny squares and triangles as the first light of dawn stole into the room. I dozed off again until Ba Ba Gyi's mellow voice reciting Pali prayer texts brought me back to greet the day. I felt happy and secure, knowing that Ba Ba Gyi's recitations would

drive away the evil spirits and bring in good spirits to bless the home.

As Ba Ba Gyi went on reciting, I looked at the bamboo matting wall with fair isle patterns woven in black against pale-yellow background. The rooms in Ba Ba Gyi's house were partitioned with bamboo matting and the patterns were varied and beautiful.

Ba Ba Gyi struck the brass triangular gong and called upon all sentient beings to come and share the merit of his good deed of morning devotions and I pulled myself up and made for the door. The next moment I felt I had stopped on air and no wonder... the floor level of my room was a few inches higher than the corridor outside, and I fell on the floor with a bump.

It was always like this in Ba Ba Gyi's house... so full of unexpected turnings and levels, which kept on changing all the time; Ba Ba Gyi pottered round the house armed with carpenter's tools and the rooms, corridors, doors and windows were never in the same place. Poor May May Gyi was often exasperated especially when she had to call in professional men to finish what Ba Ba Gyi had begun.

I knew my Ba Ba Gyi would get a scolding if she knew my mishap, so I silently rubbed my hip and limped away to begin my morning ablutions. Another day had begun with the sweet tones of the brass triangular gong, which was a glorious climax of Ba Ba Gyi's morning prayers and recitations.

Parittas: Recitation Of Pali Texts

The recitation of Pali texts and calling upon one and all to come and share the merit is closely connected with the basic teaching of Buddhism, that all sentient beings go through the cycles of birth and death and rebirth. There are thirty-one planes of existences.

With the abode of the human as centre, there are twenty-six higher regions above and four lower regions down underneath. When one dies, one is born again as human, animal or celestial being according to the merit of one's own deeds.

Recitation of Pali texts is done so that the celestial beings could once again hear the words the Buddha had spoken in His lifetime; for the texts are from His teachings. It is considered a deed of merit to recite them and the good spirits or celestial beings who hear them are gladdened. Such ones bring blessings to the home. Evil spirits do not dare to come near such a home. The invocation to come and share the merit is supposed to be of great help to many beings, even evil spirits, who are only lower beings. If such ones rejoice on hearing the invocation and say, "Well done," they too will be blessed; they might go to better planes of existence.

May May Gyi was already waiting with our morning meal of rice porridge, hot and steaming, boiled peas soaked in sessamum oil, dried fish toasted on charcoal fire. We did justice to May May Gyi's delicacies and finished off with coffee. Ba Ba Gyi took the black earthern tea pot full of hot green tea. I snatched the small china cup and soon we were off.

Down the Garden Path

I trotted happily along with Ba Ba Gyi down the garden path, listening in awe to his invocations. "Those who stay on the trees and in the bushes, in the shrubs, those who stay in the garden, those who stay at the well, those who stay at the pond, may you all be blessed, may you have the best of everything, may you share the deed of merit I have done". I walked entranced through the paradise of mangoes, guavas, jack fruits, limes, lemons, then to the rows of roses and jasmine and orchids. I was thrilled by

the thought that the spirits or the *devas* of the trees and shrubs would be saying 'Well done,' and how they in their happy joyous state would be grateful to my Ba Ba Gyi. They may even be promoted to higher regions as a result of getting their share of merits done by Ba Ba Gyi.

When we came to the other end of the orchard where there was a well, Ba Ba Gyi put down his precious tea pot in a safe place and prepared to begin his day's work. I learnt on the brick walling of the well to look into the mirror of clear water down inside. Ba Ba Gyi warned me not to lean too much into the well, although the walling was higher than my height. I moved to the brick tank which was close to the well. There I watched what I thought to be the most wonderful feat in the world.

A few feet away from the well was a wooden pivot with a long wooden beam mounted on the fulcrum; at the end of the beam hung a long bamboo pole to which was fitted a pail. At the other end of the bamboo was a counter weight of bricks. Ba Ba Gyi stood on the brick wall and pulled the bamboo pole down into the well. Then the water-filled pail came up almost by itself because of the counter weight. The pail tilted naturally into the trough which ran over to a brick tank. I watched fascinated as cascades of water flowed down into the tank.

Ba Ba Gyi's cleverness did not end there: he had devised an irrigation system for the whole estate. There was a network of canals by which all the trees could be watered. I waited till the tank was filled to the brim and at Ba Ba Gyi's signal I opened the water-lock and jumped to race with the gushing waters into the lime groves, shrubberies and flower beds. I ran happily teasing and cajoling the rivulets with a stick or floating a navy of dry leaves.

The Household Shrine

Ba Ba Gyi watched my antics while having cups of green tea as he rested under a shady tree. My explorations along the numerous tributaries were given a recess when Ba Ba Gyi reminded me that it was time I picked flowers, for May May Gyi would be waiting for me at the houseold shrine. Sobered by the call to sacred duty, I plucked flowers which I took triumphantly to May May Gyi. She was already at the veranda where the household shrine was. She had thrown away the old flowers and washed the vases clean.

As soon as I had put the flowers in May May Gyi's hands I sat down with my hands raised on the forehead to bow down to the golden image of the Buddha. I then helped May May Gyi arrange flowers and listened entranced as she kept saying that a nice girl who did such deeds of merit would ever be blessed. She told me stories of maidens who were born beautiful, rich and good as a result of such deeds of merit. I loved these stories, for, even though I was born with a dark complexion, high forehead, small eyes and a snub nose, I could still hope to be a statuesque beauty in my next existence. It was in fact the reason why I never failed to help May May Gyi in her morning ritual of offering flowers at the household shrine.

It seemed that May May Gyi did not want me to wait till the next existence to become a beauty, for, right after the prayers she prinked me for the day beginning with my hair. As was the vogue of the five year-olds, my head was shaved leaving a circular patch on the crown which was allowed to grow until the hair could be done into a knot and a thin layer of hair round the patch was trimmed into a circular fringe so that the knot would not be too severe. That circular fringe of hair is called *sa-yit*.

Hair Styles.

Before my hair was long enough to be done into a knot, it was gathered and tied with a red wool yarn at the base so that the ends of the hair stood stiff like a bunch of fowl's quills and this hair style was called *kyet-taung-si* (a bunch of fowl's quills).

May May Gyi conditioned my hair with coconut oil and combed it commenting on its silken softness and picked up with the fine teeth of the wooden comb the longer stresses that had strayed into the *sa-yit* circular fringe. May May Gyi said, "Your *sa-yit* is alright, I need not trim it today." She then coiled my hair round her four fingers using the thumb to keep it in place and with an expert movement she achieved a small knot with an inch stub of hair sticking out.

As she gave finishing touches she sketched a happy picture of me some years hence when there would be no need to shave round the coiffure and the circular fringe would be allowed to grow; the front bangs would go into the main coiffure and the two tresses would be curled behind the ears to frame the face; the fringe at the back would be trimmed just above the nape of the neck. This hair-style is called *sa-dauk* (meaning probably that the main coiffure is being propped by the bangs at the back). May May Gyi then wiped away the smudges of coconut oil from my forehead and prepared to put *thanakkha* paste on my face. I loved the big circular stone slab, (used for grinding *thanakkha* bark), the face of which is as smooth as satin and it had three stumpy legs about two inches high; the circular face was surrounded by a narrow channel no deeper than an inch. May May Gyi poured a few drops of water on the stone face and rubbed the *thanakkha* bark in swift circular motion. In no time fragrant creamy paste began to appear and flowed into the channel, May May Gyi went on rubbing

putting drops of water occasionally until she thought to be enough.

Thanakkha–The Natural Make-Up

May May Gyi first put three blots of *thanakkha* on my face, one on the forehead, the others on each cheek and spread them all over the face. It was a sweet cooling sensation and May May Gyi impressed me the importance of putting *thanakkha* on my face every morning if I wanted to be a beauty when I grew up. We two were so enraptured by the beauty ritual that we forgot the time until Ba Ba Gyi called, "Hey, you two, are you going to grind off the *kyaukpyin* to bits ...it's nearly time for the monks to come."

Daily Alms-Giving

With May May Gyi, I went to the latticed front room where Ba Ba Gyi was drinking his green tea on the wooden-framed dais with bamboo flooring. On a small table beside the dais were two black lacquer, bowls, one filled with hot steaming rice and the other with boiled peas soaked in sessamum oil. In each bowl was a bronze ladle. May May Gyi had her brown shawl draped over her shoulders, as she always had when she was saying her prayers or when she had to meet the monks. Soon the yellow robed brethren of the Buddha's order came single file in procession of ten or fifteen, their jet black alms bowls cradled in their arms. With downcast eyes they stopped one after another and silently opened the lacquer lids of their bowls to receive the alms-food. May May Gyi ladled out the alms-food into each bowl as they paused and passed. I watched in awe and reverence as the staid yellow-robed figures walked silently away into the long shaded alley speckled with the mild rays of the morning sun.

Monks go on their rounds for alms every morning barefooted. They stop unobstrusively outside the lay men's houses. If someone comes out with alms they would receive it in silence. If no one comes to make an offering, they would go on their way. Of course, there are households like my grandparents who daily wait with alms-food for their coming. Each householder gives what he can, quantity or quality does not matter as much as the spirit in which it is given.

The Buddha allows monks to accept food sent to them at their own place. Monks with well-to-do relatives or donors do not have to go on alms rounds. They can also accept invitation to laymen's houses to partake of alms-food. Although such monks do not need to go on alms rounds, they often do so as an act of humility and also to give the poor people a chance of seeking merit. People who cannot afford to send alms-food to the monastery or invite monks to their own houses, have a chance of gaining merit by making offerings to the monks on their daily rounds. Monks consider it an act of compassion for poor people to go round on alms rounds.

Even people who can afford to invite monks to partake of alms-food in their own houses do not want to miss the daily alms rounds; for this kind of offering alms is considered more meritorious. It is a spontaneous alms-giving without any wish for show or ostentation. There is also a spirit of impersonal and impartial good will; that is why my grandparents who often had monks to have alms-food by invitation, took care to do the daily offering of alms to monks on their rounds.

The day so begun with thoughts and deeds pure and holy, would be filled with sweet wholesome hours, which were reckoned with herbs and flowers. Ba Ba Gyi would potter round the garden happily

tending the trees and shrubs he had planted with his own hands since his retirement from government service. He had no permanent help, but only casual hands who came and worked part time. Some of Ba Ba Gyi's staff who had also retired were glad to come and help, so there never was a dearth of helping hands. Sometimes a family of such people would be staying on the estate so that there would be a man to help Ba Ba Gyi in the garden, a woman to do the household chores and some young person to amuse and attend to the doted grandchild. In those days I felt like a princess and I was treated like one perhaps.

Tales Of A Grand Father

Ba Ba Gyi had an inexhaustible fund of stories, mostly from the Jatakas or the Buddha's birth stories. They were supposed to have been told by the Buddha Himself, revealing remarkable incidents in the long series of His previous existence as a Bodhisatta or the One destined to be the Buddha.

The one I liked best was the story of King Nemi, the Bodhisatta who was so good and virtuous that he was invited by the king of the celestial regions to visit his abode. As he rode on the heavenly chariot, the celestial charioteer explained to him the wondrous sights on the way. This was the favourite theme of the poets of old. Ba Ba Gyi recited the old poems and I shut my eyes as I rested my head on Ba Ba Gyi's lap.

As I listened to Ba Ba Gyi's recitation, I would be carried away on the back seat of King Nemi's chariot soaring on the seraph wings into the airy regions. As a dazzling panorama of pinnacled mansions of gold and crystal, ablaze with heavenly light, unfolded, I would see beautiful goddesses in their bejewelled robes. I would hear the charioteer explain to King Nemi how these maidens won such

existence with their deeds of merit. Sometimes, I would pass the flaming bounds of space and time to spy the secrets of the Abyss, the regions of hell, where the wicked were punished.

More Stories

Even the non-religious stories were based on the belief in the cycle of existences. One of the interesting characters in folklore is the guardian spirit of treasure trove. Such spirits, the story goes, had been human beings; but they had died with a great craving for some hidden treasure. Their craving made them spirits of a somewhat lower order. Because of their attachment to the treasure trove they could not go to the higher regions. They might have done some deeds of merit as humans and such deeds would give them attributes of beauty and supernatural powers.

There is yet another kind of treasure-trove guardians; they are spirits, who, for some reason or other have to guard the treasures enshrined in the pagodas. It is said that the builders of ancient pagodas put kings' ransom of gold and jewels in the secret vaults of the pagodas. People who tried to steal them were supposed to bear the penalty of guarding the treasures when they died. There is not an old pagoda which does not have a treasure trove spirit story, a legend mostly unwritten but handed from father to son.

The town of Sagaing with her numerous old pagodas, the relics of the monarchical days, was rich in legends. The ranges of hills nearby with their old pagodas lent a romantic background to the stories of the treasure trove spirits. I listend to the stories of spirit maidens who, tired of their duties, wishes to be born again in the abode of humans. They had to ask permission from their superiors who granted them

a short lease of life. When such ones were born as humans, they were reminded of their previous existence by their spirit friends, who visited them in their dreams. The spirit friends helped such persons by giving them nuggets of gold to spend during their lease of life.

May May Gyi often told me about 'true stories' of some people who had children who were treasure-trove-spirits reborn. Such children died young, May May Gyi said. After they died they often visited their parents in dreams and told them how sorry they were to leave the human abode. Such stories and characters were part of our daily life. Our daily rituals reminded us of the blessedness of human existence. We humans have the chance to do deeds of merit. If we had been born a treasure-trove-spirit, it would have been very difficult, for example, to give alms to the monks or keep sabbath.

Sabbath Days

Sabbath days are assiduously observed during the lenten months. The lenten months coincide with the monsoon season. Monks are not allowed to travel during Lent, so it is the duty of the faithful laiety to see to their needs; hence the custom of offering Lenten Yellow Robes and candles. Such offerings are made so that the monks should spend the lenten time in quiet meditation or study without having to worry about their needs.

The first day of the Lent, which is the full moon day of Waso month, was an exciting time on my Ba Ba Gyi' estate. Monks would be invited to partake of the alms food and I gazed fascinated at the yellow robes, neatly rolled and encased in tall lacquer cups, each crowned with flowers and streamers and the tall coloured lenten candles. Such holy objects stood against the background of staid yellow-robed monks sitting with

their faces modestly hidden behind the huge palm-leaf fans.

The whole family including servants gathered to bow down to the monks and make the offering. Sometimes the ceremony of lenten offering in made communally, neighbours, pooling their resources. It was the custom of my grandparents to contribute something to the communal offering; but this did not prevent them from inviting monks to take alms-food and offerings of the season on the sacred day, the first day of the Lent.

The lenten week-ends or sabbath days are meant for holy duties. Grown-ups observed the Eight Precepts, which being three more austerities added to the daily observance of the Five Precepts, namely, to avoid taking life, stealing, unlawful sex relations, telling lies and taking intoxicants. Children, though they were not expected to observe the precepts, went along to the monastery where the older folk usually spend the day.

The day before sabbath day May May Gyi would be busy preparing food for the morrow. Ba Ba Gyi would get the choicest fruits ready and I would pluck the prettiest flowers to place before the image of the Buddha at the monastery. The next morning we left home, Ba Ba Gyi carrying the basket of fruits and flowers and May May Gyi with her red lacquer bowl on her head, and I, an impish mite trotting along feeling on top of the world.

The monastery was in the midst of a woodland surrounded by ruined pagodas. It was so cool and pleasant that youngsters liked to go along with the elders to the monastery even if it was to play. The main building was a solid brickwork and it was the abode of the head monk and the older monks. All over the compound were smaller buildings mostly wooden, where the younger monks and novices stayed There were special rest houses for laymen and they were called *Zayats*.

A Day at the Monastery

The main *Zayat* which was a large open hall was teeming with people, each group settling down in a chosen corner. As we went in there would be a general exchange of greetings. Ba Ba Gyi left us after he had seated us in a suitable place. May May Gyi spread the mats kept in the *Zayat* for the use of the congregation and sit down. Fanning herself with her scarf she talked to friends who came to wish her. I gazed longingly at the many-tiered lacquer bowl May May Gyi had brought. I could hardly wait to seee what was inside; for the opening of the casket of delicacies was one of the most exciting events of the day.

At long last, May May Gyi got rid of her last acquaintance and she made ready to open her bowl. With mounting eagerness I watched her take the lid on top; it was the size of a water goblet and it was so used; underneath was a shallow tray with cheroot and matches; "Will you take this cheroot and match to your Ba Ba Gyi, dear?..."Oh. May May Gyi, Ba Ba Gyi is talking to his friends, he is busy, please let me see what is under the tray, I will go to Ba Ba Gyi afterwards." May May Gyi laughed indulgently and went on unveiling the mysteries of the bowl, while I could hardly contain myself with excitement. Underneath the tray was a bigger tray divided into compartments, wherein I saw pickled ginger and tea-leaves, toasted sessamum seeds, peanut crispies, sliced garlic fried and green lettuce leaves; in the next tray were big chunks of fish cooked in soya bean sauce, and in the last tray covering the main bowl were curries whose spicy aroma went right into my hungry little belly. In spite of the indulgences I enjoyed, I could not expect to have a single bite until May May Gyi had put something of each in a big plate to be offered to the monks. For it was

the custom of the people to offer the delicacies they had brought to the monks. Even the poorest and humblest would reserve the best portion of their meal for the monks. Sabbath in the monastery was a day of plenty.

At about nine, all would gather in the main building of the monastery and the head monk received the alms of the day and invested the congregation with the Three Gems and Eight Precepts. All made obeisance to the Three Gems and vowed to keep Precepts for the day. Children were allowed to take part in the ceremony, although they were not expected to keep the Precepts. This participation in a small way at least kept the children quiet for a short time.

The head monk gave a short sermon extolling the deeds of the day. The alms, unless offered specially to an individual monk, would be shared by all. In the sermon, the head monk often stressed the importance of the right spirit in alms giving; one should give alms to monks as ones dedicated to the service of the Order of the Buddha. Even though one gives a morsel of food to a young novice, the deed should be done in this spirit, for then the merit gained would be no less than that that they may be gained by offering a sumptuous meal to a great monk. It is the spirit that matters.

Monks live solely on the offerings of the laiety. They are dedicated to the service of the Buddha by studying the scriptures, and propagating them, and practising meditation to gain insight. Monasteries have so long been seats of culture and even to this day the rural population has depended on the monasteries for their elementary education.

Monks, therefore, have been part of our lives as revered teachers. They constitute the Three Gems—

the Order of the Yellow Robe. They are to guide us in spiritual matters and they are often described as fertile lands where we may sow seeds of merit by offering alms. Monasteries are also places of retreat from worldly affairs. My grandparents loved going there on sabbath days; Ba Ba Gyi usually had an interesting time discussing Buddhist scriptures with other retired gentleman, who, like him had found a useful vocation in the study of the scriptures in their retirement. Sometimes the discussions were spirited and they would often take their arguments to the head monks for decision.

May May Gyi would have a fine time meeting friends and she had an opportunity to do deeds of merit like sweeping the grounds. Children happily helped with chores and were taught the sacred duty of keeping the monastery grounds clean instead of leaving it strewn with litter. Apart from being a happy outing, a day at the monastery is satisfying in many ways, social, cultural and spiritual. These outings are to remain in my treasure of happy memories for I as a child had fun, eating so many delicacies and playing in the woodlands. Late in the afternoon we would come home, the end of a perfect day.

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WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

The Buddha, in His discourses, never slighted the role of women, not only in His personal life, but also in His mission of teaching the Truth He had found. He began His life as a Sakiya prince and he left his parents, wife, Princess Yosodhara, and baby son, and took to the woods to search for the Way, that would lead to the Cessation of Suffering.

One of his first acts, on returning home after His enlightenment, was to speak publicly of Princess Yosodhara's virtue and how she had been good and faithful, not only in this life, but in many other lives as well.

One beauty about stories of the people of the Buddha's time is that some of the incidents in their previous lives were often revealed by the Omniscient Buddha, as occasion demanded. Princess Yosodhara's virtue is illustrated in many stories, which today live not only in literature, but in popular songs, plays and poems.

The Love That Lasted Many Lives

The story of the Buddha-to-be and His mate (the one who became Princess Yosodhara), began eons of years ago, in the time of Dipankara Buddha, the fourth of the twenty-eight Buddhas, who had gone before the one whom we know as the Gotama Buddha.

Dipankara Buddha was coming with a retinue of monks to a town, where a large audience waited for him to pay respects. He stood on the bank of a small stream where no cross-over bridge had been built.

It seems that the Buddha and His monks arrived a little earlier, than expected, because a young hermit named Sumeda was right there with his spade digging up stones to pave a pathway across the stream. The young hermit threw himself prostrate before the Buddha so that the Buddha might walk over him.

Dipankara Buddha declined, saying that the young hermit would one day be a Buddha like Himself. It was a great moment for the young hermit Sumeda, to hear from the lips of the Buddha: "You, my son, will be a Buddha like me....."

There was a general rejoicing to hear the young hermit so honoured. Of course, it would take billions and billions of lives of practising the cardinal virtues of a Boddhisat. It also meant innumerable lives of steadfast courage, determination and sacrifice to attain Buddhahood. The road before him that he must tread was like an endless expanse of burning charcoal, as deep and wide as the universe; the Great One who was determined to be the Buddha must not flinch to tread that fearsome path, until he attained the Goal of Buddhahood.

The young hermit Sumeda, knew only too well what it meant to strive for Buddhahood. He was happy that he was qualified to strive for such a goal. At that time, among the audience, was a young weaver maid, who was filled with admiration for the young hermit. She made an offering of lotus flowers at the Buddha's feet and made a wish: that she might be reborn in all her lives to come as the young hermit's help-mate and companion.

So, it was how it began, the love story, so to say, that lasted not only one life, but many lives.

Female Disciples Of The Buddha

During his ministry of forty-five years, the Buddha spoke as highly of his female disciples as of his monks. There was Maha-pajapati, the Buddha's step-mother, who nursed him as her very own, when his mother died seven days after the birth.

It was due to the lady's entreaty and insistence that the Buddha granted her ordination into the Order and thus founded the Order of Nuns or Theris. Princess Yosodhara was among the first who entered the Order and attained the highest stage of enlightenment.

Today, there is only the order of monks but not of the Theris. Even though there are nuns, they are no longer of the same status as the Order of monks.

The life stories of the Buddha's female disciples also include those of the lay women. Lay disciples, it seemed, played an important role in the propagation of the Truth the Buddha taught.

The Buddha's Counsel On Marriage

There was Lady Visakha, born of a fabulously rich family, later married into a family of the same status, but of a different faith. Her story lives today as an excellent guide to women; because in her story, there is a wealth of wisdom and advice to, perhaps, women of all times.

When Visakha was given in marriage to Migara's son, in a far-away town of Savatti, her father gave her ten admonitions, many of which even to this day, are good pieces of marriage counselling. To quote only two of them, namely: one, carry not the indoor fire outside; two, carry not the outdoor fire inside.

Carry not the indoor fire outside means, if you see any fault in your father-in-law or your husband, say nothing about it when you go to other houses; carry not the outdoor fire inside means, if either men or women in your neighbours' houses speak ill of your father-in-law or your husband, you must not repeat it to your family. This piece of advice holds good any time, anywhere.

In accordance with the custom of the days and the rules of her caste, Visakha went to live with her husband's family in the faraway town. "Whither thou goest, I go, thy people are my people, thy country, my country....." she might say, but not 'thy god, my god' because, her husband's family worshipped the naked ascetics.

Needless to say, Visakha's early years of married life were beset with problems. It was her wisdom and strength of character that finally coverted her husband's family to follow the Buddha's Path. Her father-in-law, Migara, after hearing the Buddha's sermon, was so moved that he declared. "Today henceforth, Visakha is my mother....." She came to be known as the Mother of Migara.

Visakha—Leader Of Female Disciples

Visakha was one of the supporters of the Buddha and his monks. She saw that they had no lack of food, robes, shelter or medicine. She was the leader of the female disciples, and in his discourses with her the Buddha gave blueprints of happiness and success for women.

In one of his discourses the Buddha said:

"Oh, Visakha, to be a success in life, a woman must practise Four Virtues, namely she has the affairs of household and family well in hand, and goes about managing them efficiently, from preparing wool to

household chores. She is skilled and diligent and never idle, always seeking ways and means to do better; she is very capable.

"Secondly, she knows how to look after relatives, friends and slaves. She knows every niche and corner of the household and who is doing what, and whether he does it well or not. She looks after the sick and the ailing and attends to the needy and the poor.

"Thirdly, she does only the things that delight her husband. Fourthly, she looks after the property, land grain, silver and gold, her husband has earned for her and family.

"Such a woman, Visakha, is a success in life."

A Virtuous Woman Who Can Find?

This discourse, perhaps might remind the readers of the lines in the Bible, Proverbs, Chapter 13:

"A virtuous woman who can find?
For her price is far above rubies.
The heart of her husband trusteth in her,
And he shall have no lack of gain.
She seeketh wool and flax.
And worketh willingly with her hands.
She riseth also while it is yet night,
And giveth meat to her household.
She spreadeth out her hand to the poor;
Yea, she reacheth forth her hand to the needy."

Visakha was one of the pillars of the Buddhist society of her times. She was responsible for many rules of conduct for monks and nuns and also for the taming and conversion of many wayward women.

Once Visakha had to look after five hundred young women whose husbands were away from home. The young women gave themselves to drink and staged a scandalous drinking bout, singing and dancing. Visakha took them to the Buddha, who brought them to their senses and established them in mindfulness. They were so tamed.

Visakha lived to a ripe old age. She kept all her life the appearance of a girl of sixteen. It is said that no one could tell who was Visakha, when she sat among her daughters, grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters. O ly when she stood up, her old bones creaked and gave her away.

Visakha's Joy Of Life

Visakha is an example of what great service a lay disciple could do to the cause of Buddhism; she brought happiness and peace among her kinsmen and friends. She had as much capacity for work as for the enjoyment of life.

She could enjoy life with great gusto. Once she built a great monastery and offered it to the Buddha and his monks. She was so filled with a joy of achievement that she walked round the monastery surrounded by her children and descendants, dancing and singing a song:

"When shall I give the gift of a monastery, a pleasing dwelling place plastered with cement and mortar?

"Fulfilled is my desire."

Some of the monks were surprised that Visakha should sing; they thought she had gone mad. The Buddha explained how Visakha in one of her past lives had made a wish that she might be the donor of a monastery to the Buddha and his monks. The Buddha ended his discourse with the words:

"Monks, even as out of a great heap of flowers of various kinds, a skilful garland-maker makes all manner of garlands of flowers even so the mind of Visakha inclines to the doing of all manner of good deeds."

A Woman Like Anyone Else, Anywhere, Any Time

The story of Visakha lives today in the hearts of Buddhists, maybe because, it is a story of a lay-woman closer to people than the Theris or nuns. Visakha is very much a woman like anyone else; she had marriage problems, social difficulties, and sometimes ran into awkward situations with government officials.

Once, her relatives at home sent her costly presents and the customs officials levied an impossible amount of tax on them. She appealed to the king many times, but the king had neither the time nor inclination to see into the matters. All she could do was to take refuge in the Buddha's comforting sermons.

Buddhism: No Anti-Feminism

Buddhism, says a western writer, knows nothing of the persistent anti-feminism of other eastern religions. The most essential task for every Buddhist is to gain insight into the Buddha's teachings, and this could be achieved by anyone, man or woman. Nibbana, or the highest stage of enlightenment is, to many, a long way off, but there are other stages of insight, or in other words, other fruits of the great Truth the Buddha taught to be gained; and such stages are within the reach of laymen and householders. Visakha and many other lay disciples stand as living examples of what a lay Buddhist can achieve.

The story of another lady, Matika-mata, a lady disciple, is a good illustration that there is no discri-

mination of sexes in Buddhism. This lady built a monastery for the Buddha's monks and looked after their needs.

One day, she asked the monks to teach her to practice meditation; the monks taught her verbatim of what the Buddha had taught them.

The Lady Who Went Ahead Of The Monks

Matika-mata practised along with the monks, but she went ahead of them and attained insight while the monks were still struggling. In Buddhism, knowing the method, through reading books or hearing sermons, is one-thing and to practise and see for one-self the light of Truth is another.

Matika-mata, in her newly-attained wisdom, saw that none of the monks had attained insight. She also saw that the monks could not attain insight, unless certain creature comforts were satisfied. So, she saw to their needs in such a way that no sooner had the monks wished for some particular food than their wish was fulfilled in exactly the way that they wished it.

The monks were embarrassed, thinking that the lady must be a mindreader. They put more effort in their practice and finally attained insight. They reported back to the Buddha of their achievement and praised the lady with deep gratitude. Matika-mata, not only went ahead in her achievement, but even helped the monks to gain insight.

The Nuns Or Theris: "Free...Gloriously Free!"

So much for lay disciples. Then come the Theris or nuns, the ladies, who renounced the worldly life to enter the Buddha's Order. As nuns, they might not be as close to worldings as Visakha, but they too started as laywomen. Their life stories are human stories of their struggle to attain inner peace.

The lives of the Theris are found in the verse or psalms uttered by them at the moment of their attaining insight; each psalm is an autobiography in a nut-shell. These verses had been rendered into English by Mrs. Rhys Davids.

Some of the psalms should be battle hymns for those of the Women's Lib movement. There was one lady, who after breaking away from worldly bonds sang out:

"O Free indeed! O gloriously free am I!"

These nuns or Theris had laid down all social position and domestic happiness; they had lost their world; but in exchange, they won the status of an individual free from all fetters.

"How Should A Woman's Nature Hinder Us?"

Once, Mara, the evil spirit, taunted Soma, a high-born lady who had entered the Buddha's Order thus:

"What vantage-ground the sages may attain
is hard
To reach. With her two-finger consciousness
That is no woman competent to gain!"

The evil one meant that a woman's sense went only as far as testing the boiled rice grain with her two fingers to see if it is cooked; so, how could this 'two-finger sense' gain insight? Soma, the Theri, rebuked the evil one:

"How should a woman's nature hinder us?
Whose hearts are firmly set, who ever
move
With growing knowledge onward on the
Path?"

A Poor Ill-Used House-Wife Freed From Drudgery

Not all those who attained insight were rich high-born ladies. Here is a poor ill-used housewife who entered the Order. One day, as she sat in meditation, she attained insight; in her moment of triumph, she cried:

"O Woman well set free! How free I am!
How thoroughly free from kitchen drudgery!
Me stained and squalid among my cooking pots...
Purged now of all my former lust and hate!
I dwell, musing at ease beneath the shade
Of spreading boughs.....oh, but 'tis well with me!"

The Order of Nuns or Theris in the Buddha's time consisted of women from all walks of life, princesses, commoners and courtesans. There was Ambapali, the famous courtesan. She was so beautiful in her youth that there was strife among the princes, each desiring her for his own. At last they solved the problem making her a courtesan.

Song Of A Former Courtesan

Ambapali became the Buddha's lay disciple and she built a monastery for him and monks. Later she entered the Order and she soon attained insight. In her psalm of triumph, she decribed how she gained insight into the Buddha's teaching, namely impermanance and decay:

"Like the coils of a snake the full beauty of the thighs of me.
They with the waste of years are even as stems of bamboo.
So and not otherwise runneth the rune, the word of the Soothsayer."

She went over the decay of her own beautiful body in twenty verses and she ended each statement with the realization that word of the Soothsayer, in other words, the Buddha, who never said otherwise. Her psalms are remniscent of Francois Villon's

The Complaint of a helm-maker grown old:

"Such is the end of human grace;
The arms grown short and hands all thrawn;
Shoulders bowed out of their place;
Breasts all shrivelled up and gone;
The haunches like the paps withdrawn;
The thighs no longer like to thighs,
Withered and mottled like brawn...

Women like Ambapali were once vain of their beauty and success; they had once 'devoured the virtue of many' with 'manifold wiles'; and then came the day when they lost all their beauty. But it was not the end. Because they followed the Buddha's way, they gained something above all beauty, namely insight into the Truth. This, they achieved, by strenuous contemplation on their shrunken body, age-weary, weak and unsightly.

Human Moving Stories

There is a wealth of reading and contemplation in the psalms of the Theris and Nuns, whose stories are human and moving. There is the story of Kondalakesi, who became a wandering ascetic, a disciple of the Jains. She was famous for her intellectual prowess. She went from place to place challenging any sage to engage in intellectual discussions with her. One day, she met one of the Buddha's disciples, who defeated her.

Thenceforth she was converted to the Buddha's way and later, she attained enlightenment. This only

her life story as an ascetic; but she had a colourful past as a laywoman.

Born to wealth and position, she was so proud that she could not find any man whom she could love enough to marry. One day, looking out of the window, she saw a bandit being led to execution. She fell in love with him at first sight and she managed to get him saved by means of bribery, so that she might love and cherish him as her lord and master.

The union did not last long however, for the bandit got tired of her. One day, he asked her to come out with him to a picnic on the hills. Once on top of a lonely hill, he told her to prepare herself for death, for he was going to hurl her over the cliff. Kondalakesi asked for the last favour of embracing him for the last time, which he granted. She held him in her arms in a last embrance, loosened her arms lingeringly and gave him a desperate push over the cliff.

A [redacted] or a spirit-dwelling on the hill saw this and praised her:

"Not in every case is Man wiser ever;
Woman, too, when swift to see, may
prove as clever."

She did not go back home; she became a wandering ascetic, until she came to the Buddha.

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To novitiate our own son...our hearts full of hope and joy that we are going to fulfil the most important duty of parenthood.....

SHINPYU

The time came for our son to be novitiated. I was thrilled by the prospect. We discussed the matter and Ko Latt and I decided we would not make a show of it. Nor could we afford to. Since this occasion was a purely religious one we decided to spend all we could on the monks only. No invitations to friends, no feast, no entertainment. We would feed the monks only. Of course relatives and a few close friends would be asked to come and witness the novitiation.

Both Ko Latt and I had never felt the importance of being parents so much as when we made plans for our son's novitiation ceremony. First we had to put him under a monk to receive the necessary instructions. Daw Daw (Aunty) took us to a monastery. Once again I entered a monastery with a heart full of hope and joy for we were going to fulfil the most important duty of parenthood.

The monastery was surrounded by shady trees and its spacious grounds were well kept; the building were old and solid yet unpretentious. It was eight in the morning and we saw the monks coming back for their daily alms-round. Daw Daw told us that the monks staying there had to go on alms-receiving rounds every morning in the same old-fashioned way I had known in my childhood. The alms-round, I understood, was done more in the spirit of humility and compassion for the people than of necessity.

The people were being given thereby a chance to do deeds of merit by giving a morsel out of their daily food to the monks.

The presiding monk received us kindly and we told him we wanted our son to be given pre-novitiation instruction. Khin Maung Win was put under the care of a monk who gave him some Pali and Burmese passages to learn. Since my youngest brother and Daw Daw's son were going to be novices, all three were to go to the monastery every morning. My young brother and Daw Daw's son both of whom were about fifteen had already been novitiated. It was not unusual for a male child to become a novice more than once, but there is yet another great occasion for a son...the *upasampada*...ordination at the age of twenty. It is considered a great privilege to have a son.

In the weeks that followed we talked of nothing else. We had to make our son, now nine years old; realise the importance of being a novice. I told him the story of the young princeling Rahula, Buddha's own son. I never realised its beauty until I presented the story to my nine-year-old son. We showed him young novices who followed older monks as they went on their morning rounds. We pointed out the young boys in the yellow robes with black bowls cradled in their arms after the fashion of the older monks. Their eyes were downcast, their faces benign. Some two thousand five hundred years ago Rahula, the seven-year-old novice had followed in the footsteps of the Buddha, his Father. For seven years the young prince had waited for the Father who had left him when he was a baby in his mother's arms. He had listened to his mother Yasodhaya's story of how one sad night his Father Prince Siddhartha had left the palace on horse-back attended only by his faithful groom. Where had his father gone? Why had he gone? These, the little boy

wanted to know. Yasodhaya told him how the faithful groom had come back with the news that the Prince had gone into the forest after changing his princely attire for a yellow robe. Why had he done this? He had gone into retirement to seek the way out of pain, suffering and death; when he had found it he would come back and teach men the Truth he had found.

After seven years He came back with his head shorn, robed in coarse yellow cloth, with the black bowl cradled in his arms. He walked, with downcast eyes, the street he once rode in grandeur attended by foot-soldiers, mounted guards, elephants and chariots. His father King Suddhodana was filled with shame and anger. He chided Him for disgracing the Sakkya warrior race to which he belonged. The Buddha answered that He no longer belonged to the Sakkya race but to the race of the Buddhas before Him and the Buddhas after. A strange meeting it was; a great King, proud and mighty in warrior-mail meeting his son in hermit-raiment. The son had become greater than the mightiest of kings, for He had become the greatest Teacher. One who would teach the way out of sorrow, suffering, pain and death.

Happy yet tearful was the meeting of Rahula's mother and the Buddha. The whole palace was agog with the news of the Buddha's acceptance of His father's invitation to come and partake of alms-food at the palace. When the meal was over everybody was there to make obeisance to the Buddha except the ever-adored one Yasodhaya. She was standing fast by her conviction that the once beloved would be moved to come to her not forgetting mutual obligations. Then she would make her obeisance to her heart's content. The Buddha had prescience that if He did not go to Yasodhaya she would die of grief. Handing his begging bowl to

the King father and accompanied by two disciples He repaired to Yasodhaya's chamber. There He sat Himself down on the seat of honour set ready for Him. Yasodhaya was at His feet in all haste and clasping His two ankles in her two hands she pressed her face on His feet and smothered them in her tears. Thus she made obeisance to the Buddha, her beloved lord. For some time the Buddha stayed at His father's city teaching His law to the people. One day Rahula's mother told him to go to his Father and claim his heritage. The young prince went to his Father the Buddha and said, "Father, give me my heritage." The Buddha put Rahula in the care of His disciple, Sariputra. Rahula was given the Yellow Robe. This was his glorious heritage.

Now our nine-year-old son was going to receive the heritage the Buddha had given to his own son two thousand five hundred years ago. Our son was to be the Buddha's own kin; we were giving him up into the holy Order of the Yellow Robe. It is then that a Buddhist marriage, which in itself has no place in religion, finds its highest fulfilment as the means of rendering unto the Order the flesh of one's flesh, the bone of one's bone.

We were up in the clouds during the days of planning and shopping. Yellow robes and all the paraphernalia of novices were got ready. On the appointed day, we left home for the monastery, Ko Latt carrying the yellow robes, Daw Daw and the girls carrying gifts for the monks. Khin Maung Win was dressed in silk longyi and long-sleeved shirt. Since we were cutting down on the show, we had no princely dresses: no horseback ride and gilded umbrella for him.

We gave the hundred and fifteen monks in the monastery their morning meal. It was an unforgetable sight; the yellow-robed monks partaking of the morning meal. I could only see their austerity and humility as Sons of the Buddha. After the morning duties were done, the boy and his two companions had their heads shaved. Ko Latt and I held a snow-white sheet to receive his hair which we buried near a pagoda. Then the boys were led to the monk who was to be their teacher. Each with a roll of yellow robe cupped in both hands, they begged permission in Pali to be novitiated. The monk invested them with the robes. We picked up our son's worldly attire and there he stood looking pure and serene in yellow robes, yet so young and so tender. My eyes were filled with tears of joy. How could our love, Ko Latt's and mine, bring forth something so sublime? We prostrated ourselves at his feet and paid obeisance to him, who was no longer our son but the Son of the Buddha.

The boy stayed in the monastery for nine days during which he had to keep the ten precepts, one of which was to abstain from solid food after the hour of noon. Naturally we were worried about whether the boy could do without his evening meal. He was given lime juice in the evening and he took to his new way of life quite easily. In a place where no one ate in the afternoon it was easy to adapt himself. Going without the evening meal eliminates all the work and fuss and leaves more time for study and meditation. Young people keep fit and strong enough as a result of this act of self-denial.

Every morning our son came with the older novices, each carrying his black bowl. We put rice and curry and delicacies into the bowl. Since the novitiation, our son had become another person altogether. Apart from respecting his shorn head, the yellow robe and a new Pali name, we had to speak to him in honorific terms. We no longer called him

by his layman's name and he addressed us 'Lay-sister' or 'Lay-brother.' We were no longer his parents, just lay-people, for he had become a Son of the Buddha. All this brought us a strange feeling of ecstasy.

Our son's novitiation brought back the sense of wonder I had known in my younger days. The monastery where he stayed was somewhat like the ones I had seen when I was a child. The monks were staid and quiet and spent their days in meditation and the study of the Buddhist scriptures.

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PART SEVEN

THE SPLENDOUR THAT WAS PAGAN

The ancient city of Pagan, as it stands today with many of its architectural beauties still intact, but many more in all stages of decay, is not a mausoleum of the long dead past. It is alive. The pagodas are still part of the everyday life of the Buddhists who revere them.....

THE SPLENDOUR THAT WAS PAGAN

Since the days back in nineteen twenties, when I went along with my grandfather, U Pe of Mandalay, on his archaeological expeditions to Pagan, I have fallen in love with the city and her people of the past.

He once showed me a terra-cotta plaque with a Pali inscription, which he said, was written by the hand of Anawrahta, king of Pagan in the eleventh century. He made an exact copy of the incription on paper and read out to me the name and title of the king. I cherished the piece of paper for as long a time as an eleven year old kid could; for who would not be thrilled to own an autograph of a king of nine thousand years ago?

Grandfather spoke of historical characters as if they were our next door neighbours. He once described Anawrahta as *kalatha* king with a wander-lust. The term *kalatha* is used to describe wild, boisterous young men, or men about the town. Grandfather called Anawrahta a *kalatha* king, because of his shrewdness and insight in the affairs of the state. When he said that Anawrahta became a real person, not a cold printed name in a text book.

Trudging through the hot dusty lanes of Pagan, waylaid by thorns and brambles, grandfather made me forget the discomforts by transporting me to the days of the past when the very ground I stood on trembled with the thumb of the elephants' tread and horses' hooves and the air was filled with the war-cries of the spear-slinging heroes who rode on their backs.

Even though the demands of adult life took me farther away from my youthful dreams, the memory of the days when the splendour that was Pagan opened out to me never forsook me entirely. Every trip I made to Pagan on my hard earned holidays excited me more than ever and the urge to make those people alive became stronger.

From Prologue

ANAWRAHTA OF BURMA

(A historical novel of old Pagan)

A LETTER TO MY GRANDCHILDREN

Will you ever know what you have lost?
My dear grandchildren,

Tonight your grandfather and I have just come back from a dinner, where we met journalists. They were talking of the latest news, that had just come over the wires—the news of the earthquake that destroyed many of the old pagodas of Pagan.

I cannot go to sleep until I have written this letter to my children, because only a few days ago, I said: "I'm looking forward to the day when I can take my grandchildren to Pagan." I thought I would wait two years when you twins will be nine so that you will enjoy the trip all the more.

One day, my dears, you will understand what tonight means to your old granny—what a great personal loss it is to me, and to you too. Oh, will you ever know what you have lost, my children?

To me it is a dream lost—a dream that one day I might hold your little hands and lead you through the great wonderland and which was our proud heritage. I have dreamt of doing the same thing that my grandfather did to me half a century ago.

My dear ones, your great-great-grandfather was a well known scholar and archaeologist who was responsible for the discoveries and translations of the ancient city of Pagan. Of course I did not know that when I was young. I only knew that he loved Pagan and he taught me to love Pagan too.

I hope, one of these days, your father will tell you of the wonderful trip twenty years ago, to the wonderland of Pagan- I tried then to work up the magic of my younger days with my grandfather for him. I hope I had been able to give him enough to pass it on to you—the heritage of wonder and pride.

Tonight, my heart is full and heavy with sorrow. Words are inadequate to express my feelings. Every heart beat says: "Lost, lost, lost." Will you ever know what you have lost, my children? Will you ever know what Pagan means to you? Shall I ever be able to teach you to love Pagan?

Perhaps, one day, you may read ANAWRAHTA OF BURMA, your old granny's love song to Pagan and I hope you will learn to love and take pride in Pagan and its glories—but for the present "Lost, lost, lost."

Your Granny

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LOOK YE THE STARS SHINE STILL

Even as the pall of grief falls over us, happy memories of the days we spent in the great wonderland of Pagan shine through the darkness like the stars. The memories bring tears, but they are not wholly of sorrow; for there is a joy, the joy that we experience when we see something that is glorious and sublime.

I retrace, in my mind, the steps of pilgrimage I had taken as a child in a perpetual state of wonder bubbling with questions; and as an adult with an insatiable thirst to find out more about the marvel that was Pagan.

This journey of the mind is one through the vale of tears, but there comes in the end the realization of the Buddha's teaching—impermanence. The magnificient stupas themselves are not above this law. Perhaps it is the message that is driven home by the tragic catastrophe.

Men's faith in the teachings of the Buddha had inspired them to raise these beautiful stupas, but perhaps, it is not so much their physical beauty as the spiritual that should be meaningful to us.

It is an ancient Pagan that the teachings of Theravada Buddhism found its footing and spread all over Burma—a unifying force that reached all the indigenous races of the country. For the first time in history, our people were freed from fear and superstition.

Man became an exalted being; the Buddha was a man enlightened; all other beings, spirits and gods were his subordinates to help men in their mission to bring peace and happiness through the teachings of the Buddha. Men did not have to grovel in fear of gods and spirits.

Human dignity was enhanced; man became individuals each in his own right to seek strength and Nibbana within his own self. This is (or was) seen in the Shwezingon pagoda; all around the stupa are statues of *nats* or spirits who were once worshipped by the peoples of different ethnic groups. Each was given a niche, for they too have become the disciples of the Buddha and they too were entitled to the benefits of the merit gained by the people's good deeds.

There is to be seen the spirit of tolerance, freedom of worship and above all, respect for man. Anawrahta began the construction of the stupa and it was Kyanzittha who finished it. The story says that the king of the celestials and his retinue helped in the building of the stupa, by laying bricks. "Men and celestials lay rows of bricks by turns—"people say even today.

There is the Ananda temple built by Kyanzittha—well, I could go on and on, All these beauties are subject to decay, only the words of the Buddha can shine for ever with immutable truth

The essence of the Buddha's teaching was given by Assaji, the youngest of the five disciples who heard the Buddha's first sermon on the full moon day of Waso, which incidentally falls this week—in a stanza: "Of all things that proceed from a cause, of the cause the Tathagata hath told, and also how things cease to be, this too the mighty monk hath told."

And later a version of the same was found on a terra-cotta tablet: "Of all things that proceed from a cause, of the cause the Tathagata hath told. And also how these things cease to be, this is the creed of the great king Anawrahtha."

So, these are the words to be enshrined in our hearts, to give us strength, and also to free us from fear, and to enhance our human dignity.

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PAGAN, A CHALLENGE

The destruction of the old city of Pagan by the recent earthquake is a challenge to the Burmese of today: "Your ancestors of long ago had built the beautiful stupas, the architectural wonders with their bare hands. Now with your technical know-how and the most sophisticated tools, see what you can do to restore your cultural heritage."

In my mind's eye, I can still see the glory that was Pagan with the eyes of a child full of wonder and with a heart full of love. Words fail and I will not even try to describe what I see, the beauties now lost. No, I say firmly to myself, no more emotional outbursts, enough is enough. Instead I try to contemplate on things other than destruction.

Even to this day, people use the Burmese idiom, 'it rains gold and silver'. It is an expression that describes the affluent days of the Pagan era. There are legends of how an alchemist succeeded in making 'a philosopher's stone' which brought wealth to the whole country. As the story goes, everyone became rich, so much so that 'even a widow can build a pagoda'.

Legend or no legend, the evidence is there—that Pagan at a certain period of history did enjoy an affluent age; this happened everywhere. Take for instance, Italy in the renaissance period; with the fall of Constantinople the ancient civilization of the Greeks found its home in Italian cities.

It was then that rich and powerful people found good use of their wealth in patronizing fine arts. There are genuine lovers of art like the Medicis and also others who just followed the vogue of the day. At any rate fine arts flourished.

So, when it rained gold and silver in Pagan of old, people just built stupas...kings, queens, lords and commoners, all of them. Pagan had its source in Buddhism and looked to the teachings of the Buddha for inspiration. It was a great period of creativity; it was a time of grandeur.

Because the men of ancient Pagan embraced Buddhism, they expressed their creativity and human desire to leave traces of their grandeur behind in building stupas. In doing so, they not only left for posterity objects of beauty but also their testament of faith in the teachings of the Buddha.

One thing that stands out in the whole scheme of things is that the people of Pagan, whether they were kings or commoners did not leave their likenesses or magnificient tombs. The statue of King Kyanzittha (perhaps the only statue of a king) is represented kneeling with his hands raised in prayer, a posture that bespeaks of humility and attestation of his faith in the Buddha's way.

The people of old Pagan did not glorify their personal power in the building of those memorials. They only expressed their faith in the teachings of the

Buddha; their own selves and their worldly achievements were not important, since the paths of glory lead but to the grave. No storied urns or animated busts for them, since all must turn to dust in time. The only thing that shall shine through is their faith.

It is their faith and their inspiration that made them give away their wealth towards the building of the stupas. It is gratifying to see even today how generously and spontaneously contributions are flowing in towards the repairing of the stupas. I rejoice wholeheartedly in the deed of the many who are giving all they can...thadu, thadu, thadu.

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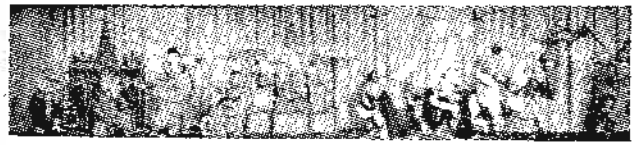
PART EIGHT

PERFORMING ARTS



In Burmese drama, it is 'a kingdom for a stage and princes to act': There is a touch of royal in the nomenclature of the performers: the epithet 'mintha', the leading man, is synonymous with prince, and 'minthami', the prima donna means also princess. These appellations are still in use in reference to the film stars.

BURMESE MARIONETTE THEATRE

No pagoda festival in Burma is complete without a marionette show. Festivals come after paddy is harvested and when farmers can look forward to a short spell of leisure. What is more, they have hard cash to spend.

The stubble plains where people had, some time before, worked hard at harvesting, is now a scene of revelry. Caravans of bullock carts loaded with pilgrims, and some of them carrying wares to sell, camp under the huge tamarind trees.

On the river, side barges are moored and people gather round to see what products they have to sell. The most interesting of them all is the barge carrying the marionette troupe.

Soon the festival ground is filled with people. You walk along the line of stalls where you can buy products from far and near—glazed earthenware, handwoven cottons, bamboo and cane baskets, mats, woodwork, boxes made of toddy palm leaves, which come in all sizes from the smallest toy things to huge packing cases; their outsides are woven in attractive designs.

The festival has all the trimmings of a trade fair: ferris wheels, merry-go rounds, and of course, marionette shows. The stage for the show is built of bamboo. Tradition decrees that it is not built with its back to the village. It slopes slightly towards the audience who sit on the ground; they bring their own mats. It is an open air show.

Marionette Stage

The stage is bare except a green branch stuck in the middle against the white backdrop about two and half feet high and a *kadaw-pwe*, which is an arrangement of two bunches of bananas and green coconut on a tray decorated with flowers wrapped in green banana leaves.

Kadaw-pwe literally means an offering of respect; it is an important item in any Burmese celebration both in family circle and public.

Ritual Dance

The show opens with the ritual dance performed by a female marionette to pay respects to the guardian spirits of the area. It is a formality to pay respects to 'those to whom respect is due'; through this dance the troupe requests the powers that be to waive away all the dangers that may be lurking on the festival grounds. The ritual dance is exciting and boisterous; the marionette in red and pink costume dances to the booming of the orchestra. The opening bars of the song call for a cresendo and connisseurs judge the vocal virtuosity of the troupe by the way the ritual song is sung.

The orchestra men also show their artistry and prowess that match the song and dance of the votaress, the manipulator of which has to take the challenge and give an exhibition of his dexterity. In this way the ritual dances serves as a 'trailer' for the audience.

Primeval Forest Scene

After the ritual dance comes the dance of the animals and mythical beings in the primeval forest. It is also supposed to be the beginning of the world. The orchestra preludes the scene with a boisterous music which symbolizes chaos before the earth came into being.

The first to appear is the horse; according to the Buddhist concept of the universe, the first planet to appear on the firmament is *Asavani*, the galaxy of stars shaped like a horse's head. The coming of the horse therefore tells the audience that the earth and the sky have come into being out of the chaos.

After the horse comes the elephant, stepping with grace and dignity. Soon the stage is full of animals, tiger on the prowl, birds in the air, and the monkey doing his antics.

Mythical beings like the dragon, ogre and zawgyi (demigod or magician) also come in and dance. They lend an air of fantasy, glamour and the mysterious beauty of the wilds.

This scene is a favourite with children.

The Play: Scenery and Props

Scenic background, until recently is not used because marionettes show better against the white background. The props used are not many: tree branch to convey the idea of a forest, the throne for the king's audience hall and the couch for the boudoir.

The play invariably opens with the king holding court. Sometimes this scene is hardly part of the story. The court scene however tells the audience that after the primeval forest scene, human society with law and order has come into being. The king and the

ministers, in the course of their conversation, reveal where the action of t e play is to take place and who are to be the main characters. In this way the scene 'lays the foundation of the plot' as the saying goes.

One thing about the Burmese marionette show is that its strength lies in the lyrical beauty and the epic grandeur of the dialogue which is rendered in song, arias, recitatives and commentaries in rhymed prose supported by the orchestra.

Usually it takes two to present a marionette on stage, one to recite or sing and the other to manipulate the strings in co-ordination. Sometimes an artiste might be able to do both but such ones are rare.

Importance Of The Court Scene

There is a saying that no play is complete without the royal court scene with the king and ministers, but it is a fact that the scene is so boring to the audience. It is, however, considered auspicious to open the play with this scene. In the colonial days, it was a reminder of Burma's sovereignty which had been lost. The glorious music of the orchestra and the song in praise of the king and his realm awakened nostalgic memories in the old who passed them on to the young.

The Duet Dance

After the court scene comes the much waited *hna-par-thwar*, the duet dance which is a 'love scene'. The scene does not do much to help the story move forward: it only represents the two leading characters in the play in a state of lyrical happiness.

The scene calls for the artiste's mastery of singing, elocution and histrionics and the co-ordination of marionettes to the texts of the songs and recitatives, and the music of the orchestra.

All-Night Performance

The marionette show goes on all through the night. This often makes a non-Burmese ask in surprise: "How is it possible? Why all night?" The Burmese in turn are surprised by the question. As long as they remember, the shows go on all night; never mind how or why.

Every now and then some well-meaning people make attempts to shorten the duration of the show but with little success. Some say that if the show finishes in the middle of the night, it is not easy to get transport home. In rural areas, people come from other villages over long distances and they come prepared to stay the whole night. Others say that the Burmese love fun, music and entertainment in such a prodigious manner that they are content with no less than whole night entertainment.

Leisure and easy-going ways may have something to do with this. Today, even though leisure is much curtailed, all-night shows go on and they are enjoyed not only in small towns and rural areas but in cities too.

The Magic of the Marionettes

It is often a wonder to many that people can sit through the night and watch the antics of the marionettes. In small towns and villages they still do, although there is much less of this kind in cities The enchantment of the marionettes is still dominant.

The Burmese go to a *pwe*, or theatre, and relax; they look forward to entertainment. As they settle down in their seats in an open-air marionette show, they have with them peanuts, crispies and all sorts of delicacies to chew as they talk; never mind if they

miss some of the dialogues. It is just the king and his ministers talking 'shop.'

The dance of the animals, a delight to children enthralls the adults as well, even more so, because they can understand the song and the music that accompanies each character.

As the *nhe* (oboe) pipes eeriely like the winds howling through the dark caverns and the boom of the big drum crashes into the air, the ogre in dark green costume steps out, graceful and lithe, and yet awesome like an animal on the prowl; he is handsome if in a grotesque way, ruthless and powerful, half-god, half animal. His dance steps, like master strokes of an artist's brush bring out all the qualities of his personality.

Zawgyi, the magician or the demigod, resplendent in red flaming dress is full of vigour; he leaps and flies; he is a symbol of power, the one who with his magic wand can do wonders. The *zawgyi* marionette is considered the most complicated and difficult to manipulate. The one who handles the *minthami*, the prima donna, also does the *zawgyi* too. It is not easy to say which is more difficult to manipulate, prima donna or *zawgyi*. The one who does the prima donna has to know the steps of other marionettes too. Sometimes the story says that the heroine is to be disguised as a *zawgyi*; she is helped by a good spirit who thinks that she takes that disguise for safety. So there it is—the prima donna must convey the idea of being a *zawgyi*. Since change of costume is not "done" in the marionette theatre, the prima donna remains herself. She cannot fly or leap like a real *zawgyi*. As the orchestra play the music of the *zawgyi* dance, she manages to create the illusion of her disguise by doing a few steps and gestures that are characteristic.

Customs and Traditions

Marionette theatre has strict rules laid down by traditions. Dolls, especially the leading characters must be made of *yamanai* wood (clogwood) and each must be made to be a replica of a human down to the smallest detail. Even animals must be made that way.

There is never change of roles; each retains once and for all the character he or she is to play, be it king, spirit, ogre or *zawgyi*. Each puppet is treated with the respect it is due.

Marionettes are kept in two separate chests, called the Right Chest and the Left Chest. King prince, princess, ministers, hermit and all the 'senior' ones are kept in the Right Chest; the 'lesser' ones, like animals, clowns are put away in the Left Chest.

These are specific rules of entrances and exits. Those who are supposed to have super-normal powers like the *zawgyi* and the spirits enter the stage 'flying' over the white backdrop and exit the same way. The elephant enters from the right, the tiger from the left, so on and so forth.

Spiritual Kinship

The marionettes fashioned to represent humans or spirits are very close to their manipulators. Hours before the show starts the artiste sits with his marionette on his lap, prinking it and even talking to it.

There is an idom among the performing artistes—'to be possessed by *lamaing* spirit,' who is the patron of performing artistes. They believe that they can give the best performance only when they are possessed by *lamaing*.

With the marionetteers, it is even more important, because the puppet they manipulate too must

be possessed; the two must be one in spirit, the artiste must give something, nay, perhaps all of himself to the marionette. That is why manipulators keep close to their puppets even in non-performing hours.

Each marionette is a complete embodiment of the role he enacts, king or ogre or *zawgyi*, in every inch of its whole visible appearance. To the manipulator it is a real thing and he himself is the creator, who can give life to the marionette.

The Aura of Mystery: strong cultural roots

There is an aura of mystery in the Burmese marionette theatre; taboos, conventions and superstitions. Maybe it is because this art springs from strong cultural roots.

It was in 1776, during the reign of Singu Min. that an officer in charge of performing arts, U Thaw, was commissioned by the king to create a new art form.

By that time, Burmese drama with its accompaniment of music, song and dance had already been enriched by the Thai artistes who were part of the trophies of the Burmese campaigns to Thailand.

Masques were performed to enact the story of Ramayana in the king's court, but commoners had only folk music and dances, hardly any drama. Perhaps the marionette theatre first brought the finer form of dramatic art to the common people.

A Compromise

Tradition says that the marionette theatre came into being as a compromise between man's need for entertainment and the Burmese sense of propriety.

It was but three or four decades ago that it was considered highly improper for a man and a woman who were not a married couple to make a twosome in public. Demonstration of affection in public, so much as holding hands even between married couples, is one of the things that 'was not done.'

All the same, people need love and romance, not only in songs, poems and stories but also in audio-visual action. There is also the need for public information and instruction, especially on the teachings of the Buddha.

This ran into problems: one, performers are reluctant to play the role of holy persons, like the Bodhisatta (the One who is to be the Buddha), who is often an important character in plays; two, Burmese sense of propriety would not allow man and woman to act as married couple or lovers on the stage: this would be even more frowned upon when the performers were not married to each other.

U Thaw's plan

U Thaw, therefore, planned a marionette troupe which called for strict discipline as laid down by the teachings of the Buddha and at the same time which allowed as much asthetic freedom as possible for the performers. Every marionette must have a special meaning and every scene was meant not only to entertain but to also instruct.

U Thaw decided to have 28 marionettes for the troupe, according to the Buddhist analysis, the physical body of a living being is a component of 28 material phenomena. Perhaps, U Thaw wanted to establish the fact that his creation of the marionette troupe was firmly based on the Buddha's teachings.

The 28 marionettes were:

Ritual dancers	2	King	1
Horse	1	Prince	1
Elephants (one white and one black)	2	Princess	1
		Elder Prince	2
		Brahman	1
Tiger	1	Hermit	1
Monkey	1	Celestials	2
Parakeet	1	Old Woman	1
Dragon	1	Clowns	2
Ogres	2		
Zawgyi	1		
Ministers	4		

Forerunners Of The Regular Theatre

Marionette characters are considered the forerunners of the regular theatre. Burmese drama is deeply in the tradition of the marionette theatre. The same set of characters appears on the regular stage with human performers.

It has become a tradition that living men and women should dance as though pulled by strings just as the marionetteer's highest achievement is to make his puppet dance like a living human being. One of the well known dance steps for living dancers is 'puppet's quick run'.

Carl Hagemann is quoted in *Puppets and Automata*, "The puppets play better than real actors; they make a much better theatre than men. Their performances are more powerful artistically; because of the absence of curbing humanity they are presented symbolically with the highest intensity of expression; all reality has vanished."

Not Mechanics But Art

In most marionette plays in all parts of the world, and especially in Burma, very little attempt

is made to persuade the audience that the puppets are anything but what they are. In the Burmese marionette stage, the white backdrop is about waist high and the manipulators are visible to the audience.

Perhaps the god-like attitude the manipulators assume towards the creatures helps them succeed in making the audience forget their presence altogether. A mysterious power cast a spell over children and grown-ups alike so that they are bewitched into seeing living creatures of flesh and blood. The spectator sees only what he wants to see and as his imagination makes its contribution, he sees much more.

The manipulators pour themselves, emotions and all, into the puppets and they are one possessed by *lamaing* as believed by the performing artistes. It is their ART.

Artistes Who Do Not Give Up

Today Burmese marionette theatre admittedly has lost much of its artistry and popularity; decadence has set in and many are already tolling the knell. As an organized form of entertainment, it has lost its popularity in urban areas.

But the spirit dies hard. Once in a while we hear over the radio a veteran marionetteer giving an exposition of his art. There are today many artistes scattered all over the country, each holding fast to his art and puppet.

You go into their humble homes and talk to them, and they bring out of a huge balsa wood box, an old rag bag, and lo and behold there comes out a prince or a princess or a *zawgyi* or an orge.

Life-like puppets bedecked in silks, satins and sequins contrast pathetically with their impoverished but ever smiling masters.

Maybe marionette stage in Burma is not what it used to be, but its art still lives in the hearts of the people and the artistes.

(Note: "At the end of the last century Burmese marionette gave a special performance at the Folies-Bergeres, in Paris, which was received with great enthusiasm. A magnificent, complete puppet theatre from Burma is in the possession of the Ethnographische-Museum in Munich."

(*Puppets and Antomata* by Max von Boehn)
Dover Publications, Inc.
New York.

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THE MAGIC OF BURMESE ZAT PWE

Burmese *zat pwes* have not lost their hold on us in spite of the invasion of movies and other forms of entertainment. One essential feature in the Burmese *zat pwe* is that the audience must be prepared for a 'complete suspension of disbelief'. We do not look for realism on the Burmese stage. The dance, song and music build a fantastic world of make-believe. That is why the *zat pwe* cannot be appreciated when one tends to be coldly rational.

The purpose of *zat pwe* is to entertain and to convey a few truths for us to live by. Most of the stories enacted are from the Buddha's birth stories whose moral values are universally recognized.

Decades ago, people from rural areas owed their education to monasteries and *zat pwes*, in that order. Many of the great artistes of the Burmese stage learned literature in monasteries and they gave the audience nuggets of wisdom through their songs and lines spoken on the stage.

Like all dramatic arts, the Burmese stage has its own stock in trade, characters like *belu* (ogre), *zawgyi* (a demi-god with miraculous powers), *nat* (celestial being), *naga* (sea dragon) and *yathe* (hermit). There are also dramatic situations that help to symbolise certain abstract ideas.

Belu (Ogre)

Belu, *naga*, *zawgyi*, and *nat* are colourful characters that are sheer delight to the audience. The *belu* dance is a poetic composition of grace, ruthless virility and elusive swiftness, the one that fills the audience with awe and admiration. The *zawgyi* dance is colourful, thrilling, and full of gusto and bounce.

Zaw-gyi (Demi-god With Miraculous Powers)

One does not naturally pause to think if there is such a creature as *belu* or *zawgyi*. One does not put poetry under a microscope. These mythical dances are to be enjoyed, not to be rationalised.

Many of the dramatic stories are not credible; for instance, the story of the princess born out of a lotus bud. It is neither rational nor scientific; but who wants to be that, when we are watching the beautiful princess come out of the lotus bud singing:

At the soft tender caress of zephyr
The *padonma* lotus petals unfold,
And I, the goddess maid, come forth...
ရွှေပဒုံ လွှာအချပ်ကိုလေ၊
လေအဟုန် လာ၍တော်စဉ်က၊
ကညာနတ် ထွက်ခဲ့တယ်။

Princess Born Out Of A Lotus-Bud

The princess born out of a lotus bud symbolises the flawless virtue of the princess and her ethereal beauty. The whole scene with all the dance and music is a hymn to womanhood.

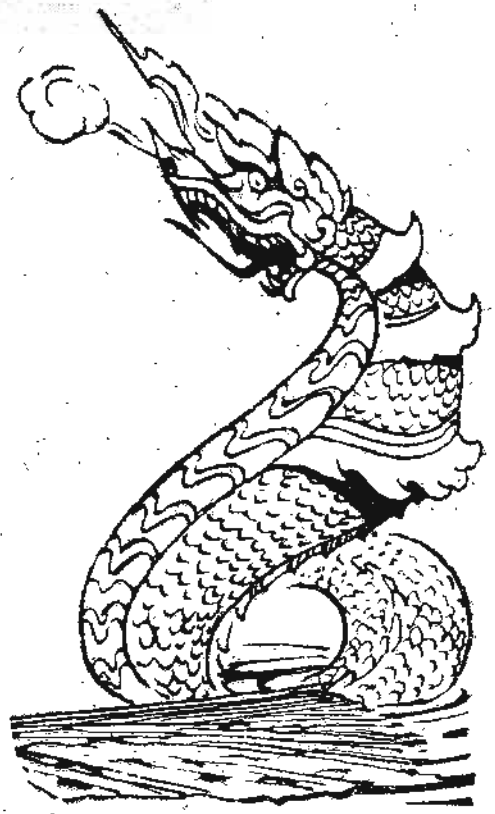
One of the popular scenes in Burmese *zat* is the seduction of a virtuous woman by either a *belu* or a *zawgyi*. In Rama *zat*, the princess is left alone in the forest with her husband's command that she must not go beyond the line he has drawn on the ground. Then the *belu* comes in the guise of a holy man and tells the princess he will not accept her offerings unless she comes out of the bounds her husband has marked. It is presumed that the *belu* cannot cross the line drawn on the ground and take her away.

To the rational mind, it sounds ridiculous that anyone cannot cross the line drawn on the ground. But then, the line symbolises the bound of propriety that a virtuous wife should not overstep. When the princess unwillingly goes beyond that bound, she exposes herself to the evil machinations of the *belu*.

This is meant to be a warning to women. In the days of our grandmothers there were few books to read, no women's magazines, no lonely hearts column. *Zat pwes* were the medium of their education.

It is a stroke of genius that the villain who tempts the virtuous heroine is either a *belu* or a *zawgyi*. The drama of conflict is between virtue (personified by the heroine) and sin (personified by the *belu* or *zawgyi*). Sin is not represented in a repulsive form, in which case, it might be easier for the heroine to resist, but it will weaken the dramatic force.

When sin is personified in the attractive figure of either a *belu* or a *zawgyi* conflict becomes more intensive. In representing sin as colourful characters the dramatists must have been carried away by their down emotions. When Milton presented Satan he



Naga (Dragon)

could not help adding colourful strokes that came very near glorifying the villain. It is human to be attracted by the glamour of sin, as moths are by the glare of light.

Sin appears on the stage virile, graceful, ruthless, and full of dignity like *belu*, or sometimes

colourful, mysterious, playful and teasing like the *zaw-gyi*. The resistance of the virtuous woman against such an antagonist heightens the drama.

One of the mythical characters that seems to be most unsatisfactory is the *nat* without whom no play is complete, even though he does not seem to do anything at all. His function is, however, as indispensable in Burmese drama as the Chorus is in Greek drama. They are commentators, not emotionally involved in the plot.

The play moves on, its characters loving, hating, laughing, weeping, everyone tossed by the waves of passion, but there has to be a character who is like a rock even though everyone around him has gone berserk. Such a character in Greek plays is the Chorus, usually represented as Father Time.

Our *nats* and hermits do the same function as the Chorus, but they are more attractive. Unlike the Chorus they do not stand apart from the plot. They participate in the plot but do not interfere with it.

The example of the part played by a *nat* or a hermit can be illustrated by a stock dramatic plot. A baby prince is left in a burial ground, because there is a war, going on between his father and another king. The baby is picked up by a poor goat-herd and brought up as his own son. Since the next scene must show the baby as sixteen-year-old something has to be done to bridge the passage of time. So in between the two scenes, a hermit or a *nat* comes out and comments on the evils of war and greed and soliloquises on the fate of the young prince in the house of a poor goat-herd; to make things easy for him, the *nat* or the hermit bathes the baby in a magic pond. And lo and behold, a young prince rises out of the pond with appropriate music and songs uttering the declamations.

We ask why should this hermit or the *nat* with such miraculous powers appear only after things have gone too bad? Where was he when all the war and killing took place? Why can't he prevent the horrid war that deprives the baby of his parents? But then we forget that if the *nat* or the hermit could prevent that war there would be no plot, no *zat* at all.

We come to see the *pwe* not to ask questions but to enjoy. And it is often through the lines spoken by the *nats* or hermits that some special message or moral lesson is conveyed to us.

It is complete suspension of disbelief, sheer delight in music and songs we seek in a *zat pwe*. All this and moral lessons too!

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HOW TO ENJOY A BURMESE 'ZAT PWE'

The first thing to know about enjoying a Burmese zat-pwe is that you must be prepared to stay the whole night, that is from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. You cannot go about it casually as you go to the flicks, You have to organise the expedition, with efficiency.

First, get as much space as you can afford in the theatre, a huge rambling tent of bamboo matting. You can book spaces marked with numbered bamboo mats. It is advisable to allot one mat for one person although two or three can sit comfortably on one mat.

After getting the space not too far or near the stage, you leave home at about 8 p.m. taking quite a few things you will need for the night. The list should be,

One big carpet big enough to cover the space booked,

As many small cushions or pillows as you can get,

Light cotton Burmese *saungs* or covers,

A big flask of tea or coffee.

Oranges or any other fruits in season,

A dish of *letphet* (pickled tea) and *gyin-thok* (ginger).

This last named item can be bought from *pwe-zay* (eatable stalls), a gastro omical wonderland of Burmese delicacies which are yours for the taking provided you have a strong stomach.

Carrying your things, you wade through the crowd into the *zat-yon* (theatre) easy...easy, for you might step on some sleeping child or knock over some body's cheroot, for many *zat-pye* fans are already before you and they have already settled in their places.

At long last you find the mats whose numbers matched those on your tickets. You shoo away the squatters as tactfully as your patience allows and you spread the carpet and put the cushions to mark the 'border', so that others will not encroach on your territory. You put the basket of eatables in the middle and sit down stretching your legs...oh, I almost forgot, you wear comfortable clothes and you shove your slippers under the carpet. If you feel like having extra comfort, a quilt or a light mattress should be taken along. Now you can have a smoke, no need to fear of choking, the *zat-yon* is well ventilated, you can see the moon and stars through the chinks of bamboo mat roofing and I hope you have not forgotten to bring the ash-tray.

Before you, the scarlet velvet curtain hangs on the stage, enhanced by the lights, and you try to imagine the mysteries that are going to be unfolded tonight, for the programme is rather vague, the first part of the show being a musical play with contemporary theme and the latter part, a presentation of a story from the Jatakas or Dhammapada, a story as well known to the Burmese public as *Hamlet* is to the English theatre goers.

Going to a Burmese *zat-pwe* is an aesthetic adventure, for you never know what you will see, that is

Carrying your things, you wade through the crowd into the zat-yon (theatre)

unless you have seen the same programme before, but the possibility is remote, for *zat-pwe* programmes are varied.

So, there is nothing for you to do but lounge on your cushions with your feet wrapped up in cotton *saungs* (covers) and take a few mouthfuls of *letphet* or *gyin-thok* and look around. The Burmese orchestra stands on the left of the stage and the figure of unicorn, scintillating with gilt and glass mosiac, looks proudly over the circular row of small drums (*bons*). As the huge drum boomed *behti*, the coloured balls hanging on the stand fly to and fro.

Of course you are not in a hurry for the show to begin. *Zat-pwe* is not meant for those who are too absorbed in the rat race to enjoy the beauties life has to offer...one of the best, if not the best being Burmese *zat-pwe*. Burmese *zat-pwe* is for those who are not afraid of waiving away the mundane affairs, to step into a world of fantasy where prosaic things are not allowed to enter.

Personally speaking, enjoyment of Burmese *zat-pwe* is a rediscovery. I had spent my impressionable years with relatives who never missed the performances of Sein-ga-done or Po Sein at the festivals, but it is thirty years since I went to a Burmese *zat-pwe*,...since I left my home-town to settle down in Rangoon where cinema houses blazed with posters of foreign films.

It is Daw Ah Mar's book *Aung-bala, Po Sein't Sein-ga-done* that recreates the art of the three great *minthas*, of the *zat-pwe* stage, and awakens old memories, and urges me to go out to recapture the old magic of enjoying a *zat-pwe*. Today Shwe Mahn Tin Maung is the reigning king of the *zat-pwe* stage after the Great Po Sein is no more. It is gratifying to know that Shwe Mahn Tin Maung is carrying on the tradition of the Burmese *zat*, the art of which is a balm to over-wrought souls.

Burmese *zat-pwe* is a national institution, educator of the masses, a store house of culture where folklore scripture stories, Buddhist thought, and social ethics mingle with music, songs and dances and are communicated to the people, and above all it is a fount of life giving nectar, without which we, Burmese people would not have survived through all these civil strifes, wars and invasions.

Do not for goodness sake be worried by objections to having an all night long performance. Attempts have been made these four decades by well-meaning persons to shorten the performance, but the artistes and audience agree that nothing less than an all night's performance will do, so that's that. You can't get a bus to go back home in the middle of the night anyway.

Only after you have seen through the all night's performance...lounging comfortably on cushions, sucking oranges, you realise the beauties of the Burmese *zat-pwe*, a sumptuous dish of serious contemplation, drama, wit, and humour presented with songs, dances and music.

In the morning you are relaxed and happy, not at all like the mornings you wake up after tossing on a sleepless bed. The following day you switch off the phone, leave a message for the world that you are dead...and sleep the whole day. Late in the afternoon, you will wake up, a giant refreshed, equal to face life for some days to come.

I am glad I rediscovered the art of enjoying a Burmese *zat-pwe* in time to stop me from becoming an interfering mum-in-law and shortly an over-anxious doddering granny.

—o—

THE ART OF BURMESE 'ZAT-PWE'

(*zat*: story; *pwe*; show; *zat-pwe*; Burmese musical play; *mintha*; male lead; *minthami*; female lead; *ngo-gyin*; wailing song; *nha-par-thwar*; duet dance and song; *lun-khan*; tragic scene.)

There is no nation on the face of the earth so fond of fun and laughter and theatrical entertainments as the Burmese. For a Burmese, from the movement he is pushed into the world, his first wah-wah is accompanied by *saing* (music of the orchestra played to celebrate any event), and through-out his life's journey, everything that happens to him, or everything he does is accompanied by *saing*; this goes on, until he leaves the world with *saing* playing the dolorous note of the Monkey King's Lament, that being the title of the funeral music.

'Without the benefit of *saing*' (ဆိုင်းဓေါ်–ပူဇော်) is a popular Burmese idiom to describe any dull, uninteresting event or something unceremonious or unheralded. A person arriving without any previous notice is often remarked upon as arriving without the benefit of *saing*.

The art of Burmese *zat-pwe* is one of the subtlest and most elusive of arts, and trying to explain it is like capturing a moon beam to analyze its power over lovers and poets.

Zat–pwe is deeply rooted in the traditions of the country and has many conventions which are not easily understood by a casual spectator. Burma's monarchical past has given the *zat-pwe* the glorious music and songs as well as court dramas of great poetic beauty. Most of the *zats* (stories or plots) are drawn from Buddhist scriptures and from there, the *zat* artistes draw their inspiration and help to interpret to the laymen the Buddhist thought and way of life.

Since the elements of the opera, ballet and musical are woven into the *zat-pwe*, the whole thing is a wonderful piece created by the teamwork of artistes; but the artistes themselves are fiercely individualistic, each expressing himself or herself with such freedom that it makes you marvel at the spontaneous co-ordination that is finally achieved.

Because of its individual style, that is characteristic of the Burmese, we cannot look at *zat-pwe* through coloured spectacles of foreign manufacture... which mistake I made, when I viewed it with eyes dimmed by half-baked ideas I had gathered, after scanning through ancient Greek dramas, Shakespeare and modern English plays for the purpose of passing an examination.

In those days I had so much to say about *zat* conventions and practices; "there is no classification of tragedy and comedy, it lacks realism, no proper attention is given to the plot, the scenes are long drawn-out, there is no unity of time or space. There's the *nha-par-thwar* scene, with one *mintha* and six or eight *minthamis* singing and dancing; it's hardly de-

cent, because it is like flinging the *mintha's* Cassanova activities in the public's face. As for *lun-khan* why should there be *ngo-gyins* (wailing songs) enough to make us a nation of pessimists?...et cetera et cetera." Yes there was a time when I said all these and much more.

Today, I take back all the things I had said and I feel both humble and happy in the realisation that I had been blind to the beauties of the *zat-pwe*, which I recently discovered after thirty years of turning my impetinent back upon the traditional Burmese entertainment.

Today, *zat-pwe* is still mis-interpreted and much injustice is being done to it in futile attempts to evict decadent influences that are as natural as weeds in a flower garden. One cannot be too careful not to injure the blooms in pruning away the undesirable undergrowths.

Na-par-thwar scene in the old days used to be a duet dancing and singing, with one *mintha* and one *minthami*. Later, probably to meet the demands of the audience, the artistes introduced new attractions, hence one *mintha* with many *minthamis* in the scene.

The dancing and singing of each *minthami* in *nha.parthwar* scene symbolize different facets of feminine charm and the *mintha* responds with varifying moods to match each act. One of the arts of a *mintha* is the art of *nha-par-thwar*; not only has he to do the duet dance and singing, he must also have subtle artistry in reciprocating the infinite variety of his *minthamis*.

The *hna-par-thwar* scene in the hands of a consummate artist blossoms forth as a thing of beauty, but when a lesser performer enacts it, it becomes nothing but a vulgar sham, a Cassanova shamelessly

flaunting his amours and bringing out the worst side of man's baser instincts.

Ngogyins (wailing songs) used to worry me a lot. "There are too many of them in *zat-pwes* enough to drive the whole country mad; we shall become a nation of pessimists..." Now I realise all that kind of high and mighty talk is nothing but a pose, a wiser-than-thou attitude acquired through having a smattering of education; for when Daw Ah Mar's book on the three great *minthas*, *Aung-bala*, *Po Sein*. *Sein-ga-done* came out complete with texts of *ngo-gyins* sung by the great three, I found myself warbling the half-forgotten airs of my younger days to the astonishment of my family. Only then did I remember how I had enjoyed them both at *zat-pwe* and on the discs played on the trusty grammophone, fitted with a fluted horn.

I discover that *ngo-gyin* is not a dolorous wailing song as it literally suggests. *Zat-pwe* being partly operatic, most of the dialogue is wholly or partly sung to music of the orchestra and *ngogyin* is somewhat, if not wholly, similar to the arias of the western operas. *Ngo-gyins* are sung both as soliloquies and also in dialogue and they are sung to express lyrical emotion.

The histrionic and singing art of *ngo-gyin* deserves a comprehensive treatment with reference to texts sung by great artistes, and with the help of Daw Ah Mar's book and colourful snippets I managed to pick up from my recent re-discovery through seeing Shwe-Mahn Tin Maung's *zatt-pwe*, I hope to present the art of *ngo-gyin* more fully some day.

Suffice it to say for the present that the art of *ngo-gyin*, like that of *nha-par-thwar*, needs a really accomplished artist to bring out its beauties.

One of the many mistakes I made in assessing *zat-pwe* is that I deplored the lack of realism, which I now realise is a stupid thing; for, who wants realism in the fantasic world of make-believe created by dance, song and music? If I were not prepared to be transported into a realms of 'suspension of disbelief,' I should not have gone to a *zat-pwe* in the first place. I should rather be left to wallow in the slime of realities that life has to offer in abundance, today, or any day.

Zat-pwe is thoroughly Burmese, very much in keeping with the national character, and I hope I shall ever be Burmese enough to enjoy its beauties that custom cannot stale. I hope I shall never be such a dull piece of goods, that the stirring music of *nat-chin* the music of the *nat-ka-daw* dance (ritual) dance which usually opens a *zatpwe*) fails to make my heart beat to its tune. I pray that I may never have a soul so dead that the dance of the *belus*, *zaw gyis*, and *nagas* fails to fill me with a sense of wonder and insight into human aspirations symbolized by these mythical creatures.

—o—

THE FOUR PUPPETS *

A folk tale from Burma

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 far away 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.

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The fourth and last was a figure of 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 come 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 lurking 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 his 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 this 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 yourself 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. They bring not good or evil of themselves: 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, 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.

—o—

PART NINE

IT'S ME, FOLKS

Last, but not least (I hope), may I slip in a few touches to give the readers an impressionist profile of myself, without which, I am vain enough to think that the picture of Burma would not be complete...if these are superfluous, I only crave the readers' indulgence.....

A WRITER IN THE FAMILY

Come on, let's face it; this happened in the best families. When a family has the misfortune to have a writer in the family, he or she has to be tolerated. It is often that the species happen to be female. You cannot help having a writer for a parent or a brother or a sister, but remember you do not have to marry one.

Perhaps you did not know you were marrying a writer, only someone who was rather clever at putting words on paper. You never realized until too late that there was some demon inside the person that drove him or her to weave words in fantastic patterns.

But, what does one do, when one has someone in the family, the kind who is not bad enough to be locked up, but as embarassing to have around?

You might moan over the fate that gives you a writer in the family, especially a female one.

If you were to be inflicted with a creative artist in the family why not a painter, sculptor, singer, musician or an actor?

The aforesaid species of artists are held in greater respect than the writer. No one will say, "I could paint, sing, act or play the harp, if only

I had the time"; but not so with writers. Many think that any literate person could be a writer, if only he or she had the time.

There are quite a few who really appreciate the effort and time a writer puts into his work. Such people quite rightfully decide that all the gruelling work is not worth whatever one might make in writing...name or money. There is so much to enjoy in life without destroying yourself with hard work.

Although you can help not being a writer, you cannot help having one in the family. If you had a writer in the family, just grin and bear it. No use saying repeatedly: "Why can't you enjoy life like other people? Why can't you eat, drink, sleep like other people at regular hours?" It is a harrowing experience to see someone being driven by some demon to go on writing and writing, while all the others are living a normal, decent respectable life.

Perhaps, you could get some exorcist to expel the demon or take her to a psychiatrist to cure her. But you will have to consider what would be left of her when the spirit or demon is taken away. How could she learn the tricks of being a woman again? Have her moving around the house like a zombie? It is more merciful to leave her with the malady called the creative urge, and tolerate her.

There is nothing else to do but bear your fate, even though the rat-tat-tat of the typewriter drives you mad, as she carries on with a boudoir louse named Smith, Corona or Remington. Why not get even with her: get yourself an Italian siren named Olivetti and bang her away like mad?

—o—

THE JOYS OF BEING A NEUROTIC

Do not ever believe that neurotics are gloomy unhappy people. They are, I assure you, as happy as, if not happier than the next person. Take me, for instance. To me the world is seen through the high-powered magnifying glass, so everything is exaggerated.

Exaggeration is the spice of life. The sudden appearance of a tiny jasmin on a leafless bough that looked otherwise lifeless, could send me into fits of ecstasy "Life can be so good, so wonderful. There's always hope." I sang happily.

Of course, there is also the other side of the picture. When those giant snails ate away my orchids, I was down to the depths of misery. "Why should they want to destroy beautiful things; why should they, oh, why should they? Those ugly loathsome snails...they just cannot stand anything good and beautiful, oh, (sniff) the world is always like this; everywhere there are pests who must destroy beauties, because anything beautiful is such an affront to their ugliness; the evil wants to destroy the good for the same reason. Oh, what's the use of trying to bring beauties into this bad bad world; they are sure to be destroyed. And what's the use of being good....."

Things went real bad, until the mail came with letters from son and his family. "Just look, how my little grandson Pyone Cho has drawn the picture of their house on the Bassein college campus! There is the lake, the bridge with people walking over it, the golf course, the pagoda and everything. What a neat beautiful hand my little girl Mi Mi writes. Oh how can life be so good. I am glad I am born a woman, never mind being a second class citizen, never mind the women's lib. If I were not born a woman, how can I be a mother to my son, an interfering mother-in-law, and an over protective granny. Last, but not least, how can I be such a maddening wife to my very good man? I would not have missed them for anything. Oh, really, what have I done to deserve all this?"

Such are the heights of joy I can attain, but there are also lowly depths right into which I often fell. More often than not, things went wrong in the kitchen: the kerosene stove threw a tantrum and I ended up with my face and hands blackened with soot; or I get my finger pierced by a fish fin. At such times I raised my hands heavensward and called out to Thagyarmin, king of the celestials: Oh, Thagyarmin, they say your downy couch will be hardened like a stone slab if some noble person down here is in trouble. Where are you? Are you on a journey? Oh, nothing ever goes right (sniff). This kitchen hates me; it is a death trap. One of these days I shall be found dead in my kitchen, a martyr. No, this kitchen will not kill me, at least not yet. Oh, (sniff) I shall be chained to this dratted sink with heaps of dirty dishes. How can I hope to create literary masterpieces for posterity, if I have to be in this darned kitchen, with all these fumes from the frying pan? How can I get any inspiration with all these greasy pots to wash up? Oh, (sniff) life is impossible. Everything is against me, I cannot even

sit at my desk, there, the horrid typewriter bares its teeth, like the ogre in Shin Ottamagyaw's *Tawla* (Nature poem). Don't you jeer at me, you horrid thing...one of these days, I shall put out your dratted keys, one by one and.....'

I could not finish, because, the typewriter, as if tapped by some unseen fingers, typed out the words: "Stop being sorry for yourself. You are always complaining and making excuses, and worse still looking for some scapegoat to hang on your limitations. You are just plain lazy, face it. The sooner you face it the better. You are always shirking work. You are lazy, repeat, lazy. Don't you kid yourself about the drudgery in ths kitchen: I often hear you giving peptalks to people about drudgery being good for the soul. Didn't you once say how people like Madame Curie and Florence Nightingale rose above the most burdensome drudgery and become...well I do not have to tell you; they are your favourite models, aren't they? Now stop all this nonesence, there is your column to write: Now get working on your copy."

I was instantly accelerated into action. I said: "Thanks, my old faithful...how can you be so good and patient with me? I would plant a kiss on every key of yours, if only I had not had my new shade of lipstick on...oh, life can be so good and wonderful. I have such good friends!

—o—

HOW STUPID CAN I GET ?

Perhaps, Thagarmin, king of the celestials must have guessed my unspoken wish, for, I find myself stupider every day. When I mentioned this to my good man, he said vehemently: "No, my dear, that's impossible, simply impossible!"

What he meant must be that I am already so stupid that there is no room left for extension.

Anyway, I find my mind wandering, never able to remember where I put my reading glasses and other things as well. Only a few days ago, my good man asked: "Where have you put away the nail clipper?" I gazed into nothingness and said: "Let me see, I used it only this morning, because my finger nails have grown long: you know, when we were young, elders said that only witches had long finger nails; we sort of understood that to be a witch was terrible; so we tried to keep our finger nails short. It was in the days before the use of nail polish on long pointed finger nails."

"But, my dear, I want to know where to find the nail clipper," said my good man patiently.

"I shall soon know where it is. Don't you see I'm trying real hard to remember. If you go on interrupting me like this, I shall lose thread of my thoughts. Now, where was I? Well, I was clipping my finger nails only this morning. I had an oldnewspaper on my lap to take the clippings; you must not drop them on the floor, if you do, you would be

broke. By the way, have you been dropping finger nail clippings on the floor, these days? Be sure you have something to take the clippings, when you clip your finger nails."

"Yes, I sure will, when you tell me where to find the nail clipper." Men have the tiresome habit of repeating things.

"Don't you see, I am trying to remember where I put that darned clipper. Yes, I used it only this morning. I remember, I was wearing this same light coat.....you never like this coat, you said that the pockets are too big and ugly. So I said why don't you get me a new one, the kind made of the hand-woven cloth from Mandalay. Of course you've forgotten all about it."

"No, I haven't. I took you to the market, remember? I showed you the hand-woven cotton material, but you said you didn't like the beige colour; because you will need one of those Corala or Carola cars people brought back from abroad, to go with the coat. My! the prices of these cars are rocketing; they are astronomical!"

"May I remind you, you're diverging from the original theme.....we were trying to remember where we put the nail clipper. Remember?"

"No, not we, but you. You were trying to remember where you put the nail clipper."

"Oh, I wish you didn't dwell too long on these tiresome details. It's splitting hairs. Let me see, where was I? Well, I was wearing this coat with big pockets, you said, were too large and ugly, but never mind, you will get me a new one. So, to go back to the nail clipper, I was using it this morning. I had an old newspaper on my lap to take the clippings. I have this small table in front of me. There are books on the table; two big tomes with hard green covers.

They are, I remember, the two volumes of DICTIONARY OF PALI PROPER NAMES. I must have looked learned and scholarly with those tomes in front of me. What do you think?"

"I think you should remember where you put the nail clipper." I could see that my good man's patience is running low.

"Sure, I will, don't you worry. You see I was clipping my finger nails, because I have not quite outgrown the tale told by my elders that only witches had long finger nails. Our witches are quite different from those of the West. They fly through the air riding brooms. But our witches, when they want to fly, just fix a pair of *zagaws*, shallow bamboo trays to the shoulders and fly. I sort of like the idea. It would be fun to fly flapping those *zagaws*; it is much more dignified than riding on a broom. I can do even without *zagaws*. I can put my hands in these big pockets like this and flap the sides of the coat.....oh, what's this, here's the nail clipper, in this very pocket! I told you, I shall remember all right, if you just let me follow the stream of my consciousness."

—o—

MAKE A WISH!

If a fairy godmother were to appear before me and tell me to make a wish, I know exactly what I shall say:

"Oh, fairy godmother, make every nook and corner of the house dusty with cobwebs and scraps of paper, let there be a mountain of dirty dishes in the sink and tiers of pots and saucepans in the scullery; let there be a thousand and one things clamouring instant attention. And amidst all these, let me sit down and write oblivious of everything."

You might as well ask me why don't I ask for a house as clean as a new pin, so that I could sit down and write with a free and easy mind. But, there is no point in sitting down to write *only after* or because everything is in perfect order in the home. What I wish for is the ability to sit down and write, in spite of the house being a mess, I just want to say something like a misprint in an advertisement: "Wanted an able-bodied woman: to *hell* with housework."

What I wish for is not any *help* with housework, but to be able to say: "To hell with housework". I have so far lived with an unflattering realization that I am too much of a housewife to be a good writer, and too much of a writer to be a good housewife. I have, in other words, lived long enough with a sub-standard home, and a half-crippled career, with a generous seasoning of queen-sized guilt complex.

My dear friends will say: "Why don't you wish for a streamlined labour-saving kitchen you see in those glossy magazines?" My answer is again no; because it would be like the wish made by a coolie. Do not, please, stop me, even if you have heard it before. The story runs someting like this:

Once upon a time there was a coolie who worked at a market place. People hired him to carry their bales and baskets, and he did it cheerfully and willingly. Everyone loved him and called him Maung Pyaw or Mr. Happy.

Maung Pyaw was a very kind-hearted man. He carried loads for old people free of charge; he also served the poor even though they could not pay him. Mothers with babies and toddlers found him indispensable.

He had a strong bamboo pole with a basket hanging on each end. He carried the pole flung on his shoulders. Sometimes he put a sleeping child in one basket and bundles in the other so that the mother could walk with her hands free. Children loved the rides he gave them in his baskets.

Even though Maung Pyaw's face was always smiling with a song on his lips, another part of his anatomy did not share his joy, namely, his shoulders, which had to carry the yoke. As days, weeks, months and years of hard labour wore on, the shoulders became bruised, and later hardened into thick cutaneous scabs.

Maung Pyaw did not complain; he went on with his work smiling and singing. He always said: "Well, this can't go on forever. Thagyarmin, the king of the celestials, will not surely leave me like this. It is his duty to watch over the humans and help the deserving. One day, perhaps, he will be reminded of his duties by the hardening of his couch."

Maung Pyaw believed that Thagyarmin's couch was so soft and downy that when he sat down (Thagyarmin, not Maung Pyaw) on it, it sank to his waist, and that when he was forgetful of his duties, the couch would become as hard as a stone slab. Then Thagyarmin would know who in the human abode was needing his help.

Maung Pyaw's faith in Thagyarmin paid off. One day, he came down and stood before him in splendour and said: "Now, make any wish you like."

Maung Pyaw cried joyfully: "Oh, Thagyarmin, please grant me one wish.....give me a soft downy pillow covered with red velvet, trimmed with gold tassels." Thagyarmin said: "Well, is it all you want?" Maung Pyaw replied: "Yes, Thagyarmin, this only and no other.....you see, I want to put the pillow over my shoulders so that they will not hurt when I carry the yoke."

So that's that.

—o—

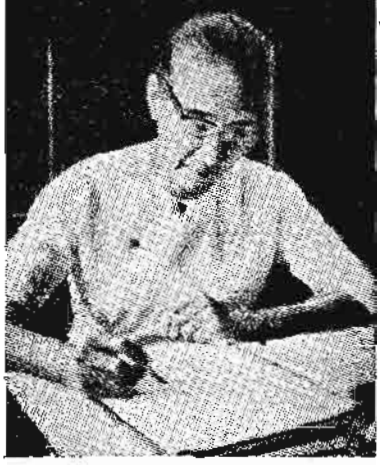
ERRATA

Page		Read		for	
	12	*sonnets*		*sodnnets*
	13	,,	*scenes*	,,	*scences*
	16	,,	*giving*	,,	*givings*
	22	,,	*white*	,,	*wh*
	24	,,	*as we*	,,	*aswe*
	26	,,	*beams*	,,	*beam*
	26	,,	*respects*	,,	*respec*
	29	,,	*gifts*	,,	*gift*
	34	,,	*dramatist's*	,,	*dramatists,*
	38	,,	*towns*	,,	*owns*
	47	,,	*hardly*	,,	*harldly*
	47	,,	*shallow*	,,	*swallow*
	48	,,	*(comma)*	,,	*(full stop)*
	53	,,	*memorabilia*	,,	*memorabia*
	54	,,	*own*	,,	*own own*
	54	,,	*piece*	,,	*peace*
	55	,,	*oil*	,,	*sil*
	64	,,	*surprised*	,,	*surpried*
	64	,,	*trips*	,,	*trip*
	65	,,	*bean*	,,	*been*
	69	,,	*of good*	,,	*on good*
	69	,,	*comes*	,,	*come*
	71	,,	*toddy*	,,	*todday*
	74	,,	*chillies*	,,	*chiilies*
	74	,,	*for*	,,	*for for*
	79	,,	*dip*	,,	*dlp*
	79	,,	*crispies*	,,	*crispie*
	79	,,	*woman*	,,	*women*
	79	,,	*fingers*	,,	*finger*
	80	,,	*appetizer*	,,	*appitizer*
	88	,,	*man*	,,	*main*
	88	No inverted commas after			*topknot*

Page		Read		for	
	91	*inflorescence*		*inflourescene*
	93	,,	*rainy*	,,	*rain*
	94	,,	*the answer*	,,	*answer*
	98	,,	*snack of*	,,	*snack*
	101	,,	*of*	,,	*and*
	106	,,	*illusions*	,,	*illupions*
	106	,,	*poverty*	,,	*soverty*
	106	,,	*uncomfortable*	,,	*uncomforteble*
	108	,,	*our*	,,	*or*
	113	,,	*talk*	,,	*lalk*
	115	,,	*kept*	,,	*keep*
	115	,,	*she*	,,	*he*
	116	,,	*trail*	,,	*trial*
	124	,,	*unconcernedly*	,,	*unconceredly*
	128	,,	*fence*	,,	*fenced*
	129	,,	*colleague*	,,	*colleagues*
	134	,,	*not*	,,	*dot*
	139	,,	*knew*	,,	*know*
	140	,,	*towns*	,,	*town*
	143	,,	*leant*	,,	*learnt*
	145	,,	*tresses*	,,	*stresses*
	148	,,	*soaring*	,,	*scaring*
	149	,,	*wish*	,,	*wishes*
	151	,,	*is made*	,,	*in made*
	152	,,	*sat*	,,	*sit*
	158	,,	*converted*	,,	*coverted*
	165	,,	*This is only*	,,	*This only*
	167	,,	*from*	,,	*for*
	175	,,	*hundred*	,,	*thousand*
	176	,,	*throb*	,,	*thumb*
	177	,,	*wonderland*	,,	*wonderland and*
	180	,,	*in*	,,	*an*
	183	,,	*magnificent*	,,	*magnificient*
	187	,,	*are*	,,	*is*

Page 203	Read	*intense*	for	*intensive*
203	,,	*their own*	,,	*their down*
208	,,	*gastronomical*	,,	*gastro-onical*
212	,,	*moment*	,,	*movement*
213	,,	*eight*	,,	*fight*
214	,,	*impertinent*	,,	*impetinent*
214	,,	*varying*	,,	*varifying*
218	,,	*came*	,,	*come*
230	,,	*heavenward*	,,	*heavensward*
231	,,	*became*	,,	*become*
232	,,	*the thread*	,,	*thread*

—o—



Khin Myo Chit, literally translated "Nation Loving Maid," had already made her mark as a writer, debator and broadcaster in Burmese before she ever attempted to write in English

There was a hiatus in her higher education after she left the university in 1938. But by that time she was already under the spell of English language and literature, especially Shakespeare, closely followed by P. G. Wodehouse.

After her graduation in 1952 majoring in English, she was persuaded to write in English. One of her earliest short stories, *The 13-Carat Diamond*, was included in *50 Great Oriental Stories*, a Bantam Classic, published in U. S. A. and Canada March 1965. A collection of her short stories and sketches also bears the title, *The 13-Carat Diamond*. *The Quest for Peace*, serialised in *The Working People's Daily*, is largely autobiographical

First Printing