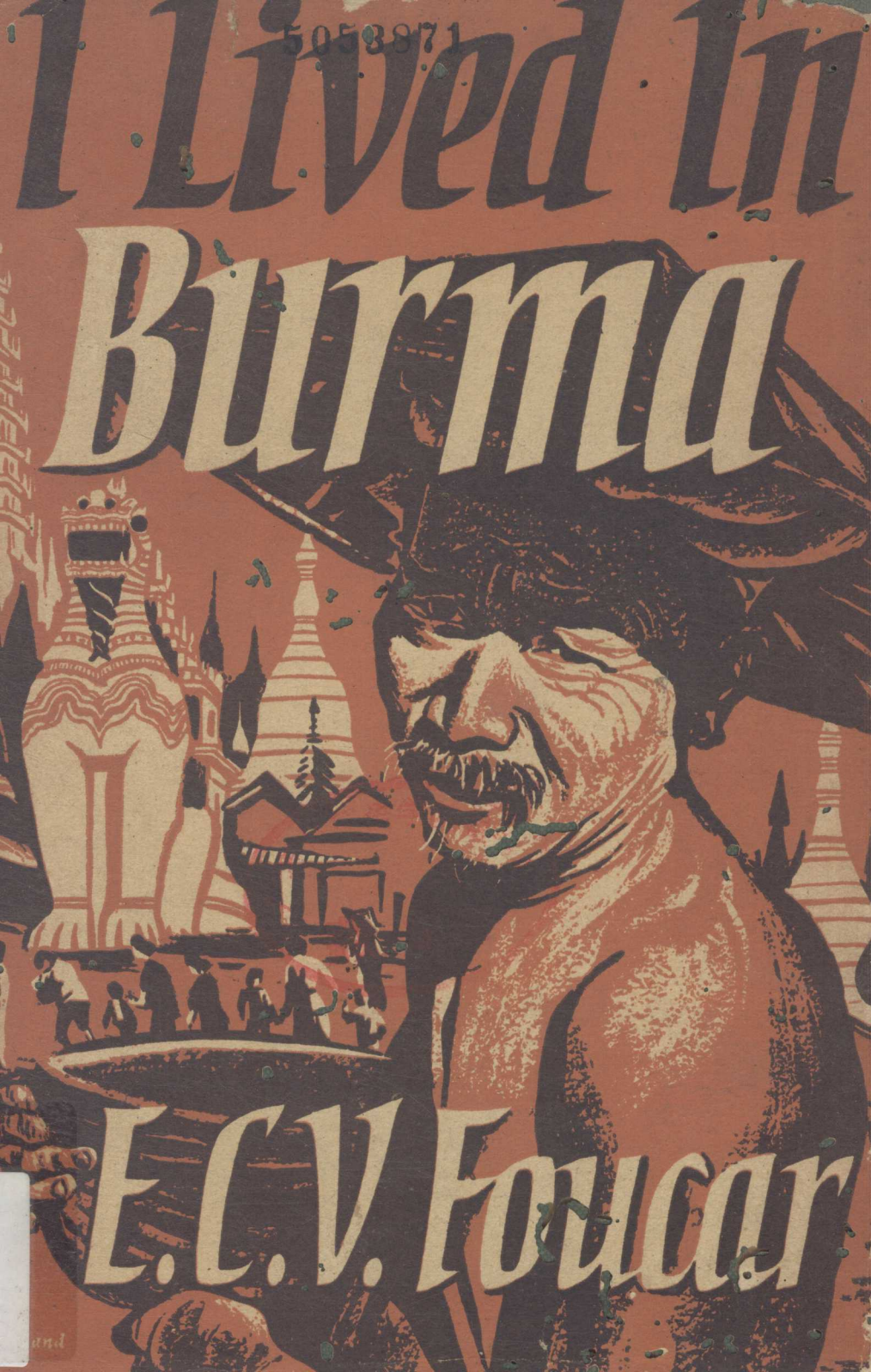
I Lived In Burma



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I. THE LAND WAS BRIGHT

CHAPTER ONE

When We Shook that Pagoda Tree

THE Burmese Inspector of Police thrust a form at me across the expanse of his desk. Many intimate questions demanded written answers, and at the head of the paper in heavy type ran the words 'Registration of Foreigners'. I began to read the form. . . . The Inspector spoke, apology in his voice: "Please let me see your passport. . . . We shall require your photograph. In duplicate."

Recently we had both been British subjects. Now, since January 4th 1948, he had become a citizen of the Independent Republic of the Union of Burma; and I, who had practised law in Rangoon for more than a quarter of a century, found myself a foreigner in the land. My continued stay in Burma was dependent on my good behaviour, and on the whim of the men in power.

It was not a happy moment. However generously one regarded Burmese aspirations the realisation that the country no longer was an open door to the British was a bitter thought. Inevitably there came to mind the blood and tears of the war that had just ended. Was it for this, registration as foreigners, that a few brief years ago many thousands of our race had died in the dark jungles and on the dusty stubble of those sunbaked paddy lands?

The issues were not as simple as that. But it was thus that the question shaped itself. Perhaps I and many more had been too closely involved to take a detached view. . . .

I began to fill in the form. The printed instructions told me that I must notify the Police of any change of address, that I must give due warning before leaving the country. In short, I was an alien with all the implications of that ill-favoured word.

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When my father first set foot in the country, in the early eighties of the last century, King Thibaw still reigned in Mandalay. The British ruled in Lower Burma, but beyond the forts of the frontier towns of Toungoo and Thayetmyo lay the medieval kingdom of Ava with all its ramshackle splendour. Mandalay during its short existence had earned an unenviable reputation for intrigue, treachery and Palace murders on an unprecedented scale. But in British Burma was peace and prosperity. The opening of the Suez Canal had stimulated cultivation of rice in the fertile lands watered by the lower reaches of the Irrawaddy, Sittang and Salween rivers. Cultivators fleeing from the oppressive rule of Thibaw were settling on the rich lands the British had made secure. Forests were being developed, and the famous Burma teak shipped overseas by British merchants found new markets.

My father and his elder brother began the timber undertaking that for upwards of sixty years bore their name. They took up forest concessions and erected sawmills in Rangoon and Moulmein. From these ports their teak went to every quarter of the world. Other European concerns were similarly employed.

The orderly development of British Burma was threatened by the hostility of Thibaw. He regarded the British as interlopers who had robbed him of the richest part of his birthright. That he himself had seized the Lion Throne of Ava to which he was not entitled was nothing to him. He schemed with the French, promising them splendid concessions; his Government shortsightedly disregarded the

elementary rights of British subjects in Ava; and the general attitude of truculence towards a powerful neighbour had its inevitable consequences. The final undoing of Thibaw came with the imposition of a vast fine on the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation then working forests in Ava. Towards the end of 1885 the British declared war, and within a few weeks Thibaw's kingdom had fallen. Of all this I have written elsewhere,* and it is unnecessary to repeat the story.

When I was born, less than a decade after Thibaw's removal, Burma was ruled as a conquered country, the newest province of the Indian Empire. Unquestionably the British rule was kindly, but that we were the rulers was not in doubt for a single moment. It was in this atmosphere, as one of the master race, that I spent the early years of my childhood. I must confess that it was very pleasant. Looking back upon that time I can appreciate how much more pleasant it must have been for my elders. The land was theirs. For them, a mere handful of Europeans, the Burmese people worked. Not that they toiled very hard; nature was kind, and it was easy to earn enough to feed and clothe oneself. Upon the European and his undertakings was based the economy of the country. Few there were who appreciated that in the very nature of things this happy state for Europeans could not last.

Under the protecting hand of Britain entered numbers of Indians and Chinese. There were communities of these people in Burma in pre-British days, but now new opportunities arose. More industrious than the Burman, they rapidly acquired a large share in the country's trade. Many Indians settled upon the land, sowing the seeds of a problem to become acute half a century later. Others came in as moneylenders, their activities contributing to the same problem.

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* *They Reigned in Mandalay.*

The land was bright in the eyes of children whose days were spent in the peaceful riverine port of Moulmein. Gold was the sunlight; golden, too, were the pagodas agleam on the hill above the town; cannas aflame in the gardens reflected a dozen hues of the precious metal; golden were the innumerable lights when the laughter-loving Burmese held their festivals under the cloudless moon. To a child each day was far too short. There was so much to do, and for more than seven months in the year sunshine for every hour of play.

Even when it rained—and the monsoon downpours of Burma must be experienced to be believed—the days did not lack interest. Cataracts of water descending the steep hill above our large teak-built house did extraordinary things to the paper boats we set adrift on the raging torrents. Sometimes the flood invaded the lower regions of the house raised high above the ground on sturdy timber posts; we would join the Indian servants who, waistcloths tucked high, splashed through the frothing tide in an effort to divert it elsewhere. Thunderstorms terrified my brother and me pleasurably. Tall palms and seemingly fragile clumps of bamboo bent themselves to incredible angles before the gale; branches torn from stout trees flew high through the air; rain, lashed by the wind, forced its way beneath roofs and through shuttered windows. Lightning scrawled vivid patterns upon the slaty sky. But these monsoon interludes never lasted long. The golden days returned.

One particular joy was a visit to my father's sawmill, where great logs were shaped by screeching circular saws into fine squares of timber. Sound, movement and the scent of fresh sawdust! Of far more interest were the elephants, the selfsame beasts that Kipling saw 'apilin' teak', as they dragged the logs from the Salween River, upon whose waters the timber rafts had floated from the forests. These rafts had more than a touch of romance about them.

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Their counterparts are still seen on the great rivers of the country. Too heavy to float by themselves, the logs are buoyed by bamboos to form a huge platform difficult to navigate by the expert raftsmen in control. The men live aboard in small mat huts, often having their families and dogs with them. A voyage from the forests to the mills may take weeks, so these floating homes are a necessity. As a youngster I often envied the children of the raft folk as I watched them splashing in the river.

To return to the elephants. Each sagacious creature could judge to a pound the weight of a log to be hauled through the mud to the yard where it was stacked. This stacking an elephant did with its trunk; it did a further job when the logs had been converted into squares and planks, again performing the stacking. Every elephant was a staunch trade unionist, not one of them working a moment beyond his or her recognised hours. Any attempted persuasion resulted in a strike, as did a shortage of rations. There was no arguing with an elephant when it downed its trunk. Its just demands had to be granted before the work of the mill could proceed.

In the days of my childhood Moulmein was busier than it is now, although it had already lost much of its trade to the growing capital, Rangoon. For less than a century this Eastern backwater had enjoyed prosperity, and many a sailor coming to the port must have been delighted by the natural beauty of the spot. Pinned to the river by a steep, pagoda-crowned ridge, the town presents a picturesque medley of roofs half hidden by thick-foliaged trees. The timber-mills, despite chimney-stacks and stark sheds, are not unlovely against their background of greenery. Above them rise the golden pinnacles of the great pagodas on the hill. It is a scene of peace; it was thus in the days of its prosperity; it so remains.

For a brief spell at the end of January 1942 Moulmein was in the headlines. Here was fought a bitter battle, the first

major engagement of the Japanese invasion. The small British force, comprising Burmese and Indian Army units, was opposed by greatly superior numbers. There was fierce fighting on the ridge and around the pagodas; houses, a few days ago peaceful homes, sheltered snipers and were wrecked by shell-fire; the British force fell back to the river, holding off from the jetties the swarming Japanese. After heavy losses the defenders got across the Salween in the flotilla of steamers in readiness for them. All this was in the distant future when I was a child.

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Our circle of playmates was strictly limited. We visited the homes of other European children or played with them in the park, where often a uniformed band performed almost entirely for our benefit. This was always spoken of as the band of the Native Infantry, the somewhat derogatory term applied to the foot regiments of the Indian Army. The Native! A person with whom one did not mix, and whose children were to be shunned by nice little boys and girls.

It was only the Indians who were natives. This, presumably, was because Burma formed part of the Indian Empire. The Burmese, too, were a race apart from ourselves. Burmese children were equally taboo. One might catch all manner of diseases from them; their English accent was all wrong; they would teach us things it was not nice to know. All very absurd, but prejudices die hard. Now at last and when it is far too late to mend matters there is a change. European children mix freely with those of Burma. How different things might be today if this had been permitted earlier.

For us there was an abundance of parties, particularly during the Christmas season. A decorated tree, sometimes an exotic product of the jungle, was laden with lighted candles, Chinese lanterns and ornaments. Often Burmese

and Indian children were present, discreetly segregated in the background. When presents were distributed by a suitably garbed Father Christmas these infants were fobbed off with inferior gifts. Did the benign adult sweating beneath his long robe and fuzzy whiskers ponder the implications of all this? Probably his only worry was how soon he could rid himself of his warm disguise and claim the reward of an ice-cold whisky and soda.

At these parties snake-charmers and magicians entertained us. We did not miss the antics of Punch and Judy. What child would not prefer to see a deadly cobra swaying obediently to the notes of a flute or coiling gently about the arms and bared chest of its master? Then there was the small boy in a brief loin-cloth who was packed into a wicker basket through the interstices of which his father thrust a pointed sword. We gasped and held our breath, fearing for the life of the small urchin. A moment later he would appear out of the bushes at the end of the garden, laughingly, to rejoin his proud parent who had so miraculously caused him to vanish out of the basket.

On one occasion a wealthy Indian merchant invited a number of white children to tea. I am quite sure that our host had previously been subjected to close interrogation by several mothers anxious to scrutinise his list of guests. Certainly it was an exclusive party. Those invited included my younger brother and myself. We tucked into the ice-cream, sponge cakes and meringues. The party was most enjoyable until our host attempted to speak to my brother, a diminutive brat in a white sailor suit. Replete with rich food, my brother became sensitive of his high place in the world. "Go away, you horrid black man!" he ordered. More abuse followed, then tears, and we were unceremoniously hustled home, followed by the polite expostulations of our kindly host, who understood the vagaries of the very young.

Justice was swift, for my father stood for no nonsense. The offender received six of the best on his bottom. But

far more humiliating was the ceremonial visit we paid next day to our host to tender our joint apologies. Was it this incident that all his life gave to my brother a rooted distaste for persons of colour? . . . I am glad to say that our host bore no ill-will. Twenty years later, when I returned, he became one of my best clients and a good friend.

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In many ways my father was a stern man. This was due to the Huguenot strain in him. He and his brother enjoyed a high reputation for business probity, a reputation still spoken of in the country. This may account for the fact that they were never more than moderately successful in a land where sharp practice is recognised as the attribute of a shrewd man. But they enjoyed the affection of their employees and were ahead of their time in according them fair treatment.

For his own mills my father ended the iniquitous system whereby coolies are paid through their *maistries* or overseers, who control all labour and enjoy excellent opportunities for graft. A man objecting to the payment he receives from a *maistrie* soon finds himself out of a job. My father required all labour to attend pay parades, when the *maistries* stood by glumly as each man tendered an empty cigarette tin into which went the silver rupees due to him. This rule naturally enhanced the popularity of the sahib.

My father was opposed to the lax ways of the East. On one occasion he was approached by a parson for a subscription to an orphanage. As was then common, this housed numerous illegitimate children from casual unions between white men and the women of the country. My father refused to contribute, saying that he saw no reason why he should pay for the pleasures of other people. He was actually a generous man who helped many in distress.

His last years were embittered by his misplaced trust in others. His company had London agents with a high financial reputation. When pressed for funds the senior