

SELECTED SHORT STORIES  
OF THEIN PE MYINT

Translated, with Introduction and Commentary,

by

Patricia M. Milne



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SOUTHEAST ASIA PROGRAM  
DEPARTMENT OF ASIAN STUDIES  
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## THE CORNELL UNIVERSITY SOUTHEAST ASIA PROGRAM

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## FOREWORD

In the great expansion of Southeast Asian studies that has taken place in the past several decades, much light has been shed upon many facets of the experience and ideas of Southeast Asians. Western knowledge and understanding of the arts of the region, however, is much less well developed than our apparent comprehension of its governments, foreign relations, history, and economies. The Southeast Asia Program of Cornell University is delighted to be able to supplement the slender fund of translations from Southeast Asian literature with this volume of translations by Patricia Milne of several short stories by the prominent Burmese author, Thein Pe Myint.

Shortly before World War II, Thein Pe Myint became widely known, under the name "Tet Hpōn-gyī Thein Hpei," as a result of his novel (*Modern Monk*) attacking certain corrupt members of the Buddhist monkhood of Burma. He has since become a prolific writer, especially upon political subjects. He has exercised, and still does, considerable influence through his writings. This translation of a small selection of them will be welcomed by students of his times, who will also gain considerably from Mrs. Milne's short account of his life, and her essay on "The Short Story in Burmese Literature," included as part of the introduction to this volume.

The Southeast Asia Program is especially grateful to Mrs. Anna J. Allott, who supervised Mrs. Milne's work at the School of Oriental and African Studies and contributed substantially to the translation, for bringing this work to our attention and enabling us to make this important contribution to the study of Burma more widely available.

David K. Wyatt

Ithaca, New York  
December, 1972

## PREFACE

The author and journalist Thein Pe Myint is one of the most widely read writers in Burma today. At one time the editor of the daily newspaper *Vanguard* (*Bo-tahtaung*), he now writes a regular signed column under the heading "Frankly Speaking (*pwīṅ-bwīṅ līn-līn pyō-bayā-zei*)" in which he expresses himself forthrightly on a wide range of topics touching on all aspects of life in Burma.

He began his career as a writer while still at Rangoon University and took up journalism soon after; he has travelled widely inside and outside Burma, especially since the war; and he has been involved with politics, whether at the center or on the fringe, all his life. The list of his writings which have appeared in book form gives some idea of the range of subjects he has tackled and of his versatility; and it should be said that he has never hesitated to deal with controversial subjects or criticise certain sections of the community who might have preferred to remain unchallenged--such as the Sangha or the government. It can be seen from the titles of his books and from the stories here translated that he is not content to treat literature simply as entertainment. He writes to inform and to reform, to provoke and to convince, as well as to entertain.

The qualities that have made him into a successful political journalist are already evident in the pamphlet he wrote in September 1938 called the "Indian-Burmese Conflict (*kalā-bama taik-pwē*). It was perfectly timed, soon after the July riots, and its clear and persuasive arguments convinced the Burmese reader that the time had come to protect themselves and their country against the Indian threat to their Burmese economic and cultural life. Orders for the pamphlet came flooding into the Nagani Book Club from all over the country and numerous letters of approval were received, even from monks who had so recently been outraged by T. P. Myint's previous controversial book, *Modern Monk*.

From 1937 to the present day T. P. Myint has continued as a journalist to chronicle and to criticise the life of his country, and as an author to transmute what he observes into successful works of fiction.

The purpose of this data paper is to provide source material for the student of literary and political history. Hence the stories are presented with a minimum of critical comment, the author's own being given first place. A short chronological account of the author's life has been given which, taken in conjunction with the dates of the stories, should help to show what episodes inspired them. The list of T. P. Myint's published works fails to do justice to his tremendous output of day by day journalism but nevertheless it helps to place the stories in relation to his other writings. Finally, a brief outline of the development of the short story in Burmese literature has been included.

The material in this data paper was prepared as a thesis for the degree of Master of Philosophy (University of London) by Mrs. Patricia Milne under the supervision of Mrs. Anna J. Allott at the School of Oriental and African Studies; the thesis was submitted in 1971. The reader should note that the interval between submission and publication leaves the bibliography of Thein Pe Myint's published works somewhat out of date.

The commentary on the text, which includes explanatory notes on linguistic points and cultural background, has been included here as it may be of value to students of the language wishing to read the stories in the original Burmese, and explains points of detail not covered in most reference sources.

We should like to express our gratitude to Thein Pe Myint for his helpfulness and his support for this project, and to Professor Hla Pe and to U Khin for their help in elucidating difficult points in the Burmese text. Any errors of fact or interpretation are entirely our own responsibility.

Patricia M. Milne  
Anna J. Allott

London  
January, 1973

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NOTE ON THE TRANSCRIPTION OF BURMESE WORDS

An attempt has been made by the author to use a consistent system for rendering Burmese words in English, including marking the tones of the syllables. This system, which follows the one used in the Library of Congress and the S.O.A.S. Library, is outlined in the following notes.

However, it frequently happens that there are accepted English spellings for Burmese names and these have usually been adhered to, especially in the introductory sections, e.g., Thein Pe Myint (instead of Thēin Hpei Myīn).

Vowels:

အ	a	အာ	a	အား	ā
အိ	i	အီ	i	အီး	ī
အု	u	အူ	u	အူး	ū
အေ	ei	အေး	ei	အေး	ēi
အဲ	e	အယ်	e	အဲ	ē
အော	aw	အော်	aw	အော	āw
အို	o	အို	o	အိုး	ō

[The mark ' above a vowel or consonant is represented by the letter 'n', e.g., 'an']

Consonants:

က	ka	ခ	hka	ဂ	ga	ဃ	ga	င	nga
စ	sa	ဆ	hsa	ဇ	za	ည	za	ဉ	nya
တ	ta	ထ	hta	ဒ	da	ဗ	da	ဏ	na
ထ	ta	ထ	hta	ဒ	da	ဇ	da	န	na
ပ	pa	ဖ	hpa	ဗ	ba	ဘ	ba	မ	ma
ယ	ya	ရ	ya/ra	လ	la	ဝ	wa	သ	tha
ဟ	ha	ဠ	la						

N.B. Consonant symbols:

၂ = ယ	When ယ and ဂ are combined with က, ခ, ဝ they are romanized as follows:	ကျ ကြ kya
၆ = ဂ		ချ ခြ cha
ဝ = ဝ		ဂျ ဂြ gya
၂ = ဟ	When ဟ is combined with another consonant, it is romanized as an "h" preceding the consonant, except:	ဟှ sha
ဃ = ဟ ၊ ဝ		ရှ sha
၆ = ဂ ၊ ဝ		ဟှ sha/hlya
၂ = ယ ၊ ဟ		ဟှ sha
၆ = ဂ ၊ ဟ		
၂ = ဝ ၊ ဟ		
၆ = ဂ ၊ ဝ ၊ ဟ		

[N.B. The short central vowel 'a' is romanized without a following hyphen, and the dot may be omitted, otherwise romanized syllable groups are separated by a space, and syllables within the group are separated by hyphens.]

N.B. Final Consonants:

When preceded by vowels and diphthongs

Final Consonants	အ	အိ	အု	အော	အို
က်	အက် et			အောက် auk	အိုက် aik
င်	အင် in			အောင် aung	အိုင် aing
စ်	အစ် it				
ိ	အိ i in				
ု	အု u in				
တ်	အတ် at	အိတ် eik	အုတ် ok		
ပ်	အပ် at	အိပ် eik	အုပ် ok		
န်	အန် an	အိန် ein	အုန် on		
မ်	အမ် an	အိမ် ein	အုပ် on		

Exception:

ဝ	wə		
ဝတ်	wut	ကွတ်	kut
ဝပ်	wut	ကွပ်	kut
ဝှော်	wun	ကွှော်	kun
ဝမ်	wun	ကွမ်	kun

N.B. Tone Marks are represented as below:

အ	á	အ	a	အ	ā
အိုင်	in	အိုင်	in	အိုင်	īn
အိုင်	aing	အိုင်	aing	အိုင်	āing

Conventional Signs:

အိုင်	i
အိုင်	ywei
အိုင်	hnaik
အိုင်	lagāung
အိုင်	kāung
အိုင်	kyāung

[N.B. Voiced Consonants are transcribed as they are pronounced, not as they are spelt, e.g., hpōn-gyī not hpōn-kyī, although in the case of extended voicing in a consonant preceding the short central vowel, the consonant is written as it is spelt, e.g., tḍā not ḍā.]

## INTRODUCTION

### U Thein Pe Myint

U Thein Pe Myint was born on July 10th, 1914,<sup>1</sup> in Budalin in the Lower Chindwin District of Burma. His father, U Ba, was a revenue surveyor, and his mother was Daw Myint, in whose honour Thein Pe later added Myint to his name.<sup>2</sup>

After receiving his early education at the local vernacular school, Thein Pe attended the Intermediate College in Mandalay in 1932/33, studying Burmese Literature, Modern History, English Literature, Pali and Logic, and completed the two-year course in one year. He then continued his studies at Rangoon University, dropping Pali and Logic, and graduated with a general degree at the end of the 1934/35 academic year.<sup>3</sup> While in Mandalay Thein Pe had received his initiation into politics when he took part in the student agitation to keep the College in Mandalay affiliated with Rangoon University, and also when he campaigned for the Separationists on the issue of whether Burma should be separated from India as recommended by the Simon Commission; in the subsequent referendum on this issue Thein Pe tried to vote, but was not allowed to do so since he was under-age. On reaching Rangoon, Thein Pe joined the *Dobama Asi-ayone* ("We Burmans Society") which had been founded in about 1931 to promote the nationalist cause in Burma. Members addressed each other as "Thakin" ("Lord" or "Master") and studied the works of Marxist and other writers, and developed their own ideology that was both Marxist and Nationalist. Thein Pe played an active part in student affairs, serving on the executive committee of the Students' Union in Rangoon, which was becoming an increasingly nationalist movement, and was responsible, together with Kyaw Nyein, Aung San, and Thi Han, for drafting Nu to stand for the presidency of the Students' Union in the 1935/36 academic year. Many of Thein Pe's student contemporaries who were later to play a part in the struggle for independence and in post-independence governments gained in such student activities their first experience of political organisation and manoeuvring.

After passing his B.A. examination in 1935, Thein Pe did not wish to sit for the Indian Civil Service examination, and decided instead to enrol for a law degree using the money he earned from writing to pay his university fees; while an undergraduate he had written several short stories which were published in such journals as *Gandalawka* and *Dagon*. Nu was able to arrange for him to stay on in college so that he could carry on as secretary of the Students' Union. Before the course started, however, Thein Pe attended the Dobama conference in Yei-nan-gyaung and was elected an assistant-secretary under Thakin Ba Sein, in which capacity he was in charge of propaganda. After the conference he spent some time lecturing with Hsaya Lun, and on his return to Rangoon found himself disqualified from his law course which had already started. He then left Rangoon University and began his career as a professional writer. Although he was no longer a student, he remained actively interested in the student movement, and was one of the leaders of the 1936 Students' Strike. As a journalist his first job was with *Sa-hso-daw* Magazine, which he edited

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<sup>1</sup>This is the date given in Dagon Taya's *Profiles*, and it was confirmed by Thein Pe Myint to the writer as correct. It should be noted that incorrect dates have been given by other sources as follows: July 14th, 1914 in the *Guardian*, "Who's Who in Burma," p. 40; July, 1916 in Thompson and Adloff, *The Left Wing in Southeast Asia*, p. 258; 1918 in Badgley, "Intellectuals and the Burmese Vision," stating that he was twenty-one in 1939.

<sup>2</sup>Thein Pe changed his name to Thein Pe Myint in 1949 in memory of his mother who had died before the war and to provide a family name for his children. He also hoped that by so doing he would shorten his name, since he had been known as Tet Pongyi Thein Pe since the publication of *Tet Hpōn-gyi* in 1937; in this he was not immediately successful as he then became known as Tet Pongyi Thein Pe Myint for a time.

<sup>3</sup>Thein Pe Myint, in his biography of Kyaw Nyein, p. 13, states that he passed the B.A. examination in 1935 and that he enrolled for a law degree in the same year; he has also confirmed to the writer that this is correct. (Brimmel, *Communism in South East Asia*, p. 120, and Thompson and Adloff, *op. cit.*, p. 258, give the date as 1936.)

for about two months. He then worked on the editorial staff of the weekly *Di-Dok*, and later became a correspondent for the daily newspaper *New Light of Burma*, for which he went to India in 1936 to cover the Lucknow session of the India National Congress.

Thein Pe stayed on in India for two years studying at Calcutta University for his master's degree in arts during the day and for a law degree in the evening, as well as continuing to write for the *New Light of Burma*. He also wrote *Tet Hpōn-gyi* [The Modern Monk], a novel attacking abuses in the monastic system and urging their reform; this book brought him such fame and notoriety that he became known as Tet Pongyi Thein Pe. During this time Thein Pe came into contact with communism through the Bengal Students' Federation, on which he served as executive secretary for foreign relations, and met communist leaders such as Mustafa Ahmen and others. This group had contacts with the Bengalis in Burma. Thein Pe left India in 1938 without graduating as he wished to join in the nationalist movement in Burma.

On his return to Rangoon, Thein Pe and Nirandu Dutt, a Bengali communist who had accompanied him, organised the first of several Marxist study groups in Burma. Aung San and Hla Pe (Bo Let Ya) were also members of this group, and Goshal and Kyaw Sein organised others. In the same year Thein Pe wrote *Tet Hkit Nat Hsō* [Evil Spirits of Modern Times], a novel about the social dangers of venereal disease. The Red Dragon Book Club had been founded in December the previous year to publish original works by Burmese writers and translations of foreign works, and its first issue was Thein Pe's biography of Thakin Kodaw Hmaing (Hsaya Lun). Thein Pe's *The Student Boycotter*, a novel about the students' strike of 1936, was also published by the Club, as was Sun Yat Sen's *San Min Chu I* [Three People's Principles] which he edited. At this time Thein Pe was still writing for the *New Light of Burma*, as well as working closely with Nu, Aung San and Bo Let Ya in liaison work with student organisations throughout the country.

In 1939 Thein Pe began to disagree with the Dobama policy of continuing the nationalist struggle to the limit, and felt that they should halt and consolidate the situation. Dobama took action against him, and he left the organisation. He continued his work as a journalist writing anti-fascist articles for *Nagani Journal*, and also wrote one book *Who is Wrong? Hitler or Chamberlain?* as well as film scripts, one of which was produced as a film in that year. One of the articles he wrote for *Nagani* supported the Soviet Union's action in attacking Finland, and because of this article *Nagani* was proscribed by the government.

With the outbreak of war in Europe, the nationalist movement gained a new impetus in Burma as various elements formed and reformed. The Thakins joined with Dr. Ba Maw's Sinyetha party to form the "Freedom Bloc" to press for the independence of Burma and to seek help from abroad, particularly Japan, to attain this end. The Burma Revolutionary Party (B.R.P.) was organised as an underground movement in the same year with similar aims and its members were drawn from the Thakin movement and the communist cells. Many of its leaders, among whom were Kyaw Nyein, Ba Swe, Aung San, and Thein Pe (although the latter did not subscribe to the policy of collaboration with the Japanese), felt very bitter against Britain for suppressing nationalist organisations and banning Dobama under the Defence of Burma Rules in 1940. Under the same act Thein Pe and several Thakins were arrested and gaoled in 1940, Thein Pe being released after two or three weeks. By 1941 part of the leadership of Dobama, the B.R.P. and the communist cells (there was a very thin line differentiating the three which constituted the left wing of the nationalist movement) took the view that the fascists, in this case the Japanese, were for the time being the main enemy, and sought to use the British, albeit temporarily, as allies, whilst continuing to press for independence; however it was already too late as Aung San was in Japan with the "Thirty Comrades," and popular opinion was for the Japanese.

After the commencement of the Japanese attack on Rangoon in December 1941, Thein Pe went to Upper Burma since, as one of the leaders of the B.R.P., he had undertaken the task of organising the party there. Although the B.R.P. nominally supported the Japanese, Thein Pe proceeded to distribute anti-Japanese pamphlets through B.R.P. channels, and because of these activities he was forced to go into hiding to avoid arrest by the Japanese. Early in 1942 it was decided by Thein Pe, Soe, Kyaw Nyein and Mya Thwin that Thein Pe should go to India to make contact with the Allied forces there. His first attempt (with the assistance of the Chinese forces) failed, since Japanese forces operating along the Irrawaddy cut his route from Shwebo to Katha, and he was forced to return to Shwebo. There he met Aung San, Ne Win and Bo Let Ya who were there with their Japanese advisors, and although surprised to see Thein Pe, they gave him cover and he hid. His next attempt with Tin Shwe was successful, taking a route from the south through Arakan, up the Kaladan

River by boat and on foot, and they reached India in July 1942.<sup>4</sup> Soe had wanted to accompany them, but, with the swift change in popular opinion as people tasted the aggressiveness of the Japanese, decided to stay so that he could carry on organising the underground resistance; he felt too that the country had been betrayed by Aung San and the B.R.P. leaders, and as a result trusted very few people, Thein Pe being one of the few.

After crossing the Chittagong Hills, Thein Pe and Tin Shwe were arrested by Indian border police, who escorted them to an army unit in Bandarban near Chittagong. There Thein Pe told the British officer who questioned him that he wanted to go to New Delhi to convince Indian leaders that they should not make Burma's mistake of co-operating with the Japanese. The British authorities at first doubted the sincerity of his anti-Japanese views, and Thein Pe was kept in detention for the rest of 1942, first in Calcutta and afterwards, for five months, in Delhi. During this time he was interrogated on several occasions about the Japanese in Burma, and he met representatives of the Burma Government established at Simla, who shared British doubts about Thein Pe. Despite his detention, Thein Pe was able to pass news of his arrival to the C.P.I. and to the Chinese Government (with whom he had had contacts in connection with his anti-Japanese activities in Burma) through their Commissioner in Calcutta. It was during this period that he wrote "What Happened in Burma" and subtitled it "The frank revelations of a young Burmese revolutionary leader who has recently escaped from Burma to India."

Finally, after the intervention of the Chinese with the British authorities, he was permitted to travel in January, 1943, to Chungking where he sought Chinese co-operation in co-ordinating the activities of the anti-fascist movement in Burma. He had discussions with the International Relations Research Institute, and also made contact with the Communists, meeting Chou En Lai whom he found sympathetic, but neither the K.M.T. nor the Communists were in a position to offer him any physical support. After seven months in China without results, he returned to Delhi where the official attitude towards Thein Pe had changed. The organisation known as Force 136, which was responsible for aiding resistance movements in the Southeast Asiann area, had been unsuccessful in its attempts to infiltrate agents into Burma, and in view of the success of similar movements in Europe had decided to co-operate with the anti-Japanese resistance movement in Burma. Tin Shwe was sent into Burma in November 1943 to inform Aung San and the resistance forces of the British decision to recognise them and give them assistance, while Thein Pe remained in India working in the propaganda department of the Ministry of Information on pamphlets and radio broadcasts, and acting as a liaison officer between the British and the Burmese resistance. This period in India, including his visit to China, has been described by Thein Pe in two books, *The Wartime Traveller* and *Burmese Emissary to the Allies*.

While Thein Pe was still in India, the Burmese Communist Party (B.C.P.) which had developed from the Marxist study groups formed in Rangoon in 1938, held its first congress in 1943; Soe was elected secretary with Than Tun as his deputy, and Thein Pe acted as a link between the B.C.P. and the Indian Communist Party (C.P.I.). During 1944 the Communists, the Socialists from the B.R.P., together with elements from the army, agreed to collaborate in a resistance movement against the Japanese, and the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (A.F.P.F.L.) was founded by them in August 1944. By the end of the war, the A.F.P.F.L., although united in its desire for Independence, began to show signs of division within its ranks, both within the B.C.P., which was divided on policy matters and by personal rivalries, and between the B.C.P. and the Socialists.

Before leaving India in 1945, Thein Pe had been elected General-Secretary of the B.C.P. in place of Thakin Soe; he returned to Burma with instructions from the C.P.I. on policy to be followed in Burma. These instructions reflected the Browderist line in recommending collaboration with Western powers since they were allies of the Soviet Union; the C.P.I. and Thein Pe, in the confusion of the post-war period, did not know that, by this time, Browderism had been denounced in Moscow as a heretical doctrine. Soe, who was unhappy about his demotion, criticised Than Tun and Thein Pe at a Central Committee meeting in February 1946 for following the moderate Browderist line. Than Tun and Thein Pe replied that Soe had accepted this

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<sup>4</sup>Although Brimmel, *op. cit.*, p. 157, and Thompson and Adloff, *op. cit.*, p. 259, give the date of his departure for India as 1943, Thein Pe Myint has confirmed to the writer that the sequence of events given in the text is correct, and he has described this period in his book, *The Wartime Traveller*.

<sup>5</sup>See Brimmel, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-9.

line also, and accused Soe of moral misdemeanours; when it came to the vote, Soe's motion was defeated by twenty-eight votes to eight. The following month, Soe split the B.C.P. by forming his own party, the Communist Party Burma (C.P.B.), known as the "Red Flags."

In 1946 differences in the A.F.P.F.L., relating principally to the tactics to be pursued in the struggle for independence, arose between the socialists, under Aung San, who constituted the majority, and the communists. These came to a head in July when Aung San decided to replace Than Tun as General-Secretary of the A.F.P.F.L., and proposed the socialist Kyaw Nyein in his place. In response Than Tun nominated Thein Pe who lost by one vote. However, in August 1946 Thein Pe was elected a joint General-Secretary of the A.F.P.F.L. while Than Tun took over from his the General-Secretaryship of the B.C.P.

Relations between the B.C.P. and the A.F.P.F.L. were by this time very strained. They were further exacerbated in September 1946 when the Governor, Sir Hubert Rance, appointed Aung San as deputy chairman of a new Executive Council being set up as part of the process of granting full independence to Burma, and invited him to nominate members for the Council. Aung San chose as the sole communist member, Thein Pe, who became Minister for Forests and Agriculture, and in this capacity attended a conference in Singapore on food supply.<sup>6</sup> Following Aung San's refusal to consent to a larger communist representation, Than Tun called for another general strike against the government. Aung San countered this move by expelling the B.C.P. from the A.F.P.F.L., and Thein Pe was forced to resign after only two weeks in office.

The socialists of the A.F.P.F.L. were now in power, but immediately they had to contend with an active opposition, whose intentions were demonstrated in a speech Thein Pe made on October 28th, 1946, when he was speaking on behalf of both communist factions. He announced that the communists would "appeal to the country in the forthcoming elections to endeavour to rescue the national movement and achieve Burma's complete freedom,"<sup>7</sup> and that until then the communists would sponsor mass political strikes and promote workers' and peasants' movements against imperialism and capitalism.

In December, 1946, the B.C.P. received a letter from the C.P.I. criticising reformist mistakes and sectarianism in the Communist Party in Burma. Thein Pe, according to his own account,<sup>8</sup> felt himself responsible as one of the leaders, and submitted himself to the Central Committee, of which he was a member, for their judgment. It was decided that he should take leave from the Central Committee for six months for "self-study and rethinking." While on leave, Thein Pe found that his further study of party doctrine was leading him to disagree with the way in which the new line in policy was being implemented. He submitted his views to the Central Committee in April 1947, but the Central Committee ignored them and did not allow his statement to be circulated within the Party as Thein Pe had requested.

After the assassination of Aung San and other ministers in July 1947, there was a short rapprochement between the B.C.P. and the A.F.P.F.L. when they worked together to demonstrate unity among the nationalist forces working towards independence, and the Central Committee agreed not to allow public criticism as the parties were reunited, and to concern themselves only with top-level negotiations. Thein Pe was still on leave from the Central Committee, unable to take part in any party activities and unable to publish his criticisms openly in the press. He therefore, because he was so concerned about the lack of real cohesive unity in the country and the fact that criticism could not be made while negotiations were in progress, decided to write an article under an assumed name suggesting a policy for the country based on A.F.P.F.L.-B.C.P. unity. This was duly published, but was recognised as Thein Pe's work by Than Tun and Goshal, another leader of the B.C.P., who promptly expelled him for publishing an anti-party article. Thein Pe appealed, and was able to retain

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<sup>6</sup>It is interesting to note that the A.F.P.F.L. had submitted Thein Pe Myint's name in the previous year for a council being formed by the then Governor, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, who "flatly refused on moral grounds to accept Thakin Thein Pe as a member of his council." Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, pp. 523-4.

<sup>7</sup>See Trager, *Burma: From Kingdom to Independence*, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup>In *Political Experiences*, pp. 432-44, Thein Pe Myint gives the text of a letter which he wrote to an Indian Communist in October, 1950, in which he explains the circumstances which led to his departure from the B.C.P.

his membership of the party although he lost his seat on the Central Committee. He was not given any responsibility within the party, nor was he assigned to any cell.

In December 1947, Goshal was sent to India by the B.C.P. to discuss policy. Burma became independent on 4th January, 1948, under an A.F.P.F.L. government headed by U Nu. Goshal returned in the same month with the new line calling for open insurrection. "Goshal's Thesis," as this is now known, was adopted by the Central Committee in Burma. Thein Pe felt that the C.P.I. line was not applicable to the circumstances in Burma, but the Central Committee would not hear his objections. The B.C.P. called a congress of the All-Burma Peasants' Organisation at Pyinmana on 12th March, 1948, at which the new policy of insurrection and violence was urged on the crowd of some 300,000 who were present. Thein Pe wrote a full exposition of his views on 19th March, 1948, published it on 26th March, and left the party. "The fact that I had to leave the party was not of my own choosing . . . I abandoned the path of the inner-party struggle."<sup>9</sup> The next day it was announced that Thein Pe had been expelled from the party because of his right-wing deviationism.

On 28th March, 1948, following a strongly seditious speech by Than Tun to a mass meeting in Rangoon on the previous day, the Government ordered the arrest of all Communist Party leaders. Than Tun then called on all party members to rise up against the government. During the early stages of the subsequent insurrection, Thein Pe continued to work in the cause of unity, and tried to exert influence through the People's Volunteer Organisation (P.V.O., which had been set up by Aung San) to bring about unity between the socialists and the communists, and between the Government and the insurrectionists. Under the sponsorship of U Nu, he drew up a Fifteen Point Leftist Unity Programme<sup>10</sup> in May, 1948, but although it was strongly Marxist, it failed to tempt the communists. By August 1948, the Government had lost patience with the Unity Programme, and Thein Pe was imprisoned for one year.

During this period of enforced inactivity in gaol, Thein Pe completed the novel *The Way Out*, which spans the period from the end of the war until just before independence, and also wrote *The Teachings of Mao Tse Tung* and a film script which formed the basis for his later novel *Your Fond Request*. It was at this time, too, that Thein Pe changed his name to Thein Pe Myint.

The years immediately following independence in Burma were marked by rebellion and insurrection by various groups in opposition to the A.F.P.F.L. government led by U Nu. When Thein Pe Myint came out of gaol in 1949, he resumed his political career and continued his efforts to unite the dissident factions in the country which the Leftist Unity Plan had failed to do.<sup>11</sup> In 1951 he became General Secretary of the People's Peace Front (P.P.F.) which had been formed by Aung Than in that year, and under Thein Pe Myint's influence it became pro-Marxist in orientation; the P.P.F. then joined with two other pro-Marxist parties to form a Triple, or All-Opposition, Alliance which contested the Municipal elections in Rangoon in February 1952. By March, 1952, however, Thein Pe Myint decided to found a new political party to press for negotiations to bring about a peaceful end to the insurrections. The People's Unity Party (P.U.P.), with its Marxist ideology and "peace and unity" platform, drew its members mainly from the ranks of the P.V.O.'s who had surrendered (*alīn-win-de*, "enter the light"), and it was, in fact, as Brimmel points out, "the closest approximation to the B.C.P. on a legal basis."<sup>12</sup> For the 1956 elections, the P.U.P. joined with other opposition parties to form a pro-communist coalition, the National United Front (N.U.F.), in which Thein Pe was a member of the Praesidium. He was elected to parliament as the N.U.F. member for Budalin, and kept that seat until 1961 when he was defeated in a bye-election by the Union Party candidate. In 1958 Thein Pe Myint dissolved the P.U.P. after most of the P.V.O.s had accepted the government's offer of an amnesty to surrendering insurgents and had formed the People's Comrade Party (P.C.P.) which became part of the N.U.F., with Thein Pe Myint as one of its leaders.

During the period from 1952 to 1962 Thein Pe Myint travelled extensively overseas on a number of official missions. In 1952 he travelled twice to China, first as a member of the Burmese delegation to the May Day celebrations in Peking, which

<sup>9</sup>Thein Pe Myint, *Political Experiences*, p. 444.

<sup>10</sup>See Thein Pe Myint, *Political Experiences*, p. 396.

<sup>11</sup>This information was obtained from U Thein Pe Myint in an interview with the writer in October 1970. It is possible that his political opponents may not agree.

<sup>12</sup>Brimmel, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

he described in *Farewell to the Past*, and then in October to attend the Asian Pacific Region World Conference. In 1956 he again went to Peking on the occasion of the death of Lu Hsun. The following year he was a delegate in the Parliamentary Mission to the U.K., and he also attended an Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference in Cairo. He was a member of the Burmese Writers' Goodwill Mission to China, Japan and North Korea in 1961, and in the same year visited the United States on a Special Grant. In 1962 he went to the Soviet Union. Thein Pe Myint described these travels in several books, such as *Bewildering Paris and the Traveller of Peace*, *The World as I've Seen It*, *Setting off to the West, but Coming Home from the East*, and *The Goodwill Traveller*.

In addition to his political activities and travel, Thein Pe Myint published a collection of his political writings in 1956, a long novel entitled *As Sure as the Sun Rising in the East* in 1958, a biography of Kyaw Nyein in 1961, and an account of his electoral defeat in 1961, *A Glimpse of a Smile from Within Failure*; he also found time to act as vice-president of the World Peace Congress, Burma, in 1951, as vice-president of the Burma-China Friendship Society which he founded, and as a member of the Soviet-Burma Cultural Association. From 1956-58 he was president of the Burma Writers' Association, and in 1958 he founded *Botataung* newspaper, becoming its chief editor as well as chairman of the Board of Directors. The paper was proscribed by General Ne Win's caretaker government in 1959 for eighteen months, and it was nationalised in 1964. Thein Pe Myint was offered the post of chief editor which he refused so that he could continue to write freelance for other journals as well as a regular column for *Botataung*.

The interruption of normal political activity by General Ne Win's coup d'etat in March 1962 and the imposition of a military government did not seriously affect Thein Pe Myint, who has continued to work within the framework of the Burma Socialist Programme Party which was set up by General Ne Win as the political organ of the revolution. He served on the government's Cultural Council from 1962 until recently, and still serves as a member of the Rangoon University Council, in addition to lecturing, contributing a regular column four times a week to *Botataung*, freelance writing, and working on a new novel.<sup>13</sup> His recent publications include two books about Burma, *Budalin*, *The Truth is Found Among the People*, and *History is Beginning Now in the Chin Hills*, as well as the best-seller *Mao Tse Tung's China and the Sovereign Power of Burma* in 1967 and the novel *Thi-ta-pyon* in 1968. In 1968, too, he published a collection of twenty-three of his short stories which were written between 1934 and 1966 and reflect many of his experiences during this period.

### The Short Story in Burmese Literature

The short story, as a literary genre, appeared comparatively late in Burma, only becoming fully established from the 1930s onwards. The reasons for its late emergence lie both in the very conservative nature of the traditional literature of Burma, and in the far-reaching effects of certain political events in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the life and literature of Burma.

The greater part of the traditional literature of Burma consists of poetry written under the patronage of the court by Buddhist monks and courtiers. In style it is both formal and erudite with elegant embellishments and with a high moral tone, since the purpose of literature was edification rather than entertainment. Its dominant themes are religion and royalty; personal reaction to Nature, and private expressions of love figure mainly in the less important genres. Readership was confined to court circles, and the fact that texts had to be laboriously copied by hand onto strips of palm-leaf or specially treated folded cardboard would in any case have precluded a wider distribution of these works. Prose was used in the monasteries by monks and scholars, but for works of an academic nature rather than imaginative literature. Religious texts were translated from the Pali canon and commentaries were written on them, and the Jataka stories, which tell of events in the former lives of the Buddha, were also translated. In addition, prose was used for legal works including collections of wise decisions and precedents, historical chronicles and royal biographies, and various scholarly treatises and works of reference.

Since this traditional literature existed under the aegis of the court and monastery, it was inherently conservative and resistant to change; from the fifteenth

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<sup>13</sup>Badgley, *op. cit.*, p. 604, states that Thein Pe Myint was also selected as an advisor to the Revolutionary Council and appointed to a Political Institute formed by the army. Thein Pe Myint denies this and thinks that Badgley must be referring to freelance lecturing work he has done.

century to the nineteenth the genres evolved only very slowly, and this pattern remained remarkably constant despite periods of protracted warfare and political upheaval as ruling dynasties rose and fell. In the nineteenth century, however, substantial changes occurred as a result of the impact of external events on Burma and Burmese society.

In 1767 Siam was conquered by Burma, but although the annexation was only temporary, it left an important legacy. Contact with Siamese literature and drama introduced the novel concept that literature could entertain as well as edify, as seen in the Siamese plays and romances, and that it could be based on secular sources such as the Hindu epic, the Ramayana. This led to some diversification of the traditional literary genres with the development of songs, *yagan*, and particularly drama, thus paving the way for the later acceptance of new genres such as the short story and the novel. Before this could happen, however, Burma was to undergo annexation by Britain after three Anglo-Burmese Wars fought between 1824 and 1886 which culminated in the fall of the monarchy and the exile of the king. During the colonial period, which lasted until 1948 when Burma regained her independence, Burmese literature changed course and entered what may be called its modern period.

There were several important factors which made this transition possible. Firstly, the departure of the king meant the removal of the customary patron of literature and the arts. Since the former had been so entirely centred on the court and monastery, it was left without a sense of direction. Secondly, the first printing presses were imported into Burma and were well established by 1870; this made possible the rise of newspapers and the growth of a reading public. In addition, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 led to some degree of commercialisation of agriculture since it gave easier access to distant markets; the resulting prosperity meant that people could afford to buy books and attend plays. Thirdly, the establishment of English schools facilitated contact with the West and particularly with English literature. In its turn, this new exposure to the influences of Western life and literature brought about as a reaction a revival of nationalist feeling which was expressed through the Buddhist lay organisations, particularly after the Montague-Chelmsford Report of 1918.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of these three factors, Burmese literature of the modern period branched out in new directions. Writers, no longer bound by the conservatism of the court, experimented with new genres and styles, and began to use prose for works of imaginative literature. Readership was no longer restricted to the Court; the introduction of printing made literary works available for all. After 1870, printed plays, for the most part in freely flowing rhymed prose interspersed with songs, enjoyed enormous popularity; they retained elements of the traditional literature but also constitute a transitional stage towards the development of new forms. In 1904 came the publication of the first Burmese novel, *Maung Yin Maung and Ma Me Ma* by James Hla Gyaw. It was in fact inspired by the first part of *The Count of Monte Cristo* by A. Dumas, and it was quickly followed by original works of purely Burmese inspiration such as U Kyi's *Maung Hmaing, the Roselle Seller* in 1905, and many others. By 1920 the novel had become accepted as a literary genre, as can be seen from the numbers of novels listed in the quarterly catalogue of books printed in Burma.<sup>15</sup> As well as novels, novelettes and stories were also very popular; they were often published as books after having been serialised in weekly fiction magazines such as *Athōn-daw-hkan*, *Aung-daw-mu*, and *Pyaw-daw-hsetn*, which were all being published in 1920,<sup>16</sup> and short stories appeared in such monthly magazines as *Dagon*, *Kawī-myet-hman* and *The Sun*. It is unfortunate that many of these stories have been lost; they were regarded merely as light entertainment by the reading public and so did not merit being collected or reprinted. Of those that have survived, the works of four writers stand out as forerunners of the short story: Mya Myo Lwin, who published stories in the fiction magazines; P. Monin, a prolific and popular writer who wrote at least

<sup>14</sup>Under this Report, India was allowed some measures of self-government from which Burma was specifically excluded. The Young Men's Buddhist Association (Y.M.B.A.) and other Buddhist groups formed the General Council of Burmese Associations (G.C.B.A.) in 1919-20 in order to press their demands more strongly.

<sup>15</sup>Whitbread, *Catalogue of Burmese Printed Books in the India Office Library*. The India Office Library in London has one of the most extensive collections outside Burma of Burmese printed books from the early nineteenth century to the time of the Second World War.

<sup>16</sup>Whitbread, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 90, 101.

twelve novels, six of them being published between 1920 and 1922,<sup>17</sup> as well as short stories; U Hpo Kya, well known for his historical textbook *The Valour of the Burmese People* and later for his volume of Jataka stories and *The Thirty-Seven Nats*; and U Ba Cho, a journalist who wrote political satire, short stories and essays which were published in *Di-dok Journal*.

1920 was an important year in the history of Burmese literature. Not only was there a profusion of popular printed fiction, as has been noted above, but also an upsurge of nationalist feeling after the establishment of the University of Rangoon in that year. This was closely followed by a student boycott of the new university arising from opposition to the entrance requirements, and the establishment of "national" schools as an alternative to the schools run by the colonial government. The student boycott provided an identifiable rallying-point which served to unify the various pockets of resistance to British rule which had already found expression in organisations like the Y.M.B.A. and the students' original grievances were overtaken by broader nationalist aims. Thus began a tradition of student involvement in politics which is reflected in the subsequent careers and writings of people like Thein Pe Myint.

1923-24 marked a turning point in the history of Burmese literature for it was at that time that U Pe Maung Tin, formerly lecturer in Pali and by then Professor of Oriental Studies, instituted an honours course in Burmese at Rangoon University. Students taking the course were expected to write poems and short stories to demonstrate their knowledge of the language, and it was not long before many of the students began a literary output. The climate was favourable for the production of creative writing: there was both an incentive to write since in Burma admirers like to imitate, and also the means to publish in such magazines as *The World of Books*, a monthly organ of the Burma Education Extension Association, *The Rangoon College Magazine* which had two or three issues a year, and *Myoma Boys' High School Magazine*. In addition to these, students were also able to contribute to two monthly magazines, *Kyī-pwā-yeī* and *Tō-tet-yeī*, and to the university sections of *Kawī-myet-hman* and *Dagon* magazines. The students subscribed enthusiastically to these magazines which also reached a wider public as relatives and friends read them.

Ten years after the institution of the Burmese Honours course, Professor Pe Maung Tin collected and published under the auspices of the Burma Education Extension Association a volume of short stories which he entitled *Hkit-sān Pon-byin* and a volume of poetry, *Hkit-sān Kabya-myā*. He limited his selection of stories to those written by some of his early honours students, Sein Tin (Theippan Maung Wa), Maung Wun (Minthuwun), E Maung (Maung Thant Zan), Toe Aung (Ku Tha), as well as Thein Han (Zawgyi), who took a post-graduate course following his general degree. In style these writers sought, within the framework of the short story, a new and simplified mode of expression that would be essentially modern while retaining the best features of traditional literature, and much of their subject matter was drawn from their own experiences and everyday affairs. Of these writers, Sein Tin, who was the first student to graduate with honours in Burmese, was perhaps the most innovative, and a second volume of *Hkit-sān Pon-byin* was devoted to his stories in 1938. It is possible that Professor Pe Maung Tin intended to go on collecting stories and issue further volumes later, but after the students' strike of 1936 he was appointed Principal of the University College and could no longer play a leading part in encouraging creative writing.

However, these three volumes caught the imagination of the reading public, and helped to establish the short story as a literary genre in Burma. The acceptance of the short story as a recognised and distinct form at this stage was, of course, a natural extension of the trend of literary development since 1904, but there were three other factors which encouraged its appearance at this time.

Firstly, there has always been in Burma a strong tradition of oral story telling. Many of these stories were simple folk tales and folk legends<sup>18</sup> which were

<sup>17</sup> Whitbread, *op. cit.*, p. 167 *et passim*.

<sup>18</sup> U Htin Aung has published three collections of folk tales: *Burmese Folk Tales*, *Burmese Law Tales*, and *Burmese Monk's Tales*. In *Burmese Law Tales* he classifies these tales and legends as follows:

Folk Tales: (i) Jataka tales; (ii) tales with some moral or religious background, adapted from Pali and Sanskrit sources; and (iii) juristic tales (noting that these are Burmese in origin and not derived from the Hindu Code of Manu as he

told in public or at home in the evenings, and were a common feature of village life. Others, told by monks in their sermons since they concerned general moral virtues, were Burmese versions of the Pali Jataka stories which relate incidents from previous incarnations of the Buddha. U Htin Aung states<sup>19</sup> that the Jataka was a developed art. "Some of the stories existed in India long before the time of the Buddha and therefore they were artistically finished through retelling by generation after generation. In short, the Jataka was an artistic and finished short story." The Jataka stories were also presented in a more embellished form as *hāw-za* which were dramatic recitations in verse. Such a tradition of oral story telling found new expression in the form of the short story.

Secondly, in the written literature of the past there is a narrative tradition in several of the poetical genres but particularly in those *pyo* which are based on Jataka stories and in the satirical *yagan* which date from the eighteenth century. In prose literature too there are the collections of legal precedents which tell the stories of various incidents leading to famous judgments in Burmese customary law. And in drama, both in the court plays and the popular stage plays, *pya-zat*, there is a strong narrative line.

Thirdly, the evolution of the short story was influenced by a conscious movement to encourage Burmese writing and to introduce new ideas through translated works. The Burma Education Extension Association was set up and in 1920 J. S. Furnivall founded the journal *Gandalawka* (The World of Books) to encourage young Burmans to express themselves freely in Burmese as well as English. Under its auspices many translations were published of works of Western literature.

It was thus in the 1930s that the effects of these influences, in conjunction with the natural development of Burmese literary forms, popularised the short story as a literary form among the writers connected with the Rangoon University. The term *Hkit-sān*, meaning "experiment for a new age," which was originally coined to describe a volume of "new" writing, is now applied to what became a literary movement.<sup>20</sup> It was by no means a formal movement with a single style, but rather a number of writers who reacted to the stimulus of their university studies, and who had in common a new attitude to writing which consciously sought freedom of expression and a modern literary style that was not bound by the conventions of the past. This tradition has been carried out by many pre-war and post-war writers including Maung Htin, Dagon Taya, Maung Aung, Ba Thaung, Hla Maung, Ohn Pe, Myo Min, and Thein Pe Myint.

Thein Pe Myint was an undergraduate when the *Hkit-sān* movement came into being, and he contributed many short stories to *The World of Books* and the *Rangoon College Magazine*, and has continued to write short stories since the war. In addition to short stories he has also, unlike the five original *Hkit-sān* short story writers, branched out into other fields such as novels, biography, travel, and politics, as well as journalism.

#### Some Selected Short Stories of Thein Pe Myint

In 1953 a collection of nine of Thein Pe Myint's short stories was published under the title of *Ā-lōn kāung-ba-de hkin-byā hañ let-ywēi-zin wut-htu-do-myā*

had thought when he first published this classification in *Burmese Folk Tales*.

Folk Legends: (i) those relating to persons who are either heroes or magicians mentioned in the Chronicles; (ii) those relating to places: a) place name stories, b) stories about places, and c) stories relating to hidden treasure.

<sup>19</sup>Htin Aung, *Burmese Drama*, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup>Dagmar Bečková, in her article "In Burma, along the trail of *Khitsan*," notes that there is no agreement among writers in Burma on several questions relating to the term *Hkit-sān*, e.g., whether the *Hkit-sān* period finished before the Second World War or whether it continues today; and which writers may be considered as *Hkit-sān*. In this context it is interesting to note that in Zawgyi's opinion (p. 90) only Theippan Maung Wa, Minthuwn, and Zawgyi himself could be considered as *Hkit-sān* writers. "The others did not even grasp the essence of *Khitsan* and some of them do not understand it till today. . . . Later when *Khitsan* was already established, Maung Htin Aung and Thein Pe Myint carried on its tradition." In Thein Pe Myint's view, the significance of *Hkit-sān* has been overestimated: "*Khitsan* was a phase in the development of Burmese literature. I do not attach too much importance to this phase" (p. 91); but he admits that *Hkit-sān* strengthened a trend and thus considerably influenced Burmese literature (p. 91).

("All's Well, Sir and Selected Short Stories"). It was the first time that a collection of short stories such as this had been published in Burma, and the publishers were reluctant to print any more than 4,000 copies; its popularity, however, ensured that it was soon reprinted. These nine stories have now been included in a volume of twenty-three short stories entitled *Wut-htu-do-bāung-gyok* ("Collected Short Stories"), which was published in 1968.

In his introduction to the 1953 volume, Thein Pe Myint states that the stories chosen reflect the history of the growth of national feeling in Burma, and he goes on to describe how each of the stories fits into this pattern; he also explains that he is using his pen as a tool for political ends, and only when these ends have been achieved will he be willing to devote himself to purely literary writings.

"The Royal Warrior," written in 1935, is the first story in this collection and Thein Pe Myint says of it that it demonstrates the spirit of patriotism and the desire to defend one's country against invaders. It is set at the time of the Anglo-Burmese Wars, and has not been translated here. The story concerns Aung Kyaw who, as the story opens, has just discovered that the baby he thought was his son was in fact fathered by the son of Ban-du-la; after his initial shock, he decides that the child should be named Maung Zei-ya, the name of King Alāung-hpayā who had liberated Burma from Mon domination. Aung Kyaw wanted the child to fight with him at the time of the Second Burmese War and be a royal warrior, but the child did not want to fight. By the time of the Third Anglo-Burmese War, the father, Aung Kyaw, is too old and sick to fight, but in deference to his wishes, the son has become a soldier; the father is excited at news of his son's daring exploits on the battlefield, but the truth emerges at the end of the story when the son returns, not as a conquering hero but as a coward who has fled. The father makes a final defiant gesture, then dies, bitterly disappointed in the son.

The next story in the collection, "Her Husband or Her Money," was actually written in the previous year while Thein Pe was still a student at Rangoon University. He claims that this story illustrates the first signs of discontent of the peasants with the rich landowners. It opens with a vivid description of a storm and the havoc created by it, which leads to the introduction of the two principal characters, the rich widow, Aunt Sēin, and Ū Kyauk Lōn, who eventually marries her. Although it seems that Aunt Sēin's wealth will bring him happiness, he discovers to his cost that this is not the case, particularly when their house is burgled by his nephew who is angry with Aunt Sēin for insisting that her loans should be repaid. When Aunt Sēin is forced to choose between her husband and her wealth, and chooses the latter, revealing overwhelming avarice, Kyauk Lōn professes to repent. After giving his nephew some money he had hidden, he enters a monastery. Unlike many of Thein Pe Myint's later stories, "Her Husband or Her Money" contains no open political preaching. The greater part of the story consists of a sympathetic exploration of the relationship between the two principal characters, and the disaffected peasant is introduced only just before the climax of the story. Social conditions in the country are well depicted and pointed up with many details of country life and local atmosphere. Thein Pe Myint has employed a straightforward narrative technique for this story, and the plot moves swiftly toward its climax where the tension is well sustained. With its simple construction, well-developed characterisation, and good plot, this is perhaps one of the most successful stories in this collection.

The next story, "Oil," was written in 1938 after Thein Pe's return from India. He notes that this story describes the life of the oil-field workers and the beginning of their opposition to capitalism. U Minn Latt goes further<sup>21</sup> and states that this story "was among the best works touching upon working-class life." The story concerns an oil-field worker, Ko Lu Dok, and his reaction to a frustrating predicament: because of lack of money to buy oil, even though he lives in the midst of plenty in a village on an oil-field, he cannot provide a light so that his son can learn "proper," i.e., Buddhist prayers. His solution to this dilemma is to steal some oil, and he rationalises this act by claiming to himself that he is only taking back what rightly belongs to him as a Burman. However, when he finds out that a fellow worker has been fined because of the missing oil, he steals his daughter's ring to pay the fine, and this in turn causes his son and daughter to quarrel. His realisation that the oil has caused dissension in his own family, trouble for his friend and degradation for himself, leads him to pour it back into the earth with a solemn curse. At the time this story was written in 1938, there was much industrial unrest in the oil-fields in Burma, and it was being encouraged by the nationalist

<sup>21</sup>U Minn Latt, in *New Orient Bi-Monthly*, 6/1961, p. 175.

Thakins.<sup>22</sup> It culminated in a four hundred mile march to Rangoon and a general strike. Thein Pe did not take part in the march himself, but he met the marchers on their arrival in Rangoon. This story, therefore, was both timely and pertinent. It is one of the shortest of his stories and is tight and compact in its construction with no superfluous elements; in fact, the two most important events in the story (the stealing of the oil and the stealing of the daughter's ring) are not described, so that the reader can concentrate on the main theme, i.e., the father's thoughts, hopes and subsequent disillusionment. There is an atmosphere of darkness in the story, four of the five scenes being set at night, and light is used as a symbol to indicate both illumination and learning.

"A Song to Make One Weep," which was also written in 1938, is a sketch, somewhat emotional in tone, rather than a short story. Its inclusion in this volume is, however, significant since it deals with Thein Pe's conception of the relationship between literature and propaganda. It describes a distressing scene which he witnessed in Rangoon: two small children who, because of their poverty, had to sing and dance to earn enough money to survive, while the watching crowd discussed their merits and were unconcerned at the unfairness of a society which tolerated a situation of this kind. This scene is then used to justify Thein Pe's contention that literature must be used for political ends so long as "the greed for gain of the capitalist imperialists goes unchecked, and the strong triumph unashamedly and the weak are heartlessly oppressed."<sup>23</sup> In thus stating his position so clearly, he foreshadows his later writings which are so politically committed.

"Bitter-sweet" was written after the war in 1949, but it is set at the time of Hsaya San's rebellion and the 1932 election which was fought on the issue of Burma's separation from India. The story concerns the peasant-farmer, Chit Po, and his problems. The first chapter of the story sets the scene in Kok-ko-zu village, and introduces Chit Po who is characterised as being kind, dutiful and in love with Ma Set Kyi. The next chapter tells more of the relationship between Chit Po and Ma Set Kyi with a delightful description of their encounter with the deer. The story then goes on to describe how economic conditions at that time affected Chit Po and prevented his marriage to Set Kyi; this section also includes a digression which tells how Chit Po, as typical of the peasant farmers at that time, reacted to the Hsaya San rebellion. The narrative continues and Chit Po's financial problems come to a head with the visit of the revenue surveyor; this provides an excuse for another digression which gives examples of the types of arguments used by the Separation and Anti-Separation factions in the country. There is further political comment at this point in the story as Thein Pe Myint notes that the rebelliousness among the peasants engendered by the Hsaya San affair had been dissipated as they turned their attention to the issue of Separation, which in turn led to a cynical self-interest among the peasants. The story continues with an account of Chit Po's attempts to borrow the money he needs from the rich spinster Ma Dāung Mei, and his realisation that the only solution to his pressing financial problems is to marry Ma Dāung Mei and not his childhood sweetheart. The story consists of personal reminiscences and narrative told in the third person interspersed with political comment; this rather loose, distended form of construction does, however, allow Thein Pe Myint to incorporate in the story many interesting details of country life in Burma. But the story remains essentially a critique of the type of social system in which worthy peasants like Chit Po are caught in the grip of prevailing economic conditions and cannot act freely.

"Not Till After Independence" was written in 1948 and, according to Thein Pe Myint, it describes how independence looked to the working class. The story opens in 1946 on the day when Kyaw Mya and Ei Nyun went to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon and pledged that they would marry on the day Burma became independent, whenever that might be. Having first attended an A.F.P.F.L. rally on the middle terrace, Kyaw Mya was also excited at the thought that the English companies would be nationalised and the workers would control them when Burma became independent; since he worked for an English company, Independence Day had a double significance for him. On the day when the date for independence was finally set however, he received notice that he was going to lose his job. When Independence Day arrived they were married as planned, but since Kyaw Mya had lost his job, he had been forced to borrow money for his wedding. Thus Burma was free but the young couple were not, since they were starting their married life in debt. This is a much shorter story than the previous one, and is tighter in construction so that the reader's attention is concentrated

<sup>22</sup>Tinker *The Union of Burma*, p. 283.

<sup>23</sup>See p. 43.

on the young couple's hopes for what independence will bring them. In common with many of Thein Pe Myint's stories, however, there is an ironical twist at the end of the story as these hopes are not fulfilled. The blame for this is put onto the English companies, thus reflecting a common belief that the English companies were drawing wealth out of Burma and should therefore be nationalised. The story is sensitively told, and captures well the atmosphere of excitement before independence.

The next story, "All's Well, Sir," was written in 1949 and concerns a prisoner serving a sentence for dacoity in Rangoon gaol. The story opens as Maung Thit has just heard the news of his impending release from gaol. He is naturally delighted, and quickly resolves to lead a law-abiding life after release, and not to become involved with dacoits again; he hopes that the Land Distribution Act will enable him to get some land so that he can return to farming. These feelings change to resentment as he hears the nightwatchman call out "All's Well, Sir." As he waits anxiously to make sure his name is on the list of those being released he thinks back to some of the memorable events during his time in gaol. The story goes on to describe in detail his preparations for release and a conversation with Thein Pe Myint in the person of Tet Hpōn-gyī, a fellow prisoner. As the prisoners listen to a lecture just before their release, the reader follows Maung Thit's train of thought: half of those to be released will stay within the law if they can get jobs or land to farm, and the rest are committed to a life of crime, thus the lecture is pointless and the implication is that the gaol sentence has been likewise. The rest of the story describes the reactions of Maung Thit and a fellow prisoner on tasting freedom outside the gaol, their difficult journey home because of the fighting of the insurgents, their first glimpse of their village which had been burnt to the ground in the fighting (thus making the question of land distribution no longer relevant for them), and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions. The story is told with compassion and understanding and it paints a vivid picture of life inside the gaol and the feelings of the prisoners. Thein Pe Myint claims that the story is a protest against oppression, although he does not specify further. There is political comment throughout the story on many issues, and the story serves as a vehicle for explaining Thein Pe Myint's programme for peace and unity which he later developed when he formed his own political party, the People's Unity Party.

"How Could They Call Him a Traitor?" was written in 1950, and it explains at length Thein Pe Myint's disillusionment with the policies and behaviour of the various insurgent groups who were fighting in the country, and again seeks to justify his programme for peace and unity. The first chapter sets the scene in the town of Hpya-pon where Thein Pe Myint is walking on the outskirts of the town. As he walks, he sees in the distance the little communist village of Tū-myāung which he had known well when he was a member of the B.C.P.; he then meets up with Nyun Sein, a former leader of the village. The next two chapters describe in greater detail the workings of this model communist village and the ideal relationship between Nyun Sein and his young wife Hla Shin. From this point on the story consists of a long conversation between Nyun Sein and Thein Pe Myint in which Nyun Sein explains how the civil war has affected village life: villages fighting each other, families split and fighting each other, and finally the split between Nyun Sein himself, who has been expelled from the Communist Party and the Peasants' Union because he was a follower of Thein Pe Myint, and his wife Hla Shin. As Nyun Sein explains to Thein Pe Myint how this came about, he is in fact acting as Thein Pe Myint's mouthpiece to point out the errors in the communist policy of trying to liquidate their opponents: confiscation of weapons meant that villagers could not defend themselves against dacoits, confiscation of excess land and bullocks meant that villagers found it difficult to earn a living, cancellation of debts made credit difficult to obtain. When Nyun Sein suggested that it might be sensible for the communists to join forces with the P.V.O.s and the socialists, he was accused of being a follower of Thein Pe Myint and a traitor. After Thein Pe Myint has returned to Rangoon, he reads in a newspaper that Nyun Sein has been arrested by the Government under the Treasonable Offences Act, and he wonders how a man like him can be called a traitor. Of all the stories in this collection, this one contains the most explicit political comment: the whole story is a carefully reasoned analysis of the errors made as communist principles were being put into practice at that time, and also a justification of Thein Pe Myint's own policies which neither the Government nor the communists favoured. Nonetheless, the story is effectively told, and the note of tension is well sustained, from the hint of mystery at the beginning of the story to the bitter twist at the end when Nyun Sein is arrested as a traitor.

The last story in this collection, "A Place in the Third Class," was written in 1951, and it is perhaps the most moving of all the stories. It takes the form of letters from a father, who has been driven out of his village by the civil war, to his son, whom he has left in a monastery in the village. The letters describe the

father's attempts to set himself up as a *mōn-hīn-gā* seller in Rangoon; when he is properly established, he hopes he can be reunited with his son. In the first letter he gives a brief description of Rangoon and some fatherly advice to his son, and then tells him that he intends to become a *mōn-hīn-gā* seller. The next letter comments both on the political situation in his village where the communists and the white P.V.O.s are fighting, and on the contrast between the life of the rich and the poor in Rangoon. The father goes on to describe the start he has made at his new job, and includes a touching account of his first day's work. By the time he writes his third letter, he is very depressed because he has not been able to earn enough money to recover his original investment. In the fourth letter the father, having made his breakthrough allows himself to indulge in dreams of glory, and is then suddenly overtaken by tragedy. The endearing optimism of the father, the futility of his efforts, and the hopelessness of his situation are very well presented in this story which depicts the life of the poor in Rangoon.

The most distinctive feature of these stories is their political content. Thein Pe Myint was actively involved in politics during the period in which the stories were written, and his political philosophy is reflected in them. It is his belief that literature may legitimately be used for political ends, and he expressed this view as early as 1938 in his story "A Song to Make One Weep" and again in 1952 in his introduction to this volume of stories. He amplified this point in 1970<sup>4</sup> when he explained that he had always wanted to be a novelist, but that while the political situation in Burma was not to his liking, he felt that he had to take an active part in righting it. His solution to this dilemma was to try to combine the two careers of writing and politics, and to use his writing as a tool to propagate his views. It is his opinion that literature must consciously reflect life, and he does not believe in "art for art's sake"; he goes so far as to criticise the *Hkīt-sān* writers for not taking an active part in the nationalist movement. Thein Pe Myint has, however, been criticised for mixing politics and writing in this way by U Nu, who wrote a preface for this collection of stories. U Nu stated that Thein Pe Myint was potentially a very good writer and that he should therefore abandon politics and concentrate on literature.<sup>5</sup> Dagon Taya, on the other hand, approves of this mixture, and in his opinion Thein Pe Myint's politics have improved his writings.<sup>6</sup> U Ohn Pe likewise feels that Thein Pe Myint's propagandist writings have enough literary quality to be convincing.<sup>7</sup>

Another important feature of the stories is the sense of actuality which they convey. Thein Pe Myint has used his own experiences mixed with those of others of his generation, thus making the stories, to a certain extent, semi-autobiographical. In addition to this, since the stories are so frequently based on actual events, and since the main characters in the stories are intended to be representative of the period in which they are set, these stories chronicle in a fictional way this interesting and important period in Burmese history.

This collection of short stories also demonstrates that Thein Pe Myint has a gift for narrative writing, which is important if a short story is to be successful. He tells each of his stories well, and has the power to hold the reader's attention.<sup>8</sup> It is also important that a writer of short stories should understand the limitations inherent in his medium, and should concentrate on the essentials of the narrative without superfluous elements; stories such as "Oil" and "A Place in the Third Class" show that these principles have been understood by Thein Pe Myint. His powers of description enable him to capture the human qualities of his characters and their aspirations (although disillusionment usually follows with an ironical twist at the end of the story). He also has the ability to create atmosphere in his stories, whether of Rangoon, or Upper Burma where he was born.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>24</sup>In an interview with the writer in October 1970.

<sup>25</sup>See U Nu's second preface contained in Thein Pe Myint, *Selected Short Stories* (1953).

<sup>26</sup>Dagon Taya, *Profiles*, p. 130.

<sup>27</sup>U Ohn Pe, *Modern Burmese Literature*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>28</sup>This quality was admired by Yan-gon Ba Swe in his foreword to Yebaw Hla Myo, *Thein Pe Myint or the Politician Who Would Not Accept Defeat*.

<sup>29</sup>U Nu mentioned this as being a distinctive feature of his stories in his first preface for Thein Pe Myint, *Selected Short Stories* (1953). This was written in 1937 for a volume of three of Thein Pe Myint's stories: "Her Husband or Her Money," "Member of the Legislative Council," and "The Royal Warrior."

Thein Pe Myint is a versatile writer who has turned his hand to many genres; his short stories form just a small part of his literary output as may be seen from the bibliography of his writings which is appended. These stories were written between 1934, when the short story was still a fairly new prose form in Burma, and 1951, by which time it had become a well established literary genre. They have been widely read in Burma, and prescribed for use in schools; and they have been republished recently with others of his short stories in a larger collection. Thein Pe Myint's short stories provide an interesting example of writing that is politically committed and at the same time successful as popular literature.

#### Bibliography: Works by Thein Pe Myint

(Books are arranged as nearly as possible in order of date of publication. An asterisk indicates that the book has not been seen by the writer.)

*The Modern Monk*, Tet Hpōn-gyī. Rangoon, New Light of Burma Press, 1937.

This novel, attacking several features of the monastic system in Burma and particularly the itinerant preachers, created such a sensation when it was published that monks tried to seize the Press, demanding that the book be banned from circulation, and stopped only when the proprietor of the Press promised that it would not be printed again. The author subsequently became known as Tet Hpōn-Gyī Thein Pe.

*Biography of Thakin Kodaw Hmaing*, Hsaya Lūn Ahtok-pat-tī. Rangoon, Maung Tin Hlaing, 1964.

This book, which was first published in January 1938, was the first publication issued by the newly-formed Nagani (Red Dragon) Book Club.

*Evil Spirits of Modern Times*, Tet-hkit Nat-hsō. Rangoon, Kyaw Lin, 1947.

This novel about the social consequences of venereal disease ran to two editions in 1938 and has been reprinted three times since 1947.

*The Student Boycotter*, Thabeik-hmauk Kyāung-thā. Rangoon, Pagan Publishing House, 1967.

This novel forms an account of the 1936 Students' Strike at Rangoon University, and was written in 1937. It was first published by the Red Dragon Book Club in 1938, then reprinted in 1961 in two parts, and again in 1967 in one volume.

*Democracy and the French Revolution*, Pyi-thu-a-na-hnīn pyin-thit ayēi-daw-bon. Rangoon, Red Dragon Book Club, August 1938.\*

Although this work came out under Thein Pe's name, it was actually written by Thakin Ba Thaug while in gaol. Thein Pe wrote only the preface.

*The Indian-Burmese Riots*, Ku-lā Bama Taik-pwē. Rangoon, Red Dragon Book Club, 1938.\*

This pamphlet, written in 1938, was a best-seller. (It has been translated into English by Tin Htway in his thesis; see General Bibliography.)

*Who is Wrong? Hitler or Chamberlain?* Rangoon, Red Dragon Book Club, October, 1939.\*

*Challenge to Germany.* Rangoon, Red Dragon Book Club, March 1940.\*

*U Saw Goes to England*, Ū Sāw Bī-lat Thwā-Pyazat.\*

This play was written in October, 1941.

*What Happened in Burman* Allahabad, Kitabistan, 1943.

This work, which is sub-titled "The frank revelations of a young Burmese revolutionary leader who has recently escaped from Burma to India," was published in English in India during the war, and concerns the disillusionment of many Burmese resistance fighters under Japanese rule.

*The Waxing of the New Age*, Hkit-thit-hsān-bi. Rangoon, Aung Press, 1945.\*

This is the Burmese version of a play that had been written in English in 1943-44 in co-operation with Daw Than Aye. Thein Pe Myint was in India at this time. The English version, was called "From Out of the Ashes (Pya-bon-baw-hmā)."

*Present Politics*, Gu-let-ngin naing-ngan-yēi. Rangoon, Aung Press, 1945.\*

This booklet contains correspondence on political matters between Thein Pe at the time he was General-Secretary of the B.C.P., and Than Tun who was General-Secretary of the A.F.P.F.L.

*The Way Out*, Lān-za Paw-bi. Rangoon, New Light of Burma Press, 1949.

This novel, which was completed in September, 1948, was printed first in May 1949, and then again in August of the same year. It covers the time from June 1945 (the last part of the resistance to the Japanese) to 1947 and the Burma Liberation Movement. This book includes a paragraph explaining why he added "Myint" to his name. See Note 2.

*Your Fond Request*, Chit-ywei Hkaw-ya. Rangoon, Shumawa, 1952.†

In 1948-49, while in Rangoon Gaol, Thein Pe Myint wrote a film script which he sold to the British-Burma Company; but it was changed and rewritten by U Nya Na. Thein Pe Myint decided to write a novel based on this story at the beginning of 1951. It was largely finished when he became involved in politics, and he finished it off in a hurry just before the film was released at the end of 1952. The title is taken from an eighteenth century poem by Sein-dakyaw-thu.

*Farewell to the Past*, Nei-yit-taw Hkit-hāung. Rangoon, Maung Tin Than, 1963.

This is an account of Thein Pe Myint's trip to China beginning in May 1952. It was first published in September 1952 and reprinted in 1963.

*Biography of Hpō Sein*. Rangoon, True Literature Publishing House, 1953.†

This is a biography of the famous dancer and actor, Po Sein, and it was published the year after his death.

*The Wartime Traveller*, Sit-atwīn Hkayī-the. Rangoon, Pagan Publishing House, 1966.  
*Burmese Emissary to the Allies*, Maha-meit-hnīn Bama-taman.

These two works were first published in serial form in *Shumawa Magazine* starting in 1951. They were then published separately, *Wartime Traveller* in 1953 by Shumawa Books, and *Burmese Emissary to the Allies* in 1963 by Hkit-Myanma Sa-pei-taik. In 1966 Pagan Publishing House published the two together as a single volume entitled *The Wartime Traveller*, which has since been reprinted. *The Wartime Traveller* forms an account of Thein Pe's and Tin Shwe's escape from the Japanese, their difficult journey to India, and their work there to achieve the liberation of Burma. The story begins in Mandalay in April 1942, and ends with Thein Pe's preparations to visit China in January 1943. An advertisement for this book in *The Student Boycotter* describes it as a "chapter in the history of the National Liberation Movement and Anti-Fascist Resistance." *Burmese Emissary to the Allies* is a continuation of *The Wartime Traveller*, starting in January 1943 when Thein Pe left New Delhi for China, and it ends in 1946 after he had returned to Burma.

*Selected Short Stories*, Ā-lōn Kāung-ba-de Hkin-byā. Rangoon, True Literature Publishing House, 1953.

This is a collection of nine of Thein Pe Myint's short stories and includes two forewords by U Nu. "The Royal Warrior," 1935, "Her Husband or Her Money," 1934, "Oil," 1938, "A Song to Make One Weep," 1938, "Bitter-Sweet," 1949, "Not Till after Independence," 1948, "All's Well, Sir," 1949, "How Could They Call Him a Traitor," 1950, "A Place in the Third Class," 1951.

*The Teachings of Mao Tse Tung*, Maw-si-tōn-ī Thin-gyā-chet-myā. Rangoon, Kyaw Lin, 1954.†

This was originally published as *Teachings on the New Democracy of Mao Tse Tung*, but Thein Pe Myint changed the title for the second edition. He wrote it in Rangoon Gaol, finishing it on March 20th, 1949. The foreword to the second edition is dated November, 1952.

*Political Experiences in Revolutionary Times*, Taw-hlan-yēi Kalā Naing-ngan-yēi Atwei-akyon-myā. Rangoon, Shwei-pyi-dan Press, 1956.

In this book Thein Pe Myint has collected many of his statements, manifestos, documents and speeches together with comment and analysis.

*As Sure as the Sun Rising in the East*, Ashēi-gā Nei-wūn Htwet-thi-pama. Rangoon, Kyaw Lin, 1960.

This long novel, which Thein Pe Myint states in a letter "is woven out of the anti-imperialist liberation movement of 1936-42," was first published in three volumes in 1958, reprinted in 1960, and is being reprinted again now. The title is taken from the national song of that time, the phrase being completed by "our time will come.†"

*Biography of Kyaw Nyein*, Kyaw Nyēin. Rangoon, Shwei-pyi-dan Press, 1961.

This biography of Kyaw Nyein also contains much autobiographical material. It was reprinted in 1969.n

*Goodwill Traveller*, Chit-kyi-yēi Hkayī-the. 1961.†

Selections from this book on Japan, Thailand and China were reprinted in *The World as I've Seen It*.

*Setting off to the West but Coming Home from the East*, Anauk-ko shauk-pa-lō Ashei-go-ṭe hmyaw-laik-yīn. 1961.\*

This book is described in the introduction to *History is Beginning Now in the Chin Hills* as a "round-the-world journey to the West: Karachi, Beirut, London, the Atlantic, New York, Washington, San Francisco, the Pacific, Honolulu, Manila and Hong Kong. So I was a traveller going to the West, but my family and friends expected me from the East.† The title, which refers to a *byaw* song, may also be taken to mean "Setting off for the West, i.e., Capitalism, but longing for the East, i.e., Communism," since the book is a travelogue describing his visit to the United States. Chapters describing Pakistan, Lebanon, Egypt, England and America have been reprinted in *The World as I've Seen It*.

*A Glimpse of a Smile from Within Failure*, Ashōn-dē-hmā Apyōn. Rangoon, Nan-tha-taik, 1970.

This book was written after Thein Pe Myint was defeated in a parliamentary bye-election in 1961 and was first published in 1962. It was reprinted in 1970 together with "Returning to Upper Burma."

*Budalim*, Bu-dalin Hsāung-bā-myā. Rangoon, Revolutionary Government Handbook, 1963.

Thein Pe Myint was born in Budalin and spent his childhood there.

*The Truth is Found Among the People*, Pyei-thū Kyā-hma Ahman-sha. Rangoon, Pagan Books, 1964.†

Thein Pe Myint's travels in Burma.

*Bewildering Paris and the Traveller of Peace*, Wō-dawā Pa-ri Nyēin-gyān-yēi Hkayī-the. Rangoon, Sein Tin, 1965.

There are selections from this book reprinted in *The World as I've Seen It*.

*History is Beginning Now in the Chin Hills*, Wi-thei-thā-tāing Thamāing-asā. Rangoon, People's Handbook Series, Burma Translation Society, 1967.

In the preface, Thein Pe Myint states that although he had travelled all over the world, he had not been to the Upper Chindwin and the Chin Hills, and so he went there and wrote the book. It won the Sarpay Beikman Prize in 1968.

*Mao Tse Tung's China and the Sovereign Power of Burma*, Maw-si-tōn Tayok-hnṭin Myan-ma Achok-acha A-na. Rangoon, Nan-tha-taik, 1967.

This was written just after the anti-Chinese demonstrations in 1967, and was a best-seller, selling over 100,000 copies.

*The World as I've Seen It*, Kyun-daw Kyon-bū-thāw Kaba. Rangoon, U Chit Swe, 1967.

This volume covers his travels to India, Pakistan, Lebanon, Soviet Union, German Democratic Republic, Egypt, Italy, France, England, America, Japan, Thailand, China and North Vietnam, and it contains articles and chapters from the following: *The Wartime Traveller*, *Burmese Emissary to the Allies*, *Setting off to the West but Coming Home from the East*, *Botataung Newspaper*, *Bewildering Paris and the Traveller of Peace*, *Goodwill Traveller*, "Leaving Behind the Past.†"

*Collected Short Stories of Thein Pe Myint*, Wut-htu-do-bāung-gyok. Rangoon, Pagan Publishing House, 1968.

The following twenty-three short stories have been included in this volume

"Her Husband or Her Money,†" 1934.

"Member of the Legislative Council,†" 1935.

"The Royal Warrior,†" 1935.

"Independence," 1936.

"One Night,†" 1937.

"Mali," 1938.

"Oil," 1938.

"A Song to Make One Weep,†" 1938.

"Not Till After Independence," 1948.

"Mother,†" 1948.

"All's Well, Sir," 1949.

"Bitter-Sweet,†" 1949.

"How Could They Call Him a Traitor," 1950.

"A Place in the Third Class," 1951.

"Ngwe Sein Breaks Her Paddle While Rowing,†" 1955.

- "Ah, These are but Vanities," 1955.  
 "Utmost Incorruptibility," 1957.  
 "Bikkhu Sumana," 1958.  
 "The Problems of the Old Hsaya," 1959, and  
 "The Impact of the Month of Tabaung on the Old Hsaya's Problems," 1961.  
 "Love at Dusk," 1965.  
 "That Girl and Bala Sithu," 1965.  
 "Fidelity or Sein Net," 1966.  
 "The Lascivious Rake in his Legitimate Pursuit," 1966.

*Thi-ta-pyōn*. Rangoon, Padei-tha Ya-za Sa-pei, 1970.

This novel, from a film script of Thein Pe Myint, was serialised in *Botataung* and published in 1968. It was reprinted in 1970.

*Revolutionary Essays*, Taik-pwē-win sa-myā. Rangoon, Yamuna Publishing House, 1968.

This is a collection of Thein Pe Myint's writings on literary topics, reprinted from many sources. Biography, literary criticism, style, ideology, politics and propaganda all appear as subjects for his pen.

*The Ocean Traveller and the Pearl Queen*, An-nawa hkayī-the-hnīn palē dei-wi. Rangoon, Aung Thu-ri-lyā, 1969.

This novel was first published in *Botataung* in serial form and is set in the Mergui Archipelago.

*Return to Upper Burma*, Anya-pyan. Rangoon, Nan-tha-taik, 1970h

This was first published in serial form in *Thwei-thauk Magazine* in 1955-56, and the present volume includes "A Glimpse of a Smile from Within Failure."h

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HER HUSBAND OR HER MONEY

(1934h *Gandalawka*)

I

A very strong gale had blown up. The banyan and tamarind trees and even the great acacias were bending and swaying, while the smaller trees and bushes<sup>30</sup> were practically prostrate, just like little chickens cringing in fear of a kite.

To the west of Thī-bin-aing village, the main branch of the banyan tree was broken. On the eastern side, the tall sugar palm was lying flat. To the south, the big acacia tree had come crashing down with a loud groan. All the little tinkling bells<sup>31</sup> on the pagoda at the top of the village had come adrift, and the sheets of corrugated iron from the roof of the burial ground rest-house had flown off in the gusty wind just like soaring aeroplanes. Ū Tō's house, Ū Hpaung's hut, Aunt Hkañ's granary, and Ma Gūn Hmon's house were all gaping open with their roofs off.

Was the god of the wind<sup>32</sup> drunk with toddy palm wine to make him so wild and rough? The howling gale did not stop until after midnight, but as the wind died down there were flashes of lightning and loud claps of thunder. Before long it was raining.

The next morning, the whole village was astir as it became light. People had to go rounding up the pieces of thatching and woven bamboo walls which had taken it upon themselves to leave their own houses and go off visiting others.<sup>33</sup> All the tamarind leaves had been blown down, and those from Ū Hpaung's house were all mixed up together with the ones from Aunt Hkañ's house. The rubbish from the whole village, having floated away on the water, collected on the road in front of the house of the Headman,<sup>34</sup> Ū Hpō Wīn, and seemed to be saying, "Headman, Sir, we have come to pay our taxes to you."

The roof of Aunt Sēin's house was just a gaping hole, and all that remained were a few bamboo rafters. Aunt Sēin, who would have been no more than forty-five, was a rich widow. She owned two large areas of land<sup>35</sup> for mixed crops near the river, as well as assorted cordia myxa plantations with their rich soil, and had also inherited from her husband a collection of paddy fields at Kyauk Myei. She used to give loans to the poor people but demanded an excessive amount of goods in return, such as beans, sesamum, or oil. When she lent out money for interest, her interest

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<sup>30</sup>The text lists the following: *tama*, tragacanth; *ōn-nē* (*ok-hnē*), Euphorbia; *thanat*, Cordia Myxa; and *dahat*, Tectona Hamiltonii.

<sup>31</sup>These are small bells with tongues shaped like banyan leaves hung on the *htī* (umbrella) at the top of the pagoda.

<sup>32</sup>The term *lei-nat-thā* means the nat or spirit of the wind. Since the *lei-nat-thā* is a celestial spirit who would not normally meddle in human affairs, this is a facetious suggestion. See Note 151.

<sup>33</sup>Literally: "they had to go out and collect Mr. Palm Leaf (roofing) and Miss Woven Bamboo (walling), who had left their own houses to go and visit others."

<sup>34</sup>The *thu-gyī*, or headman, was the chief official of the village with limited administrative and judicial powers. Amongst other duties he saw to the collection of taxes from the villagers.

<sup>35</sup>In this paragraph the words *tāw* and *taik* are used to describe the farming land owned by Aunt Sēin. In this sense, *tāw* means an area of land, probably several fields, which are used for a certain purpose, e.g., *ya-tāw* for mixed crops, *le-tāw* for paddy, and *thanat-pin-tāw* for cordia myxa trees. When *taik* is used, it indicates a collection of these areas or fields, as in a plantation or estate, e.g., *le-tāw-taik* (cf. *kyāung-taik*, a cluster of monasteries, where *taik* indicates a collection of things united under one head (Judson)h

rate was ten per cent. And when she was demanding repayment of loans she could be quite pitiless, and would take possession of carts, bullocks, and houses if she could not get her money.

When a *hsūn-lāung-pwē*<sup>36</sup> was being held in the village to offer food to the monks, whereas most people gave fried cakes, beans, steamed fish, and various sweet breads, Aunt Sēin could afford to offer richer confections like little savoury puffs, sweet fried bread plaits, Indian sweets, as well as coconuts and bananas.

Aunt Sēin and her husband Ū Hnget Kyī had been married for a very long time, but they had had no children. Although she would have liked to marry again, she kept her desire for a husband in check, because the only prospective masters of her house she could find hadn't even a penny to their names<sup>37</sup> and would have just frittered away all her wealth. If she had set in a pair of balance scales her desire for a husband against her fear that her money would be used up, her fear would weigh the heavier.

But today, it seemed that it was just because she had no husband that her roof had to be gaping open like this. She had no one to put a roof on for her or give her a hand. And last night, it seemed that it was just because she was by herself, without a husband, that she had to go and lose a pearl ear-ring<sup>38</sup> while she was trying to keep out of the rain. Aunt Sēin felt helpless and sad, but especially when she felt in need of a man. However, from the time she had firmly closed the tempting pot which said that it would be good to have a husband, with the lid which said all her money would be wasted, no whiff of the advantages of a loving husband was able to get out.

As soon as it was light, having bought five mat's worth<sup>39</sup> of toddy palm leaves, she had sent for her paddy field labourers Maung San Ēi, Maung Aung Bān, Maung Hpō Ni, and Haung Hlā Dan, and set them to putting the roof on the house. By the time the monks had received their morning offerings and returned to the monastery,<sup>40</sup> the roofing of the house was almost complete, and there remained only the ridge of the roof. She prepared a meal of pork and cooked pumpkin, sour bean salad, and dried venison with fried chillies to give the men.

While they were eating, Ū Kyauk Lōn arrived. He was a widower. Previously he had been a country broker, but now he traded in skins. His two sons had both married and left home, and he had lots of friends in Kyauk-ō, Kok-ko-zu, Kyet-yō-gōn, Nyaung-gan and many other villages. Although the skin trade was not particularly lucrative, he could keep himself comfortably in food and clothes. And he was still only about fifty years old.

When he saw the roof, Ū Kyauk Lōn called out, "Haven't they fixed the ridge of the roof on yet?" Aunt Sēin heard his voice and came outside from the kitchen.

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<sup>36</sup>A *hsūn-lāung-pwē* is a ceremony in which food is offered to the monks (*hsūn*, cooked rice for the monks; *lāung*, pouring, i.e., into the begging bowl; *pwē*, ceremony). The act of giving, and especially of giving to the monks, is very important to the Buddhist since it is one way in which he may build up *ku-tho* or merit which will strengthen his *kan* or destiny, and thus assist him, in his future existences, to attain the state of *Neik-ban* or Nirvana to which he aspires.

<sup>37</sup>Literally: "did not even have a bundle of cloth."

<sup>38</sup>Various types of ear-rings are worn in Burma. This one is the *nā-kat* which is "a curious ear-plug, big at both ends, and smaller in the middle, where the two parts screw into one another. The screw is passed through the lobe of the ear, and the other portion is then twisted on." Shway Yoe, *The Burman: His Life and Notions*, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup>Before 1952 the Indian monetary system (rupees and annas) was used in Burma. One *mat* was equal to four annas, i.e., a quarter of one rupee. (The rupee is now known as the *kyat* and is divided into 100 *pyā*.)

<sup>40</sup>This is one of the idiomatic expressions of time found in Burmese, and it means that the time was about 9 a.m. Cf. *thu-nge-eik-hseik-chein* (children's bed-time), about 8 p.m.; *lalin-pyan-gyein* (time when young men return from courting), about 10 p.m.; *lu-chei-teik-chein* (time at which the human foot is silent), about 11 p.m.; *kyet-ū-dun* (earliest cock's crow), about 2 a.m.

"Is that you, Ū Kyauk Lōn?h What are you doing here?"<sup>41</sup>

Ū Kyauk Lōn smiled at the question. "Why? Aren't you pleased to see me? I've come because I heard your house was being roofedh"

"Oh, I see. Well, that's all right, then. What about having something to eat"<sup>42</sup> now? I've fried some dried venison."

"Please don't bother.h"

"No, no! I've cooked plenty. There's enough for you. Come on, wash your hands and come and join us. We'll all fit round the table."

Because she was so insistent, Hpō Kyauk Lōn, who was highly delighted,h<sup>3</sup> washed his hands in the rice washing pot, joined them and tucked in heartily.

When they had finished eating, they each smoked a big maize-leaf cheroot. Then, while Ū Kyauk Lōn stripped some bark for tying up the thatching, Aunt Sēin, who was sitting near him, put the strips of bark into a bowl of water. After a while, as he was splitting a palm leaf with his whittling knife, he began: "Me Sēin, you didn't tell me sooner, so I got here too late. When there is something you need done, just ask me to come and do it. Don't hesitate. You haven't got a husband to rely on, so just ask me, as you would a member of your own familyh"

"It's very kind of you to say that, but since we weren't related, I didn't like to ask you to help." As she spoke, she pushed down into the water the pieces of bark fibre that were floating and bobbing on the surface.

"Me Sēin, it is not only relatives who can be of help to those near and dear to them; you should turn to people like me. The most important factor in getting things done is friendship, don't you agree?"

Just as he was warming to his subject, Maung San Ēi interrupted,<sup>44</sup> saying, "Aunt Sēin, we are going up onto the roof now.h"

"Yes, yes. Try to get it finished before the monastery bell rings," said Aunt Sēin, giving him the strips of fibre.

Kyauk Lōn followed Aunt Sēin. "Me Sēin, I'm going up onto the roof too."

"No, please don't. You'll fall and break something. Let hale and hearty men do the job."

"Young men may be strong, but you can't beat an old hand like me.h"<sup>5</sup> Out of the way, I'm going up!"

<sup>41</sup>In translating conversational passages into English, it is not always possible to give a literal translation. In Burmese, many nuances of mood can be expressed by the use of various personal appellations and interjections; formality and informality, politeness and familiarity, respect and disrespect, can all be indicated in this way, and a literal translation would not give their true meaning. Therefore, in order to convey more accurately the sense and mood of the original, it is sometimes necessary to alter the English translation slightly.

<sup>42</sup>Literally: "Come and have some rice." Instead of the more usual *htamīn* for rice, the author has used *ahmīm*, which is the pronunciation found in Upper Burma.

<sup>43</sup>Literally: "Hpō Kyauk Lōn, who was a Hpō Kyāing Dok. . h ." The phrase *kyāing dok* is onomatopoeic, and describes the throbbing of the heart of a young man when he sees the girls. It is commonly prefixed by *hpō* (Mister)h

<sup>44</sup>At this point in the text a proverb is employed to emphasise the irrelevancy of the interruption: "Ayēi-gāung dēin-dāung hpyet-laid-lei-ī" ("Just as the writing was going well, it was interrupted by 'Ding-dongh"). "When a lunatic, who was pointing out where treasures were buried, realised people were taking down notes, he distracted their attention by shouting 'Ding-dong.'" Hla Pe, *Burmese Proverbs*, p. 66.

<sup>45</sup>A Burmese proverb is partially quoted at this point. The full proverb is "Nwā-byo than-hlā nwā-o paung kyō thalauk-shī" ("The strongest young bullock is only as strong as an old bullock with a broken leg").h Hla Pe, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

"Oh, don't go up, please don't go up. This is all very laudable, my dear sir, but you're not as young as all that. Don't go up. I can't bear to watch."

"What is there to be frightened of? I want to go up and do this for you, even if I fall and die. I really do want to fix the ridge on your roof for you. Do you agree?"

As Hpō Ni caught the sound of his voice questioning eagerly, he poked Hla Dan in the ribs, and picked up the palm leaves. They finished roofing the house that day.

## II

Ū Kyauk Lōn knew how well off Aunt Sēin was. As for himself business was not going very well, and he was hard put to it to earn his living by trading in skins. Although he was fifty years old, he felt that he still needed someone to carry his offerings when he was going to observe duty-days.<sup>46</sup> He also needed someone to cook his meals for him at regular times. He felt that he deserved to have someone to roll his cheroots for him and weave his *lon-gyis*. When he saw other married couples living together, going about together, he envied them whether they were young and fresh or old and wizened. This was why he felt drawn to Aunt Sēin: she had money, she was exactly the right age for him, her complexion was fair, her flesh was youthful, rounded and plump, in fact she was most desirable. He loved her. He adored her. He was seized by a great feeling of sympathy for her. To cut a long story short,<sup>47</sup> he wanted her now, before Lent.<sup>48</sup>

Because of this, he went round to see Aunt Sēin at every opportunity. Just as mint is added to give spice,<sup>49</sup> he was in the habit of spicing all his ordinary everyday remarks to her with hints and suggestions of love.

One evening as the sun was just setting, Aunt Sēin sat on the charpoy in front of her house, skinning the soaked and swollen beans. Ū Kyauk Lōn arrived, and sat down next to her. Aunt Sēin offered him a cheroot.

Ū Kyauk Lōn, who was usually very talkative, was rather pensive, and seemed to have something on his mind. She noticed that he kept on swallowing and clearing his throat. He puffed at his big cheroot until clouds of smoke appeared. Aunt Sēin could see that Ū Kyauk Lōn was ill at ease, but she pretended not to notice, and started talking. "There are a lot of bad ones in this lot of beans ..."

"Yes, there are a lot of bad ones. That's why the Kan-ū-daik Hsaya-saw<sup>50</sup> Ū Meik

<sup>46</sup>There are four duty days in each lunar month, falling on the new moon, the eighth of the waxing moon, the full moon, and the eighth of the waning moon. Observance of a duty day includes a visit to the monastery or pagoda, the offering of food to the monks, the taking of the Eight Precepts instead of the usual Five (see Notes 53 and 268), as well as devotional activities such as meditation, religious reading, sermons and discussion.

<sup>47</sup>Literally: "Without telling the whole story of Benares and the still-born babe...." This is a reference to a queen who gave birth to a still-born baby, and wailed at its birth that she was far from her own kingdom, that the father did not know, that she was a servant in a strange land, and that she did not know what to do. The story is told in *U Pon Nyā wut-hty-bāung-gyok-ahpyei* by U Hpō Sein. In modern usage, an allusion to this story indicates "making a mountain out of a mole hill," or negatively, as in the text, "without telling the whole story," "to cut a long story short."

<sup>48</sup>The Buddhist Lent, or *wa*, is observed for three to four months during the rainy season. Religious duties are strictly observed, monks are supposed to confine themselves to their monasteries, laymen often go into retreat, and young boys who have been initiated into the novitiate in *shin-byū* ceremonies spend a few days, a whole Lent, or longer in the monasteries. During this time, too, no celebrations are held and no marriages take place, hence Ū Kyauk Lōn's desire to get married before the full moon of *wa-zo* which heralds the beginning of Lent.

<sup>49</sup>Literally: "Just as mint is added to the cooked Momordica plant."

<sup>50</sup>A *hsaya-daw* is rather like an abbot in that he is the chief monk of a monastery or a group of monasteries; the title *hsaya-daw* may also be applied as an honorific to a particularly revered and learned monk.

preached that there are many bad people in the world, just as there are many bad beans. If you really look closely, there are so many stupid and useless people<sup>51</sup> in this world of ours. For instance, there is Maung Hkwet Kyī, a drunkard, in that house to the south of us, and on the other side of us there is Maung Chon and his family who claim to be monastery patrons,<sup>52</sup> yet they go in for cock-fighting; and what about Ū Byaw Wī, there he is still gambling at cards even though he has one foot in the grave. In this village there aren't many men like me, living simply and honestly, and abiding by the Five Precepts<sup>53</sup> I'm not saying this because it's me I'm talking about; in this world of ours, good men like me are few and far between." As he was speaking, Aunt Sēin sighed deeply.

"My dear husband Hnget Kyī was a good honest man, too. He never once drank toddy palm wine. Nor did he play cards. He never played a mean trick on anyone. Poor fellow, he was simple and honest. He was so kind to me, and indulged my every whim. He looked after me and really was a perfect husband. May the Lord Buddha and all the spirits see that his soul rests in peace." As she spoke, with her knuckle she rubbed away the tears that had started to well up in his eyes.

"Yes, indeed. I pray that my good friend may rest in peace. He really was a good and honest man."

"That's why I can't forget him. I miss him very much, Ū Kyauk Lōn."

"I was thinking about him too, just today."

"But it is more than just missing him; it is so difficult for me now, as I have to do all the jobs which he did when he was alive."

"Of course you feel lost without him. I'll tell you something. Will you listen?"

"Yes, go on."

"There are some jobs which women shouldn't have to do, such as collecting in the produce and claiming debts. They are major tasks. The workers aren't afraid of you as they were of Ko Hnget Kyī, and they probably cheat when they give you the crops. If they say the yield was only ninety baskets when in fact it was a hundred, you have to believe them. You can't go and check. So, since this is the position, you should look for someone reliable and ..r" he said, and puffed deeply at his cheroot again.

"And then what? I should have to pay him a lot."

"I didn't mean an employee. What I meant was that you should find a straightforward honest man and marry him." At these words, Aunt Sēin pursed her lips with disapproval.

"Oh, no, please don't try to make me take another husband," she said, looking terrified at the prospect.

"Think it over, my dear, because you are still young. Your wealth will just diminish if you haven't got a husband. It is not becoming to you to be without a husband. You're like a picture without a frame.<sup>54</sup> Now if you had a husband, you wouldn't feel so helpless and lonely, your difficulties would disappear, and your riches would not be in danger. Take my word for it, I'm giving you good advice."

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<sup>51</sup>The phrase *lu-maik lu-ba-la-nan* is taken from the verse concerning foolish people in the *Min-gala-thok*, the summary of beatitudes in the Buddhist scriptures. (A translation of the *Min-gala-thok* may be found in Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, p. 574.)

<sup>52</sup>A monastery patron is one who, to gain *ky-tho* (merit), has built a monastery and is therefore a respected person.

<sup>53</sup>These are five commandments which are binding on all, and form part of the Buddhist devotions. They form a basic code of rules which must not be violated: not to kill, steal, commit adultery, lie, or drink intoxicating liquor. Observing these precepts builds *ky-tho* (merit), while violating them builds *aky-tho* (demerit).

<sup>54</sup>Literally: "a basket without a rim."

"Dear Kyauk Lōn, I don't want a husband. And if I did want one, I wouldn't be able to find one who would work for me honestly and help me make money," she answered, putting the bean husks into the sieve.

"If you decide to marry, you'll be able to find someone. It won't be difficult."

"Not difficult I can't see anyone at all."

"Come, come. You don't need to look far. You can't see your own ear with your eye, but you know it's there because you can feel it with your hand. There is someone who is just like that. Now, you say you can't see anyone suitable. Just put out your hand and feel who's sitting on the same board, right next to you," he said, and his face broke into a broad grin. Aunt Sēin's face clouded over and she burst out furiously:

"Go, go away. Don't come to my house any more! And if this is your attitude, don't come asking me to go out with you ever again!"

"Me Sēin, dear, please don't take offence. I have been really fond of you for a long time. Since Ko Hnget Kyī passed away, I have been fond of you."

"You horrid brute, go away! I hope you meet a ghastly death. Get out! Go away! And don't come back. I don't want to see you again."<sup>5</sup>

"Please think it over, Me Sēin."

"What is there to think over? Damn you, you vile beast! May vipers<sup>56</sup> bite you. May you be struck by lightning and go up in flames. Go away, right now!"

"I'm only going when I've got you, Me Sēin. I swear it, once for all, twice for all."<sup>7</sup> I love you!"

"I told you to go. Haven't you gone yet? Must I curse and scream? You great pot of lust, you walking corpse ..." She abused him loudly.

"I'm only asking you to be fond of me. Can't you love me just a little in return? My intentions are quite honourable. I'm thinking of you as a wife."<sup>8</sup>

"Now, really! ..h 'honourable' ... 'as a wife' ..h" she muttered, grinding her teeth, and she hit out at Ū Kyauk Lōn with the bean sieve.

"Good heavens, you really are hard hearted ... oh dear! I only spoke because I love you so much. Even if you don't love me, you might have a little pity. Even if you don't love me, couldn't you try and just show me a little kindness, a little affection? That was a cruel thing to do ... ouch, it hurts ... Me Sēin, you are as heartless and unfeeling as your name!"<sup>8</sup> He stood up, and started to hum sadly. "Ever they beset me, woes and troubles thick, for this is what I'm destined for by my former fate, tum - hmmm - mmm."<sup>9</sup> As he sang, she realised that, in her violent action, she had gone too far.

"Wait a moment, Ū Kyauk Lōn, I must just say something. Sit down, please. You really were taking liberties. I was thinking of you as a relative, someone I could turn to, and that's why I reacted as I did when you spoke in that foolish manner."

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<sup>55</sup>For the various imprecations and curses that occur at different points in these stories, it is not always possible to give a literal translation whilst retaining the spirit of the original. See Note 41.

<sup>56</sup>The word used in the text for viper is *mabwēi*, which is the pronunciation found in Upper Burma for *mwei-bwēi* Russell's viper.

<sup>57</sup>The phrase *ahok-tage-nhake* employs a pun on *tage*, which means "certainly, indeed, surely, in truth." *Tage* has been used here as a numerical classifier, and has been followed by *nhake*, meaning "certainly, certainly twice."

<sup>58</sup>The word *sēin* in Burmese can mean "destitute of natural affection, unfeeling, inhuman, savage" as well as the more common meaning of "green" (Judson)h

<sup>59</sup>This is taken from a song popular at the time the story was written in 1934.

"Me Sēin, no matter whether they're old or young, how can you put man and woman, male and female together and expect them to live as brother and sister or just as good friends? Now think! Since I am only human,<sup>60</sup> how can I help loving you? You're so lovable and desirable. Come now, please try to love me a bit, like I love you." The old charmer spoke very coaxingly.<sup>61</sup>

"It's impossible, Ū Kyauk Lōnh I can't love you," she said as she put the sieve down on the charpoy again.

"You can, my dear, please try to love me, please try, I beg you. I shall die if I don't have you, I swear to you," he said, taking hold of Aunt Sēin's hand which was holding the basin, but she immediately drew it away and instead hit Ū Kyauk Lōn three times on the head with the big bean basin.

"There! Get away with you, you oaf. You're a vile animal, you dirty old man! Go away, go on! Take that, and that!" She was hitting him as she spoke, when some blood appeared from a wound on his forehead. Ū Kyauk Lōn covered the gash with the palm of his hand, saying,

"Oh my God! How it hurts! Me Sēin, oh Me Sēin, help me. Ooh, ouch! I feel quite giddy. If you won't help me, then nobody will, oh dear! And if you won't help me, I shall surely die. Oh God! Ow!" And with these words he toppled over onto the bench.

Aunt Sēin opened her eyes wide in fright. She was at her wit's end as she realised what a difficult position they were in because of her impetuosity. She began to feel sorry for Ū Kyauk Lōn. How cruel she had been! How violent! She was desolated that she had beaten him so heartlessly, and she gently helped him to sit up.

"Do you still feel giddy, Ū Kyauk Lōn? Does it hurt? Oh, look how it's still bleeding," she said. Ū Kyauk Lōn just rolled his eyes a little, then said,

"Me Sēin, you've been cruel and heartless, but I'm not angry with you. Please help meh" He closed his eyes.

"I didn't mean to be cruel, but you went so far that I couldn't help losing my temper."

"Oh, my dearest Sēin, I love you so much. 'Love and hunger know no shame'<sup>62</sup> after all. And it is because I love you that I couldn't help blurting it out. Although you hit me just now, my love for you is not destroyed. Although my body is wounded, my love is unwavering. Even if you were to strike me with a dagger, my love for you, far from disappearing, would surely continue, even into the next life!" he said in a supreme effort of eloquence, and he laid his head on Me Sēin's breast and was still.

Me Sēin smiled as she said, "Is that the truth, my dear Lōn?"

"The truth, yes, I swear it."

"Then I love you too, dearest Lōn." As soon as she said this, Ū Kyauk Lōn looked at her tenderly as if to say in the words of the song, 'Let's love each other then, my dear. My left arm is around you, and my right arm holds you tight.'

### III

'My, my, things are looking up. I have dug and chanced upon a treasure which is

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<sup>60</sup>Ū Kyauk Lōn has described himself here as a *py-tu-zin*, i.e., a person who is still subject to human failures and has not yet become an *ari-ya* ready to attain Nirvana.

<sup>61</sup>Literally: "he coaxed as an old fowl might coax."

<sup>62</sup>This is a common saying which is used by people in love to excuse and justify their acts; it is felt that one should not have to apologise for one's behaviour when one is in love, or hungry, or sleepy.

richer than the treasure of Shwei Kyō Hpyu himself.<sup>63</sup> I must have exceptional merit<sup>64</sup> to have found this sort of treasure. I am in luck ... me, in luck ... I shall stop being a skin trader; apart from being tiring, it is demeritorious - not honourable work at all. Having suffered so much, I can now enjoy a pleasant life. Me Sēin, Me Sēin ... now I, Nga Kyauk Lōn, am you husband aren't I!" While he was musing thus, he heard a call from outside the house, "Rice for the monks." He sat up and gently nudged Aunt Sēin, who was curled up asleep near him, to wake her.

"Hey, Me Sēin ... Me Sēin ... get up ... it's very late. You'll miss the morning offering of rice."<sup>65</sup>

Aunt Sēin straightened her back and sat up. "I've got the rice, but there isn't any curry, so I'm too late. The beans which I was going to cook for the offering all got spilt last night," she said, and got up to go and wash her face.

"Ah, Me Sēin, Me Sēin, I love watching you like this with your hair all loose as you move around a little unsteadily clutching at your *htamein*-skirt<sup>66</sup> and your scarf. Luck has finally caught up with me. And what is more, people call me a rich man as is fitting; and if you ask whether my merit is of the kind that brings good results, look at the sort of wealth I have acquired without working for it. I am going to be very happy. I am going to enjoy myself. I am going to buy lots of silk *pahsōs* to wear, and I am going to have tailored jackets made of the finest Indian homespun. Oh, how happy I am ... what bliss!" he exclaimed joyfully<sup>67</sup> as he washed his face.

After they had been living together as husband and wife for some time, Ū Kyauk Lōn began to realise that his experience was in no way matching up to his expectations. Since he had married a rich person, by his calculations he should have been having an easy life, but far from it. He had to keep on going into the country to inspect the cultivated fields, and there were constant arguments with the workers. Every month he had to make trips to fourteen or fifteen different villages to collect debts. When he was repaid in kind he had to see to the selling of the produce himself. If he got sesamum, he had to grind it in a mortar, collect the oil, then sell it, and that was a lot of work. And the pulp had to be made into sesamum seed cakes,<sup>68</sup> and that was yet another thing to be dealt with. If he got ground nuts, these had to be dried in the sun, then shelled and crushed, all the while frightening off the

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<sup>63</sup>Many Burmese people believe that when a materialistic or miserly person dies, he becomes the guardian spirit of a buried treasure trove. Shwei Kyō Hpyu and Mu Lā Gē are two such characters from a well-known folk tale which has also been dramatised.

<sup>64</sup>See Note 36. Since merit or *ku-tho* is carried on through each existence, Ū Kyauk Lōn is now assuming that he must have had an excellent store of merit since he has fallen on such good times. An accumulation of merit assures a happier reincarnation in future existences until eventually one attains the state of Nirvana.

<sup>65</sup>Buddhist monks, or novices on their behalf, beg daily for their food, thus giving people an opportunity to build up merit for themselves by their act of giving. The food is always cooked and often specially prepared. "The begging monk comes roughly at the same time each morning, and the woman knows when she is to have the food ready. If she cannot, for some unforeseen reason, have the cooked food ready, she borrows some from a neighbour in order not to miss out on this *kutho* building time." Nash, *The Golden Road to Modernity*, pp. 137-8.

<sup>66</sup>The *htamein*, or *lon-gyi*, is the wrapped skirt which is worn by all Burmese women; with it is worn a blouse called an *ēin-gyi* which is fastened with five buttons. Men also wear a *lon-gyi* which is knotted in front and a shirt; on more formal occasions a *pahsō* (which is like a *lon-gyi* but made from a longer piece of silk fabric and knotted differently in front) and a tailored *ēin-gyi* jacket and shirt (without collar and cuffs) would be worn, together with a *gāung-bāung* (which is a man's head-dress made out of a long piece of silk wound around a small fitted frame of cane). Both men's and women's clothing are adaptations of the formal court dress which is seen now only on the stage and at such festivities as the *shin-byu* and weddings.

<sup>67</sup>The use of the word *tān-tā* in this context is a malapropism.

<sup>68</sup>The pulp of the sesamum seed, which remains after the oil has been extracted, is pressed into cakes which are used as cattle food.

crows. As job piled on job, it got to the stage that he wished that people wouldn't give him ground nuts at allh

But that wasn't the end of it. Every evening he had to carry water from the monastery pond at the top of the village right to the house. He also had to sweep under the house and in the compound until the sweat poured off him. Watering all the roselle plants, chilli bushes, gourd creepers, snake gourds, and duffa plants which grew in the compound was another big job. But he could hardly tell Aunt Sēin that he didn't want to do it as this might have implied that she wasn't pulling her weight.<sup>69</sup> Aunt Sēin collected the firewood herself, and she picked the vegetable leaves for the curry and cooked the rice. She also dressed the cotton and spun it, set up the loom and did the weaving. She was always busy.

When he did venture to say, "Me Sēin, I'm very tired. Can't we hire someone to draw the water?" or "Me Sēin, I've really had enough. Do I have to work the oil press?" she replied, "Huh, if I had got tired and had enough like you, I should not be as well off as I am now. If you want to be rich you just have to work.<sup>70</sup> And so he had to remain silent.

Sometimes when Aunt Sēin returned home carrying firewood on her head and green vegetables slung in a bag over her shoulder, he would feel very sorry for her seeing her so tired and dripping with perspiration. "Next time, don't go and collect the firewood yourself, buy it. If you buy one *pyā*'s worth of green vegetables, that will be enough for three or four meals. Why wear yourself out?" he would say.

"My dear, if you don't want to do the job, don't; I don't mind what I do so long as it saves us money. That's all that matters. Don't go urging someone who is putting all her energy into a job not to try so hard," she would reply.

He had trouble too when he wanted to buy a silk *pahsō*. "Ū Kyauk Lōn, at your age, you don't want to be buying silk *pahsō*sr If you put on a silk *pahsō* it will be just like a monkey dressing himself up in the jacket of the great actor Hpō Sein."<sup>70</sup>

"Oh Me Sēin, how stupid you are! When mixing in society one makes a much better impression<sup>71</sup> in good clothes and a bit of finery. After all, clothes maketh man, the rim maketh the basket, as the saying goes. Why, if I am respected, then it enhances your standing too. That's what I mean ..."

"But I'm not interested in impressing people. If what you wanted in the first place was to cut a fine figure, then you should have hooked for another wife. I can't produce a single *pyā* to buy you a *pahsō*," she had replied rather loudly; so up until now he had had to be content with cotton jackets, perhaps of red cotton home-spun,<sup>72</sup> and with dark blue *pahsō*s, or sometimes a cotton *lon-gyi* shot with a few

<sup>69</sup>The translation of this sentence has had to be expanded because of the word *twet*, to calculate, i.e., to calculate the duties of another person. This would be impolite since it would imply that the other person was neglecting his duty and not pulling his weight

<sup>70</sup>Hpō Sein, who lived from 1880-1952, was one of the greatest Burmese actors. It is perhaps appropriate to quote a tribute paid to Hpō Sein by Thein Pe Myint on the occasion of Hpō Sein's 70th birthday: "U Po Sein, the dramatist and pagoda-builder. Over the past fifty years this man has been the crown of Burmese drama and the brightest star in Burmese culture. A man who has enjoyed continuous popularity over this span of years and is perhaps the most famous living Burman to the people of this country. The past fifty years might justly be called the era of U Po Sein." (Sein and Withey, *The Great Po Sein*, p. 149.)

<sup>71</sup>Ū Kyauk Lōn uses the word *gon* here. "The notion of *gon* is akin to the English idea of virtue. It connotes a sterling personal character, special religious learning or piety, or even the trait of impartiality in a dispute." (Nash, *op. cit.*, p. 76.) Nash also notes that the village Burman has a trinity of concepts about personal power: *hpōn* (power), *gon* (influence), and *āw-za* (authority, and that *hpōn* and *āw-za* are the power dimensions of social relations, whereas *gon* is the moral content.

There is no single English word to express the full meaning of *gon* so words like "respect," "impressing people," "cut a fine figure" have been used according to context

<sup>72</sup>This fabric, which was woven in Burma out of red thread, was favoured by the nationalists who boycotted British goods.

threads of silk, sometimes a blue-grey yaw *lon-gyi*,<sup>73</sup> and on his head just a towel wound round and never a silk *gāung-bāung*.

In the matter of food, too, there had been no improvement in his situation: dried brinjal, cooked chillies, sour tamarind soup, roasted dried venison and similar curries; gourd leaves, bean leaves, roselle leaves, vine leaves, cordia myxa leaves, connarus leaves, cow's tongue leaves, sour berry fruit, momordica, and other wild fruits, all cooked in plenty of oil, were still his basic diet, as well as beans of all kinds cooked in all kinds of ways: shelled and cooked, soaked and fried, boiled and fried with wild leaves cooked in a soup, beans stewed in oil, and so on. Sometimes, when the nat who watched over his table exerted himself on Ū Kyauk Lōn's behalf, he was able to eat pork, dried plums, a little offal or horse meat. If he felt hungry in the middle of the day he had to eat cold left-over rice, pounded chillies, or roasted beans. Just occasionally he might have some pop corn, poppadums or jaggery.

"Oh dear, what's the good of becoming a rich man. I have to work so hard and still I go hungry. Wretched woman, she would have to be so stingy, wouldn't she! If you so much as touch a piece of her money, she is absolutely furious," he complained disconsolately to himself and sighed.

Another time, his nephew Maung Kan Htaik was so much in debt to a Chettiar<sup>74</sup> that he had to put his house up at auction and sell his carts and cows; Ū Kyauk Lōn wanted to help him and asked Aunt Sēin if she would give him about one hundred *kyats*. But she had replied angrily, "My dear Ū Kyauk Lōn, if I am to help all your relatives every time they run out of money, we shall soon be in trouble. How can I possibly do it? Just take a long look at all your relations. I'm not a millionaire, you know."

Later, when the time seemed more opportune, Ū Kyauk Lōn tried again: "There's something I should like to say, my dear.ñ"

"Go on, say it then. Why are you being so diffident? There's no need to overdo it."

"In that case, I'll say it."

"By all means, go ahead. You can talk about whatever you like so long as it's not money." With that, "bang" went his hopes of saying anything.<sup>75</sup>

During the previous *Thadīn-gyut*, Ū Kyauk Lōn had had a splitting headache and pains and aches in all his muscles. He asked Aunt Sēin to send for the masseur and the doctor, but she ignored his request and gave him a good hard massaging herself. When she forcibly administered betel-leaf eye drops, which were supposed to be an instant cure, he doubled up and shrieked in pain. She gave him a violent purgative which left him retching and heaving. But the fever was so frightened of Aunt Sēin that it rapidly left him. Ū Kyauk Lōn was so terrified of betel-leaf eye-drops and the violent purgative that he prayed that he might never again in his life have a fever.

Thus, Ū Kyauk Lōn, who sought to gain wealth and happiness from a wealthy wife, was like a man walking towards the horizon thinking it close to hand and not realising it was out of reach.

#### IV

Kan Htaik put some coarse strong tobacco into his pipe and lit it with a live coal. The flames had died down in the fireplace in front of him and only the embers glowed brightly. Legs astride he lowered himself onto a small cane stool and sat there puffing away at his pipe.

<sup>73</sup>This is the standard grey-blue cotton *lon-gyi* from the Yāw area.

<sup>74</sup>A Chettiar is a member of a caste of traders and money-lenders from southern India.

<sup>75</sup>Literally: "Little shrimp, here comes Maung Yin. Bang, the door is closed.ñ" This is a reference to a children's game; cf. "Oranges and Lemons": "and here comes a chopper to chop off your head.ñ"

"I don't see how I'll ever get anywhere in this world. It's more than a year since I've had a day off; I've had to work every single day. In the hot season there are the cattle to be grazed and fed and watered. In the rains there is the ploughing, the sowing and the weeding to be done, and the crops have to be watched. In the cool season the vegetables have to be planted, the corn harvested, the sesamum brought in. I never have a free moment, and in spite of all this hard work, I never have a *pyā* to show for it. Then, when the harvest comes, just as I'm thinking about how much I'm going to be able to spend, loans have to be paid back in kind with interest, taxes have to be paid, and it's all gone. Aunt Sēin is never satisfied until all her loans are paid back; and the Headman likewise must have his taxes paid, otherwise he is very hard on you. So I just keep getting poorer and poorer while the rich get richer. I can't help it. 'Nothing venture, nothing win,'<sup>76</sup> as the saying goes. If I keep on at this work of mine, I'll never get rich. What I must do is rob this female of some of her wealth; she has far more than she needs. I have to slave away in misery, and she does no work at all, and just takes what we earn by the sweat of our brows. She doesn't use all her money anyway; if she were to give some of it to poor fellows like us, we could put it to good use. Now my house and my cart have been taken by the money lender, and I haven't even anything left to eat. What a fate!<sup>77</sup> If she is going to be as unkind as this, then I'll just have to pay her back with a bit of her own medicine.<sup>78</sup> I shall rob her, yes, I will!" At this point he drew a deep breath and went on puffing at his pipe.

Later, he got up from his place, called four of his friends, and went to Aunt Sēin's house.

Ū Kyauk Lōn, thinking he could hear the creak of the gate opening, lifted his head and listened. He could hear it again. Aunt Sēin, by his side, was sound asleep snoring. At that moment the creaking stopped and there was a loud noise; he knew the door to the stairs had opened. Ū Kyauk Lōn was trembling all over. Agitatedly he sat up in bed. As he peered into the distance he could make out what looked like people coming upstairs. His eyes were still cloudy from sleep, and his heart was pounding like a toad bitten by a scorpion. Suddenly he pulled himself together and shook Aunt Sēin. "Hey, woman ... get up, get up," he shouted at her to wake her.

"Oh ... oh," Aunt Sēin yawned and turned over in bed, stretching to wake herself up.

"Come on, woman, get up."

"What's the matter, Ū Kyauk Lōn?"

"Woman, woman ... give me the long knife. There are dacoits<sup>79</sup> in the house," he said urgently to Aunt Sēin who grunted in reply.

"Get me my knife, woman. I'll give them what for," he said.

"Oh my god," she cried, and clutching her *htamein* round her she handed him the long knife.

At this moment, Kan Htaik and his band threatened them, saying, "Don't scream. If you scream, we will kill you," and let them see the gleam of curved knife blades.

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<sup>76</sup>Literally: "The earth if I die, the golden umbrella if I live." The same proverb, phrased slightly differently is mentioned by Hla Pe, *op. cit.*, p. 37, with the translation "Nothing venture, nothing win."

<sup>77</sup>"Kan is the bundle of ideas tied in with destiny, fate, luck and life chances. It means to the villager the whole sum of his past deeds, the moral balance of good and evil which goes on from existence to existence. . . . A person's kan is strengthened by adding *kutho* and weakened by adding *akutho*. . . Some people have *kutho-kan-kaung-de*, a good destiny and proper moral balance while others have *kutho-kan-makaung bu*, a bad fate or a preponderance of past bad deeds over merit earning activities." (Nash *op. cit.*, p. 106.)

<sup>78</sup>Literally: "I shall just have to close the crooked-mouthed pot with a crooked cover."

<sup>79</sup>A dacoit is one of a band of armed robbers, a bandit or a brigand. *Hobson-Jobson* notes that "by law, to constitute dacoity, there must be five or more in the gang committing the crime." Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, p. 290.

Tha Wā and Hpō Māngrabbed hold of Ū Kyauk Lōn and trussed him up with rope. Tauk Htūn and Maung Hpē kept Aunt Sēin covered with their knives. Kan Htaik came over, pointing his knife at her.

"Don't scream, if you do, I shall slit your throat. We have come because we want money. You must give us five thousand *kyats*."

"I haven't any money. Please spare my life."

"What do you mean, no money? You must give us money. If you don't I shall cut your throat. We know you're a mean bitch. You're very rich."

"Please, I have nothing now, I swear it."

"Now then, no pleases! Don't you go trying it on us," he said, sticking the sharp point of the knife into the side of her buttocks.

"Help ... you're killing me."

"Will you give us the money or won't you? Speak up."

"Please, please, I haven't got a single *pyā*."

"You're lying again. Are you going to tell me that you haven't got any money?" and he nicked her other thigh with the knife.

"My god ... you're killing me now. Must you be so cruel to me? I told you there isn't any money," she said weeping.

"You take other people's money. Where have you put it? Hand it over!" he shouted angrily, thwacking her on the back with the flat of his knife. "You still say you won't hand it over?" he said, and he rammed his knee into her back so that she fell headlong onto her chest.

"My god ... it hurts. How could you be so cruel?"

"Do you want to love five thousand *kyats*, or do you want to lose your life? If we don't get the money, we'll have to kill you. Come on, speak!"

"I can't give it to you. I haven't got any money, I swear it. If you must kill me, then it only remains for me to die. Have pity!" she begged coaxingly, as a female pigeon might coax a male.

Far from feelings of pity, hatred suddenly welled up in Kan Htaik, and he struck her on the forehead with the butt of his knife. It was so painful that Aung Sēin almost swooned.

"Huh, they've got so much, let them die then. We'll kill them both. Bring Kyauk Lōn along, and don't let him go until she pays the five thousand *kyats*. If she doesn't pay, kill him. You rotten swine. Can you bear to see your husband killed? Or will you hand over the money?"

"Whatever you do to Ū Kyauk Lōn, I shall have to bear it. I haven't any money at all," said Aunt Sēin, weeping.

Had she really meant to say this? Which was worth more to her? In this world, one didn't get money because one had a husband; but with money, one could have as many husbands as one wished. Husbands were nothing to be coveted, and they even brought troubles in their wake. It wasn't as if she would have died because she hadn't a husband. It would be foolish to give away five thousand *kyats* on account of a husband; it would mean that a husband was worth five thousand *kyats*, and this was a fantastic sum of money. She had gone without food and drink to save money. It would be like killing and eating, all in one morning, a chicken she had been nurturing all her life. She couldn't use up all the riches that she had amassed throughout a lifetime just on one single husband! Husband or money--her money was worth more to her. Kill Ū Kyauk Lōn? They could roast him and eat him as well! As these thoughts ran through her mind, she did not take back her words.

Upon realising his wife's heartlessness, Ū Kyauk Lōn felt bitterly hurt and very ashamed. 'Oh, Me Sēin, Me Sēin, have you no human feelings at all? All you desire is money. I might as well be dead for all you care, so long as your money

isn't touched. It's all the same to you! When we have lived together as husband and wife for as long as we have, only you would be capable of being so utterly without sympathy, love, or consideration of any kind for your husband. It is your money you are married to, not me!' he thought silently to himself, his head bowed, but inside him a feeling of hatred was rising up towards her. In fact, had he not been tied and bound, he would have killed Aunt Sēin dead. He abominated her. She disgusted him. He felt that he could cut her up on the spot.

Kan Htaik ransacked the whole house, but all he found was a pair of golden rolled ear studs, three commemorative gold coins,<sup>80</sup> and two bracelets of twisted gold.

"Hey ... you trollop! Where have you put your money?" he asked, and Ū Kyauk Lōn replied,

"Her money is buried in her fields at Kyauk Myei. Even I don't know the exact place. Take her to her Kyauk Myei fields, and keep on at her till she tells you where it is. Just beat her to get it out of her, this cruel woman. She'll tell you where.<sup>81</sup>"

After Ū Kyauk Lōn had given this advice, Kan Htaik, Tauk Htūn and Maung Hpē grabbed hold of Aunt Sēin and tied her up. They tied a *lon-gyi* over Ū Kyauk Lōn's face. Then Kan Htaik gave them orders:

"Hey, Tha Wa, you take him with you. Do you know the big cotton tree on the road through Lēih Myei? Wait for me there. Hpō Mān, you go with him. We'll come later. Here, take this stuff with you."

Then Kan Htaik, Tauk Htūn and Maung Phē, beating Aunt Sēin and dragging her along, made their way to the Kyauk Myei fields.

"Show us where you've buried it, you blind bitch."

"I don't know. I didn't bury it."

"There you go, pretending again. Tell us!<sup>81</sup> As he spoke he made a small cut into her upper arm with his knife.

"Ouch! That hurt. I will tell you."

"Come on, then. Where is it?"

"See that acacia tree over there. It's near the toddy palm to the north of the acacia tree.<sup>81</sup>"

"Good, good, we'll go and dig," and off they went, but although they dug for a long time, they found nothing.

"You bitch. You deceived us. Now tell us the truth. Where is it? Just you try cheating us again!<sup>81</sup> he said, and gashed her arm with his knife.

"I would rather die than tell you.<sup>81</sup> She spoke so stubbornly that Kan Htaik, unable to control his temper, hit her with a swinging blow of his knife on the neck, and Aunt Sēin fell down in a heap.

"You murderer, may you meet a most violent death yourself, and may you be a slave and a pauper in all your future existences," and with this curse on her lips, she expired.<sup>81</sup>

Disappointed and crestfallen, Kan Htaik, Tauk Htūn, and Maung Hpē made their way back.

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<sup>80</sup>The coins described carry a picture of a man on horseback carrying a spear.

<sup>81</sup>The word used here is *zi-wein*, from the Pali *jivin*, meaning "living, leading the life of . . ." together with the Burmese word *chok*, meaning "to terminate." This is a rather grandiose way of saying *thai* ("die"), and is rather out of place in this context.

The eastern sky was flushed pink, like a maiden's cheeks. The thick banks of cloud were like mountains of gold and silver, and the fleeting rays of sunlight adorned the sky like a golden necklace.

Kan Htaik's band of dacoits, taking Ū Kyauk Lōn with them, had reached the foot of a mountain. The rocks were still wet from the dew, and the trees were dark and sombre. Mountain mists began to rise. Kan Htaik and his men were bathed in perspiration from their brisk climb up the mountain even though the weather was quite cool. Before long they reached a flat level place on the brow of the hill. At this point the jungle was very thick.

The red disc of the sun suddenly appeared in the midst of the banks of cloud, and the mist over the mountain became denser. The tops of the wet green trees seemed to be sprinkled with gold. They could hear the crowing of the jungle fowl and the cooing of the doves, and the sound of the crow pheasant added to the pleasures of the morning. The northern breeze blew gently.

Kan Htaik took Ū Kyauk Lōn over towards a steep precipice and undid the rag which had been tied over his face. Ū Kyauk Lōn's knees shook with fright. Kan Htaik also removed the false moustache he was wearing and slipped off the big Shan *gāung-bāung*. Ū Kyauk Lōn looked up in wonderment, drawing in his breath as he stared.

"So it's you, my nephew! How could you have done such a thing?"

"If it had been anyone else, I wouldn't have, Uncle. I did it because I simply couldn't stand that wife of yours. All I know is that I was poor because of her. I was nearly starving, but she never gave me a helping hand. You never realised how much we contributed to her riches, did you? I don't want to talk about it. She was a mean bitch."

"But, what have you done with Me Sēin now? Didn't she tell you where the money was."

"She not only didn't tell us, she tricked us as well. So we had to dispose of her in the end."

"Oh, wasn't that going a bit too far?"

"After all this, do *you* feel any pity for her?"

"I don't feel any pity for her as my wife; but when I hear that a human being has died, then I do feel sorry."

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? At your age, seeking a wife, forgetting your religion, and having a good time with this creature. Was there anything good in all of this? It wouldn't have been so bad if she had been a likeable person. But there isn't a single redeeming feature in the whole business as far as you are concerned. By her own calculation, her money was worth more to her than her husband. You wanted to be rich, as well, but you couldn't manage it. You should be ashamed!"

"Yes, you are right. I made a terrible mistake, and I regret it now. And now, I don't have even the smallest scrap of affection for her. I don't want to cut a fine figure in this life. I don't want honour and glory. As the saying goes, 'When one is old, the rosary suits';<sup>82</sup> henceforth I intend to live devoutly, telling my beads. I shall become a *hpōn-gyī*. On this very hill there is a forest monastery, and here I shall don the yellow robe<sup>83</sup> and end my days. Nephew, don't keep blaming me for all my mistakes. As for what you have done, I shan't tell anyone, so no one will know. If the police find out about it, you will end up in prison, so you must lie low. How much did you get last night?"

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<sup>82</sup>Rosary beads, made from the seeds of the *Canna Indica*, are fingered while repeating formulae such as *aneik-sa*, *dok-hka*, *anat-ta* ("impermanence, suffering and non-self")r

<sup>83</sup>I.e., "become a monk." Having in boyhood undergone the *shin-byu* ceremony and thus been initiated into the Buddhist monkhood, he can return to the monastery and don the yellow robe at any time during his lifer

"I should say about two hundred *kyats*, Uncle."

"Go back to the house. In the roof of the granary there is a bamboo container which I hid there. Inside it there is five hundred *kyats*. I got it just the other day from selling oil; I kept it and didn't give it to Me Sēin. Then under the house, there is a big wicker bean basket. Underneath it, in a small pot, I have hidden five hundred *kyats*. Take all that and share it out equally between the five of you, and behave yourselves, mind! Don't you do this sort of thing again, will you? Use the money profitably, nephew," he said, and with this they returned to their homes.

As for Ū Kyauk Lōn, he became a monk, as he had said.

OIL

(1938)

I

Away in the distance the B.O.C. buildings were brightly lit by electric lights,<sup>84</sup> but in the small village where the workers lived, everything was in darkness except for the headman's house and the house of the master carpenter who earned seventy *kyats* a month. Up in the sky, a few stars appeared momentarily among the scattering clouds.

Just then ... "God save our gracious King, long live our noble King, God save the King. Send him victorious, happy and glorious, long to reign over us. God save the King."<sup>85</sup> The words of the British national anthem rendered into the Burmese issued plaintively from the workers' quarters which were hidden in the darkness.

"Kyaw Yin, that's a good song but we don't understand it. What does it say?" said Ko Lu Dok to Kyaw Yin, his nine-year-old son. Kyaw Yin was lying on his back, propping his feet against the wooden wall; he was reciting as much as he could remember from what he had been taught at the B.O.C. school.<sup>86</sup>

"That song you're singing--what does it mean?"

"Oh, really, Father! It's not a song; it's a prayer."<sup>87</sup> Our teacher taught it to us," he answered, looking sidelong at his father who could not see his face.<sup>88</sup>

"I've heard it before. So it's a prayer, then? Tell us what it means ... Ow! ... now there's a wretched bed bug biting--that's going too far." Ko Lu Dok sat up in bed as he spoke. His wife, Ma Hsin, struck a light for him and together they looked for the bug.

"I'm not sure, Father. It prays to the Lord that the glory of our king should be great, and that his lands and seas should greatly increase," said Kyaw Yin, reaching out with his fist and hitting his twelve-year-old sister, Mya Nyun.

"Oh, you! You are too big for your boots. I was nearly asleep.

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<sup>84</sup>This is a reference to the flood-lit oil fields which are contrasted with the workers' village which was in darkness because it had no electric light.

<sup>85</sup>The child is singing in Burmese a literal translation of the British national anthem.

<sup>86</sup>Burmah Oil Company, known as B.O.C., controlled most of the oil production in Burma from 1886 until 1963 when it was nationalised. "The Burmah Oil Company was notable not only for technical achievements in oil production, but also for an enlightened policy in labour relations as regards housing, hospital care, and other welfare services. This did not prevent its being the main target of Burmese politicians who saw the company as the outstanding example of 'economic imperialism.' The first exercise in mass political agitation conducted by the Thakins was a campaign in the oilfields in 1938, culminating in a general strike: Aung San was the chief organiser of the movement." (Tinker, *The Union of Burma*, p. 283.) This story was written in 1938.

<sup>87</sup>The phrase used in the text is *hpayā shi-hkō*. The meaning of *shi-hkō* is to raise the hands, the palms being placed together, in an act of respectful obeisance or homage (Judson). The word was used by Christian missionaries to translate "to pray," and the phrase *hpayā shi-hkō kyāung* was coined for a Christian Church. Here, the meaning is a "hymn" or a "prayer," but the child is referring to a Christian prayer, whereas the father means a Buddhist prayer.

<sup>88</sup>The phrase *myet-sāung-htō* means "thrusting the eye sideways." This gesture is considered rude in Burma.

"Big ... big," said Kyaw Yin, pounding Myā Nyūn even harder with his fist.

"Hey, you, Kyaw, do you want a taste of my slipper? Let her go to sleep," said Mā Hsīn, intervening.

"You used the words 'our king' just now. Who's that? We haven't got a king. Our king went away a long time ago."<sup>89</sup>

"Really, Father, you've got it all wrong. Of course we have a king, we still do, we really do."

"Who is he, then?"

"He's called King George. He lives a long way away in that place, England or whatever it's called."

"Who taught you that?"

"Teacher."

"He's wrong."

"He isn't."

"He is completely and utterly wrong."<sup>90</sup> I've got a book. You have a look at it. Oh well, never mind. And about those prayers, haven't you ever heard a prayer?"

"That was a prayer just now, Father."

"That was a song. Don't you know any proper Buddhist prayers?"<sup>91</sup>

"No, I don't," he said, kicking at the wall with his foot.

"If you don't know any, you must learn some. A man must know how to pray." Ko Lu Dok laid his hand on his son's forehead and stroked it.

Like a hungry person who pricks up his ears at the sound of spoons and plates,<sup>92</sup> Kyaw Yin accepted the suggestion and asked eagerly, "Where is the book. I want to learn some then."

"Mā Hsīn, would you light the lamp, please."

"We haven't any oil," said Mā Hsīn, in complaining tones.

"Oh, woman, there's plenty of oil."

"Certainly, if you buy it; but you don't get it for nothing. Come on now, just go to sleep, all of you. There isn't any oil." Mā Hsīn turned over on her side and closed her eyes firmly.

"We used to get it for nothing, but we don't now. Very well then ... we'll buy some on pay-day."

"It won't be possible. Your daily wages won't stretch that far. We've got to pay our debts and buy rice, and Myā Nyūn needs a new blouse too."

<sup>89</sup>The phrase *pa thwā*, meaning "to accompany, to go along of one's own volition," when used in connection with the Burmese king, is a euphemism for being taken away forcibly. This is a reference to King Thibaw who was deposed in 1885 by the British and exiled to India in 1886. See Trager, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>90</sup>Literally: "to be so wrong that one would say *wi*."

<sup>91</sup>The father mentions two specific Buddhist prayers, quoting their opening lines rather as one might refer in English to "Our Father" and "I Believe." The *Aw-ga-tha* is a devotion commonly used at Buddhist gatherings and when paying respects to a *hpōn-gyī* at a monastery. A translation is given by Nash, *op. cit.*, p. 114. The *I-tī-pī-thāw* is a prayer in praise of the Nine Attributes of the Buddha.

<sup>92</sup>This over-contrived simile is another example of infelicitous styling.

Since Mā Hsīn had forestalled him with these sound arguments, he just gave a deep sigh.

It seemed to Kyaw Yin that what his father said and what his teacher taught him were as diametrically opposed as north and south.

"Are you sure that's right, Father?"

"Of course I am. We haven't got a king in Burma. Your prayer isn't one of our Buddhist prayers. I'll give you the right ones to read."

"It's difficult when there isn't any oil, Father."

There were five families altogether in the quarters where they lived. A newly married couple lived in the next room on the south side; ever since they were married, they hadn't dared to enjoy themselves happily in bed for fear of the embarrassment of being overheard in the next room. The poor young wife pleaded with her husband to speak quietly, pointing out that everything could be heard next door.

"I'll find a way to get some oil. You must read, my son, and not waste your time." Ko Lu Dok's voice sounded from the adjoining room.

"Let's go to bed," said the young husband.

"Wait a moment, they haven't gone to sleep yet next door." When the young man heard his wife's answer, he heaved a sigh and retired abashed.

"Hey, Ko Lu Dok!"

"What is it?"

"What's the time? I think it's getting late, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Ko Lu Dok patiently, and lay still.

## II

Ko Lu Dok couldn't sleep. He kept thinking about his young son. "My son is learning all the wrong things. Even at this age he doesn't know how to say a prayer. It's a good thing that he can read, but not when he has to read wrong things and bad things," he pondered, stretching his arms above his head.<sup>93</sup> The noise of the pump machinery penetrated the village with a dull roar. "I can't buy paraffin oil so that my son can read ... my fate must be very bad. Even though I work as hard as I do, I shall never get out of debt, and I shall never be free of the consequences of past sin, shall I?" As he muttered complainingly to himself, the sound of giggling, like the clucking of a house lizard, sounded loudly from the next room, and Ko Lu Dok's train of thought was broken.<sup>94</sup>

Ko Lu Dok was sitting with his knees drawn up and his head buried in his hands, thinking about it again. "What can I do to get paraffin oil for my son? It's like being thirsty in the middle of the ocean." As this thought occurred to him, he pictured in his mind the tins of oil stacked up at the B.O.C. shop. He often had to go to the B.O.C. shop with a lorry<sup>95</sup> which he stopped in front of the storage godown.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup>The phrase *gāung-yīn* means literally "to the head end" (of the house) i.e., in the auspicious section of the house, probably towards the south or the east, where the shrine room and the *thabyei-taing*, which is the main post of the house, are situated.

<sup>94</sup>The phrase *thē-lun-zā*, literally "the beginning of a rope of sand" is a reference to the well-known story about Mahawthata which is told in the Maha-Ummagga Jataka No. 546. *Thē-lun-zā* usually means "clue" or "trace."

<sup>95</sup>The English word, written as *law-ri-kā*, has been used here. *kā* (car) has become Burmanised to such an extent that it is used as the Burmese identifying element in many compounds, e.g., *gyit-kā* (Jeep), *bat-s-kā* (bus), *maw-taw-kā* (motor car).

<sup>96</sup>A *go-daung*, or godown, is a warehouse for goods or stores. The word is used in Chinese ports as well as in India and Burma. *Hobson-Jobson* notes that the word

It would not be difficult for him to enter the godown alone. Because the watchman trusted him, he did not usually watch closely while he was unloading the lorry. Here was the answer ... this was his chance. While no one was looking, he could load a tin of oil onto the lorry. "No, that's not right ... the punishment is severe for stealing, for taking what is not one's own. I would really suffer the torments of hell for that."<sup>97</sup> He dropped his knee and stretched out his leg as he thought about it again. He sighed deeply.

"This oil is produced by our own work; it is our digging that gets it out of the ground." The excuse made itself heard again. In his mind he could see the workers digging the weels. He heard the nightwatchman striking the gong for ten o'clock. He folded his arms across his chest.

"After all, don't they say that this land belongs to us Burmans; we have owned it from the beginning of history. So we must own the oil which comes from our land. Why should I suffer the torments of hell? I am only taking back what belongs to us. I'll steal it, yes, I'll steal it."

As he came to this decision, he became aware of the sound of his own heavy breathing

### III

And so it was that a few evenings later a small lamp was burning in Ko Lu Dck's room, and the shrill sound of Kyaw Yin reading aloud could be heard. In the quarters where the five families lived, the old man furthest away on the left rejoiced<sup>98</sup> when he heard Kyaw Yin reading prayers. In the room immediately to their left, they remarked crossly that they were fed up with the sound. To the young couple on the other side who were waiting to retire to bed, his reading sounded just like a funeral dirge, while the family in the room beyond said unkindly, "He's awfully fond of reading, that young chap over there. I suppose it's because his father used to be a monk!"

However, Kyaw Yin's elder sister, Mya Nyun, was feeling cross with her brother because the light was shining in her eyes and stopping her getting to sleep. Mya Nyun was wearing a gilt ring<sup>99</sup> which gave off a reddish glow in the light of the lamp, and which was conspicuous on her hand.

Ko Lu Dok was like a violinist delighted by the sound of his own playing; he was overjoyed when he heard his young son reading and learning to say his prayers.

"My son is fine; as well as being able to read and write properly, he will know what is right and he will know how to pray. He will be a true man. When I compare him with other children, none of them are half so clever as my son. My son is among the best." And his pride in his son grew.

### IV

Thus for several days he remained jubilantly happy for his son ...

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"godown" seems to have passed to the Indian continent from the Eastern settlements, where the Malay word *godong* is used in this sense, but that the word probably originally came from the south of India, where there are similar words in Tamil, Telegu and Singhalese, and the movement of ancient trade would explain the borrowing. (Yule and Burnell, *op. cit.* p. 381.)

<sup>97</sup>A vivid description of the torments of *ngayē* (hell) is given in Shway Yoe, *op. cit.* pp. 98-100.

<sup>98</sup>Literally, to call out *tha-du* (Pali *Sadhu*, meaning good, virtuous, pious, meritorious). This is done when praising an act of merit.

<sup>99</sup>The ring referred to is made of a substance called in Burmese *mō-kyō*, which is an alloy of copper and gold used in making jewellery. This is similar to pinchbeck, which is an alloy of copper and zinc, but more akin to gilt, meaning gold-coloured or made of a gold-like substance as well as gilded.

Mya Nyun was asleep with her face buried in her pillow. Kyaw Yin was so tired from reading that he had fallen asleep with his book open on his chest. Ma Hsin was rolling up cheroots by the foot of the bed, and Ko Lu Dok was sitting cross-legged in the doorway.

The light of the lamp lit up the whole room clearly. The room was only about ten feet square with a low roof. The floor planks were laid down with an inch gap between each one.<sup>100</sup> Their shoes were placed in a row at the head end of the family bed, right next to the upturned cooking pots and the dishes and plates. At the foot of the bed was a six inch high bag of rice on top of which had been placed the folded *htamein*-skirts. At the southern end of the room there was a *thanat-hkān*<sup>101</sup> grinding stone on which Ma Hsin had put the basket of cheroots.

Ma Hsin took a cheroot and lit it. She tucked her left foot under her and stretched out the other leg, puffing away at her cheroot.

"Ku Lu Dok ... have you heard?"

"What?" asked Ko Lu Dok, glancing up briefly.<sup>102</sup>

"U Mōn, the watchman at the Company godown, has been fined."

Ko Lu Dok showed rather more interest after Ma Hsin had explained what had happened.

"They say a tin of oil is missing from the warehouse," she said in reply to his question.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry to hear that," muttered Ko Lu Dok in an unsteady voice.

He looked towards the electric lights which seemed to blossom luxuriantly like the magic *padei-tha* tree.<sup>103</sup> As he stared each light grew into two before his eyes. His mind was in a turmoil; all that he could think of was the unhappy look there would be on U Mōn's face; in his mind's eye he saw first U Mōn's face, and then the way he had stealthily loaded the tin of oil onto the lorry. His heart was pounding.

"Here's a cheroot," said Ma Hsin, passing one over. Ko Lu Dok shook his head.

As he realised what he had done, he began to hate himself, thinking, "I am a thief, I am a thief; and because of this, poor Ko Mōn has been fined." He was disgusted with himself. "Someone else has landed in trouble because of my wickedness. Ko Mōn, you don't know this, but it is I persecuting you, I am the beast doing it."

Ko Lu Dok stood up. He could not hold his head high; his shoulders drooped, and he felt weak. He hung his head and went outside.

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<sup>100</sup>Shway Yoe discusses this type of flooring and points out that it "offers an irresistible temptation to drop all litter and garbage onto the ground immediately below" (*op. cit.*, p. 78). The description which follows of the arrangement of the household articles suggests that Ma Hsin is a slovenly housewife, since the shoes and cooking utensils, both lowly in function, have been placed in the most auspicious part of the room, the *gāung-yīn* or head section.

<sup>101</sup>*Thanat-hkā* is a fragrant straw-coloured paste with astringent properties made from the bark and roots of the *Murraya paniculata*. It is smeared onto the face and body, and Shway Yoe notes that "a good deal of skill is exhibited in putting on the requisite amount. Unpractised hands usually smear on far too much, and it is as unsightly as a badly whitewashed outhouse. On others it is barely visible" (*op. cit.*, p. 327). Almost all Burmese women use it because it is refreshingly cool as well as being good for the complexion.

<sup>102</sup>Literally: "turning his neck like a deer." This image has a suggestion of coyness and could be used to describe lovers turning shyly towards each other. In this context the metaphor is not appropriate, particularly since the husband's name implies that he is a big, thick-set man.

<sup>103</sup>The fabled *padei-tha* tree, in Burmese cosmography, grows on the great Northern Island, and on its branches hangs everything one could possibly desire. A brief description of this system of cosmography can be found in Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-96. The term "*padei-tha* tree" is also used to describe small artificial trees laden with religious offerings for pagodas and monasteries.

"Ko Lu Dok, where are you going? It's late," said Ma Hsin, putting down her cheroot.

"Just out here," he said as he walked slowly up and down in front of the house.

"I have done a stupid thing. I have never stolen like this before. I have never done anything wicked before. But now, because I've done wrong, another person has got into trouble. I'm not a man; I'm a dog. I'm not worthy to live the life of a human being. These rich men aren't willing to dismiss even a trifling loss lightly, and here they are persecuting someone who had nothing to do with it. When they get millions of tons of oil a day, why do they have to hand out punishment to one man for the loss of a mere gallon or so? Have they no pity? This oil is our oil. Tell me how they can punish us for the disappearance of our own oil."

He looked into the room. Ma Hsin was asleep on her side. The small lamp filled the room with light. He went back inside again.

"Ko Mōn has had to pay a fine, and he's been fined because of me. It's I who ought to be paying the fine; it's nothing to do with him. I'll make it up to him. I'll find the money somehow."

He tried to think of a way to get the money for the fine. He thought of this and that, pondering on a way to do it. Mya Nyun was sleeping on her back with her left arm folded across her chest. In the light of the lamp, her small gilt ring shone brightly, and Ko Lu Dok caught its beckoning gleam.

"I've got it ... I will take this ring and send it secretly to Ko Mōn. That's the answer... everything will be alright. When he sells this ring, he should be able to get at least three *kyats* for it; I'll send it off to him. He won't know who sent it. Yes, yes, that's it."

He went over to his small daughter and took hold of her small hand. When he saw how well the ring looked on her small slender fingers, he remained gazing at it and could hardly find the heart to slip it off.

## V

When it became light in the morning and Mya Nyun woke up, she couldn't see her father nearby. She washed her face, and as she was wiping it, she noticed that her ring was missing.

Mya Nyun shook out her blankets, but it wasn't there. She repeatedly moved her pillow, grimy and thick with dirt, as she searched, but she couldn't find it anywhere. She looked all over the floor but it was nowhere to be found. She then shook her mother to waken her.

"Mother, mother, my ring has disappeared," she cried out. Ma Hsin sat bolt upright like one of those push-down-pop-up toys, rubbing her eyes with her hand.

"What's that? Your ring's disappeared?"

"Yes, it has."

"Hey, Kyaw Yin, wake up!" Mya Nyun shook Kyaw Yin to waken him.

"Ow, who is it? Go away ... let me sleep." Although Kyaw Yin muttered grumpily, Mya Nyun persisted in arousing him.

"What is it?"

"My ring has disappeared. Have you taken it?"

"For goodness sake, why should I take your ring?"

"You must have taken it ... give it back, you!"

"I didn't take it. Go away ... and don't spoil my sleep. I'll hit you if you don't go. I said, go away!"

"I won't. You took it."

Kyaw Yin couldn't bear to be wrongly accused of being a thief for no reason at all, so he kicked her with his foot.

Mya Nyun punched her young brother on the head with her fist.

"Huh! ... hit me again, would you?" shouted Kyaw Yin, grabbing Mya Nyun and pulling her head down by the hair.

"If you didn't take it, then it was because of your lamp that someone must have seen it and stolen it. Ow!" She kept on hitting Kyaw Yin.

At that moment Ko Lu Dok arrived. "What's the matter?" he asked as he came hurrying in.

Ma Hsin had been looking on helplessly, making no effort to separate her fighting son and daughter. "They are quarrelling because her ring is lost."

"Stop it, or I'll give you both a beating, now!"

The fighting stopped. Dazed, Ko Lu Dok looked at his children. He felt as if his heart would break as he watched the tears streaming down his daughter's face as she wept for her lost ring. In silence he stood there, thinking bitterly about the oil.

After a while, he took the tin of oil, went outside, unscrewed the lid, and tipped the oil away.

"Accursed oil; it has caused my son and daughter to quarrel; it has got my friend into trouble; and it has made me into a despicable creature. Away with it, ill-fated stuff!" he muttered as he solemnly poured it away onto the earth.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup>Literally: "Oil, which has interfered in my life like a malevolent planet; oil, which has caused by son and daughter to be enemies; oil, which has brought suffering to my friend; oil, which has made me into a despicable creature; accursed oil (*thauk* being a euphemism for *sauk*), go, go away!" The words are reminiscent of formulae repeated to exorcise ghosts, etc., and the action of pouring the oil away is similar to the pouring of water onto the ground at a religious ceremony. (In Jataka No. 547, the story is told of Wei-than-daya [Vessantara] who poured water onto the ground to invoke the earth to pay witness to his good deed.)

A SONG TO MAKE ONE WEEP

(1938, *Sa-pei-thit Magazine*)

My dear editor has suggested to me that I should write a piece which is "real" literature. I can guess what he means by the term "real" literature. He doesn't want me to write anything with political overtones.

Yes, I know, but I can't be forever writing simple fiction at a time like this, when the greed for gain of the capitalist imperialists goes unchecked, and when the strong triumph unashamedly and the weak are heartlessly oppressed. I can't be forever lost in admiration at the sweet cooings of doves. Even as we try to keep it out with our hands over our ears, the sound of the imperialist devilish bombs and guns penetrates our hearing. I am aware of it. Nevertheless, I have made a promise, and so I've been racking my brains to work out a way to write the sort of story he wants. I couldn't get any inspiration at home, so I went out for a walk to think about it.

The monsoon skies were ominously dark over Rangoon. Above the wet green trees and the red buildings, the High Court clock tower stood out tall against the threatening sky. The big clock face, very white against all the dark background, showed the time as half past six. Inside Victoria Park<sup>105</sup> the crowd was beginning to break up. I gazed at the pleasant scene around me, and began to breathe in the fresh clean air. I was beginning to think that the lawn in front of me looked like a big green velvet carpet. The shining gold Hsū-lei<sup>106</sup> Pagoda was beginning to take on an aura of wonder. In brief, I was beginning to find myself in the right mood to be able to write some "real" literature.

Just at that moment, there came the sound of a song from outside the park: "Like a sun with a thousand rays culling the darkness, the royal glory shines forth from the palace, the golden abode, the imperishable throne."<sup>107</sup> Although a little too loud, it was being sung quite well. It was a child's voice, not an adult's, with an appealing quality like that of a young cowherd calling from his perch in the top of a tamarind tree.<sup>108</sup> When I looked around to see where the voice was coming from, I saw a crowd round a brick platform outside the park.

"I shall go and have a look at this child, and then write something about him singing so happily at the top of his voice; that's the sort of thing my editor wants."

I came out of the park and pushed my way into the crowd of people. In the centre of the crowd that had formed was a twelve-year-old boy who was wearing a *gāung-bāung*<sup>109</sup> which he had made for himself out of paper. He was dressed in a tightly fitting jacket<sup>110</sup> which had split down the right hand side, and a trailing

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<sup>105</sup>This park, which is in Rangoon, was formerly known as Victoria Park (literally: "Queen's Gardens"), but is now known as Ban-dū-lā pān-gyan.

<sup>106</sup>This is usually spelt "Sule" in English, which gives a misleading idea of the pronunciation; "Soolay" which is an older spelling is also sometimes found.

<sup>107</sup>This is the beginning of a *nān-bwe-kyō* extolling the glories of the palace. The complete song may be found in *Maha-gi-tā-bāung-gyok-kyū*, a collection of classical Burmese songs (p. 21)

<sup>108</sup>Young boys minding cattle in the hot dry zone frequently climb tamarind trees so that they can sit in the shade and eat the fruit as they watch the cattle.

<sup>109</sup>A *gāung-bāung* is normally made out of a piece of fine silk (see Note 66), but the child has improvised by winding a piece of paper around his head.

<sup>110</sup>The *htaing-mathēin ēin-gyi* is a long fitted jacket which was formerly part of the court dress. At the time Shway Yoe was writing (1882) it was worn by elderly people and the wealthy of all ages, when paying a visit of ceremony or going to worship at the pagoda (*op. cit.* p. 73) It is now seen only on the stage and on

pink *lon-gyi* tied like a full-length *pahsō*. He had powdered his face to whiten it, and the powder completely hid his eyebrows.<sup>111</sup> He was dancing, turning in a circle, now a step high to one side, now toe up and heel down to the other, holding out the end of his *pahsō* as he twirled. Just by him there was a young girl, not more than ten years old, dressed in a flounced jacket<sup>112</sup> and Mandalay patterned *htamein*-skirt,<sup>113</sup> with her little fringe neatly combed all round and her long switch twisted about a comb on top of her head.<sup>114</sup> Her face was white with the powder she had smeared on, but her eyes were red. Looking sad and pathetic, she was holding out a small bowl for money to the onlookers. Judging from the age and the appearance of these two children, I decided they must be brother and sister.

The little boy danced until the sweat streamed down his face, singing song after song just as they came into his head. The veins on his temple and neck were standing out, and he looked miserable and exhausted. There was no enthusiasm in his voice, and the tone was as lifeless as a ship's siren hooting.<sup>115</sup> His sister jingled the coins in the bowl as she held it out, saying, "Kind sirs, kind ladies, Indian sirs,<sup>116</sup> please spare us some money."

I found it unbearable to watch and listen. I felt suffocated, like someone enclosed in a brick building on a sweltering hot-season afternoon. I was getting desperate.

From the audience came the command, "Do a love scene<sup>17</sup> for us and we'll give you some money."

"Yes, yes, another one."<sup>18</sup>

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occasions such as weddings. The child has apparently tied his *lon-gyiso* that it looks like a *paysō*. (See Note 66.)

<sup>111</sup>Mi Mi Khaing notes that "the face is painted chalk white by the addition of a cosmetic containing lead to the *thanakha*, the favourite brand being called in Burmese 'B-Ngā-Lōn : Five B's,' with the parenthetic explanation in English: 'Burma Brand Burmese Belle's Beautifier'" (*Burmese Family*, p. 154). The child in the story has tried to achieve the same effect with *paung-da* or powder.

<sup>112</sup>The *kadaung ēin-gyi* is a jacket which fits tightly as far as the waist and then flounces out into stiffened wings made by stiffening the lower seams and hem with rattan cane (*kadaung* means "the flap of a saddle").

<sup>113</sup>This type of *htamein* is known as *acheik*, which is a term applied to the wavy pattern like interlocking hooks characteristic of the traditional Mandalay *htamein*. These patterns were achieved by using one small shuttle for each "hook" of the pattern instead of the large shuttle. Thus a full-width *htamein* required a hundred shuttles or more, and consequently each row of warp took several minutes to weave, but it resulted in a richly coloured luxurious fabric.

<sup>114</sup>This hair-style, known as *hsan-yit*, used to be worn by both boys and girls. The hair on the crown of the head was grown long, and then either twisted into a knot or twisted round a comb to fasten it, and around this was a circular fringe of hair about two inches long.

<sup>115</sup>Literally: "The songs came from his spiritless mouth, just like the sound of a siren from a lifeless funnel."

<sup>116</sup>*Ba-bū-gyī* is a Hindi form of address, something like "Mr." or "Sir" and very polite, used amongst themselves. The phrase was adopted by Burmans to use when addressing Indians in Burma. It is interesting to note that the Burmese suffix *gyī* in *ba-bū-gyī* coincides with the Hindi suffix *jee*, also indicating respect, as in *babujee*.

<sup>117</sup>The *hnapā-thwā* scene of a play, in which the young lovers plight their troth and return to their home, is an essential component of stage-plays in Burma, and must be included whether the plot warrants it or not, since it is this scene that the audience looks forward to most. It would therefore be a popular choice for the children to enact.

<sup>118</sup>Literally: *wūn-samō*, i.e., the English phrase "once more."

"I agree, I give money,"<sup>119</sup> came the voice of an Indian.

"Yes, a love scene, a love scene," came a chorus of voices. I wanted to run away, but I couldn't because the crowd was eagerly pressing forward to watch and it was impossible to get out. I couldn't help being apprehensive at the thought of having to watch a show that would be even crueller than a cock-fight.

There was no way out for the two children but to take the parts of the prince and princess and dance; the little prince cocked his head to one side and straightened his back.

"Come on, sister, let's try it," he called.

His sister put the bowl of money down near the pile of clothes, and called out in reply, "Your little sister, Orchid Spray, is at your service, awaiting your command."<sup>120</sup> With a fan made out of wrapping paper in one hand, and the other hand on her hip, she began to sing, "The little girl, beloved in Mandalay, is number one, so they all say ..."<sup>121</sup>

I was so distressed at the unfairness of the world that I bowed my head and closed my eyes. They were children of the poor for whom there was no work; they had to live by begging. And, as there were so many beggars, ordinary begging was not enough, so they had to sing and dance and play love scenes as well.

"How unjust this life is! If one is poor and hungry, one has good reason to weep over it, but these poor children aren't even to be allowed to weep. They must dance to relieve their hunger and play love scenes to relieve their poverty. Surely this is no different to giving opium to relieve pain before death. Where is the difference?" I asked myself angrily.

"This one is my wife, my most dearly beloved. In beauty she is unequalled. The fervent adoration in my heart cannot be transferred to anyone else, only to Ma Mya Nyun. I swear it in the presence of the most excellent Shwei-dagon. I will not be unfaithful. If I should ever indulge my pleasures elsewhere, may the Lord strike me down ..."<sup>122</sup>

As he sang, he danced, swaying and pulling at the fringe of his *pahsō* like a puppet prince. When he had finished dancing, the princess fanned him with her little fan.

"Our two fates were linked before, so in this human abode we meet again. I will tell you what this is in my mind. You are always in my mind, and I shall always be constantly faithful to you."<sup>123</sup>

Although she sang clearly and sweetly, her grief was real. On the stage and in the puppet plays, for all the weeping, the tears were never genuine. But here I realised that they were crying from their hearts. I couldn't bear it any longer, and, as I turned to go, someone said,

"Those children's voices would be good if they were taught properly."

"They'd be fine. Shouldn't we take them with us? And since our Company is on strike, we need people to speak the words while we film the speaking parts," I heard another man advising.

<sup>119</sup>The Indian speaker has used the Hindi word *accha* which means "alright," "very well." The speaker then goes on to use the Burmese phrase *paik-hsan* (money) followed by the word *dega* (will give). This is ungrammatical, but forms a sort of pigeon Hindi which might be used by English people and foreigners.

<sup>120</sup>The child speaks here in the more formal language which is characteristic of classical verse and drama, hence the more formal mode of address.

<sup>121</sup>The child has improvised in this song, mixing Burmese and English phrases.

<sup>122</sup>This type of song is frequently found in the popular *pya-zat* (stage plays) when the lovers are plighting their troth.

<sup>123</sup>This is a theme commonly found in popular songs: because of merit acquired by good works in a previous existence, the two fates are now able to come together.

"Yes, yes. And the Indian boss will be grateful if we find someone for him."<sup>124</sup>

"And since they're beggars we won't have to pay them much."

I felt as helpless in this tragic situation as a person in a condemned building at the first rumble of an earthquake. As I pushed my way out, the last words I heard were: "We must get a good price from the boss." Like a person fleeing from a fire, I fled from this little drama. As I walked I hardly looked at what lay in front of me. I scarcely heard the sounds around me.

"Come on! Do you want this one? In you get!" and, without realising what I was doing, I climbed into the bus from which the shout had come. I hadn't any idea where it was going.

I just don't know whether I shall ever be able to write a piece of "real" literature.

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<sup>124</sup>At this point in the text, Thein Pe Myint gives the following footnote: "At this time the Bagyat-ch (perhaps Bajaj) Burma Films were on strike."

BITTER-SWEET<sup>1 2 5</sup>

(1949, *Thwēi-thauk Magazine*)

I

Kok-ko-zu village is well off the beaten track. The railway line runs two miles to the east through a village called Hson-gōn. Six miles away to the west one comes to the villages of Shwei-dā and Yēi-wun-bo on the banks of the Chindwin, and four miles to the north lies Bu-dalin, which is the headquarters of the Township Officer.<sup>126</sup> Kok-ko-zu village was so cut off from civilisation that there was one woman, DawhPān Hketh who had never in her life been to Bu-dalin, the nearest town.

Although the village was known as Kok-ko-zu, which means "a clump of acacia trees," there were in fact no trees of this sort in or around the village. So that we could find out how to explain this to future generations, once when on a visit to some relatives who lived in Kok-ko-zu, we asked my great-aunt Ma Hmo Pwīn, who was the sister of my grandfather Ū Pauk Kyāing, and she nodded sagely and said,<sup>127</sup> "We've always called it that, ever since we were children. I don't know why."<sup>128</sup>

There were only fifty or sixty houses in the village, no school and not even a monastery. If anyone wanted to attend school regularly they had to go to Hsaya Kyin's elementary school at Kyī-bin-gyaung. When the villagers wanted to offer food to the monks on some important family occasion, they had to go as far as villages like Yon-hlēi-gōn or Hson-gōn to invite them.

Chit Po had studied as far as the third grade in Hsaya Kyin's school at Kyī-bin-gyaung, which was the usual thing for a boy of good family who wanted a good education. Then he went on to Hpōn-gyī Ū Thū-dama's monastery in Yon-hlēi-gōn, where he completed his study of the Buddhist scriptures<sup>129</sup> in his three years as a novice. When he turned twenty and came of age, he very much wanted to stay on for two or three more years and continue his study of Pali grammar, the Vinaya<sup>130</sup> and other religious texts so that he could take the vows to become a monk, thus achieving one of the Five Difficult Attainments.<sup>131</sup> However, his father<sup>132</sup> died and he

<sup>125</sup>The title of this story is based on the proverb: *Acho sha htanyet-hpa-ne twēi*, which means "Seeking something sweet, one finds a basket of toddy palm sugar" (i.e., something very sweet indeed). Cf. *hapyo sha kanya twēi*, "looking for a young girl he finds an unmarried maiden." Thein Pe Myint has changed the first proverb to *acho sha tama twēi*, which means "Seeking something sweet, one finds the bitter tragacanth."

<sup>126</sup>The Township Officer, *myo-ok*, was an administrative official who was responsible for local administration, including collection of taxes and local magistrate functions, in the township and the villages grouped around it for this purpose. He in turn was responsible to the sub-divisional officer.

<sup>127</sup>The Pali word *upalakkheti*, meaning "to distinguish, discriminate," has been used here in a half-humorous sense, as though she were giving a wise and learned reply.

<sup>128</sup>This is an example of Upper Burma usage, which adds authenticity to the story: *bauk-me* instead of the more usual *ba-gyaung* or *ba pyu-lo*.

<sup>129</sup>The text states that he had successfully mastered the *thin-gyo kō-bāing* which is part of the Abhidhamma. This work, which is known as the Abhidhammatthasangaha, has been translated into English by Shwe Zan Aung under the title "Compendium of Philosophy." The fact that Chit Po had completed his study of this work implies that he had completed the monastery "syllabus."

<sup>130</sup>The Burmese Tripitaka comprises three groups of canonical texts: the Vinaya, the Sutta, and Abhidhamma *pitakas*, or "baskets of learning."

<sup>131</sup>The *don-laba ngā-bā* are: becoming a Buddha, hearing the law, becoming a priest, becoming a righteous man, becoming a human being (Judson)

had to give up this plan and abandon his monk's robe so that he could support his mother, Mā Zā Lat, and his small sister, Chit Mī.

His father, Ū Hpū Nyo, had owned some farming land, which he used for mixed crops, in an area of tall cotton trees and brackish water, just to the north-west of Kok-ko-zū. Since the sandy banks of the river were full of minerals,<sup>133</sup> the water was always salty, and so the stream was known as Salt Creek. And since U Hpū Nyo's farming land was beside this creek, it became known as the Salt Creek Farm. It was nearly two and a half acres in area, and had many cutch trees growing wild in the eastern section. Adjoining it on the western side there was a banana plantation which was worked by my uncle, Ū Sō Yā, and his wife, Daw Shwei Me.

When Ū Hpū Nyo died, he left a substantial amount of property. Besides the Salt Creek Farm, he left a yoke of good strong oxen, a cow in calf, a cart, and a plough.

I attended the local school in Bu-dalin before changing to the English school. While I was in the fourth grade, there was an outbreak of the plague, and we had to get away from Bu-dalin. It was to Kok-ko-zū that we went, and we took refuge in my uncle Ū Sō Ya's banana plantation to the north of the village. At that time Ko Chit Po, who had had to leave the monastery before becoming ordained,<sup>134</sup> had already taken over his father's land, and was now well established as a farmer.

As a result of his work on the farm, his body had grown big and strong; his chest was broad and his calf muscles stood out below his rough cotton *lon-gyi* which he wore short for work. But his face, however, was not yet mature, nor did it look like a typical farmer's face. Some people even said that Chit Po had the face of a big child. His hair wasn't long enough to be knotted on top of his head,<sup>135</sup> so he used to tie a handkerchief round his head to stop his hair sticking up, as it would have done naturally.

Ko Chit Po and I were great friends at that time. We cleared some of the cutch trees from the overgrown eastern part of his farm, and built a small hut where I often used to go during the day. We used to eat our midday meal together, and we drank tea and ate roasted beans, and sometimes dried beef or venison. One thing I shall always remember about him is the way we used to fly paper kites in the mornings and afternoons from this hideout of ours. The wind whistled, and as it blew it rustled the maize and made a flapping sound among the banana leaves. As we listened to these various sounds, and the swishing of the kite as it rose and dived, our hearts seemed to soar up into the sky with the kite, and we experienced boundless joy.

One morning I lost control of my kite as it plunged down, and the string caught in a tall cotton tree and broke. There was the kite flapping at the top of the tree where it had got tangled. It was going to be difficult for me to get it back as it was about 40 feet up, but it would be even more difficult to find enough paper to make a new one. Ko Chit Po, however, without a moment's hesitation, tucked up his *lon-gyi* tight between his legs and climbed up the cotton tree. He climbed almost to the topmost branch, where the tree spirit himself lives, and untangled the kite for me. I was lost for words. I just didn't know what to say. But to this day I am still very grateful to him, and in my heart I still admire his courage and skill at climbing trees.

Ko Chit Po sometimes used to talk about Aunt Mā Eī Pon's young daughter, Mā Set Kyi. She had a clear round face, as her name implied,<sup>136</sup> and a plump attractive

<sup>132</sup>The word *hkamī-daw* is an honorific used in addressing royal fathers and the fathers of monks and novices. Ko Chit Po was a novice when his father died.

<sup>133</sup>*Thē-hsat-pya* is a type of sand which contains certain minerals which enable it to be made into a type of soap for household cleaning.

<sup>134</sup>Literally: "before becoming an *ū-bazīn*," an assistant or junior monk who has been formally admitted to the order during an ordination ceremony. Shway Yoe gives an account of this ceremony (*op. cit.*, pp. 114-8).

<sup>135</sup>Chit Po's head would have been shaven while he was in the monastery.

<sup>136n</sup>*Set* means round, and *kyi* means clear and bright. Thein Pe Myint goes on to describe her appearance in complimentary terms, likening her plump attractive figure to a bamboo shoot.

girlish figure, and she was always the one chosen to lead the procession at the Shin-byu ceremonies in the villages around as well as in Kok-ko-zu.<sup>137</sup> He had loved her even while he was a novice, so when he left the monastery he openly declared his love for her by asking if they might be betrothed. Ma Set Kyi was as quick and nimble as a little deer, and very capable since she knew how to do all the jobs country people must be able to do, such as harvesting millet, lifting ground-nuts, weeding, picking cotton, collecting firewood, and drawing water. Even his mother, Ma Za Lat, was in favour of the match.

## II

It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was low in the sky, but since it was a cloudless day it was still very bright. Beside Salt Creek there lay a small sandy stretch which was half shaded by the nearby tectona trees. Beyond this area the sand in the sunlight seemed very white in contrast. Ko Chit Po was lying quietly on the sand in the shade, gazing in front of him at a clump of plum bushes on the opposite bank of the creek. The red and yellow plums were mostly ripe and a lot had fallen onto the ground under the bushes. The creek at this point was about three feet wide and only a few inches deep, with scarcely any current. Behind Chit Po was a large field of maize with stalks more than six feet high and laden with cobs. Chit Po was holding his cross-bow and arrow, and his long knife was by his side. All was quiet around him. There was a little breeze, in which the grass rippled gently, but it wasn't strong enough to shake the tall maize plants. There wasn't a sound to be heard anywhere.

Just then the silence of the evening was broken by a low call. The scene was reminiscent of the moment in a play when the audience, sitting quite still in rapt attention, hears the special beat of the orchestra heralding the stealthy arrival of the thief.

A young deer emerged from amongst the bushes in front of Chit Po, who was lying quite still, scarcely daring to breathe. It looked around with its neck arched and its horns high, then picked up a plum and ate it. Then, with the same low call, another small deer appeared and sniffed the breeze before bending down to drink from the stream. Chit Po didn't move a muscle as he lay there.

The first deer was chestnut brown in colour with white spots on its neck, and the second one was dark brown. As Chit Po watched the deer eating and waving their graceful sculpted horns, he was so moved by the peace and beauty of the scene that he found himself unable to lift his cross-bow.

Just at this moment, Set Kyi suddenly appeared from the maize field. She was carrying a bundle of fourteen or fifteen corn cobs tied by their leaves in one hand, and a cattle goad in the other. Set Kyi was so startled to see a young man lying on the ground right in front of her that she stopped and stared. This was lucky since it meant that her sudden appearance did not disturb the idyllic scene of the pretty little deer feeding, nor break into Chit Po's admiration of it as he lay there, forgetting to pick up his bow.

When Set Kyi realised a moment later that this figure lying on the ground was none other than Chit Po, she blushed, overcome with shyness and embarrassment; her inclination was to turn round and run back into the maize field. However, her gaze was held by the two deer, and her feet were rooted to the ground as if Chit Po, like a python, had her under his spell.

"What are you doing, Ko Chit Po, lying here all by yourself? And with that big bow and arrow in your hand ... oh, my goodness!" Set Kyi clasped the hand holding the cattle goad to her breast.

She was sure he was going to draw his bow taut and let the arrow fly. It would hit the poor little deer who would fall down, pierced to the hearth. The other one would turn and run away in fear and trembling, and get its horns tangled in the bushes. Chit Po would shoot another arrow at it as it struggled to get free.

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<sup>137</sup>As part of the *shin-byu-bwē*, the ceremony in which young boys are initiated into the novitiate, there is a procession through the streets of the village, which the most beautiful girl in the village is chosen to lead. She carries in a *kun-dāung-box* the yellow robe which the novice will wear.

Set Kyi darted lightly across to where Chit Po was lying about six yards away, and threw herself down onto the ground beside him, grabbing hold of his hand which looked as though it was going to shoot. The deer suddenly turned and bounded away, making straight into the bushes. Chit Po turned and looked at Set Kyi, his eyes wide with astonishment and his mouth open. Set Kyi's heart was pounding, and she was quite breathless. After a moment she whispered,

"They are so lovely,<sup>138</sup> please don't shoot."

At first Chit Po's surprise gave way to a trace of anger, but in a moment, with Set Kyi by his side, the trace of anger was extinguished like a spark falling in the ocean. After a moment, he couldn't help smiling. At the sight of his smile, Set Kyi remembered herself, and let go Chit Po's hand which she had been holding tightly.

"I do love them. Please don't shoot," she repeated breathlessly, and hastily sat up as she realised that they were lying side by side. Chit Po sat up too, but stayed right beside her. Their hearts were pounding and they were hot and flushed. After a little while, as if she couldn't think of anything else to say, Set Kyi said it again, and this seemed to give Chit Po an injection of courage, for he suddenly smiled and said,

"You love the deer, but you don't love me."

Set Kyi was lost in thought for a moment, then said, "What did you say?"

"What I said was, you feel sorry for the deer, but you don't care about me."

Set Kyi thought for a moment before replying. "But of course I care about you. You've had all the trouble of waiting, and now, because of me, you won't have any venison after all. I am sorry."

Chit Po made a wry face, and said rather forlornly, "That's not what I meant. You don't really love me, Ma Set Kyi. You know I love you, but up till now you have never told me straight out whether you love me or not. That's what I meant ..."

Set Kyi considered what Chit Po had said with a serious expression on her face. Chit Po leaned over closer to Set Kyi, and said, "Don't you understand? That's why I said that you don't love me."

Set Kyi's whole body suddenly began to tremble, and she felt dazed by the wave of emotion which swept over her. She was so overcome with emotion, that she seemed to be spellbound, unable to move even a hand's breadth away from Chit Po.

"Come on, say it ... you don't love me, do you?"

"Who says I don't love you?"

"If you really love me as I love you, why don't you say so?"

Set Kyi's feeling of faintness began to pass off, and she felt a little bolder. She smiled.

"Come on, tell me."

"I feel as you do," she said, with a little laugh.

Chit Po wanted to get up and jump up and down; he even wanted to race with the deer. But he was held close to Set Kyi as if by a magnet, and he couldn't move an inch. So he smiled broadly and looked at her as though he could eat her up like a sweetmeat. She clasped the corn cobs tightly and in her agitation twisted the tassels into a knot. They were so overwhelmed by their love for each other that they were like two people in a maze<sup>139</sup> unable to find the path out; they just couldn't find words to begin.

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<sup>138</sup>In the conversation which follows, the word *thanā* is used by both Chit Po and Set Kyi. *Thanā* can mean both "to pity, have sympathy for" and "to love, feel tenderly towards." Set Kyi uses the word in the first sense with reference to the deer, while Chit Po teases her by using it in the second sense about their relationship.

<sup>139</sup>The name of the maze, *Win-gaba*, is a reference to the Win-ga range of mountains, with its labyrinthine passages, where King Thēin-zi, to pacify his enraged subjects, was obliged to banish his son Wei-than-daya (Judson).

All was quiet again. The big red sun, which was on the point of setting, took its leave. The wave of love seemed to spread out from Chit Po and Set Kyi all over Salt Creek, even to the deer who had been startled earlier and had run away into the plum bushes. The sounds the deer were making came rhythmically like the instrument beating time in a Burmese orchestra.<sup>140</sup> The two young deer appeared again. Together they lifted their heads and arched their necks, looking here and there. Chit Po and Set Kyi were motionless as they watched them. Even Set Kyi sat perfectly still now, not daring to fiddle with the tassels on the corn cobs.

Together the deer drank some water. Then the stag stretched his neck, and the doe inclined her heads towards him, turned and touched his horns, teasing and caressing. Then the doe tossed her horns, and the stag fondled and caressed her. For the watching Chit Po and Set Kyi, it was like being tickled when they were already on the verge of laughter. Without any warning, Chit Po kissed Set Kyi on both cheeks. Set Kyi threw down her bundle of corn cobs, and with both fists clenched, she thumped Chit Po on the chest. The deer abandoned their caressing, and fled headlong into the thicket. Set Kyi picked up the bundle of corn cobs and her stick, and stood up. Chit Po looked most frustrated as he sat there watching Set Kyi; he didn't know whether to laugh or be cross. Half smiling, Set Kyi watched him for a while out of the corner of her eye,

"Come on, get up. The sun has nearly set. Let's go back to the village."

"There you see, Ma Set Kyi, that's why I said you don't care for me at all."

"What on earth has that got to do with caring? Just look at you! Come on, get up! I must get back to the village before it's dark or else my mother will tell me off."

As she spoke, Set Kyi started walking towards the maize field. Chit Po got up quickly, picked up his cross-bow and knife, and followed her into the maize field. The ears of corn on the tall plants were waving gently, and before long the sun beams which were dancing in the tips of the tall cotton trees disappeared.

### III

"Well, this is the spot where Set Kyi and I were when it all happened." As Chit Po spoke, he pointed out to me the creek on one side and the sandy stretch on the other side under the tectona trees and the plum bushes nearby.

We returned to Bu-dalin when it was free from the plague, and it wasn't long before I had to move to the English school at Mon-ywa. From there it wasn't easy for me to go and see Chit Po, but I did meet him again when I went back to Kok-ko-zu for the long summer vacation.

As soon as I reached the front of his house where he was chopping up the maize stalks, I called out to him:

"Hullo, Ko Chit Po. How are you? Is Ma Set Kyi around?"

Chit Po stopped work when he saw me, and his whole face broke into a broad smile, but he didn't answer my question. It was a warm, friendly smile, not a sugary one.<sup>141</sup>

I sat down with my legs swinging over the edge of the verandah, and he stuck his great maize-chopping knife away in a crevice in the bamboo wall of the house.

"Well, how are you, Ko Chit Po? Where is Ma Set Kyi?"

"At her mother's house, of course."

"Oh, aren't you married yet?"

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<sup>140</sup>The *si-jet* in an orchestra is like a small cymbal which gives a regular metronome-like beat; this is an essential part of the musical performance.

<sup>141</sup>Literally: "He smiled with his whole face, not just his lips. It was not the kind of sweetness which comes from the white sugar on a twisted bread plait; it was the real sweetness of a pot of cane sugar."

"No, we're not."

"But why not? Did you have a quarrel?"

"No, we didn't. There wasn't any money for the wedding."

I was so taken aback that I could scarcely believe it. Didn't he have nearly two and a half acres of land for mixed crops at Salt Creek? Didn't he have a cart and a pair of oxen? Ko Chit Po went on talking as if to convince me in my disbelief.

"There wasn't even enough money to bribe the bachelors so that they wouldn't throw stones. And I couldn't raise another loan."

"Was it because you were already in debt that you couldn't borrow more money? Oh, I see. I didn't know that."

Ko Chit Po nodded his head sadly. It seemed to droop like a flower that isn't about to fall.

When his father, Ū Hpū Nyo, died, he didn't leave any actual money at all. There were only about fifteen baskets of sesamum and one bin of beans that could possibly be disposed of for cash. But even these couldn't be sold immediately, so to cover the funeral expenses he had to borrow eighty *kyats* from Ma Dāung Mei. Then, when he did try to sell the beans and sesamum, he couldn't get a good price; the little he got was gradually used up for essentials like fish paste and onions, and this meant that he hadn't been able to pay back the money to Ma Dāung Mei. He had been gradually paying it back for four or five years now, but forty *kyats* were still outstanding.

Besides this old debt which hadn't been paid off, he had begun to acquire new debts. In the first year, in order to meet the demands for land tax, he had to sell his sesamum, beans and corn under pressure, and they hadn't fetched a good price. The same thing happened the next year.

From then on the situation got worse and worse. Chit Po heard that business was bad throughout the country. He didn't know why this was so, but he knew the effect it had had on him. Because of the state of the market, the chief broker of Bu-dalin, Ko Myin, wouldn't buy his sesamum. In Mon-ywa Ū Ba from the leather company wouldn't take any skins. So Chit Po's sesamum was left on his hands, and his uncle Ū Sō Ya's skins became mouldy. When the plums were picked, it was even difficult to get them loaded onto the train. In spite of all this, land revenue demands were not eased; if anything, they became even heavier.

In the end, Ko Chit Po not only had to sell his cow, his ox, and the little calf, he was even reduced to mortgaging his Salt Creek Farm to Ma Dāung Mei in order to borrow money. So, in name, Chit Po was still a land-owner, but in effect he might just as well not have been.

"That's too bad, Chit Po. But couldn't you have got married very quietly, without borrowing any money?"

"We could have had a very modest ceremony, but I couldn't get married without giving her a new wedding outfit. Besides, you only have a wedding once in a lifetime. If we had married without holding a proper reception for all our friends and relatives, then both Ma Set Kyi and I would have regretted it for the rest of our lives. And we couldn't refuse to give the bachelors their money, now could we?"<sup>142</sup>

I started quoting some extracts from Ū Hka of Prome's book<sup>143</sup> about the

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<sup>142</sup>When the bridal couple leave at the end of the ceremony, they are stopped by a line of bachelors who will not let them pass until they pay *hkē-bō*, a sum of money to stop the jealous bachelors from throwing stones onto the roof of the newly-married couple. The custom originates in Burmese folk-lore, as is explained by Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-9. Nowadays, it is a customary gift to the bachelors who have assisted at the ceremony, rather like the presents the groom gives to the bridesmaids at an English wedding.

<sup>143</sup>Thein Pe Myint here refers to a widely known school textbook on economics, *Chwei-ta-jīn*, which was first published in 1927. Its three main sections deal with economising in time, money and work.

principles of economy, especially where he said that one shouldn't spend too much money on family celebrations, but Ko Chit Po interrupted.

"Birth, death and marriage are part of human life, and when they occur, they always cost money. That's what makes it all so difficult."

I had no answer to that, because human life has more to it than just keeping fed, clothed and alive.

Chit Po poured me out a cup of tea, then broke off a piece of dried beef and sprinkled it with sesame oil for me. It reminded me of the times when he and I had talked and drunk tea like this in the little hut among the crotch trees at the Salt Creek Holding.

"Ko Chit Po, let's go and see the little hut at Salt Creek. I've often thought about it while I've been in Mon-ywa."<sup>144</sup>

"The hut has been pulled down."

"Oh, no ... why?"

"There was that Hsaya San uprising, wasn't there? Where did they say it was, um, where was it?" He beat his forehead with his fist as he spoke.

"In Tharawaddy ... Galon Hsaya San's uprising."<sup>144</sup>

"Yes, yes, in Tharawaddy, that's right. During the uprising, the Hson-gōn headman and our village head gave orders that no one could live outside the village. Any huts outside the village had to be destroyed, because they were afraid that they might be used as hideouts. That's how my little hut came to be pulled down."

"Kok-ko-zu is a long way from Tharawaddy. There's about as much connection between the two as when a crow makes a dropping out of fear because a dragon fly alights on the tip of a spear."<sup>144</sup>

"Even so, there was some trouble in Shwei-bo, wasn't there?"

"No. The government simply scared people to make sure they could suppress them. They even sent an Indian regiment to Bu-dalin, as a show of strength."<sup>144</sup>

"Yes. That was clever, wasn't it?" He lowered his voice. "By the way, is it true that, during the Galon rebellion, farmers like us grabbed hold of knives and rose in rebellion? We heard that they were very brave."<sup>144</sup>

"It was Burmese blood in their veins, wasn't it? Of course they were brave."

"Of course." (He lowered his voice still further.) "You won't tell this to anyone, will you? Even we had our knives sharpened, ready for battle if need be. We were also planning to be tattooed with a magic charm against bullets by the Lēi-Myei *hpōn-gyī*, as Ko Nyo Eī from Twin-daung suggested. But the situation was never favourable, so we couldn't do anything."

My heart was beating fast. I felt surprise, mingled with admiration.

"Is that really so? Well, we students haven't been idle, either. Look at my head." I showed him my shaven head. Ko Chit Po studied it carefully as though looking for something.

"And were you tattooed as well?"<sup>145</sup> I can't see it."<sup>144</sup>

<sup>144</sup>The nationalist peasant rebellion which Hsaya San led began in the Tharawaddy district of Lower Burma in 1930. Hsaya San was proclaimed king, and his followers used magical tattoos, amulets and charms to make themselves invincible. They took as their symbol the *galon*, a fabulous bird. The rebellion had been put down by 1932. U Ba Maw, who defended Hsaya San at his trial, gives an account of this in his book, *Breakthrough in Burma*.

<sup>145</sup>Nash (*op. cit.*, p. 181) notes that this tattoo, which is usually placed on the crown of the head and thus can only be seen when the head is shaven, is the most common sort. "It is a charm which prevents knives from cutting the wearer and bullets from entering his body. . . Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not, but it is the best protection one has in any case."

"No, not that. The students in Rangoon started shaving their heads as a sign of their hatred of the English, and we followed suit in Mon-ywa ... and we are boycotting cigarettes."<sup>146</sup>

"Oh, I see." Ko Chit Po stared straight ahead, lost in thought. "Mmm, come what may, it would surely be better to take up arms and fight than to go on suffering as we are now."

And so I came away from Kok-ko-zu village; I said no more to Chit Po. What he said was right. For his part, there was no chance of him clearing himself of debt. He had to work in his fields till the sweat streamed off him, and even after toiling like this, the crops he reaped barely sufficed to cover his taxes and interest payments. How would he ever be well enough off to ask for Ma Set Kyi's hand and present her with a wedding outfit? Thanks to the little deer, he had found himself kissing Ma Set Kyi, even though she had then thumped him on the chest; but how would he ever manage to hold her two hands in his and make her his wife forever?

#### IV

At the end of the hot season, the rains came. Chit Po had plenty of work to do during the rainy season. He planted half the Salt Creek Farm with maize and the rest with sesamum, except for the soil near the riverbank where he planted aubergines of the long variety and okra.

When the monsoon was over, the cool season began. There was even more work to be done in the cool season. He planted chick peas over the whole of his land, except near the riverbank where he put in sweet corn and tomatoes.

There had been a thick mist, and the chick peas had become soaked as a result. Chit Po lit a fire in the place where the hut had stood before, and roasted a few of the plants, pods and all, and ate them. He was waiting for the revenue surveyor to come and inspect his land.

By about eight o'clock when the mist had cleared completely, the revenue surveyor and his two assistants arrived. The surveyor was wearing a khaki felt hat and a pair of canvas boots which were stained from tramping through the wet pea plants. In his hand he had a rolled-up map. One of the assistants was carrying the long map tin on his shoulder and the other had a Shan bag, with a bottle of country spirit inside it, and a water bottle.

"Farm Number 71, name Nga Chit Po, father's name Nga Hpū Nyo. Is that correct?"

"Yes," replied Chit Po.

"You're growing chick peas; that's very good. And sweet corn on the bank. Excellent. All crops coming up nicely, too. That's 2.35 acres altogether."

Chit Po's face fell.

"Oh, Surveyor, sir, please say for the record that my crop has failed."

"Hey, do you want to make me lose my job? You're so near the village here that the Inspector will very probably come and check my assessment."

"Surveyor, look ... I'm so poor ... please assess me a bit more lightly."

The Surveyor rolled up the maps which he had opened out. "Well, can you pay five *kyats*?"

Chit Po's eyes widened. "Five *kyats*? That's too much, Surveyor. I might be able to manage three *kyats*."

"What's that? Are you trying to bargain with me?"

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<sup>146</sup>To demonstrate anti-British feeling, some of the more nationalistic of the students in the schools began shaving their heads, encouraged by U Chit Hlaing of the G.C.B.A. In the 1920s also, English goods especially clothing, were boycotted as a protest.

"It's just that I can't afford it. Here, roast some more chick peas, will you?"

The Surveyor moved closer to the fire and sat down. Chit Po pulled up some chick pea plants and put them into the fire to roast. One assistant poured out some country spirit and offered it to the Surveyor. The Surveyor nibbled peas with his drink, then stood up and brushed off the dust.

"Well, then, when will you pay the money?"

"I'll come to the house where you are staying this evening and pay you them."

"In that case, I'll cross you off the list tonight. And bring some sweet corn with you, will you?"

The Surveyor moved a little way away from where Chit Po was sitting, then turned back towards Chit Po who quickly jumped up to see what he wanted.

"Did you go to the meeting at Hson-gōn yesterday?"

"What meeting, Surveyor?"

"The Separation Meeting."<sup>147</sup>

Chit Po looked frightened, and started to raise his hands in a gesture of humility. "I am afraid I didn't, Sir."

"Oh, that's why you chaps know nothing at all about what's going on. Anti-Separation is bad, I'm telling you. Can't you see how dominant the Indians are in our country? If we stay joined to India, we'll never escape from this servile position. But if we separate from them, our load will be lightened, just like a person with two waterpots on his head throwing one down. So, you see, that's why you must vote for Separation. Do you understand? Besides, the Separationist candidate, U Mauk Sein, is much better educated than U Lu Hpei, the Anti-Separationist candidate, and he has much better family connections too."

"Yes, I see, Surveyor."

The Surveyor went off when he'd finished giving this little lecture on Separation, and Chit Po was left completely dumbfounded.

When he'd been in Kok-ko-zu one day recently, he had been told that he should vote for the Anti-Separationists, and this pronouncement had come from the lips of U A-lāw-ka from Kyi-bin-gyaung, who had come to lecture at U Tok Pāw's house. He said that if Burma were separated from India, England would be able to have her own way with Burma, now much weaker, and that although India would be offered Independence, they would certainly not offer it to Burma.

As far as Chit Po was concerned, there was nothing at all to tip the balance between Separation and Anti-Separation; it was all the same to him.

But there was yet another candidate, U Hpō Kū who stood between the Separationists and the Anti-Separationists. U Hpō Kū's view was that local matters were even more important. He would make it his primary aim to look after the interests of the district, and he would vote on the Separation issue as the situation demanded. Besides, there was a rumour that U Hpō Kū was going to give three *kyats* to everyone who voted for him. Well then, it would be best to vote for U Hpō Kū. If only today had been voting day! Then he could have got the three *kyats* he needed to pay the Surveyor.

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<sup>147</sup>The Simon Commission report published in 1930 had recommended that Burma be separated from India as far as colonial administration was concerned, and the 1932 election was fought principally on this issue. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 338, points out that since "the refinements of the constitutional and separationist issues were beyond the comprehension of most of the electorate, rival politicians were obliged to fashion their arguments to appeal to popular prejudices." He goes on to illustrate the types of arguments that were therefore used by both the Separationists and the Anti-Separationists, and they are in essence the same as the ones that Thein Pe Myint describes in this particular village. Thein Pe Myint himself, while a student at Mandalay in 1932, had campaigned for the Separationists.

Poor Chit Po When he found three courses open to him he just didn't know which way to vote. There was, however, one good result from the argument about Separation and Anti-Separation. The rebellious feelings aroused among the farmers and peasants by the Tharawaddy rebellion were dissipated, and all their doubts and dissatisfactions were centred upon the question of separation from India. People's attention was diverted from the government to the Indians. As far as Chit Po was concerned, the strong upsurge of national pride disappeared, and a spirit of narrow-minded self-interest took over; his own interests were the most important, and so long as he was happy, that was all that mattered.

By that afternoon, Chit Po still didn't have the three *kyats* to pay the Surveyor. He could afford to leave no stone unturned in his efforts to find the money. Who could he approach? He couldn't think of anyone apart from Ma Dāung Mei. But he was already extensively in debt to Ma Dāung Mei; as well as the unsecured loans, there was also the loan for which he had had to mortgage the Salt Creek Farm. Besides all this he had tried to borrow money from Ma Dāung Mei so that he could marry Set Kyi, but although he had begged and pleaded, she had always refused him abruptly.

"My humble money is not for frittering away, Ū Chit Po Gyī, Sir. I beg you to forgive me, but please don't ask me again unless it's for something reasonable."<sup>148</sup>

With her "my humble money" and "Ū Chit Po Gyī, Sir," the old spinster Ma Dāung Mei had mocked Chit Po who was young enough to be her son. She had never been married herself, and she had no sympathy with other people in love.

Chit Po went to see Ma Dāung Mei that very afternoon. He felt hopeful as he said to himself, "I need the money to pay my taxes. Surely this time she'll give me a loan. It's not as if it's very much." But Ma Dāung Mei had gone to Yon-hlēi-gōn, and was not due back until that night.

V

Ma Dāung Mei was not only the richest woman in Kok-ko-zu village; she was also without any doubt the oldest of the old maids. She owned twenty or thirty acres of land, and had plenty of room to store up basketfuls of sesamum, beans and maize. To those she knew well and trusted, she used to advance money of the order of twenty or thirty *kyats*. She also owned an oil-extracting mill. The people who came to use it had to bring their own oxen with them, and as a fee they had to give an eighth of a viss<sup>149</sup> of oil for every load. But even though she was so terribly rich, she was now over forty, and the fates still hadn't been kind to the poor soul; in other words, not a single husband had ever appeared on her horizon.<sup>150</sup> One couldn't say this was because she was ugly, because in fact she was by no means unattractive. Nor had she been too choosy. She would have accepted even one of the working villagers providing he worked honestly and well. Nor could it be said that her parents and relatives had been too strict with her, since she had no relatives and her parents died when she was twenty-five. For twenty years she had been living an independent life with an old auntn. So, since she was still single and growing older, with her virginity untarnished and untouched, it seems that it must have been in her horoscope to be an old maid.

However, Ma Dāung Mei hadn't given up hope of a husband and family. At one time she had thought about the widowed teacher from Yon-hlēi-gōn, Ū Lu Hlā. But fate was against her, for he went and married a very young teacher to whom he was distantly related. At another time she had considered Ū Myat Ya, an eligible broker from Hson-gōn village who wore his hair in an old-fashioned top-knot. But fate again wasn't kind, because the poor man died. Then, as a last resort, she turned her attention upon the ordinary, simple cultivator, Chit Po. However, this was not really feasible since he was young enough to be her son, and he also had a sweetheart; so she didn't

<sup>148</sup>Ma Dāung Mei has used here a more formal mode of address, and the translation has been altered slightly to bring out the sarcastic tone.

<sup>149</sup>A viss (*peik-tha*) contains 100 ticals (*kyat*) and is the standard weight used in Burma. A viss is just over 3½ lbs. The amount in the text, *awet-thā*, is 12½ ticals or 1/8th of a viss.

<sup>150</sup>Literally: "not even once, not once" (with the second "not once" used as a verb)n Cf. the pun mentioned in Note 57.

allow herself to press this line of thought too far. Thus when Chit Po wanted to borrow money to get married and Ma Dāung Mei refused so resentfully, it was twinges of jealousy that made her want to stop this marriage to Set Kyi.

Chit Po's looks aroused her desire. She respected his honesty, and approved of the way he worked so hard. As for Chit Po, he always kept on good terms with her: after all, she was a benefactress who had lent him money for the funeral expenses when his father died, and again when the government was demanding taxes thus saving him having to put his belongings up for auction, and she was a possible source of money for his wedding expenses. When she wanted to plant gourds at her house, it was Chit Po who built a gourd frame for her. When she wanted water, he carried it for her. When the oil mill broke down, he mended it for her. From time to time she liked to eat the leaves of the connarus creeper, so Chit Po would then climb to the top of the tall tamarind tree in front of her house to gather the leaves which were climbing over the tree. All this friendly and helpful behaviour of Chit Po's made Ma Dāung Mei secretly very happy, and it also gave her food for thought.

On this particular day, Ma Dāung Mei had been to Yon-hlēi-gōn, and there she had an experience which left her more unsettled than ever. She happened to meet Ū Lu Hla, the school teacher she had thought of marrying, and his wife, the young teacher Ma Tin Ū. They looked such a happy couple, although Ū Lu Hla was in his forties, his wife was in her early twenties; this gave Ma Dāung Mei an idea. If only Buddha, Sakka and all the nats<sup>151</sup> would do this for her, too. She was in her forties, while Chit Po was in his early twenties.

By the time Ma Dāung Mei got back home again, she wanted a husband so desperately that she had quite lost her appetite. As soon as it was dark, she made a little fire in the hearth upstairs, and as she warmed herself by it, she started thinking, and her thoughts were all on Chit Po. Usually she would put a stop to this train of thought by reminding herself that he was young enough to be her son. But now that excuse was no longer there, so she gave free rein to her imagination; it was tantalising.

Just then she heard a shout, "Hey, Auntie Dāung?" At the sound of Chit Po's voice, Ma Dāung Mei became quite flustered, like a crow which upsets a basket of rice when it's disturbed.

"Hey, Auntie Dāung, it's all right if I come up, isn't it?" As Chit Po came upstairs, Ma Dāung Mei was taken completely off her guard. She couldn't decide whether or not to answer, and whether or not she should get up from the fire.

"You didn't say anything when I called out, Auntie."

Ma Dāung Mei fumbled with a maize-leaf cheroot and puffed at it, as she quickly thought up an excuse to cover up.

"I was just lighting my cheroot."

"When did you get back, Auntie?"

"Just a moment ago. Do sit down. It's cold isn't it?"

Ma Dāung Mei looked down because she couldn't think of anything to say. Chit Po looked around him. He couldn't see anyone else, not even Ma Dāung Mei's old aunt.

"I haven't seen you for a long time," she said, to break the silence.

"It's not easy, you know. But what do you mean, 'a long time'? I was here just the other day."

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<sup>151</sup>The worship of nats, the indigenous animistic system of belief in Burma, co-exists with Buddhism although it is not a part of orthodox Buddhist belief. There are two classes of nats, the terrestrial, which include the guardian spirits of physical features such as trees, villages, the body, etc.; and the celestial nats who inhabit the celestial abodes and include the spirits of gods of the sun, the moon, the planets, wind, rain, etc. There is a principal body of Thirty Seven Nats in Burma, of whom Sakka, the king of the nats, is a celestial nat, and the remaining thirty-six are terrestrial nats who all met unnatural or violent deaths on earth. The terrestrial nats are mostly malevolent, particularly if one is remiss in propitiating them; the celestial nats are benevolent, and only Sakka in this group meddles in human affairs.

Mā Dāung Mei was silent for a while as she puffed at her cheroot.

"What do you want?"

"I need three *kyats* for my crop of chick peas so that the Surveyor will cross me off his list."

"So, you only come and see me when you want money.ñ"

"That's not fair, Auntie Dāung."

"Well, all right, then. Anyhow, I'll lend you what you want."

Chit Po couldn't help feeling rather surprised. Everything had gone so smoothly when he made his request. It had been quite easy. Mā Dāung Mei poked at the fire. Chit Po watched the sparks flying up, and he felt his courage grow in the same way.

"Auntie, Mā Set Kyi and I very much want to get married and settle down. Can you help us?"

Mā Dāung Mei gazed at Chit Po with a sad look in her eyes. She appeared to be so moved that she found it difficult to answer him. Usually she refused him firmly before he'd even finished speaking. So this time there seemed to be some cause for hope.

"Auntie, we've been in love for so long now. I do want to marry her.ñ"

Mā Dāung Mei's voice broke with emotion as she replied, "Oh, my dear boy, what do you want to marry Set Kyi for? It will make you poor. She has her mother to support, and that will mean an increased burden for you. You still haven't paid off your debts. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I'm listening, Auntie. Go on.ñ"

"Will you listen to what I'm going to say?"

It seemed to Chit Po that there was something rather unusual about this particular evening. Mā Dāung Mei was looking at him so strangely. The tone of her voice and the words she used were also very strange.

"Now listen to me carefully.ñ"

"Yes, Auntie, I am."

"Don't marry Set Kyi. Try to find someone with some money."

"Where can I find someone like that, Auntie? It's not easy."

"You don't have to look very far. Rich women are attracted by hard-working honest men, just like you."

"It's impossible, Auntie. Do you mean to say ... " and he giggled, "that a rich one ... would ..ñ with me?"

For a time, Chit Po laughed quietly to himself. Mā Dāung Mei, feeling unable to speak, gazed at the fire. Although she was well on into her forties, she still hadn't lost her womanly modesty. She threw her half-smoked cheroot into the fire as she said in a strained and tense voice, "The relative ages of a couple are not important. But money, now ..." Then she got up for no apparent reason, and went down the back stairs.

Chit Po was left feeling quite at a loss. Events on this evening were certainly taking a most unusual turn. What Mā Dāung Mei had just said was the strangest thing of all. "Hmm, she said it didn't matter if people were the same age or not. She said I should marry someone with money. After all that, is she perhaps trying to get me to marry her? Yes, that's certainly what it is. Now I understand." Chit Po began to feel rather agitated. He stretched his arms behind him and drew a deep breath. All kinds of thoughts went round and round in his head.

Mā Dāung Mei came up the back stairs again. She didn't dare to come back to the fire where Chit Po was, so she went over to her bed instead, and sat down, stretching out her legs.

Chit Po was still lost in thought. If he married Ma Dāung Mei, this would clear all his debts. He could escape from the poverty in which he now lived. Salt Creek Farm, which had belonged to his grandfather, wouldn't pass out of his hands. He would be rich too. That would be good. It was even meritorious in a way. But poor Ma Set Kyi ..h

Chit Po was suddenly startled. "But Auntie, what's the matter?"

"My thighs are hurting. Perhaps I've pulled a muscle."

Chit Po was in a complete quandary. Should he take all he could get from Ma Dāung Mei? Shouldn't he consider how Ma Set Kyi would feel? Should he take the chance to be free of debt--and taste the joy of release, or should he just go on piling debt on debt for ever and ever? As Chit Po was wondering what to do, Ma Dāung Mei slapped her thighs. Chit Po sighed deeply.

"All right, Auntie. I'll massage them for you."<sup>152</sup>

"Oh, good."

Chit Po got up, and, with slow deliberate footsteps, went over to Ma Dāung Mei's bed. To the accompaniment of a love song,<sup>153</sup> he would gently tread away Ma Dāung Mei's stiffness. Chit Po had found the solution to the problem of debts.

He didn't keep his appointment with the Surveyor that evening. Since the Surveyor didn't get the three *kyats*, Chit Po would have to pay his taxes, but never mind. It was far more important to massage and tread Ma Dāung Mei's stiffness away. And he couldn't think about Ma Set Kyi any longer. She was a long way away, on the western outskirts of the village, whereas Ma Dāung Mei was right next to him, literally under his feet. Besides, Ma Dāung Mei was going to get him out of debt.

## VI

Last time I saw Chit Po, he was wearing an old-fashioned *gāung-bāung*, and was mounted on a big horse. He had come to buy stores in Bu-dalin where I was. When I asked him about Ma Set Kyi, he looked most unhappy.

"Yes, she's there."

"Did she marry?"

"No, not yet."

"Oh, so she's not married yet. The poor girl."

"She really is to be pitied. I've been most unhappy about it, and people talk too. They are saying that Ma Set Kyi is waiting for Ma Dāung Mei to die."

"Tongues will always wag. But how is Ma Dāung Mei?"

"She's fine, yes, she's all right."

"So there is nothing to be done about it, then. Well, since you're husband and wife you just have to live happily ever after."

"That is how we feel too."

At this meeting, Chit Po, riding his big horse, looked quite another person, with his big top knot, his *gāung-bāung*, tailored jacket, silk *lon-gyi*, and long cotton underpants, but I felt that underneath all this, he hadn't really changed.

<sup>152</sup>Since the feet as well as the hands are employed in massaging, the word *nīn-de*, to tread, has been used. Massaging is often a part of the technique of seduction, and that is the implication in this passage.

<sup>153</sup>The text quotes the first line of a well-known Yō-dayā song of the nineteenth century from Thailand; its sound, however, is inappropriately that of the kettle-drum, an instrument used for stirring popular music, not a gentle love song.

I haven't seen Ko Chit Po for fifteen years. Now, towards the end of 1949,<sup>154</sup> Mon-ywa is held by the government. Bu-dalin is under joint P.V.O. and Communist control. Some of the villages in the Bu-dalin district are Communist and some are white P.V.O. and there is a rumour that the Red Flags are in the Aya-daw area. I haven't heard what has happened in Kok-ko-zu. Nor have I heard the fate of Ko Chit Po, although I have heard that Ma Dāung Mei died during the Japanese retreat. It is my earnest prayer that Ko Chit Po and Ma Set Kyi are re-united by now. I hope that they can again sit together on the sand under the tectona trees, admiring the pretty young deer amongst the plum bushes, and that no rifle shot will come to startle their tender caresses.

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<sup>154</sup>The latter part of 1949 marked the zenith of rebel successes in winning control over the countryside; thereafter the tide turned and the government gradually re-established its authority. Tinker (*op. cit.*, p. 45) gives a list of towns captured by the rebels (KNDO, Communists, PVO and Army mutineers) in 1949.

NOT TILL AFTER INDEPENDENCE

(1948, *Dagon Magazine*)

I

It was now almost two years since the betrothal of Kyaw Mya and Ēi Nyun;<sup>155</sup> they had exchanged their vows on the south-east corner of the platform<sup>156</sup> of the noble Shwedagon Pagoda on the same day that a big All-Burma A.F.P.F.L.<sup>157</sup> conference was being held on the middle terrace.<sup>158</sup> Instead of getting married then and there, however, they had agreed to put off the ceremony until the day Burma achieved her independence, when they would be wed and live as husband and wife for ever after.

On that day, two years ago, as they climbed up to the platform to make their vows, they could hear the flow of stirring words from the conference meeting on the middle terrace. Kyaw Mya especially approved of the conference's argument that the poverty of Burmans was due to the fact that they had been exploited by the blood-sucking English companies. Since he was a very junior mechanic in the Bombay Burmah Factory,<sup>159</sup> he applauded loudly when they said "We must take over the English companies"; he could almost visualise the way they would do it. Ēi Nyun, too, was infected by the enthusiasm of those around her,<sup>160</sup> and her heart filled to overflowing with reverence for the leaders on the high dais. As the people in the crowd, men and women alike, vied with each other to contribute to the Independence Fund, her heart was pounding and tears welled up in her eyes. When she heard the announcement that people were pulling off their necklaces to present them to General Aung San,<sup>161</sup> she too wanted to get up and give something, but, unlike the others, she didn't

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<sup>155</sup>It is significant in this story that the young couple went to the Shwedagon to exchange their vows to marry on the day Burma became independent, whenever that might be. Although it used to be customary for engagements to last for *thōn-hnīt thōn-mō* (three years, three rainy seasons) nowadays they are shorter, more informal and normally marked by an exchange of rings.

<sup>156</sup>The pagoda platform has four straight sides, each one oriented towards the cardinal points of the compass.

<sup>157</sup>The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League had been founded in August 1944 as a resistance movement and to press for independence. Its leader was General Aung San, one of the Thirty Comrades, who was assassinated in July, 1947.

<sup>158</sup>The middle terrace ran around the base of the pagoda at a lower level than the platform. The Shwedagon Pagoda was a popular venue for important political meetings, e.g., the protest meeting after U Ottama was convicted in 1921, the mass meeting protesting about the book written by a Muslim which sparked off the 1938 Anti-Indian Riots in Rangoon. The mass meeting mentioned in the text was probably the nation-wide conference convened by the A.F.P.F.L. in January 1946 in an attempt to unite the nationalist forces working towards independence. "The resolutions passed by the rally were the usual ones challenging the projects rehabilitation scheme, which took no account of Burmese war losses, and demanding the early election of a Constituent Assembly, the nationalization of agricultural land with compensation to private owners, and the attainment of freedom through peaceful means." (Cady, *op. cit.*, p. 526.) Both Aung San and Thein Pe were among the leaders present on this occasion.

<sup>159</sup>The Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation was a long-established firm in Burma, and its dispute with King Thibaw over timber concessions was the immediate cause of the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885.

<sup>160</sup>Literally: "as cotton touched with oil" (becomes saturated) The metaphor is not completed.

<sup>161</sup>The cover of *Lān-za Paw-bi* ("The Way Out") by Thein Pe Myint has an illustration of a woman pulling off a necklace to present it to Aung San. "Aung San in particular, on this occasion, demonstrated that he commanded a degree of popular loyalty and respect amounting almost to hero worship." (Cady, *op. cit.*, p. 526.)

possess a necklace. She was just a market woman who managed to earn enough for a day's food by spending the whole day out selling, carrying her tray of *let-thok* salad<sup>62</sup> on her head. She couldn't therefore make a conspicuous gesture like the others by donating a large sum all at once, so she decided to save up twenty-five *pyās* a day so that she would at least be able to give five *kyats*. When Ēi Nyun heard the slogan "Fight for Freedom," she resolved that she too would take part in this fight, even if it meant risking her life. Kyaw Myā and Ēi Nyun, together with the crowd, shouted themselves hoarse, chanting "Fight for Freedom!" and "Give us Freedom, now!"

By the time they reached the platform where they would make their promises to one another that they would marry, they could no longer hear the shouts of the crowd; the setting sun bathed the noble Shwedagon with its golden rays.<sup>63</sup> The crowd had dispersed, but the Independence slogans still rang in their ears, together with another sound ... a song of love being sung from their hearts. As they sat there ready to make their vows, the wind from the north rustled gently among the recesses and shrines of the pagoda, and the autumn leaves fluttered around them. Then they called on the most noble Shwedagon to witness their solemn vow that they would marry on the day that Burma became independent. When they had finished, they leaned over the brick wall and gazed towards the east, hearing now only the tinkling of a solitary small temple bell.

That had been about two years before, but they had remained true to their vows, and were still very much in love. During the two years they had had very few arguments, and these hadn't been serious. For example, during the elections for the Constituent Assembly,<sup>64</sup> Kyaw Myā had not voted.

"Why didn't you vote? Don't you want independence in a year's time?" asked Ēi Nyun somewhat sharply, with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"That's not fair, Mā Nyun. I couldn't manage it because I was at work. And if I miss a day's work, I lose a day's pay."

But, in fact, Kyaw Myā had not voted because he couldn't decide whether he should vote for the A.F.P.F.L. or the Communists. Ēi Nyun, however, was rather attracted by the A.F.P.F.L. catchphrase, "We will get you independence within a year."<sup>65</sup> Because of their desire for what Independence Day was to bring them, the words gave her hope, and furthermore she believed them, as they were spoken by the General whom she trusted implicitly.

## II

The demand for independence within a year was gradually replaced by a more insistent, more specific demand for independence by January. This call rang pleasantly in all ears, but doubly so for Kyaw Myā and Ēi Nyun.

On the day when it was announced that power would be handed over on January 4th, Ēi Nyun expected Kyaw Myā to come. She polished the hand lanterns from the house so

<sup>162</sup> Literally: "mixing with the hand." This salad "is a mixture of finely shredded or cut vegetable (say green papaya, grown green mango, marian or citron) with the balancing ingredients of oil for mixing smoothly; dried prawn powder and bean powder for filling; tamarind water for sourness if the fruit is not sour, ngapi or fish sauce for salting; green or powdered red chilly for spicing; and fried crisp garlic and onion to set off and dress the whole." (Mi Mi Khaing, *op. cit.*, p. 132.)

<sup>163</sup> Literally: "made an offering to the noble Shwedagon of its golden rays."

<sup>164</sup> These elections were held in April 1947.

<sup>165</sup> "Independence within a year" had been a slogan of the A.F.P.F.L. which "called for the transformation of the Interim Government into a Provisional Government by January 31st, 1947; for the holding of national elections (not for a new legislature, as specified in the Act and Constitution of 1935, but for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution); and for a declaration of intent by the British Government, looking towards Burma's freedom within one year from January, 1947" (Trager, *op. cit.*, p. 77). The British government finally accepted this timetable in December, 1946, and Aung San led a delegation to London in January, 1947, to finalise the details.

that they shone, and lit them very early. Frying everything carefully herself, she prepared an appetising bowl of *let-hpet*.<sup>166</sup> She also bought for herself a copy of the newspaper containing the announcement about the handover of power, which she placed on the dealwood box at the head of her bed. Kyaw Mya, however, did not appear.

Late the following afternoon, Ei Nyun went round to where Kyaw Mya lived: His small room on the lower floor of the workers' quarters was silent and there was no sign of him. Ei Nyun peeped into the room and called out "Ko Kyaw Mya, Ko Kyaw Mya." There was no reply, so she sat down in the doorway and waited, stretching her legs out into the porch. After a while she heard the faint sound of fire bellows being blown somewhere in the back of the house, so she called a little louder, "Ko Kyaw Mya, Ko Kyaw Mya." She heard the fire bellows being put down, then the voice of Kyaw Mya's mother, asking "Who's there?"

"It's me, Auntie."

"Which me?" As she spoke, Daw Mō came out to the front of the house. Ei Nyun looked up and smiled.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Ei Nyun? Have you been here long?"

"No, I've only just come, Auntie. Where's Ko Kyaw Mya?"

"He should be back any minute now. He went to buy some rice," she answered. With one hand on the door frame, she looked out down the road.

Ei Nyun, who was still sitting on the floor, looked up at Daw Mō and said, "What about Kyaw Sein? Is he out too?"

"Kyaw Sein is out trying to find a job. He went out first thing this morning, and still isn't back. That's why, when Kyaw Mya came home from work, he had to go straight out and buy rice, without a rest first."

"Can't Kyaw Sein get a job in the factory, Auntie?"

"No, it's impossible. They're even going to lay off old hands in the factory, let alone taking on anyone new."

"Oh, how dreadful! And what about Me Tin, Auntie, where's she gone?"

"She's out selling groundnuts. When your Kyaw Mya is the only person with a job, our family hasn't enough to live on."

"Oh dear," murmured Ei Nyun, lost in thought.

"Look, here he comes." Ei Nyun followed Daw Mō's gaze--Kyaw Mya was coming.

"When did you get here?" asked Kyaw Mya, as he gave the bag of rice<sup>167</sup> to his mother, who disappeared into the back of the house with it.

"A little while ago."

"The price of rice has certainly gone up," said Kyaw Mya, sitting down next to Ei Nyun.

"It's not only the price of rice, everything has gone up. And onions are so expensive now, it doesn't bear thinking about ..."

While Kyaw Mya was wondering how his monthly wage would stand up to this increase in the price of rice, Ei Nyun wondered how the increased price of onions would affect her sales of *let-thok* salad.

<sup>166</sup> *Let-hpet*, or pickled tea leaves, are frequently served on social occasions, and, when wrapped up in a small package and sent to a guest, used to form both an invitation to the function (such as a *shin-byu*) and a request for a donation of money or food for the function. Shway Yoe describes (*op. cit.*, p. 298) how the leaves are mixed with salt, garlic, asafoetida, oil and a few grains of millet seed.

<sup>167</sup> Literally: "a two-*pyi* bag of rice." A *pyi* is a measure of capacity: there are 16 *pyi* to 1 *tīn*, which is about a bushel.

"What brings you here?"

"I've come to see you, of course,"

"What's the matter?"

"I've been expecting you to come since yesterday evening."

"Why, what for? Is something the matter?" Kyaw Mya asked so perfunctorily that Ei Nyun glanced at him angrily.

"...matter!" she said sullenly, but didn't go on. Only then did Kyaw Mya realise that something had happened and want to know what it was. He forgot his growing concern about the rise in the price of rice.

"Is something wrong, then, Ma Nyun?"

"Didn't you see what it said in the newspaper?"

"It says all sorts of things in the newspapers."

Ei Nyun felt hot and flushed all over. If he had been a young child, she could have picked him up and shaken him.

"I'm not talking about all sorts of things. I'm talking about the item which said that we are going to get independence."

"Yes, yes, of course. It was even being discussed last night at a workers' meeting at the factory."

"What meeting?"

"A protest meeting, because the Company is going to sack twenty-three men, including me, from the factory."

At this news, Ei Nyun's anger subsided and a wave of compassion filled her heart.

"But, how can this be?"

"It would have to happen this way. No sooner do they announce that we are to get independence, then even before we have time to rejoice, twenty-three men are to be sacked!"

"But what will you do?"

"Our Union has decided that we must fight this together. And only today, the A.F.P.F.L. Labour Department leaders came and talked to us."

"What advice did they give? They're on the workers' side, aren't they?"

"Yes, they're on our side, but they said not to join battle yet. They're going to speak to the floor supervisor first, and if they get nowhere with him, they'll go and speak to the Minister of Labour. And they say they'll help look for jobs for the people who've been sacked, but they can't guarantee to find them none. But whatever they say, we workers won't stand for it if we're sacked. We must unite and fight this together..." This was a different Kyaw Mya speaking now, and at last Ei Nyun felt much happier as she listened to him speaking so fervently.

"If that's the case, you won't be given the sack, will you?"

"We've heard that the Company may postpone this business for a while, since the workers are not going to give in. If this Company were taken over, Ma Nyun, then with the workers in control this sort of business would be settled quite peacefully."

"Could they really be taken over?"

"Of course they could be taken over when we are independent."

"I suppose so."

They were quiet for a moment, gazing straight ahead. The country did not yet actually own the factory, and they could not ignore the fact that the workers were not yet in control. It was starting to get dark, and lamps were being lit in the rooms on either side. Ēi Nyūn straightened herself, and shook her fingers nervously.

"In that case, what's going to happen about us?"

"We will get married, of course, on the day that independence is proclaimed, just as we promised."

"That's it! That was why I came. It's dark now ... I must be going."

Ēi Nyūn stood up, and Kyaw Myā followed suit

"I'll come with you."

Ēi Nyūn stepped inside to say good-bye

"Auntie, I must go home now ..."

"Yes, alright. Go with her, Kyaw Myā."

As they were walking along, they thought about their coming marriage. When they had decided to be married two years before, they had thought in terms of a large scale wedding ceremony, with at least *hkauk-swēh*<sup>68</sup> and a small orchestra.<sup>169</sup> But during the two years, their financial position had worsened. Nevertheless, it was an auspicious occasion that only happened once in a lifetime; in order to make it special, they would still offer coffee and halva,<sup>h70</sup> or something like that, to all their fellow workers and market sellers. For that day, the bridegroom had to buy a complete set of clothing to wear himself, and an outfit as a wedding present for the bride to wear. He would also be expected to provide new pillows and blankets, things for the new household. This would take two hundred *kyats* at the very least.

When they reached Ēi Nyūn's house she showed Kyaw Myā the newspaper which she had bought the day before. They passed the good news on to Daw Sū, Ēi Nyūn's mother, and then returned to the discussion of the arrangements. Daw Sū undertook to provide ginger salad<sup>h71</sup> for the ceremony to honour the young couple. Ēi Nyūn said that she would contribute fifty *kyats* towards the expenses.

"No, don't do that, Ēi Nyūn. I'll find it somehow."

"We know each other well enough, Ko Myā. Please let me."

"No, I won't!"

Although he refused it, he was really in no position to do so. Even if she contributed fifty *kyats*, it still wouldn't be easy for him; he would have to find at least another hundred *kyats*. Since he was on the list of those to be sacked from their jobs, he didn't see that his search for someone to lend him money would have much success.

As the day drew nearer, Kyaw Myā became more desperate. How would he get the money for the wedding? His wages were barely enough to live on. His friends and work-fellows too were all short of money like him. However, he had made up his mind to be married on Independence Day, and having taken this step, he would not now withdraw.

<sup>168</sup>There are two types of *hkauk-hswē* found in Burma: the Chinese dish called *hkauk-hsē-gyaw* (or *pyok*), which is a type of Chow Mein made of pork and noodles, and the Chinese Muslim dish called *pān-thēi: hkauk-hswē*, in which noodles and chicken or beef are served with a fragrant saffron-coloured sauce.

<sup>169</sup>Literally: "a group of violinists" (*tayāw-wāing*)

<sup>170</sup>This is a sweet confection known in Burmese as *shwei-chi*. It derives from the Hindustani *suji* (a type of semolina), which is rendered as *thu-zi* in Burmese, and pronounced as *hsu-gyi*.

<sup>171</sup>A salad of shredded ginger, like pickled tea leaves, may be served at social functions.

## III

Today was indeed the day, the great day, the special day, and by four o'clock in the afternoon, Kyaw Mya and Ei Nyun had become man and wife. As Kyaw Mya was getting up that morning, he heard the Independence gun salute. Ei Nyun, however, was woken by her friends' voices in her room, urging her to get up. They took part in the Independence Parade, and they shouted all sorts of slogans. Kyaw Mya, together with the other workers, shouted out for all they were worth, "Take over the English factories now ... take them over now!"

In the afternoon at four o'clock, in the presence of the honoured guests in Ei Nyun's house, Kyaw Mya and Ei Nyun were married by U Hla Maung, the chairman of the Trade Union. With more than a hundred guests present, it was very well attended for a wedding of ordinary people. The young couple and their parents were pleased when they heard people praising the delicious halva and fragrant coffee as well as the excellent salad of fresh ginger, and the other food.

When the guests were dispersing after six o'clock, Daw Su said to Daw Mo,

"Come, we'll leave the house to them. Let's go for a walk and watch the Independence celebrations."

"Ko Mya, wouldn't it be a good idea if we went and watched too?"

"No, Ma Nyun, let's not go. I haven't been able to have a rest all day today."

At this point in the conversation, Daw Mo said, "Come on, Kyaw Sein and Me Tin, we'll go and see the celebrations." Having collected everyone who was left, they went off.

The two of them were left alone in the house. Kyaw Mya was gazing towards the main road outside the house. He even yawned once or twice.

"Ko Mya, you look unhappy; it doesn't seem like Independence Day or even our wedding day."

"I was up very early this morning, and so I've been tired all day. What could there be more enjoyable than being with one's beloved? How could I be unhappy?"

"Would you like a little ginger salad?"

"Yes, please. I haven't eaten anything yet. If there's some halva left, may I have some of that too, please?"

Ei Nyun stood up, and while she was preparing it, she heard a voice calling from outside on the street, "Ko Kyaw Mya, Ko Kyaw Mya."

"Is that Hla Maung? Come on in."

"I can't stop now. There's a meeting tomorrow in the factory compound at five o'clock in the morning, and I have to tell everyone."

"What about?"

"Your case," came Hla Maung's voice, but the man himself remained unseen.

"Ko Mya, did he say your case? What's the matter?"

Ei Nyun stood dazed, still holding the bowl of ginger salad.

"Nothing's the matter, Ma Nyun."

Although Kyaw Mya spoke soothingly to Ei Nyun, he was not calm himself.

"Surely they wouldn't call a meeting if nothing was the matter. Tell me, Ko Mya, what has happened?"

"Put the ginger salad down, and come and sit down."

Ei Nyun sat down, mixing the ginger salad with her fingers, and tried to persuade him, "Come on, tell me. You can tell everything to your wife, can't you?"

"I didn't tell you because I was afraid it would make you unhappy, but they've given me the sack."

Ēi Nyun pressed hard on the ginger salad, kneading it until it squeaked. Her heart was pounding.

"So you've been sacked then?"

"Yes, I was sacked three days ago, but I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to be upset."

"Why should I be upset? Don't be so miserable, Ko Mya. I'm earning enough in the bazaar to feed us both."

Kyaw Mya put his left hand under her chin, turned her face towards him, and kissed her on the cheek. "That's my wife, you are just what I need to give me strength for the battle. The workers won't stand for this."

"Go ahead and fight, then. We wives will fight beside our husbands. And never think that you can't tell your wife something in case it makes her sad ..."

Without saying anything Kyaw Mya concentrated on eating the ginger salad.

Even though Ēi Nyun had asked him to tell her everything, there was still one point he hadn't mentioned. He had had the utmost difficulty in finding the hundred *kyats* they needed for the marriage. Being unable to get a loan in the ordinary way, he had had to go to the foreman<sup>172</sup> of his department and sign an undertaking with him that in return for a loan he would take any job he was given. As soon as he started work he would present one month's wages to the foreman, and he would repay the hundred *kyats* at fifteen *kyats* a month.

He had still not mentioned this matter to Ēi Nyun. In fact he hadn't told anybody. Had Ēi Nyun known, she would have been very unhappy. Besides, if people knew, some might say:

"No sooner do we get Independence, than Maung Kyaw Mya has to go and get himself into debt. How typical of Burma!"

Others might very well say

"He has deliberately got into debt just to spoil the image of our Independence."

So Kyaw Mya was convinced that it would be wiser not to mention the matter to anybody at all.

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<sup>172</sup>The English word, Burmanised as *hpo-min* is commonly used for "foreman"; *ku-li-gaung* (head of the coolies) is also found.

ALL'S WELL, SIR

(1949 *Thwei-thauk Magazine*)

I

Maung Thit's luck took a turn for the better<sup>173</sup> when he tripped and fell over.

He had first arrived in Rangoon Gaol more than fifteen months ago; during that time he had been upgraded from the lowest class of prisoner, where he had to have his head shaved, to the 8th Grade, where he was allowed to wear a cap.<sup>174</sup> He had now reached a position where he did not have to do hard labour like the other prisoners, since he was the leader of the four or five convicts who were acting as servants in the prison for Tet Hpōn-gyī<sup>175</sup> Thein Pe and other A Class<sup>176</sup> detainees held under Section 5.<sup>177</sup> In accordance with his higher status, he was sometimes permitted to wear white cotton underpants under the usual narrow cotton loincloth.

One day a china plater<sup>178</sup> got broken and it was Maung Thit's fault. Another prisoner-warder called Maung Mya, who, like Maung Thit, had been an ordinary prisoner before promotion, reported it to the Chief Gaoler, thus starting an investigation.

"You see, Hsaya,<sup>179</sup> the others are jealous because they can only get unpolished rice to eat while I eat polished rice with you," explained Maung Thit to Tet Hpōn-gyī Thein Pe.

When Maung Thit went to the office at the front of the goal,<sup>180</sup> he felt very downcast as he stood in front of the Chief Gaoler. He might be put into solitary confinement. His term in gaol might even be extended, and he trembled at the prospect. The Chief Gaoler was concentrating hard on a letter he was reading, and was much too busy to look at or question Maung Thit. Maung Mya was standing there too, looking so self-righteous<sup>181</sup> that Maung Thit gave him a withering glance out of the

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<sup>173</sup>Literally: "it was as though Maung Thit had begun to come into contact with gold and silver."

<sup>174</sup>Literally: "from the shaven-head state to the cap-wearing 8th Grade state." "8th Grade" apparently refers to the system within the gaol whereby a prisoner, through good behaviour, becomes a "trustee" and is given certain privileges.

<sup>175</sup>After the publication of *Tet Hpōn-gyī* ("The Modern Monk") in 1937 Thein Pe became known as Tet Hpōn-gyī Thein Pe. This story is set in 1949 when Thein Pe in fact spent a year in gaol.

<sup>176</sup>"A Class" prisoners had generally been gaoled for political reasons. After U Wisara's protest (he died in gaol in 1929 after a hunger strike because he was not allowed to wear his yellow robe in gaol), monks were also given A class privileges, which included a better diet, access to newspapers and the services of prisoner-servants or orderlies.

<sup>177</sup>"Section 5" refers to the part of the post-war legal code that dealt with sedition.

<sup>178</sup>Literally: "a plate bought from a store" (*taik-pagan*), i.e. a china plate. Cf. *taik ēin-gyī*, a tailored jacket in the style of the stores, *taik-pān*, artificial flowers.

<sup>179</sup>*Hsaya* means teacher and it is an appellation that indicates respect.

<sup>180</sup>The phrase *bū-wā* (mouth or neck of the gourd) is gaol slang for the little narrow gate through which prisoners must pass to enter the gaol.

<sup>181</sup>Literally: "with the air of a *swē-gyā*." *Swē-gyā* is a slang expression for the Court Prosecuting Officer, who had the rank of a Sub-Inspector of Police and was

corner of his eye. It was just at that moment that Maung Thit's luck took a turn for the better.

The Chief Gaoler, addressing himself to one of his subordinates, said that orders had been received to release all those long-term prisoners who only had five months of their sentences left to serve.

"Release them, yes, that's the best thing to do. There just isn't enough room in the prison with all these Section 5 detainees," replied the Junior Gaoler.

Maung Thit's face, a moment ago so woebegone and sad, suddenly lit up<sup>182</sup>. He had been sentenced to a three year term of imprisonment. Not long ago he had checked the register in his block and had discovered that he now had only five months left to serve after deducting all the remissions of sentence that had been given to him, including the days given for 12 "good merits," those given by the Gaol Superintendent and the Governor, as well as a whole week to celebrate Independence.

He was going to be free; he, Maung Thit, was going to be free. The next time he looked at Maung Mya, who had done him such a mean turn by reporting him, he no longer felt like giving him a dirty look, and instead just smiled kindly. At that point, the Chief Gaoler got up and said, "Come back another time." The investigation was over.

Tet Hpōn-gyī Thein Pe and Maung Thit's friends were waiting anxiously to see whether he would be beaten with a truncheon<sup>183</sup> or sent in to solitary confinement. They were surprised to see Maung Thit back so soon with a triumphant smile on his face. Before he reached the iron railings, he called out, "Hsaya, I'm going to be let out!" Then he shouted out loudly, "Hey, Warder!<sup>184</sup> Quick, come and open the gate!"

Throughout the day he whistled softly to himself. He ran eagerly back and forth covering every corner of the gaol as he did so; he looked just like a young bullock being driven home from his day's work. First of all he went to the sick bay to see Taik Maung who was Thahkin Sō Gyī's<sup>185</sup> prison servant.<sup>186</sup> Taik Maung came from the same village and had been imprisoned at the same trial, so he would be due for release at the same time. With a broad smile, he told all his friends in the hospital as well as Taik Maung. He was soon going to be free, so there was plenty to talk about.

However, in the afternoon when he went to see Tet Hpōn-gyī Thein Pe who was sitting reading on a reclining chair in the middle of the canna lilies, Maung Thit was looking rather thoughtful as he sat down on a stool in front of his master.

"Hsaya-gyī, we're in a much better position than you Section 5 people. We know when we're going to be released, but you have no idea at all," said Maung Thit, pouring out a cup of tea. This was quite true. Prisoners on criminal charges, even if they had a ten-year sentence, knew when they would be free. But for those arrested under Section 5, there was no time limit. They were like the lover in the song who was tired of waiting for his love; they just didn't know how long they would have to wait.

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much hated as he was the lowest-ranking officer who could prosecute in the courts. Since the Township Officers could give no more than six months, the fact that the accused was tried before the Court Prosecuting Officer inevitably meant a longer sentence.

<sup>182</sup>Literally: "Maung Thit's face, which had been so small and sad like a plum leaf, became big and fresh like a lily leaf."

<sup>183</sup>Literally: "number stick." Truncheons were numbered and hung on numbered pegs after use.

<sup>184</sup>The English word has been used for "warder": *wa-da*.

<sup>185</sup>Thakin Soe was arrested in March 1948 and released again in 1949. He was the leader of the Red Flag Communists.<sup>r</sup>

<sup>186</sup>The *tabe-hsaya* (pupil-teacher, follower-leader) relationship is a very close one in Burma. In this context "prison-servant" has been used to translate *tabe*.

The prisoners were in the habit of asking the Section 5 detainees when they would be released. Some said they would be out before long, perhaps today or tomorrow; some said they didn't know; others said "Only when the insurgents come and let us out." But when Maung Thit asked Tet Hpōn-gyī, he had replied that he would probably be free by the time he had worn out one bathing *lon-gyi*. But in fact, not one but two had already been worn out.

"Oh, Nga Thit, would you get me a new bathing *lon-gyi* tomorrow morning, please?" he said, pointing to the bathing *lon-gyi* on the clothes line.

Although the beams of the setting sun filtered through the tips of the mango trees, the sun itself remained invisible to the prisoners. Thin tapering clouds moved freely across the richly coloured heavens. For the prisoners, however, the high grey walls of the gaol stood there fixed and immovable as a reminder of their captivity and confinement. Beyond them, the prisoners could not proceed.

## II

Maung Thit found it very hard to get to sleep that night; his mind was in a turmoil thinking about what would happen when he got out of gaol.

He resolved that he would earn his living as a law-abiding citizen when he was released. He hadn't really wanted to go in for dacoity at all, but hadn't he been led astray by his friends who had given him a bit too much to drink? It was at a time when agricultural work was hard to find, and he hadn't been able to raise a loan when he was short of money. And thus it was that he'd gone along with the dacoits.

"I shall never go in for dacoity again. 'Thou shalt not'<sup>187</sup> ... so never, never again! That's what Hsaya-gyī is always telling me, isn't he? He says that dacoits are enemies of the people, and it's true. Just like the landowners who take a cut without doing any work themselves, the dacoits just move in and live off what the ordinary people have earned honestly by the sweat of their brows. He says that we must join together to suppress the dacoits, just as we must join forces to eliminate the landlord system."

Maung Thit bitterly regretted that he had ever become a dacoit. The odd thing about it was that he had not felt as strongly as this, either at the beginning of his sentence or when he had been in gaol for some time. It was only now, when he was about to be released, that he felt his conscience pricking, his courage weakening, like a stiff sponge dropped in water.<sup>189</sup> The feeling of bitter regret somewhat spoilt what should have been pure joy at the prospect of his release.

"What shall I do then?" Maung Thit turned over onto his right side<sup>190</sup> and went on thinking about it.

"A farmer must work on the land; that's obvious. I can harrow well, can't I? Everyone says so. And I can sow faster than anyone else, too. I'll do whatever else is necessary. If I need any bullocks, I can hire them from Ko Kyī Tha Baw. If he lets me have Brownie and Stripey, that will be very good. You know, I may even get some land! Didn't I hear Hsaya-gyī say the other day that the government had passed an act for land distribution?<sup>191</sup> It sounds fairly definite. He also said that if

<sup>187</sup>This sentiment is often expressed in popular songs in Burma.

<sup>188</sup>The phrase *wei-ya-maṇi* (Pali *veramaṇi*), which means "I shall refrain from, keep away from," is repeated in the Five Precepts. (See Note 53.)

<sup>189</sup>Literally: "like a piece of cotton which is dropped into oil." Cf. Note 160.

<sup>190</sup>The phrase *nan-tāung*, which is normally only used of the Buddha or royalty, gives an ironical twist to this sentence.

<sup>191</sup>The Land Nationalisation Act of 1948 was designed to abolish landlordism as laid down in the Constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 1947 in preparation for Independence. "Section 30 of the Constitution begins: 'The State is the ultimate owner of all lands.' It may 'regulate, alter or abolish land tenures or resume possession of any land and distribute same for collective or co-operative farming

the Communists come into power, they would certainly share out the land. I wonder if I'll get land from Thahkin Tin, or from that Chettiar Alakappa's land, or from the Co-operative Bankr"

Maung Thit closed his eyes tightly and tried to go to sleep, but the tighter he closed his eyes, the more vividly he kept seeing the face of his wife, Ma Kaung Hsin.

"Yes, they say she's back in the village. Good, yes, that's excellent. Usually people come out of gaol with no personal possessions at all, but because I've been so lucky with my masters, why, I even have a silk *lon-gyi*. With the five cotton *lon-gyis* I've got put away and the twenty *kyats* the army officers gave me, I can hold my head high when I get home. I shan't ask Hsaya-gyi for anything because I know he's not very well off. I won't wear the silk *lon-gyi* that P.V.O. leader, Major Htun Sein, gave me. I shall give it to Kaung Hsin. If she sews on a black strip for the waistband,<sup>192</sup> it will look fine on her. Ah, Kaung Hsin, you have such a fresh pretty little face and such a slim little, trim little figure.<sup>193</sup> If you include the time I was under detention, it's almost two years; isn't it, that we've been away from each other. But it's alright now, I'm going to see you very soon."

Maung Thit grinned as though he'd been tickled in the ribs. It was such a broad grin that his eyes crinkled up, but it didn't matter because no one could see him.

"I shall be a bit like the young bullock that escaped from Hpō Tha Wā's enclosure."

Just then the quiet was broken by the loud noise of the gong striking the hour, and the cry of "All's well, Sir."

Maung Thit became very angry. "Damn you and your blasted 'All's well, Sir'--how do you expect anyone to get out? Would you say 'All's well, Sir,' if some poor bastard had managed to escape? But you keep on with your 'All's well,' because no one will ever get over the walls of this prison and escape!"

Maung Thit had not felt this sort of resentment before. He too had been a night-watchman<sup>194</sup> before he started working for the A Class prisoners, and he too had to shout out "All's well, Sir" every fifteen minutes. But it was different now that he was almost free. Today or tomorrow he would be free.

### III

Early the next morning Maung Thit made coffee for his own Hsaya-gyi and the others with him, then he hurried over to the stores block. The warder there asked him if he was included in the group of prisoners with only five months left to serve. "Very probably, Sir," he said in a very restrained voice, trying to look as though nothing special had happened.

As soon as he had collected the stores, he hurried back to give them to the cook, Maung Thēin. Then he quickly went off to the Main Gaol, which was the principal part of the Rangoon Central Gaol. He wanted to see if the list of those with five months left had been put up, and, if so, the day and the hour he would be able to leave prison. But the list still hadn't been put up. The gaoler of the block said to him, "Last time you checked the register you had about five months left, so

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or to agricultural tenants.' The Constitution promised to end all 'large land holdings' and to limit by law the 'maximum size of private land.'" (Trager, *op. cit.*, p. 151.)

<sup>192</sup>Unlike men's *lon-gyis*, women's *lon-gyis* have a strip of black cotton, about six inches wide (*ahtet-hsin*), sewn to the top edge.

<sup>193</sup>Literally: "with a body like the banded snakehead fish," i.e., a perfect body. It is commonly said in Burma that a beautiful woman should be not too fair and not too dark, not too fat and not too thin, and not too tall and not too short.

<sup>194</sup>*Eik-hpan-zqung ba-ya* combines the court language of "watching over the royal sleep" and the Indian term *ba-ya* meaning night watchman. The sarcasm of this sentence follows the rage and obscenities in Maung Thit's previous speech, which have not been literally translated.

of course you're included.' But this didn't satisfy Maung Thit, who wouldn't be quite certain until he had seen it written in black and white.<sup>195</sup>

During that day Maung Thit went to the Main Gaol at least five times to see if the list was up, but the list hadn't come out even by the time they were locked up in their cells again. He had to be satisfied with the fact that everyone he met said, "Of course you'll be included. Stop worrying."

Maung Thit just had to be satisfied with the fact that all of the two thousand eight hundred prisoners had heard the good news and were saying to each other, "Tet Hpōn-gyī's servant Maung Thit, and Sō Gyī's servant Taik Maung, and all the other five months are going to be released." He had to be content that the good news about his release had spread all around the annexes of the gaol, the hospital block, and the condemned cells<sup>196</sup> as well as the eight gaols which comprised the big gaol. After all inside the gaol the news of somebody's release was far more exciting than the news of Burma's independence; everybody talked about it much more.

But in spite of this, the poor man's anxiety would not be allayed. The more a hungry person sees food, the hungrier he becomes; likewise for prisoners, the nearer freedom comes, the more they want to be free. And the nearer the day draws, the more they start thinking about the time they have not been free. As Maung Thit thought back on the past fifteen months of imprisonment, some moments of it seemed in retrospect to have been enjoyable, and he almost felt as though he would miss them.

When Maung Thit first arrived in gaol, there had still been a Moral Rehabilitation Association. All the prisoners cooperated with it and followed its lead. The Association had strong influence over the allocation of work, the distribution of jobs, the organisation and control of provisions, the maintenance of discipline and so on. The leaders, like Ko Ōn Thān and the others, were very fair and just in the way they ran things, and they ate the same food and did the same work as the rest of the prisoners. For this reason, Maung Thit had always respected them, and would continue to respect them even when he was out of gaol.

On the 4th January, 1948, Independence celebrations were held all over Burma. In the gaol the specially built pavilions were a glorious sight and the air was filled with the sound of music and drums. People tried to climb the greasy pole until they were exhausted, and even then they still went on climbing. They really enjoyed themselves. At the boxing matches,<sup>197</sup> they showed their true Burmese mettle. With a blow from the knee, the skin was slit; a blow of the hand left a gaping wound; then down, winded by a blow in the stomach. No sooner was one contender down, than another stepped up, each one eager to show he was better than the last. Again and again came the sound of arms being slapped in invitation for a fight. They were enjoying the Independence celebrations so much that they didn't want to stop, but at five o'clock the iron gong rang out and they had to go back to their cells. Even though it was Independence Day, gaol regulations couldn't be waived. At five-thirty, the doors clanged shut and were locked.

There had been so much noise at the Independence celebrations, and so much excitement at the Independence Day boxing matches that a cry started up when they were shut into their cells to sleep in accordance with the regulations of the gaol:

"The country is free, but we are not free yet. Please let us out of gaol! If only our Bo-gyok could be here to help us!"<sup>198</sup>

This cry was heard above all the others, and it even reached the Old Racecourse where the official Independence celebrations were being held. This cry welled up

<sup>195</sup> Literally: "in letters of black on white," an English phrase.

<sup>196</sup> The text refers to *kyō-daik mō-gyō-daik*. It is understood that *kyō-daik* (rope building) in gaol parlance means "condemned cell"; apparently *mō-gyō-daik* (metal or thunderbolt building) has the same meaning here.

<sup>197</sup> In Burmese boxing matches, "a good deal of agility and skill is shown, leaps into the air, and kicks with the bare feet, and violent upward knocks with the knee finding a place which would not be allowed by the 'fancy.' The first drawing of blood decides a contest, however slight the injury may be" (Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, p. 378).

<sup>198</sup> This is a reference to the Bo-gyok, General Aung San, who had been assassinated just six months before.

from the hearts of the prisoners. It was only reasonable that they should feel such a desire at a time like Independence, and their demands were right and proper.

After all, the great kings of old had always opened the gates of their gaols at the time of their coronation celebrations, and they had also commuted death sentences, had they not? In India, when King Akbar ascended the throne, he not only freed the prisoners, but also set free the pretty ornamental birds that were kept in the palace.<sup>199</sup> It was only right that the prisoners too should want, at this great moment, to be set free.

As well as demonstrating their wish to be free by shouting slogans, the prisoners went on a hunger strike.

"Hsaya-gyī, we didn't really understand very clearly. When everyone was demonstrating inside the gaol, I just joined in too. That's how it was. If Burma was free, then we wanted to be free too, of course. So we joined battle and took part in the hunger strike. The superintendent and the gaolers would not even give us any water, so for three whole days we didn't eat anything at all, and we had nothing to drink. On the fourth day, Hsaya-gyī, we couldn't stand it any longer. Not being able to eat didn't matter, we could stand that. But having nothing to drink was too much to bear. Some drank urine, some called off the strike; for my part, several times I was almost on the point of drinking the spittle from the tins. On top of this, the government ordered that we were to be beaten with bamboo cudgels for breaking gaol regulations. That was enough for me; Hsaya-gyī; from now on I shall be wary about going on strike. But I won't forget how united we were, and what risks we took."

Maung Thit spoke with obvious relish. He would never forget it, and he would talk about the strike with pride in the future. Although in fact they lost, it was a defeat in which the light of honour shone brightly; a defeat which bore the seeds of victory.

When the Independence celebrations were all over, and after the strike in the gaol had been broken, the Gaol Association broke up. The old regime returned. As far as Maung Thit was concerned, life went on much as before. Every day he had to sweep the front block and the offices. He had to sweep them out thoroughly morning, noon and night. After some months he was promoted, and then his duties were mending and ironing clothes morning, noon and night. This went on until the month of Wa-gaung.<sup>200</sup>

It was at this time that Tet Hpōn-gyī Thein Pe and some army officers were put into gaol. It seemed that Maung Thit was destined to go up in the world<sup>201</sup> and eat polished rice with Tet Hpōn-gyī, for at that time he was promoted. The Chief Gaoler appointed him No. 8 Prison Night-watchman. It was from that time that he became known throughout the gaol as the servant and follower of Tet Hpōn-gyī.

"Hsaya-gyī, I can't eat as much of this polished rice as I used to be able to eat of the unpolished rice. And yet I have to put up with a lot of unkind talk. Even the Chief Gaoler warned me not to get too big for my boots. And another thing, when I got the spare pillow from you, and the mosquito net, some people reported it to the Chief Gaoler. It's not fair, Hsaya-gyī, people are just not fair."

And so it was that the month of Thadīn-gyut<sup>202</sup> arrived. "Yes, even though we were in gaol, we still enjoyed ourselves, didn't we?" and Maung Thit turned over this recollection in his mind.

"At the Thadīn-gyut festival, we chaps from Hpya-pon district showed them, didn't we? People from our district danced the centaur dance, the kettledrum dance,

<sup>199</sup> King Akbar was a very powerful Moghul emperor in India in the sixteenth century (1542-1605).

<sup>200</sup> The lunar month of Wa-gaung in Burma occurs in about August.

<sup>201</sup> Literally: "swarming in his beard." The full phrase is *sā-ya-kan-kyon mok-hsēik-pyā-swē* (because fate has destined it, he does not have to search for honey, but finds it in his beard), i.e., his wishes were destined to be fulfilled.

<sup>202</sup> The lunar month of Thadīn-gyut occurs in about October, and marks the end of the Buddhist Lent with feasting and illuminations.

and the Shwei Yō style dance.<sup>203</sup> Do you remember, Hsaya, you liked the centaur dance and the drum dance so much that you saw them again and again. The little play was good, too; it was just like going to the opera. I saw it five times. The chap who played Princess Sān Sān was just like a real girl, and very pretty. We fell madly in love with her, even though we knew it was a man; we fell for her just like a girl. I suppose we did it because we were far away from the outside world, and we were starved of female company. As well as this, Maung Shein Gyī, who played the hero, was from our district, and he was very good indeed. You can't think of him as a Mān Tin,<sup>204</sup> but he was a real clown<sup>205</sup> from an acting troupe.<sup>206</sup>

As Maung Thit recalled these happier experiences he had had while he had been in the prison, his enthusiasm for leaving seemed to wane, like a little robin on the ground who is diverted by the prospect of another beakful of tender green grass from flying up and away.

At that time there was a rest period for the whole prison and some of the prisoners were lying stretched out on the ground underneath the trees. The air was filled with the chirping of sparrows, the cooing of doves, and the cawing of crows. Just then there came a jingling sound, and again and again it came from the direction of No. 7 Gaol. Every single day since he had arrived in gaol, Maung Thit had heard this sound. It was as familiar as the sound of "All's well, Sir."<sup>206</sup> It was a loud jingling noise as if someone were playing a trill with a stick on the iron bars of the prison gates and of the prison compound.<sup>206</sup>

There was the ringing sound again, as someone checked whether the iron bars were really secure, or whether someone had entered unobserved and cut the railings, leaving them open. It was the sort of sound which would frighten the little robin away, and all of a sudden Maung Thit wanted to fly away too. Now he really did want to leave, and to know the exact day and moment of his release.

He ran off to the Main Gaol again; there they said the list would be put up before long, so he sat down to wait. He noticed a hpōn-gyī in No. 5 Gaol. A hpōn-gyī in prison...

"Imprisoned, and still wearing his monk's robes. It wouldn't be so bad if it were just politics, but since it's not...it's disgraceful.

Not to mention this chap, there is the monk who kept coming into prison and preaching to us when we were awaiting trial; how can you admire a hpōn-gyī like that who tells people they should confess and admit their guilt, making sure that they really get it in the neck! It's alright for him to preach like that but it's no good to us, no good at all. And if we didn't listen to his sermons, we were beaten. What a life it is in prison!"

Maung Thit felt bitter as he thought about this, and a feeling of oppression came over him. Just at that moment, the list was posted and there was his name on it in black and white. What a relief! Now it was quite definite that he was going to be released. The day after tomorrow! But why the day after tomorrow? Couldn't they have made it tomorrow...oh, those prison officials!

Maung Thit marched triumphantly<sup>207</sup> back to No. 8 Gaol, head held high.

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<sup>203</sup>In the centaur dance, the dancer is dressed as a centaur; in the kettledrum dance, he dances with an *ō-zi* drum slung across his shoulders; the third dance mentioned is the distinctive dancing style of Ū Shwei Yō, a character from an early film in Burma, *Tāw-hmaing-zun-gā lūn-aung-hpan*.

<sup>204</sup>Shwei Mān Tin Maung was a very well known actor in Burma who died in 1969.

<sup>205</sup>The *lu-byet* (clown, or buffoon) is an essential member of the acting troupe, who will extemporise, make reference to current events, pun, quip, tell bawdy jokes, depending on the kind of play.

<sup>206</sup>Literally: "as though he were playing a trill on a drum circle," i.e., drawing the stick rapidly across the different notes of the *pat-hsāing-wāing*, or drum circle, in which the drums are fixed into a circular frame.

<sup>207</sup>Literally: "with the air of a young bullock."

## IV

The day after tomorrow! Tomorrow would be the day for getting everything ready, and the next day he would leave. It would be difficult to make the next two days pass.

Maung Thit took out the *lon-gyis* he had acquired, and patched the holes in his Shan bag.<sup>208</sup> Then he bought two strings of rosary beads with the cigars he had saved up. One string was for his father and the other was for his elder brother. By making a good impression with the string of rosary beads from the prison, perhaps he would be able to hire a pair of bullocks from him. Of the two pairs of shoes he had acquired, he tried on the thong sandals<sup>209</sup> and put the canvas shoes into his Shan bag.

He wanted to say good-bye to all his friends, so he got a note from Hsaya-gyi saying he was to collect shavings from the carpenters' planes in the workshop area of the gaol. He was then able to say good-bye to his friends like Aung Si who were in the workshops. He slipped round unobtrusively to the condemned cells and the kitchens and said good-bye to all his good friends there.

Next he went to the barber's shop to get his hair cut. His friend Ba Chit cut his hair much more carefully than usual and made him look very smart.<sup>210</sup> When he was about to put some coconut oil on, Maung Thit stopped him and said, "Don't put any of that on, please. I've brought some hair cream with me."<sup>211</sup>

Then he went to Sō Gyī's servant Taik Maung, and together they discussed how they would leave the gaol, where they would stay in Rangoon, how they would return to the village, and other matters. Although the journey would be difficult, there was nothing to worry about. Even if there was no boat going to Bo-galēi, there was one to Hpya-ponh.

"We can stay at my Hsaya-gyi's house. When his wife came to see him with a visitor's permit, she promised she would put us safely in the hands of the purser on the Hpya-pon boat."

"That's very kind of her," said Taik Maung, nodding his head.

Maung Thit arranged for Maung Chit to be promoted in his place by getting a letter from Hsaya-gyi to take to the Chief Gaoler's office so that he could get an 8th Grade ranking for Maung Chit. Then he got Nyun Sein to take Maung Chit's place. He had to work out their duties with them and decide who would draw stores, who would cook the rice, who would draw water, and so on.

"Hsaya-gyi gets up very early; he's not like the others. You must do as I did. As soon as the cells are unlocked at dawn, you must put the water on to heat. After that, you can go for relief and a wash, do you hear? And mind you strain hishwashing water for him."

On that same evening, Maung Thit slipped off his gaol uniform and changed into ordinary clothes.

"Aren't you a bit premature, Nga Thit, old chap? I didn't recognise you."

"Oh, I just couldn't stand those gaol clothes any longer."

"Go straight back to your village, won't you ... don't get held up on the way. As the Communists are in control in your village, you will be in time for the distribution of land and so on."

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<sup>208</sup>Shan bags are the woven shoulder-bags that are widely used by Burmans. As the name implies, they seem to have originated among the hill tribes.

<sup>209</sup>Literally: "aeroplane sandals." These sandals were made of leather with the front section curved up slightly.

<sup>210</sup>The English word "smart" is used here: *samat*.

<sup>211</sup>Another English word has been used: *kaw-samatit*, cosmetic, which describes here a type of wax in a metal container which is rubbed against the hair as a dressing before combing.

"Yes, that is so, Hsaya-gyī. I know Mō Kyi very well, too.Ꭰ"

Maung Thit paused to think for a while, then a question suddenly occurred to him.

"But, Hsaya-gyī, how can you possibly have land distribution if one side is fighting with the other, as they are now?"

"Hmm, it's difficult. And there aren't just two sides at present; there are a number, and they are all fighting with each other.Ꭰ"

"But didn't you say, Hsaya-gyī, that the government has passed a law so that land can be distributed to the poor people?"

"Yes, they have, but at present those who want to distribute land and those who don't, are all fighting each other. Now, in my opinion, all those who agree together on the principle that land should be distributed should unite and work for peace. We must have unity and peace."

Maung Thit gave this some thought, then said, "Sō Gyī calls you Brother Peace, Hsaya-gyī.ᎠᎡ"

"That's because my policy is Peace. However, Sō Gyī doesn't agree with it. It's vital that there should be peace. You don't actually own the land yet of course, but, until you do, the portion of the crop paid to the landowner shouldn't be more than twice the amount of the land tax. This would be bearable, provided you can work in peace.Ꭰ"

"Don't you worry, Hsaya-gyī. I shall go back to my village.Ꭰ"

"I'm glad to hear it. If you meet any of the Communists from Hpya-pon or Bogalēi, tell them that I am for peace and unity.Ꭰ"

Maung Thit smiled. "It's true, you are Brother Peace. Sō Gyī believes in violence, but you believe in gentleness and persuasion. That's surprising since you both are Communists."

The next morning, Maung Thit got up very early and washed. Then he smoothed his hair down tidily with hair cream. He looked very neat in his long-sleeved shirt, his red-checked *lon-gyi* and his leather thong sandals. He folded his gaol clothes so that he could hand them in, and put them down by the side of his Shan bag. He then paid his respects to Hsaya-gyī.

"Now, you go and earn yourself a good, honest living, and go straight back to your village, won't you?"

Maung Thit felt a lump in his throat. Surely he wasn't really going to miss it now--this unenviable place. He squatted on the ground, gazing into the distance, silent for some time. Then he said plaintively:

"I wonder if you'll get your early morning coffee every morning with these people looking after you.Ꭰ"

"Don't worry.Ꭰ"

Maung Thit stood up, picked up his Shan bag with one hand, and took up the prison clothes with the other.

The men being released all assembled in the area between No. 8 Gaol and the paddy stores block. Most did not have anything in the way of luggage, and had only the clothes they stood up in. A few were resplendent in silk *lon-gyis*, but Taik Maung outshone everyone that day. He had on a Mandalay silk *lon-gyi* with little pink and green checks, a long-sleeved shirt, and a felt hat, all got together for him by a group of Red Flag Communists. You really couldn't recognise him. It was no longer the same jesting, pock-marked Taik Maung. Maung Thit had a silk *lon-gyi* too, but he hadn't taken it out to wear. Instead, he had folded it carefully away for Mā Kāung Hsīn, his wife. Among those being released, two had no shirts to wear and had only been able to get hold of old faded *lon-gyis*.

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<sup>212</sup>Literallyn "Peace for the Golden Country" (i.e., Burma).

They all went off to the clothing stores block to hand in their gaol clothes and their numbers. As there were so many prisoners, Maung Thit had to wait quite a while for his turn. He didn't dare to push his way to the front because truncheons were much in evidence inside the gaol. One by one, as they handed in their gaol clothes, they were searched thoroughly, and their clothes and Shan bags were inspected. Then the Assistant Superintendent asked them where they were going when they were released and similar questions before handing out their gaol release certificates. Maung Thit's certificate included a mention of the fact that he had been promoted to the 8th Grade.

Upon receiving his certificate, Maung Thit clutched it tightly in his hand. He had only once before in his whole life clutched a piece of paper as tightly as this, and that was when he had first harrowed a small field by himself in the year that he started to work. He had gone to the rice mill in Maye village to sell his excess paddy, and when he was given the receipt of sale, he had clutched it tightly in exactly the same way.

This piece of paper which Maung Thit now had in his hand would not merely open all the padlocks of Rangoon Gaol, it was also a guarantee that, for seven days after being released from gaol, he would not be molested by any police, soldiers, headmen, or lesser officials.

There they were, certificates in hand and just about ready to be released, so they thought, when suddenly there was some bad news. Some V.I.P.s from outside the gaol were coming to give a lecture to those being released, and they would have to wait and hear it. Maung Thit flung himself down grumbling, "That's just the sort of thing that always happens to me." He looked as miserable as a puppet hanging limp with its strings broken.

"Why do they have to come and give us a lecture? They've already put us in prison, and now they have to add insult to injury by coming and preaching to us! It's not fair!"

Some were sitting and some were standing as they waited; some blowing their noses, spitting, talking among themselves or just thinking quietly. It was quite late in the morning, and the V.I.P.s still hadn't appeared, so Maung Thit thought it would be a good idea to go and have something to eat, and went to No. 8 Gaol. But he couldn't concentrate on what he was eating and when he was finished he didn't feel satisfied.

When the V.I.P.s arrived, there was one V.I. woman with them, and Maung Thit felt sure that they were going to have to listen to her as well. They stood in a line and listened as the first man spoke. Maung Thit wasn't interested in the lecture, and didn't listen to what was being said. His thoughts were outside the gaol. In his imagination he could hear the roar of the Rangoon buses and see them speeding by--those dreadful buses so familiar to all inhabitants of Rangoon.

The official walked slowly up and down as he lectured them, but Maung Thit wasn't remotely interested in what he was saying, and only noticed when the man was in front of him, that he had gold teeth.

'You can lecture as much as you like, but it won't make any difference to me. I am going back to farming, and, if the land is distributed, then I shall get some. But half of these prisoners here will take up dacoity again as soon as they get out. They've made up their minds already. What else is there for them to do? These two fellows standing behind me, for instance; they've got weapons hidden away, and they've even fixed up an appointment to meet a chap who will be released in the next batch. Everyone's made up their minds, so there's no point in going on talking. Most of the others are like me; they'll work honestly providing they can get jobs, but if not, I don't know what they'll do. So don't keep on talking, it is pointless. And please don't let her talk either...just let us out!'

Maung Thit's face barely concealed what he was thinking as he glanced at the V.I. woman. 'What a big, fat woman! And what a big belt she's wearing to keep her *lon-gyi* up!<sup>213</sup> We know what would happen if she didn't...' It took a lot of self-control for Maung Thit to stop himself laughing out loud.

<sup>213</sup> A belt is not part of the usual Burmese dress, although Mi Mi Khaing (*op. cit.*, p. 154) notes that a dancer will wear "a belt with a big ornate buckle, whereas a woman of dignified movements should be able to keep her *lon-gyi* up with only a deft twist--hence the expression *htamein ma-naing pawa ma-naing*: 'no mastery of skirt, no mastery of scarf' as a description of a slovenly woman."

At last the insufferable preaching was over, but they still had to wait for the police car to arrive. Maung Thit swore loudly at everything he could think of, then spat in disgust. He didn't want to ride in the police car, but unfortunately he had to. It was a gaol rule that former dacoits had to be driven by police car to the house where they were going to stay.

Finally the order came for them to leave the gaol. The inside gates weren't opened for them, so they had to stoop down and go out through the little side gate. As they had to wait in line to get out, it was some time before Maung Thit's turn came. When they came to the middle gate, the same thing happened; once again they had to queue up, bend down and climb through the side gate. It seemed to Maung Thit that his turn would never come.

"To hell with them all! If only I could be the only one getting out!"

V

"I'm out...I'm free..."

Maung Thit shook out his *lon-gyi* and tied it again, then stamped his feet to shake off the dust from his sandals. He was really trying to shake off every tiny speck and trace of the gaol.

"Prison...that place where, if they told you to collect muck, then you had to collect muck; where, if they told you to do the flogging, then you had to flog the chap with all your strength, however sorry you felt for him; where, if they told you to take the dead man off the gibbet, you just had to steel yourself to untie the rope, whatever your feelings for the victim... Prison, where you can't do what you want or go where you like, and you're separated from your family and friends. But I'm out of it now...I'm free!"

There was a broad smile on Maung Thit's face. The only other time he had smiled quite like this had been on his wedding day after the guests had finally departed and he and Ma Kāung Hsīn were left alone.

During the time that he had been in prison, Maung Thit had been to the outside gate at the front of the prison three or four times. On one occasion he had been carrying bamboo logs to the outside; another time he had accompanied Bo Htūn Sein and Bo Nyun Maung and some other P.V.O.s<sup>214</sup> when they were being released. On these two occasions he had managed to cross right over the main road in front of the prison, and catch a glimpse of the outside world: trees, houses, buildings, cars--and people moving around freely. He had been so excited at coming into contact with the outside world that his mind couldn't take in all he saw. It was almost like being blinded by a flash of lightning in the dark.

Now that he found himself outside the gaol, however, with the outside world before him, his thoughts turned straight away to his village. He could visualise the dim outlines of the village with the pointed roof<sup>215</sup> of Hsaya-daw Ū Thagara's monastery and the finial of the pagoda built by Ū Hpō Cheit. He could see the rice fields that he usually worked. Then he seemed to see Ma Kāung Hsīn smiling warmly, waiting for him at the prison gate.

Maung Thit, together with Taik Maung and all the others, climbed into the police van, and as it left Maung Thit experienced a strange sort of excitement. He felt as though it were the first time he had ever travelled in a car. As the world opened up before him, everything was fascinating and there was such a lot to look at: tri-shaws,<sup>216</sup> squatters' huts, bazaar stalls, the Chinese women and Chinamen,<sup>217</sup> umbrel-

<sup>214</sup>The People's Volunteer Organisation, which had been formed at the end of the war, went underground in July 1948 and took part in the insurrection.

<sup>215</sup>A *pyā-that* roof has super-imposed gables which are decorated with elaborate carvings and ornaments with a spire on the top.

<sup>216</sup>The English word "side-car" is used: *hsaik-kā*, in which the passenger sits in a seat next to the person pedalling the bicycle.

<sup>217</sup>The phrase *i-kya-kwēi-dwei* (a salty Chinese delicacy) is used here to refer to the Chinese men and women.

las, sandals, rolls of cloth, Indians, pagodas, buildings. They feasted their eyes on everything they saw, and chattered endlessly, until at last they reached the Kok-kaing area<sup>218</sup> of Rangoon by way of the police court

When they reached Dama-yon-wut-kyaung Road, Maung Thit and Taik Maung got off, and went into the little barber's shop at the top of the street so that they could ask the way.

"Whereabouts is Hsaya-gyi Thein Pe's house?"

"Which Thein Pe? Tet Hpōn-gyi?"

"That's right," answered Maung Thit with a smile

"Go up that street there, and turn to the left on the other side. Are you from his party?"

Maung Thit, quite taken aback, didn't know what to say.<sup>19</sup> He glanced at Taik Maung; "No, we're not," said the latter quite casually.

"No, we're not," echoed Maung Thit, and the two of them went up the road without volunteering any further information.

"The way he asked about the party was a bit too much like Section 5 for me," said Maung Thit.

"We've got our gaol release certificates with us, so I don't think we need worry."

"Don't you be too sure, my friend. Section 5 doesn't spare anyone; if they want to haul you off, they'll haul you off."

"If that's so, do you think we should stay at your Hsaya-gyi's house?" Taik Maung stopped dead. "Let's go back," he continued

"Well, don't stay if you don't want to, but it would be rude not to go in at all"

Taik Maung was unsure about what to do, but Maung Thit led him on.

"Come on, we must at least pay his home a visit."

They went on as directed, and found Hsaya-gyi's wife. They sat down very gingerly as though they were being bitten by bugs, and they didn't even put down their Shan bags.

"Put your Shan bags down in that corner. Do you want to go and have a wash? There's the pump," said Hsaya's wife.

Taik Maung didn't know what to say, and Maung Thit was also tongue-tied for a moment

"It's quite alright, ma'am, we shall be going in a moment."

"But aren't you staying here? My husband told me that you were to stay here. There will be a boat for Hpya-pon in about two days' time, and you can leave then. It's all arranged. An uncle of mine will fetch you on the day the boat leaves."

"No, that's too much trouble for you. We won't stay. We'll be off now."

"But why? Do you think we can't manage because the house is so small? Don't worry about that. I've made arrangements for you both to sleep in the quarters at the front of the house."

"No, it's not that, ma'am." Maung Thit thought for a moment. "It's like this ..we made a mistake. If we'd used the map that Hsaya-gyi drew for us to find your

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<sup>218</sup>This is usually spelt "Kokine" in English

<sup>219</sup>Literally: "Maung Thit was too dumbfounded to reply, like a crow caught unexpectedly by a man."

house, it would have been alright. But we stupidly had to go and ask at the barber's shop at the end of the street."

"You had to ask--so what?"

"Now we're faced with Section 5."

"Hmmm."

Maung Thit explained with a brave smile how they were in danger from Section 5. "No, we can't stay here. I'm scared. Section 5 doesn't make exceptions for anybody."

"In that case, where will you stay?"

"It's alright. We have a friend in Holme Road."

Hsaya-gyī's wife couldn't allay their fears in any way. There was no defence against Section 5, because its powers were limitless. They couldn't help being frightened. They reluctantly agreed to wait and go after supper. When they had finished their meal, Maung Thit lifted up Hsaya-gyī's son, Maung Hin-Tha, and said,

"I suggested to Hsaya-gyī that he should have the child brought into gaol some time; I said I would look after him. He would only need his bottle of milk. But Hsaya-gyī said it was impossible. 'Because,' he said, 'prison means the misery of living with people you don't like, and being parted from your loved ones.' He is right, ma'am. And then he said, 'My son can say Mummy now, but I wonder when he will ever learn to say Daddy.'"

When he had finished speaking, Maung Thit fell silent and Hsaya's wife remained silent too. There was nothing more for them to say. They didn't even say good-bye to each other.

Maung Thit and Taik Maung went off through Kok-kāing to Ba-hān and from there they climbed up onto the platform of the Shwei-dagon. The sun had set, and in the pale, cool, evening light, the big golden dome against the evening sky looked like gold on sapphire. Maung Thit and Taik Maung knelt before the Buddha and dutifully recited all the prayers they could remember. They poured all the faith and reverence they possessed into their worshipping. But even while their eyes were fixed on what stood before them, their minds couldn't help returning to the pagoda within the gaol. They had never once been drawn to worship there in humble reverence, for it had not been their wont to contemplate the causes of things.

Apart from the words they were reciting with such reverence and faith, they had nothing else to offer. They didn't have any flowers or candles, and, because of this, all the good and worthy people around might well make critical comments about worshipping empty-handed. But they were not aware that they should be troubled about this. They did they stop to question why it should be that they were too poor to put on any gold leaf, while the Shwei-dagon itself was dripping with gold;<sup>220</sup> nor why it was that they should be so poor that they couldn't offer flowers and candles, when the whole platform was ablaze with lights and a mass of flowers. When they had exhausted all their prayers and finished their worship, they began to rack their brains to try to work out where they would stay that night. Although they had boasted of somewhere to stay in Holme Road, this was not in fact so. Finally, they decided not to try to find anywhere to stay, but to sleep under one of the *tazaungs*<sup>221</sup> on the pagoda platform, using their Shan bags as pillows.

## VI

Travelling was not easy. The Tun-tēi Canal was in the hands of the K.N.D.O.s<sup>222</sup>

<sup>220</sup> Literally: "the Master of the Hair Relics is rich with gold." It is said that there are eight hairs of the head of Gautama Buddha enshrined in the Shwedagon Pagoda, as well as relics of three other Buddhas; the Shwedagon Pagoda is therefore one of the most venerable places of worship for Buddhists.

<sup>221</sup> A *tazaung* is a small building at a pagoda to house an image or shrine; there are many around the platform of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

<sup>222</sup> The Karen National Defense Organisation (K.N.D.O.) was formed in 1948, and soon controlled the Twante Canal which is close to Rangoon.

and in Bo-galēi they were in Communist-held territory. There were no steamers running; the motor launches hardly dared to go out, and certainly did not run daily. There was no regular boat to Hpya-pon. Occasionally, only when well-escorted in convoy would they make a dash for it.

So it was that Maung Thit and Taik Maung slept at the pagoda for the second night, and on the following night they came down to sleep on the boath. Although they had to wait, the waiting was not as frustrating and unendurable as it had been in gaol. It was bearable because one expected delays in times of general unrest, and also because it gave them the opportunity to go off to the zoo and walk around the market. Although they couldn't buy anything, they picked things up and looked at them carefully and sniffed them. They gazed up at the cinemas and theatres, and filled in the time quite pleasantly doing this and that.

Maung Thit loved a good show, and while he had been in prison he had gone again and again to see the plays. Now, finding himself near a theatre, he hovered around it as though he had succumbed to its fascination.<sup>23</sup>

But a play was out of the question because one never knew what might happen on the journey, and he had to carry a little extra money in case he needed it. He wasn't too upset about not being able to see the play, because he realised that it was more important to go back to the village. They wanted to buy a few special odds and ends on their way back to the village, but they had to restrain themselves since they didn't want to break into the return fare. But then it occurred to them that it might be a good idea to have a couple of small sickles. Maung Thit returned to the sickle shop three or four times, and inspected the sickles there.

"Come on, buy one if you want to. I'll sell my hat if we haven't got enough money for the fare. We can spare enough for two sickles." At Taik Maung's insistence, he bought two.

The boat left the following morning, and Maung Thit felt a wave of joy well up inside him as he looked out over the water. These waters seemed to flow into the very flesh and blood of the farmers of lower Burma, such as he was himself, and become part of their inner being. His eyes were drawn inevitably to the banks of the river where the fields seemed to stretch forever into the distance, and his heart followed, enticed by the beauty of the scene. Maung Thit dearly loved this expanse of water, and he longed to be back again in his own little village, which was one and the same as this land and this water. It was not a sad longing but a joyous happy anticipation for he would soon be back home in his own village.

The boat docked in Hpya-pon, but Maung Thit's journey was not yet finished; in fact, the most dangerous part had only just begun. While they stayed with Mā Kaūng Hsin's relatives at Apyaung-yat, they made some careful enquiries about the rest of the journey. It would not be possible to follow the Kyon-kan or Kyon-kaw water courses because of the fighting between the Communists and Government troops; there were some Karen-held villages as well. There was no launch running between Bo-galēi and Hpya-pon: on the basis that discretion was the better part of valour,<sup>24</sup> it remained tied up at the river bank. For these reasons they set off on foot for Kyon-ta and Kyon-tamīn villages and from there they continued their journey by a boat that happened to be going in the right direction. They had to change boats several times before they reached Maye village, and from there they had to continue on foot as far as their own village. Maung Thit felt that their safe arrival in Maye village was due to the blessing of the Shwedagon pagoda where they had prostrated themselves so many times during the two nights they had spent there.

During their journey they came across several villages which had been burnt down, and they asked what had happened. Some explained that the Government had set fire to them, and others contradicted them, blaming it on the Communists. Some said it was the White Flag Communists, and others said it was the Red Flags. Some blamed the Karens, and some said "No, it was the Burmans." Still others said the White

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<sup>223</sup> Literally: "as though he had been hypnotised by a python, and was walking around and around it, unable to tear himself away."

<sup>224</sup> Literally: "since not even Sein Bei-da Gyī dared to strike up his drums." This is an allusion to a famous *hsāing hsaya* (drum-master) of Sein-kadōn, who was a rival of Hpō Sein. It is not clear from the text whether this is a reference to Sein Bei-da Gyī himself, or a boat named after him which did not dare start its engines and go out.

P.V.O. were responsible, others the Government, and so on. But most of the people just said that the villages had been burnt when they were fighting each other, and Maung Thit felt that this was probably correct.

"Of course it's the White Flag Communists, Nga Thit, there's no other explanation."

"No, I don't agree. Mō Kyo and Ū Lwin's group would never have burnt any villages and Red Flag Sō Gyī couldn't possibly have done it on purpose either. So don't argue with me, Taik Maung. The villages were destroyed because they've all been fighting each other."

They were getting near their village now, and would be there in the space of half an hour. They could just see the dim outlines of a cluster of buildings in the distance. As Maung Thit strained his eyes trying to make out what lay ahead, he caught his foot in the cracks in the dry ground and several times he nearly fell headlong. He had stopped counting the number of times he was scratched by the stubble.

As they got nearer, the dim outline of the village grew clearer and Maung Thit began to wonder with a growing sense of bewilderment whether this really was his village after all.

"Where is the turret of Ū Tha-gara's monastery, and where is the finial of the pagoda built by Ū Hpō Cheit? They should be visible from this distance. Are they being hidden by the trees?" He wondered and tried to crane his neck to one side but still he couldn't see anything. He stepped off the side of the road but still he couldn't see them. The monastery and the pagoda were not to be seen and, what was worse, he saw only things he had not wanted to see, trees with branches gone and yellowed leaves. Maung Thit caught a whiff of burning. It was true.

Every house had been reduced to ashes and charcoal. From the middle of the heaps of ashes, charred stumps were left standing up like ghosts to frighten them.

"Where's my house? Where are my brother's bullocks, Brownie and Stripey? And where's my wife, Ma Kaung Hsin? Where are those chaps who are going to distribute land to us? What land am I going to work? And these sickles--what shall I do with them?"

Maung Thit felt like tossing the sickles into the piles of ashes, but he clung on to them just as a man clings to life however hard it has become. Maung Thit and Taik Maung sighed deeply and looked at each other helplessly. The cry from the gaol seemed to ring in their ears: "All's well, Sir."

As they crossed the stretch of burnt ground, they noticed one place which was still standing, untouched by the fire. It was the toddy palm plantation and field hut of Ko Hpō Kye, and it had been this man who had been responsible for hiring them weapons and, in exchange for a share in the profits, had told them the best times to go dacoiting. But he had avoided a prison sentence, and the fire had not touched him. And in his plantation two tall coconut palms were still standing, their fronds beckoning them in the gentle breeze.

"Come on, let's go to Ko Hpō Kye's hut and see if we can pick up any news."

They were very tired, but there was nothing for it but to carry on to Ko Hpō Kye's plantation. As they had approached the village on their way home they had been like a pair of young bullocks, striding quickly and eagerly forward. But now, on their way to Ko Hpō Kye's hut just nearby, their eagerness gone they trailed like puppets whose head and knee strings have been cut. They could almost hear the voice from the gaol saying, "All's well, Sir."

. . . . .

Go home? How could Maung Thit and Taik Maung go back home? Time and again the writer has been troubled by this question. The writer is called "Burma's Number One Communist" by the American State Department, "a Communist to be feared" by the Police Force and High Court of the Union of Burma, and "Brother Peace" by Thahkin Sō Gyī, but by most people simply "Tet Hpōn-gyī."

## HOW COULD THEY CALL HIM A TRAITOR

(1950, *Thwei-thauk Magazine*)

### I

It was the sixth evening of the waning moon of Pya-tho,<sup>25</sup> and I had gone for a walk in the south-western end of Hpya-pon town. In Upper Burma where I come from, the arrival of Pya-tho is heralded by the luxuriant flowering of the fragrant purple *hkwa-nyo* creeper. But here in Hpya-pon there were only marigolds, small chrysanthemums and daisies, particularly over to my right where the huts were surrounded by a mass of bright yellow marigolds. In Upper Burma too, the silvery dew falls and the cool north breeze blows at evening time in the month of Pya-tho, whereas on this particular evening down in Hpya-pon there wasn't a breath of wind nor a trace of dew. In fact, this evening felt just like the hot season.

I looked over towards the south-west, where the sun's red orb was displayed in its full glory above the horizon. In the foreground lay rice fields, deep yellow in colour from the stubble, and in the distance there were several villages on the banks of the Acha River--there was Danōn-chāung village, and Taman-gyī, Tū-myāung, and Kyī-hnapin. I felt a wave of sadness as I looked at these little faraway villages spread out along the horizon which was now flushed with a rose colour.

My thoughts turned especially to Tū-myāung village, for at the time when I was in the Communist Party,<sup>26</sup> this little village had been known far and wide as a "red" village, among both members and followers of the party.

During the Japanese Resistance, this village had been one of the main centres for the resistance fighters. It was also a village in which the peasant movement had made great headway because of the bonds of solidarity uniting the people who were all just tenant-farmers or farm labourers. No landowners ever came into the village any more. All the villagers were members of the Peasant's Union,<sup>27</sup> and a Co-operative Trading Society had been organised for the whole village. Whenever disputes arose, they never got to the court; the villagers accepted the decisions of the union leaders, so disputes were always settled locally. This was why Tū-myāung had the reputation of being a "red" village.

In the past I had made frequent trips to Tū-myāung, so now, as I caught sight of it again, I was filled with nostalgia and felt a strong urge to go there again. I felt like setting off straightaway through the fields of stubble as the village was only about four miles away. But I quickly put the desire right out of my mind. Why? Because Thahkin Thān Htūn's communists had put out a "red" warrant inviting

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<sup>225</sup>The lunar month of Pya-tho occurs in about January. The month is divided into two parts: the waxing moon and the waning moon, and the days are counted accordingly, as in the text: "sixth day of the waning moon of Pya-tho."

<sup>226</sup>Thein Pe Myint left the Burma Communist Party on 26th March, 1948.

<sup>227</sup>The All-Burma Peasants' Organisation, A.B.P.O., was set up by the socialists of the A.F.P.F.L. to organise the "masses" in the countryside while the Trades Union Congress organised the workers in the towns. Tinker notes that both bodies were primarily political, and that both fell under Communist domination in the early post-war years, and that both were subsequently "purged." "The machinery of the ABPO is visible in party offices in market towns all over the country. There is a national party rally on 'Peasants' Day,' 1 January, and an annual conference, usually held in May or June, attended by some 500 delegates. The organisation has its own 'private army,' the Peace Guerrillas, with units in every district. . . . The organisation has a monopoly of patronage in the countryside. The agricultural loans which have been dispensed so liberally since 1948 . . . are awarded by agents under ABPO influence. The land nationalisation organisers and the Land Committees are almost all ABPO men." (Tinker, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-6. N.B. This book was first published in 1957.)

anyone who saw me to kill me on the spot!<sup>28</sup> I was also likely to find myself in trouble from the government side if I put a foot wrong, since they did not approve of my Unity Programme.

Even so, the more difficult it became for me to get to Tū-myāung, the more I wanted to go. It was about four years ago that I had first visited this village, and it was in this same village, at the end of the war, that I first saw poverty. Men who were grimy and sweaty, in their rough cotton *lon-gyis* whose dark brown dye could stand both the rays of the sun and the dirt of the fields; poor women who could never go out to festivals as their only garment was a *htameim*-skirt tied high under their arms; workers who couldn't work as hard as before because they hadn't enough good rice to eat; poor people just scratching a living, toiling all day through the mud with their buffaloes, standing in the water, in the heat of the sun.

But this was also the village in which I first observed the stirrings of political consciousness amongst the masses at the end of the war. On my arrival in the village, a regional peasants' conference had been organised. People from all the villages around had attended, holding aloft the hammer and sickle flag. "Peasants' rights now!" "Convene the Constituent Assembly now!" "We want an interim national government!" They shouted these slogans even louder than we had shouted as children when we sent off our flying lanterns.<sup>29</sup>

During the regional conference, my comrade, Maung Kyaw Mya, sang the communist movement's song, "No more shall people steal through want, the golden age must surely come. . . oh, let not the word 'prostitute' fall on our ears again. . . ." The audience responded by applauding loudly in support. They were welcoming the shining future held out to them in the jingle, "A communist society will make life fair for all to see."

I had campaigned for the principle of the power of the proletariat: that land should be owned only by those who actually worked it, and that the administrative authority in a village should be a people's committee elected by a majority of the villagers. These principles were relevant to the sort of life led by the masses, and reflected accurately the aspirations of the people, and thus were readily comprehended by them.

And in this same village I had enjoyed the love and affection of the villagers; I used to feel it all around me, when chatting or talking things over with them, when walking or travelling by boat with them. As far as looking after me was concerned, since I couldn't be a guest in every house, they all contributed so that I would have good meals. Some sent fish, some sent prawns, others sent wildfowl curry, buffalo milk or bananas. This reminded me of how, in my youth when I accompanied the monk, my teacher to pagoda festivals, the people had had to cast lots by district for the honour of providing us with food.

Why did they entertain me and look after me with such good will? It was because I was the representative of the Communist Party, which gave them the hope of escape from their miserable lives, and of the Peasants' Union which brought them the benefits which come from being organised.

Tū-myāung village was a little communist village; how could I ever forget it? How could I help feeling nostalgic when I saw it in the distance on this Pya-tho evening? The sun's red orb was now disappearing gradually into the darkness beneath the horizon, and a flock of paddy birds flew away across the sky, their wings touched with gold by the setting sun. With an effort, I put Tū-myāung out of my thoughts and looked again at the huts past which I was walking.

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<sup>228</sup>Literally: "If you find Thein Pe, don't hesitate to kill him with your knife." Thakin Than Tun was the leader of the White Flag Communists who had gone underground in March 1948. Dagon Taya gives a slightly different version: "If you find Thein Pe-ism, don't hesitate with your knife" (*Yok-ponn hlwa*, p. 125).

<sup>229</sup>Shway Yoe (*op. cit.*, p. 229) describes these: "A bamboo framework is covered over with the thick coarse home-made paper. At the bottom, across the open mouth of the balloon, is a little platform, on which pitch is heaped, and with torches attached to it. The balloon is then tethered to the ground. The torches and resinous matter are lighted and when the strain on the stays is considered sufficient, they are cut, and the balloon goes off." This is one of the traditional celebrations at Thadīn-gyut at the end of the Buddhist Lent.

One of the huts had a large gourd frame in front of it, brinjals, tomatoes and cauliflowers growing to either side and white flowering Butea trees like a fence around it. On a charpoy underneath the gourd frame sat a man, whittling bamboo. He was dark in complexion with flattish features. In build he was short and stocky, with a broad chest, and below his *lon-gyi*, which was tied short, could be seen his strong calf muscles. He looked about forty.

As soon as I set eyes on this man, I knew I had seen him somewhere before. I drew back a step, and looked again very carefully. Surely I was right. It was Ko Nyun Sein Gyī. I stopped almost directly in front of him.

"Hey, isn't it Ko Nyun Sein?"

He looked up from his whittling in surprise and stared, so I asked again.

"You're Ko Nyun Sein from Tū-myāung village, aren't you?"

As he stared at me his expression changed. He seemed to recognise me but he just wouldn't answer, so I came closer to him, and said,

"What's brought you here?"

He still didn't reply, but he pushed the whittled strips to one side, shifted himself along, and made room for me to sit down. His face was expressionless and he seemed to be afraid to talk to me, so I was rather reluctant to sit down beside him.

"Please tell me, Ko Nyun Sein, how is it that you're here in Hpya-pon? Only just now I was looking over there towards your village, and I felt such a longing to be there."

"Sit down, I'll make some tea," said Ko Nyun Sein abruptly, and stood up. I sat down, and he went into the hut. My eyes followed him as he went inside, and I noticed that all his household belongings were packed up ready to move. Not that he had very much, but why was it all packed up? Had he just moved here? Was he about to go off again soon? Ko Nyun Sein still hadn't told me what had brought him here.

## II

I had come to know Ko Nyun Sein on my very first visit to Tū-myāung. He was secretary of the Peasants' Union, and as such he enjoyed the respect and trust of the whole village. So that he could devote all his time to dealing with such matters as union business, government loans, sale of the village rice crop, and settling disputes among the villagers, the other farmers rallied round and worked his land for him as he was too busy to do it himself, and fed and looked after his bullocks for him. And when it came to local events, he would find himself master of ceremonies at all family occasions, happy or sad. Since he had spent some years in a monastery, he was the best educated person in the village, after the village monk. When the men in the village wanted to write letters to be posted to other villages, and when they wanted to write love-letters to the girls of the village, they asked him to write for them. He was also the master carpenter of Tū-myāung. Many of the villagers could use a saw, a plane and a hammer, but none was as good as he at drawing up the plans for a house, working out the amount of wood needed, and wielding the carpenter's square. All in all, he was a most competent and effective leader however you put him to the test.

The first time I visited the village, I didn't know whether he was married or not. However, I had got to know Mā Hlā Shin, the woman who was his wife, independently. He was about forty years old, whilst Mā Hlā Shin had just turned twenty and, besides having no children, she had a comely girlish air and such carefree gaiety that it never occurred to me to connect her with him. Mā Hlā Shin was an exceptionally busy person who was always preparing for meetings, entertaining guests, and shouting slogans. Just seeing her at work was enough for me to mark her out as the leading girl in the village.

It was not until my next visit to Tū-myāung that I learned that this girl, Mā Hlā Shin, was in fact Ko Nyun Sein's wife.

After five years as a monk, Ko Nyun Sein had left the monastery, but even though he had returned to a lay life, he had not married; he had kept clear of all the com-

plications of a wife and family. Nevertheless, since he was the senior and leader amongst the young unmarried men of the village, he was always being called upon, as the need arose, to act as adviser to the young men and girls. When he turned thirty, his mother, Daw Cho, said, "Now, my son, if I should die, there won't be anyone to look after you," and thus started on a campaign to prepare the ground for suggesting Hlā Shin. Mā Hlā Shin was just in her teens, so young that she had not yet grown her hair long enough to take it up into a top-knot.<sup>230</sup>

"Oh, mother, surely not! She is much too young."

"Really, Nyun Sein, you're so hard to please. When I found you someone the same age, you didn't take her. You said she was too old. Now you say this one is too young. Do you want to stay like this for the rest of your life?"

"No, I don't, mother, but this little Hlā Shin is really too young. People would soon start accusing me of cradle snatching or worse."

"Good heavens, what vile creature would say that? But let them say it if they want to. Our village is not like Hpya-pon with two or three hundred young people. There aren't many of the right age to choose from, don't you understand?"

Ko Nyun Sein fell silent, and stared blankly at the areca palm<sup>231</sup> in front of him, with his mouth open.

"I want to see you married, that's all."

So Ko Nyun Sein thought about the young girl, Mā Hlā Shin, who was young enough to have been his niece, but all the same kept on finding objections that he could advance to his mother. One day, about nine in the morning, as his mother was sitting rolling up cheroots after drinking her tea, he said quite suddenly, without any preamble, "Surely you can't mean it, mother. The girl hasn't even taken up her hair yet."

Daw Cho pursed her lips, her jaw jutted forward, with a most determined expression on her face. "Can't you accept what I say? What does it matter if she hasn't put her hair up yet?"

Ko Nyun Sein fell silent again, and like last time he stared at the areca palm. Daw Cho kept on grumbling at her stupid son who wasn't able to find himself a wife.

Not long afterwards, Ko Nyun Sein happened to see Hlā Shin, when her hair had become just long enough to take up all round. Only then did he realise that Hlā Shin was no longer a child, but was now a young woman with a shapely figure and soft smooth skin. She had looked so much like a child with her short hair that he had not noticed that her breasts were gently rounded. Ko Nyun Sein couldn't help quietly repeating to himself the *tei-dat* song that he had learned in the monastery. "When like a child she sweetly smiles, lisping 'Who is it?' then I want to hold her tight and feel the warmth of that sweet breast."

But there was one further difficulty concerning Hlā Shin. Ko Hpō Tei's son, Kyaw Maung, who lived in the same village, was about the same age as Hlā Shin, and was in love with her. Kyaw Maung was always coming and bothering him, saying, "Uncle Sein, please put in a word for me." However, when he tried to assess what she really felt, he found that he just couldn't make her out. She didn't seem to favour Kyaw Maung, and so Nyun Sein felt sorry for him. Yet, he couldn't explain her real attitude.

"Mother, if I marry Hlā Shin, then Kyaw Maung will think that I'm utterly despicable."

"You silly creature. Can't you get those monkish ideas out of your head! How can you help what he thinks? Despicable, heavens above! He's gone and fallen in love with the girl, but she doesn't love him. It's you that she loves."

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<sup>230</sup> After wearing her hair in the *hsan-yit* style as a child (see Note 114), she was beginning to grow the circular fringe of hair, gradually incorporating it into the top-knot as it became long enough.

<sup>231</sup> The areca palm produces betel nuts.

"Oh no, I don't think so, mother."

Although Nyun Sein pretended indifference, the words "Do you really think so, mother?" were on the tip of his tongue. The desires of a young man that had lain dormant were awakening and thrusting roughly up within him.

Daw Cho hadn't yet had time to reply as she dipped her spoon into the acacia leaf soup and tasted it. Clouds of steam rose up and the smell was both savoury and delicious.

"Who told you that the girl loves me, anyway?"

Daw Cho put the lid back on the pot and dropped the spoon down onto the bench.

"For heaven's sake. I've had a talk to her, so I know. She's in love with you, can't you understand that? In the farm work you could rely on her. Her mother is the best paddy planter, and she takes after her. She's very good at cooking and housework, and she's very nimble and quick. I want to see you married soon, so that there's no need to hire extra people for this year's paddy crop. What do you say to that?"

"As you wish, mother."

So the next time Kyaw Maung came and bothered him, he said, "Go and ask my mother to speak for you. I am really no good at it." With a red face he dodged the question.

So this is how it happened that Ko Nyun Sein and Ma Hla Shin, despite their difference in age, were joined together in marriage. She was a clever mother, wasn't she? The marriage of her son and the young girl was rather like one of her soups, full of flavour and goodness.

### III

Despite the proverb which tells the newly-wed husband that to spare the rod is to spoil the wife<sup>232</sup> and despite the fact it would have been the easiest thing for Ko Nyun Sein to demonstrate his authority, he could never have brought himself to lay a finger on his young wife. And anyhow Ma Hla Shin was not the sort of person to need admonishment by beating, because she could tell from the merest hint<sup>233</sup> enough to anticipate his every wish.

She knew that a wife's duty was to love her husband, blindly; she knew that she must obey her husband without demur or excuses, and that she must not let the words of her mother-in-law fall unheeded.<sup>234</sup> The surprising thing was that from time to time she even quietly put up with Daw Cho tweaking her sharply on the insides of the thigh and saying, "What's the matter with you, girl, why must you be so dumb and stupid?"

But, in saying this about Daw Cho, I don't want you to think that she was a cruel woman who ill-treated her daughter-in-law. Although it was true that she sometimes tweaked her thigh muscle to punish her, most of the time she was very affectionate. She used to comb her head for lice and oil her hair for her. And at festivals she used to let Ma Hla Shin wear the Mandalay silk *lon-gyi* which she had bought in better times. So, although most people think of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law as being always at loggerheads, in fact Daw Cho and Ma Hla Shin really got on famously together.<sup>235</sup>

<sup>232</sup>Literally: "Take a wife, the cat must die," meaning "The husband kills the cat to show his wife his mettle" (Hla Pe, *op. cit.*, p. 49).

<sup>233</sup>Literally: "nod of the royal head."

<sup>234</sup>A wife has five duties towards her husband: to do the housework, to save his earnings, to be faithful, to look after his relatives, and not to be slothful. *Dictionary of Established Sets of Forms* by Ashin Obhāsabhivaṃsa contains many canons such as these.

<sup>235</sup>Literally: "Although usually regarded as *tau-k-te* lizard and nicotine, in fact they were like fish paste and vegetables." The first pair mentioned are incom-

Mā Hlā Shin had grown up hearing proverbs and sayings which told her that "Even a male dog is nobler than a woman."<sup>236</sup> Nyun Sein, also, had frequently heard the saying "A woman is as devious as a river."<sup>237</sup> But neither of them found themselves in the least inhibited by these teachings. Hlā Shin knew that she was strong enough to work ten acres, just like a man. And this belief sustained her when her mother-in-law was unkindly tweaking her leg. Nyun Sein, basing himself on the principle that it wasn't the Buddha himself who had said, "Women are as devious as a river," had complete faith in Hlā Shin's integrity and could see no reason to doubt his trust in her.

At the time they were first married, Hlā Shin didn't know a single prayer, and could only kneel down and say falteringly, "Forgive us...forgive us."<sup>238</sup> So a thought occurred to Nyun Sein one night, "Perhaps this is why people say that the blessing of Buddhahood is granted only to men. Women don't know how to pray for enlightenment. What a shame. Poor little Hlā Shin." Because of this, Nyun Sein found it very hard to get to sleep that night. He was thinking out ways in which he could help Hlā Shin. The very next evening he began teaching her prayers, and was delighted to see how easily she picked them up. He taught her every evening when they went to bed, and she soon knew by heart the rules of blessedness and the plea for protection<sup>239</sup> as well as the prayers. Her quick grasp thrilled him, and so he decided to teach her to read and write. As soon as she had finished the spelling primers and had learned how to spell names, she wrote "Ū Nyun Sein and Mā Hlā Shin" into all the books in the house. This gave Ko Nyun Sein the same thrill of excitement that he had felt on their first wedding night.

From the time when Mā Hlā Shin first learned to read up until the time of my second visit to Tū-myāung when I got to know them as man and wife, Mā Hlā Shin's progress was almost unbelievable. By this time, Mā Hlā Shin used to read the journal called "Thunderer"<sup>240</sup> aloud to her husband as he lay with his head on his arm, taking his mid-day rest. She had already read all about Soviet women. She was the secretary of the Women's Congress,<sup>241</sup> and she had an exercise book in which she used to write down the names of members, minutes from the meetings, Congress expenses, the women's song, the union and party songs, all jumbled up together. Finally, Hlā Shin asked Nyun Sein's permission to attend a communist training course for the district, and with his full approval she did so.

At this point, they were a perfect match in every way. One was secretary of the Peasants' Union, and the other was secretary of the Women's Congress, so when it came to chanting slogans, they could join in together most harmoniously. When there were disputes in the village between the tenant farmers and their labourers or rice planters, the husband and wife shared the same views in trying to solve these problems fairly. Ko Nyun Sein was able to see that things were fair from the point of

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patible: a little of the nicotine scrapings from the stem of a pipe may be used to disengage a clinging *tau-k-tē* lizard or a leech. *Ngapī* fish sauce, on the other hand, is an essential condiment in Burmese food.

<sup>236</sup>This saying which is taken from a *ni-tī* (book of worldly wisdom) reflects Hindu rather than Buddhist thinking; many *ni-tī* were translated from Pali and Sanskrit into Burmese in the nineteenth century. Sayings such as this are well-known in Burma since the *ni-tī* are read in schools and older people often quote sections of the *ni-tī* when giving advice to the young.

<sup>237</sup>In one of the Jataka stories, it is stated that all rivers are crooked, all women are crooked and all mountain ranges are crooked.

<sup>238</sup>This is a reference to the *Āw-ga-thā*, a translation of which may be found in Nash, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>239</sup>A translation of the *Min-gala-thok* (the rules of blessedness) may be found in Shway Yoe, *op. cit.*, p. 574. The *pareik-kyī* (plea for protection) is a text taken from a Pali *paritta* (meaning "protection"), probably the Sutta Nipāta, which is recited on special occasions to ward off illness and danger. See Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Vol. II, p. 157.

<sup>240</sup>Literally: "The Power of the People Journal," which, according to Trager (*op. cit.*, p. 77) was referred to as "The Thunderer" in English. This was a journal of the Communist Party.

<sup>241</sup>The English word "congress" has been used here: *kun-garet*.

view of the tenant farmer, and Mạ Hlạ Shin likewise from the point of view of the planters.

There is a wise saying, "On an older wife you can rely, but a younger one to help you try";<sup>242</sup> in accordance with this Ko Nyun Sein humoured Mạ Hlạ Shin in everything. He took pride in her comely strong appearance, and the lively charming way she behaved, her intelligence, and all her various skills. As for Mạ Hlạ Shin, Ko Nyun Sein was her teacher who had taught her everything; her leader who had instilled truth and goodness into her and the villagers; her lord and master on whom she depended for protection and whom she loved dearly; and as such she had loved him, admired him and relied on him from the time she was in her teens.

#### IV

Daylight was fading as Ko Nyun Sein came outside with a betel box in his hands, after lighting the fire and preparing the tea things. He sat down beside me on the charpoy and began cutting the betel nuts. He seemed to want to explain what had happened, but not to know where to begin. I couldn't control my feeling of impatience, so, while the shears crunched on the betel nuts, I repeated my question.

"Come on, Nyun Sein, please tell me now. What has brought you here?"

But he sidestepped my question and asked in his turn, "When did you reach Npyapon?"

"Two or three days ago."

"Why did you come?"

"I just came to visit my wife's family."

"What are you doing now? You've been in gaol too, haven't you?"

"Yes, I was, but now I'm working for Peace."<sup>243</sup>

"I'm for peace and quiet too. I work peacefully at growing vegetables and selling them, and rowing my sampan." He said this in rather a petulant tone of voice.

"So that's all you're doing, is it? Well, my Peace isn't quite like that."

He stopped cutting betel nuts as he said, "What's yours like then?" He seemed to be afraid.

"My idea of Peace is that we should stop trying to wipe each other out, and that the communists, P.V.O.s, socialists and other patriotic people should come together in unity and peace."

He picked up his shears again and went on cutting before he said, "You're not from any side, are you?"

"Didn't you hear that I had left the party?"

"Yes, I'd heard that. But it's like this...at the present time, the mass of poor folk are very wary, and we're frightened of all sides, so much so that, to tell the truth, I dare not speak even to you, my friend."

"I've no doubt that's so, Ko Nyun Sein. The other insurgent parties don't approve of my Peace and Unity Programme. They call it a policy of opportunism. The government doesn't like it either. So I'm in a cleft stick. This is why I can't go to your village, even though I want to go and find out what is happening. So when I found you by chance just now, I was very happy indeed."

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<sup>242</sup>"Kyī-hmi nge-chi" is a piece of rhymed advice which is often given to men contemplating marriage: if she is old, let her be rich enough for you to be supported by her; but if she is young, then let her be young enough to be supported in your arms.

<sup>243</sup>Since Thein Pe Myint's programme for peace and unity was not in favour with the government, he eventually formed his own party, the People's Unity Party, in 1952.

Ko Nyun Sein put down the betel box and stood up. "Wait a moment," he said, and he went into the hut to make the tea. I got up from the charpoy and walked around to the back of the hut. The little watercourse behind the hut was a tributary of the Apyaung River, and, as it was high tide, it was full of water. There floating in the stream was a sampan which looked as though it belonged to Ko Nyun Sein. In the bows were two Pegu jars and some bundles of firewood, and I couldn't help feeling that there must be some connection between these and the luggage that was all packed up inside the hut. Where was this man off to?

When I came back and sat down on the charpoy again, Ko Nyun Sein said, "Is what you are saying possible?"

"What was that?"

"For all the communists, socialists and P.V.O.s to be united." Ko Nyun Sein poured out the tea.

"It's like this...whether it's possible or not is what we must consider as the second stage, not the first. The first thing we must work out is whether it would be advantageous or not. Our first consideration must be whether or not unity is the best thing for the masses."

I took the cup of tea which he was holding out to me.

"Do we really need unity now? Only if we have unity can we live in peace. If we look at it objectively, it is just one another that we are killing at present. Take our village and Taman-gyī village; ours is communist, and theirs is socialist, and we are killing each other, even though there are only peasants in both villages. The present Socialist leader, Bo Thēin Hpei, is a farm labourer from Taman-gyī village, and we both went to the same school. In Kyī-hnapin to the west of our village, half are communists and half socialists, to the extent that here people of the same village are killing each other."

"Civil war in a village, one might say. That's what comes from civil war in a country."

As Ko Nyun Sein gulped down the hot tea, he seemed to be giving the matter deep thought. I too poured my tea into the saucer and drank it down while the steam was still rising from it.

"There are some born of the same mother who are on different sides and are now killing each other. Sometimes it is uncle fighting against nephew. As for me..." Ko Nyun Sein's voice dropped as he spoke.

I had got the saucer of tea as far as my lips and was so startled that I put it aside, saying, "And what happened with you, Ko Nyun Sein?"

He seemed to find it too much to answer at once, so he paused and cleared his throat. "For me, it meant a complete split between my wife and me, one to each side. I don't want to talk about it, Chief Comrade."

I put down the cup of tea that I had been holding. I had been lounging back, but now I sat up straight on the edge of the charpoy.

"Oh, did it finally come to that? I was just going to ask you where Ma Hla Shin was, but we hadn't reached that point. Do tell me what happened. Did she join the Red Flags? Did you become a Socialist? Or what? Please tell me."

"No, that wasn't what happened. She is in the Communist Party. I don't belong to any party now. They called me an opportunist and said that I was uncommitted, then they threw me out of the Union, and expelled me from the Party. It was dreadful, and I just don't want to talk about it. I've only said as much as this because it's you I'm talking to, Chief Comrade."

[The villagers of Tū-myāung used to call me "Chief Comrade,"<sup>244</sup> and even the Tū-myāung monk, although he used to address me as "Respected Layman" in letters,

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<sup>244</sup> *yē-baw-gyī* means "Chief Comrade"; the term *yē-baw* was applied to members of the P.V.O. The term *daga-gyī* is used of a layman who has donated money for religious purposes (e.g., *kyāung-daga* is one who has built a monastery; *hpayā-daga*, one who has built a pagoda), and it is therefore a term of respect.

usually called me "Chief Comrade" when we talked. When we had begun talking, Ko Nyun Sein sometimes called me "you," and sometimes addressed me baldly without any title at all. But a moment ago, and now again, he had used "Chief Comrade." It was a way of addressing me which drew the two of us together.]

"Tell me, Comrade Nyun Sein, please explain. Tell me all about it. I am asking because I want to compare my ideas with your practical experience. As you know, we communists should derive our doctrine from the practical experience of the people, isn't that so? Come, start at the beginning and tell me everything, Comrade Nyun Sein."

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"Well, you see, since the split with my wife and with the party both happened at the same time, I'll have to tell you everything all at once. As you know, Hla Shin wasn't stupid by any means. You could say that she was pretty competent as far as political ideology was concerned as she not only read "The Thunderer" regularly but had also attended a communist training course. I had encouraged her to do this. Up to this time, she had never ventured to bandy arguments with me. But now she began to argue with me about politics. I was pleased because, as I saw it, controversy and argument are constructive, and criticism is an activity which our party encourages. So we were not merely husband and wife; we had become real comrades. I was very happy indeed about all this. I don't hold with those sayings that women are inferior to men. I believe that it is character that counts, whether in men or women.

"When the party first went underground, we ordinary folk didn't understand at all what was happening or why. But in Hpya-pon, all the communists were arrested. The police came and searched the party office. We heard that they even arrested old women like Daw Chit from the Firewood Workers' Union. We heard a rumour that the police were going to attack our village. There was the policy of liquidating our enemies but as far as we were concerned there were no plans at all for armed rebellion, although the party leaders may have had a plan. Up to the time the party went underground, we ourselves hadn't been issued with any directives at all. And so to us the arrest of the communists and the police threat to take over our village appeared quite unjust. When the Hpya-pon communists who had escaped from the police came to our village, they said that they would have to go underground since they were being pursued, and that they would resist arrest by force. And we supported them because we thought it was right."

"But before the arrests, didn't you hear the government's call for cooperation, their offer of a truce?"

"No. After going underground, it wasn't long before a difference of opinion developed between the party leaders from the town and me. They had confiscated the weapons which the villagers had been holding for their own defence, and they had organised a separate armed force. My view was that they should not take away the arms which the villagers needed for self-defence; the important thing was to ensure that the village's arms weren't just in the hands of the headman and his group, but that they were available to all. Having ensured this, then when you win the people over onto your side, there you are! But the party members from the town wouldn't agree to this.

"In Byū-sahkān and Thabyei-gan, the party confiscated all the weapons which the villagers had to defend themselves, and then they were attacked by dacoits. I was furious, and told them that it was just as though the party had tied the people up and handed them over to the dacoits. Then I was accused of anti-party propaganda by the party members from the town. In the village, Kyaw Maung's group of young people, and even my wife too, supported the charge, and I had the greatest difficulty in explaining to them that what I had said was not anti-party propaganda.

"At this time there was an uprising among the White P.V.O.s, and also the Karens. The government was being pressed hard on all sides, and the communists had become much more powerful. Even though the area all round Hpya-pon was under government control, up to Hmaw-bi and Auk-kwin-gyi was all in party hands.

"As you know, life wasn't easy for us, and we hoped that there might be some sort of a change. I wouldn't say exactly that we wanted a change of regime, but it was just that a change would surely have been for the better and so when the village first came under communist control, we supported them eagerly.

"The Hpya-pon communists hadn't been in our village very long before a chap from Dēi-dayē called Bo Yē Naing arrived in the village. He can't have been more than about twenty-five, a fine figure of a man. Some time before there had been a warrant out for his arrest as leader of a raid on rice supplies. He had fled to Rangoon to join the Red Guard,<sup>245</sup> and completed their training course, after which he was sent by headquarters to be our military leader. No sooner did he arrive than he started giving us Red Guard training and exercises.

"He also formed a Women's Corps in which he drilled the women in the use of weapons. As soon as it was announced that a Women's Corps was to be organised, Hla Shin was the first to apply, of course. She hadn't had a child--I don't know if this was my fault or hers. Anyhow she was quite free, without any ties, and the army was just the thing for her.

"Her mentor, Bo Yē Naing, suggested that she wear trousers, boots and army jackets, saying that uniform would suit her figure very well. You've seen her, haven't you...she was so strong and full of energy that you would have taken her for a real soldier. As soon as she had enlisted, Bo Yē Naing appointed her as his assistant in charge of the recruitment of women soldiers. This job of organising went on day and night, so much so that she seldom came home. But I let her do what she wanted and didn't say anything.

"There was one thing I didn't like, however, and that was the way they all flashed their weapons around, particularly at public meetings when proposing resolutions or making objections. Before I spoke to anyone else about this, I mentioned it to Hla Shin to see her reaction, but she replied without any hesitation: 'U Nyun Sein, this is a time of revolution. We cannot lay down our arms.'

"I wasn't very happy about her reply, but I didn't know how to explain it to her. And then I think she must have gone and told Bo Yē Naing, because he sent for me and told me not to interfere in military matters when I knew nothing about war. I listened in silence to what he had to say, but came away uneasy about it. It worried me that we had reached a point where they had to thrust revolvers into their belts and carry weapons everywhere in order to demonstrate their authority over the masses.<sup>246</sup> For example, they might be electing a Peoples' Committee at a meeting of the villagers. If an armed Communist party official got up and proposed that so-and-so should be elected, no one dared to disagree. And this is how it used to be at all the Peoples' Committee elections.

"I was also most upset about the fact that it was my own wife who had gone and spoken to Bo Yē Naing. I am really ashamed to tell you this sort of thing, but I can see Hla Shin's point of view: I may have been her husband, but that chap was her commander, and it was important for her not to neglect her duty to her superiors. So I tried not to be too cross with her.

"After a while the party directive came and we found ourselves involved in the policy of liquidating our enemies. And when I say liquidation, I mean total liquidation. In the case of the big landowners, no one in the villages objected to them being liquidated. Our policy was to expropriate all land held in excess of twenty acres, and we took over anything in excess of that. In our village, we were all working at least twenty-four acres, so they arranged to take at least four acres from all of us. Next, people were only allowed to own two bullocks, so that if anyone owned ten, eight were confiscated. There weren't any landowners amongst our number, but there were bullock-owners who earned a living hiring out their extra bullocks.

"As far as debts were concerned, both the sum owed as well as the interest on it were cancelled. Money owed for the hire of bullocks was cancelled. Labourers were told they needn't pay back loans to the tenant-farmers. Debts to shops in the village were also cancelled. This meant that no one was willing to give credit any more, so we were hit very hard.

"Further difficulties arose because there was a ban on selling our paddy in enemy territory. Yet we had to sell our paddy if we wanted to be able to buy such

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<sup>245</sup>This is a literal translation of the phrase *tat-ni* and of course has no connection with the Chinese Red Guards of 1966-7.

<sup>246</sup>The Pali word *a-na* (power, dominion) and the English *pa-wa* (power) have been used here.

things as oil, salt, onions, fish paste, matches and cloth. At a time when rice was fetching a good price, we were unable to sell, and our market price dropped because of the ban. How could the rice farmers possibly be happy about this? This is why I just didn't see how I could support this programme of liquidation.

"Although I couldn't analyse the whys and wherefores, I dared to tell them that I didn't approve, and I did so quite openly. The party leaders called me an opportunist and claimed that I wasn't committed. They even said I was a deviationist.

"My wife went along with everything they said. She wasn't to be found at home very often, and when we did meet, the encounter wasn't particularly pleasant. We would spend our time arguing, then something would crop up and she would be off again. Hla Shin really had changed a lot by now, you see. When she came home she was always wearing trousers, with a revolver thrust into her belt. I had to beg her not to wear her trousers when she went to bed. She slept with her revolver under her pillow. It seemed to me that things could hardly have been worse. I hesitate to think what my mother would have said to her if she'd been alive. My mother has been dead for a long time, didn't you know?

"One day there was a meeting in connection with my objections to their policy of liquidation. They attacked me with words like ideology and directive and called me an opportunist and a deviationist. I only spoke briefly. I told them that this present policy of theirs was making them enemies; that it was making many enemies at a time when it would have been better to have more friends and fewer enemies; and that what they were doing might in the short term serve the interests of the peasant proletariat but that now we had a struggle in which it was all peasants on one side while the other classes were all on the other.

"So they replied that the Communist Party was the party of the proletariat, and that the present policy of liquidation was genuinely in the interests of the proletariat--the party of the 'have nots.' In my anger, I said that this was not a policy for the 'have nots,' but a policy which would reduce them to having nothing.

"Then they took a vote, sacked me from my job as union secretary, and expelled me from the party. When the vote was taken, my wife, Hla Shin, voted for my expulsion. Oh, Hla Shin, Hla Shin, how strong-willed she was! I must say that she had the courage to stick by her principles, however much it hurt.

"And there was one more thing. I said that we all ought to join together to attack Karens like U Pyu from Kat-thahmyin. You don't know U Pyu, do you? He's the well known K.N.U. leader from over near Hpya-pon and Bo-galēi, and he owns more than a thousand acres. I even said that we should include P.V.O.s and socialists like Bo Thein Hpei in our joint attack. Then they said that I was a follower of the traitor Tet Hpōn-gyī Thein Pe's policy, and that I too would have to be eliminated.

"I tried to go on living quietly in the village, but it became impossible. I was accused of being a traitor and a government spy. These accusations became more numerous as the days went by, and it was getting increasingly dangerous.

"By the way, Hla Shin and Bo Yē Maing were the subject of rumours again, what with one thing and another. From the gossip of the party members I gathered that Bo Yē Naing had bought Hla Shin a wristwatch and a fountain pen. I suppose that it was like this. Bo Yē Naing laid it down that officials concerned with fighting had to have a revolver, a watch and a pen. So I don't think it was true that he bought them especially for Hla Shin. But people talk, don't they. And, whether it's true or not, how could I help feeling upset about the fact that the two of them were never apart? They were always together, coming, going, eating together, not to mention working together! But then, they were an army officer and his assistant, weren't they.

"So one day, I spoke to Hla Shin about the way she and Bo Yē Naing were always together, and do you know what she said? She said, 'Ko Nyun Sein, you're not only a traitor to the party cause, you are also causing dissension amongst party members. What is wrong with party comrades doing things together? I don't think it will be possible for us to continue to live together any longer.'

"I hesitate to think what would have happened if my mother had still been alive, but I'm sure she would have cursed her roundly. But she wouldn't have been able to tweak her inside the leg since the girl now carried a revolver.

"Even at this stage, I still tried to plead with her. 'Don't say that, Hlā Shin. I don't want us to separate.' I believed that an older person should be tolerant of a younger one. I felt that she was being misled since she wasn't arrogant like this underneath, so I didn't want to break the bond of love between us. And I still loved her, since she was my wife who had learned so much under my guidance. It was for all these reasons that I pleaded with her. In fact, when she told me that we couldn't live together any more, my heart felt as though it had been slashed with a razor. This was when I started to feel that I wanted to run away as far as possible.

"The majority of the villagers secretly agreed with my views as far as the policy of liquidation was concerned. But, since none of us knew what we should do about it, we suffered in silence, as usual. As the days wore on, I became increasingly unhappy. Living in Tū-myāung, I began to feel like an old paddy bird living by the side of a pond whose water had dried up.<sup>248</sup> The rumours about Hlā Shin and Bo Yē Naing grew worse every day. Then, one day, I heard that the two of them had been seen in uniform in the evening twilight out walking arm in arm. Whether it was true or not, I was deeply ashamed. So I sorted out my belongings and loaded them into my sampan, and, with the secret help of the villagers, I was able to slip away. Now, I've changed my name to Maung San Yā, and I've buried my past and started anew here. My name is Maung San Yā, do you understand? So please don't call me Nyūn Sein any more, Chief Comrade."

## VI

"Alright, Ko San Yā, as you wish. Who's in charge of your village now?"

"It's in government hands now. Socialist Bo Thēin Hpei took it over and then addressed everyone in public. He said that their policy and the Communists' policy was not so very different. In principle their aims were similar as far as distribution of land and cancellation of debts were concerned. He said that where they differed was that the Communists had a policy of liquidating their enemies, and this the Socialists could not endorse. I heard that there was loud applause at this."

"How does he run the place? Has he appointed a headman?"

"No, a Village People's Committee has been elected."

"Just like the communists, then?"

"Practically the same, except that now there are socialists on the committee."

"I see. So civil war in the village hasn't finished yet!"

The tea was finished, and our tongues were dry, but there was still so much more to tell. Ko Nyūn Sein bared his teeth as he rolled the quid of betel round in his mouth.<sup>249</sup>

"Do you mind if I go on asking you questions? Where is Mā Hlā Shin now? Did she marry Bo Yē Naing?"

After Ko Nyūn Sein had scraped the lime off his finger by drawing it between his teeth, he replied.

"I haven't heard that they're married. But I heard that at one meeting Bo Yē Naing said that heroines who were as strong and courageous as Hlā Shin were few and far between. He also said that she had even left her husband who she felt had betrayed the party, and that, for that reason, everyone should praise her. Since this is tantamount to saying that there's been a divorce, I should think they'll probably marry soon."

<sup>248</sup>Cf. "A paddybird watching a water outlet," a proverb which indicates a Mr. Micawber (Hla Pe, *op. cit.*, p. 78).

<sup>249</sup>Shway Yoe (*op. cit.*, p. 71) describes how the quid of betel is made. "The Burman splits his nut in half, smears a little slaked lime . . . on the betel leaf, puts in a morsel of cutch and tobacco, and then rolls it up and stows away the quid in the side of his mouth, occasionally *squeezing* it a little between his teeth." ("Chewing" betel is a misnomer, but English does not have a better word.)

He stopped for a moment as if too pained to continue, and chewed his betel.

"So that's how it happened. Haven't you heard where they are now?"

Ko Nyun Sein went on chewing his betel and didn't answer. I made myself a quid of betel. Then he spat out a stream of betel juice and said,

"I am just about to go and look for her. I'm leaving early tomorrow."

"So that explains it." I stared straight ahead, at a loss for words.

"Yes, I understand that the Communist rebels are being squeezed between the government side and the Karen rebels. Things are not going to be easy for our comrades. I am going to keep looking for poor little Hlā Shin till I find her, so that I can get her out of danger."

"Yes, I'm sure you want to, but if she still thinks of you as a traitor in accordance with party policy, won't that make things difficult for you? And if she's married to Bo Yē Naing now, won't that be even worse?"

"Whatever happens, my duty is to save her from the danger she is in. After that, she can do as she likes. If she's married to Bo Yē Naing, let them go on living together when the danger is passed. But I know she is intelligent, and I think she will see her mistake and come back to me. That's what I hope anyway. It's time they realised that all this trouble has befallen them because they insist on this policy of wiping out their enemies."

"Let's hope so. Now, to finish the story, Ko Nyun Sein--I'm sorry, I mean Ko San Ya. That's why your sampan is all ready and packed, isn't it?"

"Yes, I am quite ready to go. I go wherever I like in my sampan, and when I stop, it becomes my home."

Darkness had fallen around us and it was about eight o'clock. I heard a cock crowing.

"Well, I must be going," I said, getting up from the charpoy. "It's late, and you're leaving early tomorrow morning on your trip."

"Wait a minute. You must be careful walking round Hpya-pon at night. I'll light a candle in a tin for you."

"I thought I'd be back before dark, otherwise I'd have brought a torch."

"In Hpya-pon the local people don't need to carry torches."

Ko Nyun Sein, now called Ko San Ya, lit the candle for me and we said good-bye.

"I hope all goes well when you meet Hlā Shin."

"I hope your Peace and Unity campaign will be successful. Surely one day it will."

"I'm off then, Ko San Ya."

"Good-bye then. Oh, Comrade, take the matches in case the candle goes out."

"As I walked along, I thought about my conversation with the former leader Nyun Sein from the former "red" village. I thought about the tea he'd made and the betel we'd chewed, and the affection he'd shown me by his behaviour. I felt the sort of warmth that one feels in Upper Burma by the fire on a cool Pya-tho evening. I held the tin with the candle, and walked steadily on. All I seemed to be able to picture in my mind was poor Ko Nyun Sein like Orpheus searching for his Eurydice;<sup>50</sup> Ko Nyun Sein plying his sampan up and down stream after stream, looking everywhere for his little Hlā Shin whom he married when she'd just taken her hair up.

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<sup>250</sup> A phrase from the first line of a very moving song by the poet U Kyaw (1839-89) has been quoted here. The full title is "Son-nan-tha-hmaing sha-bon-daw-gyi," and the song is sung by a husband who is searching for his wife.

However, I returned to Rangoon, and hadn't been back two days before I read in a newspaper the item which follows:

"Latest News.

On 12th January, government troops, led by Sahkân-gyî landowner Ū Hpō Byaw, arrested Maung Nyun Sein between Sahkân-gyî and Gēi-gū on the Kyon-dan River. Maung Nyun Sein, alias Maung San Yā, is a Communist leader from Tū-myāung who was wanted by the Hpyapon district police. When caught he was travelling in a sampan loaded with all his belongings. It is understood that the relevant authorities are instituting proceedings against him under the Treasonable Offences Act."

"Did you hear that? How could they call *him* a traitor."

A PLACE IN THE THIRD CLASS  
(1951, *Thwei-thauk Magazine*)

I

Rangoon.  
5th day of the waxing  
moon of Thadīn-gyut.<sup>251</sup>

My dearly loved son,

I feel myself honoured to be writing to you now that you are a novice monk.<sup>252</sup>

I arrived in Rangoon safely together with all the other people who escaped from the village. We didn't run into any fighting on the way. In fact, we saw the two sides standing quite peacefully only a stone's throw from each other--the rebels collecting "donations" at their road block, and the government side collecting a toll at their road block. Since we weren't traders and weren't carrying anything with us to sell, we didn't have to pay a toll; but the government officials took for their wives all the *thanat-hkā* sticks which we had brought to give as presents in Rangoon, and we had to give half of our white jaggery<sup>253</sup> to the P.V.O. toll collectors so that they could have it with their tea.

It's a good thing that you didn't come with me. I must say that it was a much better idea of mine to make you a novice and entrust you to the care of Ū Pyin-nyāw. It would have been hard for you to become a novice in Rangoon, because there aren't many monasteries which are willing to accept children of humble parents like your father. Even if we had found a monastery which would take you, there would be the problem of getting offerings of rice. It isn't easy to get rice offerings in the village as the villagers are forced to keep supplying the insurgents with their daily food; it is even more difficult here in the town for the people to give as everything is so expensive in the bazaar. It has been hard enough for me to find myself somewhere to live on my own, but if you left the monastery and joined me here, it would be almost impossible to find something for the two of us.

Now, this room that I stay in can't be more than about twelve feet by twenty-five, and in it live two Chinese families, Paw Chāw and Paw Sāw together with their wives and children, as well as Ko Kywe and his two children, and Mā Hsīn and her child. So when your Dad--sorry, I mean "your father"--has to try and find himself a space in the middle of all this, it's worse than it used to be riding on the mud-guard<sup>254</sup> of Ko Chit Po's bus when it was packed with people and produce. There isn't even room to fit in a bedstead for me, so I just have to sleep on the concrete floor. It's not too bad though, because I have spread out a nice thick pile of empty gunny bags, and the cold season has only just begun, so I am still warm enough without any blankets. And when the hot weather comes, I can sleep on the small charpoy in the street in front of the house.

Rangoon is a big city, and it has plenty of large houses and big buildings, but these things are not for people like your father. Take washing, for instance. I have to wash at the stand-pipe by the side of the road; and it's not only the men

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<sup>251</sup>These letters cover a period of three months: Thadīn-gyut (about October), Tazaung-mōn (about November) and Nadaw (about December).

<sup>252</sup>Literally: "Loved son, little novice monk." Because his son is a novice monk, the father uses an elevated form of the word father when referring to himself, *hkamī-daw*; for the same reason he uses the word *shauk-htā* (speak to, as to a superior), thus abasing himself in order to honour his son's yellow robe. The father tries to remember to address his son in this way, but occasionally forgets.

<sup>253</sup>This is a form of sugar made from the sap of the palmyra palm.

<sup>254</sup>The English word *mat-gat* (mudguard) is used here.

who have to do this, the young ladies also have to bathe in the street. When I still lived in the village, and I heard about the stand-pipes in the towns I was amazed, just as I had been when I read that bit about the long tunnel in the Mahaw-thada Jataka.<sup>255</sup> But when I actually tried washing like this, I found it was not nearly as pleasurable as bathing in the village where we used to swim and pour water and jump up and down in the pond. At the stand-pipes in the town, you have to wait ages for your turn, and when it comes you daren't take your time and have a really good long wash or else the next chap in the queue will be giving you dirty looks.

That is why I said that it's just as well you didn't join me here. It's not that a father and son like living apart, but there are many advantages for you, my son. You are well and happy and you have the opportunity to learn. Do you recite your lessons regularly? What about Û Pyin-nyāw? Is he taking you through the texts carefully? I expect you've finished the whole Compendium of Philosophy by now.<sup>256</sup> Study hard, won't you, my son. Are you keeping well?<sup>257</sup> Now remember, you can play when it's play-time, but don't play that game of spinning the palm fruit on your wrist, and please don't play "he" in the big tamarind tree or that game where you swing from its branches and kick one another. Remember, when Û A-thahpa was a novice, he fell out of a tree and broke his arm. Listen to what Û Pyin-nyāw tells you, and don't let it go in one ear and out the other.<sup>258</sup> When it's your turn to watch the rice drying on the bamboo mats, spend the time usefully. You could always recite your lessons while you are doing it. And remember not to fidget when you are being offered food. A novice should behave with proper dignityn. Then people will respect you, and then you will be offered good rice and good curry.

None of the villagers who have come to Rangoon are properly established yet. Most of them are only just managing from day to day, and some of them are even short of food. That is why I don't want to have to depend on anyone elsen. I don't want to have to ask for help. I'll find a way to manage somehow. As soon as I arrived, your Uncle Tha Hla asked me if I wanted to work in a goldsmith's forge, but I told him that I had had enough of working as a goldsmith. When your mother was alive, I was happy enough doing that, and I took pride in my skill and training as a goldsmith. But now things are different. I know I am only just over forty, but I feel like an old tree which can't bear any more fruit or blossoms. You could say that I'm like a dancer who is exhausted from having danced and sung so many times. I want to get right away from the goldsmith's trade. I think it's too hard on the eyes, and I don't think my eyes can stand the strain any more.

This is why I'm considering another sort of job. The best thing I can think of is selling *mōn-hīn-gā*.<sup>259</sup> I made some enquiries, and I was told that an ordinary third-class *mōn-hīn-gā* seller should have between five and ten kyats left over on an average day's trading. If I should have the good fortune to go on and become a second or even first-class seller, I would then be able to bring you to Rangoon and have you educated here. But I was also told that it's not easy to get established because there are so many ordinary third-class sellers. To get oneself a pitch as a third-class seller is rather like trying to negotiate the first slope of a mountain, and many fall without ever doing even this. Whatever happens I shall do my best to conquer that first slope. I can think about reaching the summit later. Don't they

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<sup>255</sup>It is told in Jataka No. 546 how "Mahosadha started to dig a tunnel, the mouth of which was in the Ganges. The tunnel, a marvellous place, was duly constructed, fitted with all manner of machinery, and beautifully decorated. A smaller tunnel was dug, leading into the larger, one opening, which was however, concealed, giving access to the king's palace. The task occupied four months. . . ." (Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 467.)

<sup>256</sup>See Note 129.

<sup>257</sup>Literally: "Are your dispositions evenly balanced?" (The Pali word *iriyā-patha* which is Burmanised as *i-ri-ya-pok* is understood. It indicates the four positions of the body: walking, standing, sitting and lying.) This phrase is used when speaking to monks.

<sup>258</sup>Literally: "let it not fall to the ground."

<sup>259</sup>This is a type of curry made with fish and served with rice noodles. The sauce has slices of banana stalk and hard boiled duck eggs added to it, and the accompaniments served separately are usually powdered chillies, fried onion rings and wedges of limen.

say, "If at first you don't succeed. . . ." <sup>260</sup>

Just as soon as I get established, I am going to buy a big towel to give to your teacher, Ū Pyin-nyāw, and for you a set of robes.

If you have an opportunity, will you please clear away the grass and weeds from your mother's grave, and clean the dirt and moss and mould off the little headstone with the inscription on it. Then recite your *paritta* <sup>261</sup> and think of her with affection, so that she may share your merit. Now that you, my little son, are wearing the yellow robes of the Buddha, your voice asking for your merit to be shared has especial power.

Your humble father,  
Maung Shwei Ya.

II

Rangoon.  
12th day of the waning  
moon of Thadīn-gyut.

I am honoured to be writing to you, my respected son. I received your letter safely. Your style of writing is fine indeed, but you need to be careful of spelling mistakes. As for Hsaya-daw Ū Pyin-nyāw's flatulence, it is becoming chronic, and in my opinion it will only be completely cured if it is treated by a doctor.

Not long ago I read in the newspapers about the fighting in the village. I was very worried about you, my son, but I've got your letter now and I'm most relieved. You said that the fighting was to the south of the police post, so that is quite a distance from the village. But I'm not happy about fighting anywhere with people killing each other. This present fighting is between the Communists and the White P.V.O.s, so it is one insurgent against another. In fact, so long as there is someone with authority in firm control it wouldn't really matter if it were the government or some insurgent leader. At least the village would be better off then, rather than being lawlessly dacoited. Look what happened before I left. The dacoits just did as they wished because there was no authority in control. And they weren't satisfied with taking everything we possessed. Like the Japanese Fascists before them, they did things like throwing water in your face, pushing sticks up your backside, tearing off fingernails, and so on. Among those who suffered at the hands of the dacoits, the poor school teacher was the most ill-treated. A teacher's job makes him loved and respected; it is a worthy calling; however, in times of war, there is no work for teachers. So, finding himself without a job he had to do a little trading. Then he was attacked by the dacoits. He was beaten up and the poor chap was left half dead. How is he now? Have all his wounds healed? There must be hardly anyone left in the village now. Considering how large a village it is, there aren't very many farmers in it; those that there are can't possibly abandon their land, so they have no alternative but to stay until the bitter end.

But here, too, the employment situation is not good. When you look at this great city of Rangoon, it is as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening in the country at all. The streets are crowded. The entertainments are in full swing and the clubs and hotels are full of the noise of music and singing. There is plenty of dancing but little of it in the graceful and beautiful style of old. Instead, one mostly sees people twirling round and round, dancing cheek to cheek, and holding hands. They say that this sort of dancing used to be common only among European men and women, but now lots of Burmese men and women do it too. Big cars swish past. Life goes on at a giddy pace. You can eat, drink and be merry in hundreds of different ways. The fact that Rangoon is crammed full with poor people like me is not immediately apparent, as we cannot proclaim our poverty out aloud, and we can't line up and display it. However, what is apparent is the wealth of the rich businessmen, high officials, ministers, and others. They make a display of it, idly parading themselves in the hotels or at charity occasions, clubs, pagodas, race meetings, courts, brothels, or at the bazaar. One can't miss it. That is why they claim that

<sup>260</sup> Literally: "If you try hard, you can become a Buddha."

<sup>261</sup> See Note 239.

we have achieved "ninety-five per cent peace." From their point of view this may well be so. Naturally in the light of their experience and their understanding of the phrase "From Peace to Stability,"<sup>262</sup> they will be quite happy to stabilise the present "peaceful" state of affairs. For the poor people like me who have fled to Rangoon, what they are saying has no connection with reality: compared to the hell we are in, they are in heaven.<sup>263</sup>

But enough of all these problems now; instead let me tell you about my work. Soon after I'd finished writing my first letter to you, I began selling *mṇ-hīn-gā*. I didn't have enough money to buy the metal pots and the yoke and sling, nor the bowls and ladles, and this presented a real problem. I didn't have much money to take with me when I left, and what I did have was almost used up on day to day expenses. By a stroke of good luck, I met up with U Hpō Hsin from the village. He said he was giving up his *mṇ-hīn-gā* business and was going to take a job as a house boy, so he was selling his metal pots and the yoke and sling to carry them in. I could pay twenty *kyats* cash down, and the remaining forty *kyats* after a month on the job. This was just the opportunity I was looking for. I borrowed a small sum of money from your Uncle Tha Hla so that I could put down the cash. I invested the little that remained in stock, and I became a *mṇ-hīn-gā* seller.

Although I really didn't know much about the job as it was quite new to me, I managed without getting intontoo much of a mess.<sup>264</sup> The people from our village who are now living in Rangoon rallied round to help me, and they showed me what to do. They gave me precise instructions about the amount of fish to use, and the amount of beans, and they showed me how to do the duck eggs, how to slice the banana stalk, and so on for the *mṇ-hīn-gā* curry, and I owe them my sincere thanks.

The first time I went out with my pots on the sling over my shoulders, I felt very self-conscious and shy. It's always like this when you start a new job that you are not used to. I went out early in the morning carrying my pots, and found that I had gone down two or three streets without even once shouting out "*Mṇ-hīn-gā*." My tongue felt as though it was glued to the roof of my mouth. I couldn't go on like that, so I had to force myself to cry my wares. When I did, I could hardly believe that it was my own voice. It didn't sound like me at all. I called with all my might but my voice came out trembly because I was so cold with fright. If you had heard me, my son, you wouldn't have recognised your Dad's voice. After I'd called out once, I kept on calling. When I stop and think about it, I overdid the shouting on that first day. I should have shouted regularly but at intervals so that my voice would carry well. Because of the weight of the slings on my shoulders, the harder I shouted, the more tired I became. In the bazaar-seller's world, you need to acquire the art of shouting. You must know what sort of voice to use, where to shout regularly, and be able to judge how far away you can be heard. And what is more, when you shout out "*Mṇ-hīn-gā*," there are no extra flourishes or twiddles you can add; you must just call out "*Mṇ-hīn-gā*." In Rangoon, you see, there are all sorts of cries to be heard, such as "Nice hot fried gourds," "Sweet, cool crushed ice," "Good to eat, good to chew, *Sān-gyāung* roasted beans--just you crunch a few," "Don't just stand there scratching, here's an ointment for your itch." And so on.

After you have learned to shout, you have to hear when people call you. You must have a sharp ear, otherwise you are cursed at, as well as missing out on a sale. During that first day I gazed up at the tall buildings, wondering if anyone would ask me to come, but no one did. They were probably listening for a familiar voice, as people don't welcome a new one. It is difficult to stay and sell close to the bazaar or the courts, or the pagodas, because there are a lot of *mṇ-hīn-gā* shops there already. And if I stand in a new place away from the others, the regular customers all go to the old places. They don't trust a new place. Since this was my first day on the job, my voice wasn't familiar, so what happened was that I had to look for people

<sup>262</sup>The phrase "From peace to stability" was coined by U Nu on Martyr's Day, July 19th, 1950 (Butwell, *op. cit.*, p. 106).

<sup>263</sup>Literally: "It is like (comparing) the sound of the heavenly lute with (the sounds of those suffering in) hell." *Beluvapaṇḍuvīnā* is the name of the lute carried by Pañcasikha, and it belonged originally to Māra. "It was so powerful that when plucked with the fingers the lovely music produced echoed on for four months. . n . Its base was of gold, its stem of sapphire, its strings of silver, and its knots of coral." (Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 314.)

<sup>264</sup>Literally: "I was not disorganised, like the centipede crawling round the rim of the wicker stand," i.e., aimless, incoherent.

who were so hungry that they didn't mind whether I was a familiar face or not, or else people who weren't in the habit of eating it regularly and just suddenly felt like eating *mōn-hīn-gā* on this particular day. I had to try to find people who wanted to eat where it was most convenient, people who didn't care whether the seller's face was old or new.

Right from that first day, I realised how many difficulties I was up against. I had both curry and noodles left over, and I didn't even cover the day's expenses. I was one and a quarter *kyats* short, so I was operating at a loss. And it is terribly hard work; in the evening or at night I have to go and buy the ingredients, the fish, beans and onions and so on. I have to get up at three in the morning to cook the curry, and I can't be any later than that. While the curry is cooking, I have to go and buy the noodles and slice the citron and coriander leaves. By half-past five the *mōn-hīn-gā* must be all ready so that I can go out and sell it. *Mōn-hīn-gā* sellers like me who are not yet properly established have very little to show at the end of a whole day of carrying the sling about, calling their wares, sitting and selling. And then being on one's own means that there is no one to go to the bazaar for you, you must cook the curry on your own, bone the fish by yourself, and sell it, and so it's exhausting. It's very difficult if you want to go to the lavatory because there is no one to stay behind and look after the sling. All one can do is leave it at a shop nearby. I am worn out, my son, quite worn out, and as a result I'm not sleeping very well. Don't be cross with me for complaining about being tired. I tell you all my troubles because I have no one else to tell them to. But even though I'm so tired, I have not lost heart. It's the way life is, so I just have to grin and bear it.

I will soon have been a *mōn-hīn-gā* seller for a whole month. On the first day I made a loss, and in the days that followed I just broke even without showing any profit for my effort. At present I am making a little, but not enough to cover my labour, and I am nowhere near to recovering my original investment. The little I make disappears in daily living. The month will soon be up and I haven't an idea how I'm going to get the remaining forty *kyats* for the yoke and slings. Because I'm not doing as well as I expected, and because I'm so exhausted, I even wondered if perhaps I should get out of the *mōn-hīn-gā* business and look for some other sort of work. However, jobs are hard to find in Rangoon and although I've racked my brains, I just can't find any way out. So I just have to try, try, try, and keep driving myself along.

In my first letter I told you that there were three kinds of *mōn-hīn-gā* sellers. You don't understand what that means, do you? Third class ones like me haven't yet got a pitch of our own; we have to carry our pots in a sling on our shoulders, call out our wares, and sell where we can. Those in the second rank have an established pitch; they have regular customers and places to set up their stalls near the tea shops, bazaars, courts, or pagodas. I'm trying hard to get a regular pitch like this, perhaps near the municipal office where there would be plenty of business. But at the moment the people from the municipal offices are like a swarm of flies near sugar around the Chinese stall which sells fried *hkauk-hswē*. *Mōn-hīn-gā* sellers in the first class, however, haven't merely got an established pitch in a good place; they can also manage to have stalls in three or four different places. Food is ordered from them for offerings and they can always get into weddings, baptisms and official celebrations where offerings are customarily made because they are well-known traders. These first class *mōn-hīn-gā* sellers can put their children into good schools, and they can adorn their wives so that they sparkle with rings and bracelets. They can afford to ride about in jeeps, and some even go to the races and spend anything up to three or four hundred *kyats*. If I ever become a first class *mōn-hīn-gā* seller, I shall bring you to Rangoon and give you a very good education. And I shall perform a meritorious deed in the name of your mother.

I still haven't been able to buy the set of robes which I promised you because business hasn't been too good. I bought a bottle of medicine for U Pyin-nyāw's indigestion, and I shall send it as soon as someone is going up that way. There is one thing I want you and U Pyin-nyāw to be careful of when you are invited to villages for the customary celebrations; you can't very well avoid going, but, please, in Communist villages, White P.V.O. villages, Red Flag ones, government ones, and all the rest, you must always be on your guard lest you are misunderstood by one side or the other.

I am delighted to know that you cleared the ground around your mother's grave. I rejoice in your act and give thanks for it. Can you tell me what's happened to

the cushions sewn out of her silk *htamein* fabric? Are they still in the monastery, or have they perished?

Your father,  
Maung Shwei Ya.

III

Rangoon.  
13th day of the waning  
moon of Tazaung-mōn.

I humbly address you, my dear son, respected novice. I received your letter safely. My business is still rather sluggish. If I don't go out selling from dawn to dusk, I have a lot of unsold stock left over. There never seems to be enough time to cook a meal for myself in the evenings, and to buy what I need for the next day's selling. I am exhausted from continually having to carry my sling around until I manage to sell all the *mōn-hīn-gān*. I am sleeping badly and I'm getting very thin. I still haven't recovered by original investment, and I can't see how it's ever going to be possible because of the expense of day to day living. I'm worried because I won't be able to pay back in two months, let alone one month, the forty *kyats* I still owe for the pots and sling. Ū Hpō Hsin keeps asking me for it, so it looks as though I may have to give up this job and return the pots and sling.

However, I am convinced that if I can manage to keep going, things must improve. My *mōn-hīn-gā* has just the right degree of saltiness, and is hot and peppery, just as it should be. The people who eat it are beginning to develop a taste for it, and now that I am calling out "*mōn-hīn-gā*" in the right places, I am beginning to get regular customers. I know that if I slip a present to the right person, then I can get a good place to sit and sell in the bazaar, or near the pagoda or the law-courts. In short, I've got the hang of this business now, and I have made up my mind to go on selling, however hard it is. I don't lack determination, and I was renowned for my powers of perseverance when I was a goldsmith. I am convinced that if I can keep on selling, I must surely do well. But there is just one thing I need to be able to go on selling. I must find another forty or fifty *kyats* capital from somewhere. At the moment I'm like a fellow trying to climb the greasy pole: high enough to touch the prize but needing to go just a little higher to grasp it and bring it down. My only problem is this sum of forty to fifty *kyats*.

Oh...the injustice of it all! The rich can spend fifty or a hundred *kyats* in one visit to a hotel. Their wives and daughters go off to the beauty salons and happily spend forty or fifty *kyats* having their hair permed and their fringes curled. They can waste forty, fifty or a hundred *kyats* with a prostitute, or they may gamble away the same amount on a horse. But we poor people cannot manage at any time in our lives to set ourselves up to earn a good living or even to make ends meet, for want of a mere forty or fifty *kyats*.

Now, this forty to fifty *kyats* which I need will be the bridge from failure to success. It is the key to my livelihood and to our living together again. Where am I going to get this small amount of money from? If I have to borrow again at an extortionately high rate of interest, I just couldn't manage to keep up the heavy interest repayments. And anyhow, it isn't easy to get loans, even at high rates of interest. It's difficult, my son, really difficult.

So that's how it is; if I can't get this money, I shall have to give up selling *mōn-hīn-gān*. It will be like cutting down young gourd or cucumber plants just as all the new little fruits have set. I'll have to find some sort of menial job if I give up this work. People like me who can't read English sometimes manage to get jobs as broker's assistants or shop assistants. And if I can't get anything of that sort then I shall just have to get a labourer's job, or any other heavy work there is. Of course it goes against the grain for the hand that held the goldsmith's hammer to have to hold a hoe. But in this life of ours today, my son, there are many things which go against the grain. What else can I do? It shouldn't be difficult to get a labouring job. Min-gala-don Airfield<sup>65</sup> is being repaired and expanded, I've heard.

But that's enough about my work. Now you, my son, since you have donned the yellow robe, and daily observe the Ten Precepts,<sup>266</sup> and live in a religious atmosphere, there is no need for me to remind you to do meritorious deeds and be mindful of the Three Gems. As for me, I have almost no time for doing good deeds, nor do my circumstances permit it. Although I don't wish to take life, I still have to kill fish, for you see, my son, if the fish aren't put into the pot quite fresh, the curry has no flavour. And then, when I want to make an offering, I haven't any money. Expecting good deeds in my miserable state of existence is rather like looking for coins in a pile of rubbish. I have to try hard to keep the Three Gems close to my heart. There are four families, five if you include me, living in our room, and there is no possibility of having our shrine in a separate place. It's only those people who live in big buildings and imposing houses who can have special shrine-rooms and so on: for them it's quite usual. They can even afford to put their lesser wives into a separate establishment. I'm not being disrespectful or blasphemous. My little son, who could have more respect for the Three Gems than your father? You can't simply regard everyone who has a Buddha shrine-room in his house as a person of great virtue. You can see that, can't you. After all, wasn't it at a shrine in his own house that Galon Ū Sāw called on Buddha to witness his plans to murder General Aung Hsān and the other leaders? You couldn't fit a separate shrine into our room. But that doesn't mean we can't adore the Three Gems. Mā Hsin has hung a picture of the Buddha on her wall and always worships before it. But in this small room I find I cannot worship properly. I feel oppressed and cannot clear my mind to pray, and I am frustrated and my conscience bothers me, so I go instead to the Hsū-lei Pagoda each night. The weather is fine and the lights shine so brightly; the pagoda and the images of the Buddha are awe-inspiring in their beauty; my mind feels pure and clean and my faith is eager and strong, my son. When I am worshipping like this, a sudden rush of joy spreads over me and a great feeling of love for others, and especially for you, my little son. And then I ask your mother to share my merit, my son, for there is nothing else that I can do for her.

Your father,  
Maung Shwei Ya.

IV

Rangoon.  
6th day of the waning  
moon of Nadaw.

I, your father, am honoured to be writing to you, my little son. I trust that the letter which I sent to you in Tazaung-mōn has reached you, and I hope the three exercise books for you and the medicine to cure Ū Pyin-nyāw's indigestion have arrived with the letter.

I am writing this quite late at night. Rangoon, which is usually so noisy, is now quiet. It is very bright outside from the electric lights on the pagodas and big buildings, but here in my room it is dark except for the light of the kerosene lamp, which gives off fumes which keep getting into my eyes. Oh, how good it would be if everyone could have electric light. But I have always had to put up with kerosene lamps. That was one of the reasons I hated the goldsmith's work.

Today was the day when you might say that I slipped down the greasy pole just as the prize was within my grasp. I went early to the Hsū-lei Pagoda where I go every night when I'm unhappy. I bowed down before the Buddha and tried to make my unhappiness go away, but without success. My prayers did nothing to ease the blows of fortune. As I sat on the platform, and bowed my head, I found that my faith and belief were growing weaker.

This is what had happened, my son. You remember I told you in my letter last month that my *mōn-hīn-gā* business was not doing very well, and that if I didn't get forty to fifty *kyats* as additional capital I would be forced to give up this work.

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<sup>266</sup>The Ten Precepts add the following to the usual five (see Note 53): to refrain from eating after noon, to refrain from attending amusements and entertainment, to refrain from adorning oneself with cosmetics, perfume, ornaments, etc., to refrain from sleeping or sitting in a high place, and to refrain from receiving money. The first three of these additional precepts may be taken by lay people on duty days, and are binding for that day only. The full Ten Precepts are taken by monks.

I know I shouldn't complain to you about my difficulties, troubles and disappointments. But there's no one else I can bare my soul to except you, so when I've got something to grumble about, I grumble to you. Please don't be cross with me for doing this; in this world it is the people we love most that we open our hearts to. When I do this it helps to lessen my worries and it's the only way that I can have you right close by me, my dear son, sharing my joy and sorrow.

The signs of man's fate are often deceptive and beguiling. Fate smiles before it scowls. I had reached the point where, if I didn't get the money, I was going to be forced to give up the *mōn-hīn-gā* business, whereas if I got the money I could cross the bridge to Success. And then I got the money which would get me established. It was your poor kind Uncle Tha Hla who found it for me; he helped me to build the bridge to Success. With this capital I paid off thirty *kyats* out of the forty I owed for the pots and the sling, and I made even better *mōn-hīn-gā*. I laid out ten *kyats* so that I should be able to take over a pitch of my own and sit and sell near the bazaar. In the meantime, I worked extra hard carrying my sling and selling. Now I would surely get myself a place in the third class, and I could look forward to the prospect of rising to the second and even to the first class. I couldn't help feeling encouraged. I was able to sell all my curry nearly every day, and this meant that I was finishing early. Because of this I was very happy indeed, and I started making plans for the future.

Then came today, the day when they were rehearsing for the Independence celebrations. They were working out where the President would review the march-past on Independence Day, where the people would stand, where the army contingent would advance to, where the naval display would be, how the Air Force would fly past, where the police would march, how they would close off the roads, and that sort of thing. Quite a lot of people had come to watch the rehearsals, and where there are a lot of people, *mōn-hīn-gā* always sells well.

There were masses of people all around the Hsū-lei Pagoda, inside and outside Ban-du-la Gardens, and along Hsū-lei Pagoda Road. So I carried my pots around these places, and did good business. I was selling, selling really well. It was the excitement of Independence Day.

So I put my slings down and went on selling in one spot. There were two men neatly and cleanly dressed who were eating my *mōn-hīn-gā*. Judging by the way they were talking to one another, they looked as though they had a leading part to play in the Independence Day ceremony. I don't know whether they were A.F.P.F.L. or Socialist, or what. Most of the people who came to eat my *mōn-hīn-gā* were poorly and shabbily dressed, but these two were different with their brand new clothes, and so I paid more attention to them. My spirits rose as I began to think of my *mōn-hīn-gā* becoming officially favoured. From what they were saying it appeared that two thousand guests had been invited to an Independence Day reception at the President's House the next day. They said that *mōn-hīn-gā* was to be served as well as other good things to eat and drink.

I pricked up my ears at this piece of news, and my thoughts moved on to the President's reception. If I could provide the *mōn-hīn-gā* at this reception, I would not only be paid for it, but I would also be famous. If I were chosen to provide the food at the President's reception, I would provide the best curry ever and make a little profit. If I became known as having received the President's patronage at the reception, then orders for my curry would keep coming in. How many *viss* of fish would I buy for a crowd as big as this? How much onion and garlic? And how much banana stalk, and all the other things? My imagination ran away with me. In my day-dreaming, I didn't even hear the two men ask for some more curry, and I only came back to myself when they shouted at me. They paid me, and got up and went, but my thoughts were still at the President's reception. When they had gone another customer came. Apart from the fact that he was shabbily dressed, I paid no attention to his face or behaviour, and as I mechanically prepared his portion my mind was far away.

Far away, I was, supplying the *mōn-hīn-gā* for the President's reception. I was calculating how much advance money I would need to provide the *mōn-hīn-gā*. I was going over in my mind how I would show an order from the President's office when I needed to run up debts. So I didn't really pay great attention to the progress of the rehearsal for Independence Day.

Suddenly interrupting these thoughts of mine, the man who had been eating *mōn-hīn-gā* said urgently, "Get up, get up! The mounted police are coming," and he jumped up from where he'd been eating, still clutching his bowl. I only realised that the

mounted police were clearing the road when they were right on top of me. I jumped up in a panic, grabbing my yoke with the slings attached, but before I could get it onto my shoulders, a big horse reared up, and the policeman leaned forward and lashed out with his whip. It didn't touch me, but while I was getting out of the way, I fell down.

Falling down wouldn't have mattered if only the slings hadn't fallen too; but as I scrambled up again, I found that they had been overturned. The plates and the fish sauce bottle were all smashed, the bowl of chillis was upside down, and the noodles were scattered all over the road. As for the big curry pot which is very difficult to tip up deliberately, there it was, completely upturned, and the curry gravy flowing bubbling onto the roadway.

I simply couldn't take in what had happened to me. My eyes blurred as I gazed at it stunned for several minutes. When I looked behind me I found that everyone else had fled to safety, all those sellers, who carried their wares on their heads or on their shoulders. The big horse continued on its way, whinnying and rearing up again and again, and the whip in the policeman's hand was swishing.

I went and righted the big pot; as I did so the curry escaped and streamed happily away. I took a bowl and started scooping up the noodles but dust and rubbish had got into them and they were unusable. Even now I can't think why I was trying to scoop them up. I picked up the noodles and then gathered up the chilli powder and put it in a pot. I collected the plates and put them on the tray, then I picked up the yoke. I didn't want to think about anything, I didn't want to do anything. I just set off back to my room.

As I was blindly making my way home, the man who had a moment ago been eating came running back with his spoon and bowl. Without saying a word, he thrust the bowl and twenty-five *pyas* for the *mōn-hīn-gā* onto the tray. I looked at his face, and saw what kind of a person he was--poor, like me, and on his face there was such an expression of sadness as if he could feel my pain. I couldn't say anything as I looked at him helplessly. All I could manage was a wry smile; helplessly, he smiled back and went on his way. When he was gone, I felt grateful for his sympathy, but my courage began to crumble, to soften like a sponge in water. I started feeling very sorry for myself, and to despair over my misfortune. Tears started rolling down my cheeks, but there wasn't time to wipe them. I shouldered my yoke, and went dejectedly back to my room.

I just didn't know what to do. The little capital I once had had now gone, and I would have great difficulties in buying new plates. I didn't want to talk about it, and I couldn't think what I would do.

So I went off to the Hsū-lei Pagoda, and there in contemplation I tried to ease my disappointment, but it wouldn't leave me. Prayers could not soften the blows of fortune. In fact, as I sat on the platform and bowed my head, I felt my faith and belief growing weaker. Perhaps I have become an unbeliever, my son.

These hands of mine, which used to hold the goldsmith's hammer to beat gold, are they now to hold the plough, and do rough work after all?

Should I try and find the money for the fare and come back to the village and work, digging out in the fields, or perhaps market gardening? If I come back to work in the village, then we can be together again, my little son.

What do you think of that, dear son? What should I do? For, as you see, in Rangoon it is quite impossible to make a start, even in the third class.

Your father,  
Maung Shwei Ya.

