

The Jacaranda Tree

Longmans' Simplified English Series



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THE JACARANDA TREE

BY

H. E. BATES

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Longmans'
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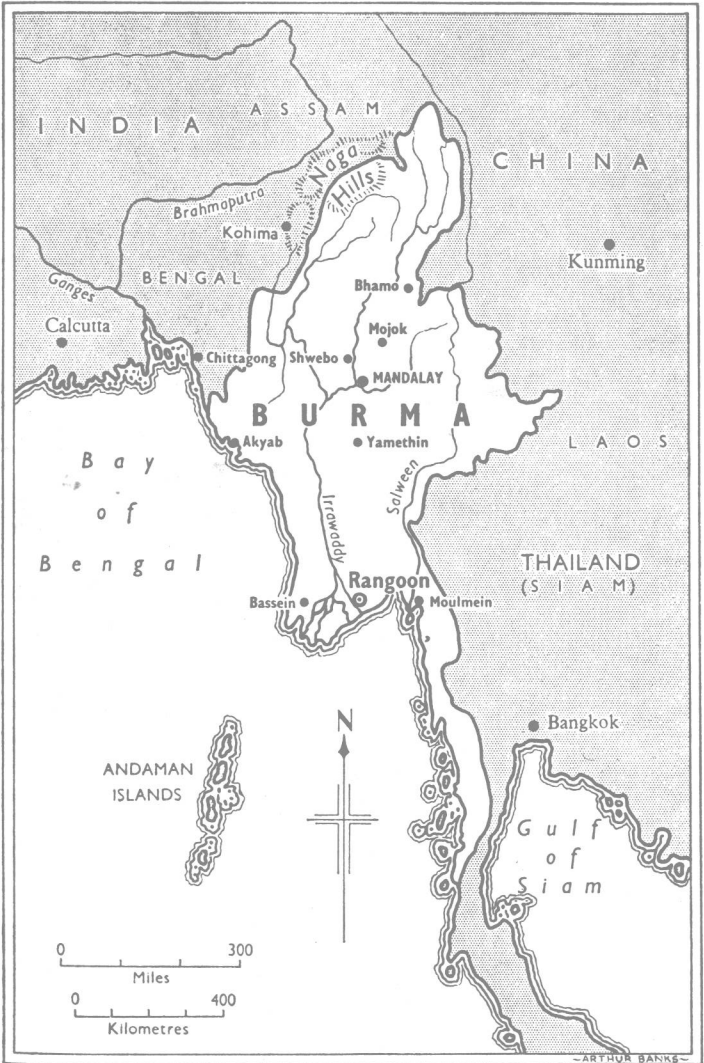
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Map of Burma

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¹The 2,000 root words of the *General Service List of English Words* of the *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection*.

INTRODUCTION

H. E. Bates was born in 1905, and was employed by the Royal Air Force as a writer during the Second World War (1939-45). Part of his service was spent in Burma and the East, and two of his best known books, *The Purple Plain* and *The Scarlet Sword* are set in that part of the world. *Fair Stood the Wind for France* is another of his well-known books, and he has also written many short stories, including the amusing stories about *Uncle Silas*.

The Jacaranda Tree tells of the escape of a group of people from Burma into India during the Second World War in the face of the attacking Japanese army.

A small British settlement is caught up in the escape under the leadership of Paterson, the manager of the local rice mill. The adventures of this group of men and women form the basis of the story; their courage and their fears in the face of terrible dangers, the various quarrels which arise among them, and the differences between the Burmese and British way of life are skilfully drawn. Indeed, the behaviour of certain members of the party, when faced with death and misfortune, often proves to be most unexpected.

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I

THE EARLY LIGHT OF DAY became tender yellow on the dust and shone on the pale, coffee-coloured face of Paterson's boy Tuesday. He was wearing a football shirt, and he carried under his arm a small radio set. He seemed to be listening for some sound to come out of the set, and his brown eyes seemed to trust that it would. He could not believe otherwise. Paterson had given him the set, and everything that Paterson did must be right. Paterson had also given him the football shirt; and these simple things, together with Paterson himself and the boy's elder sister, the girl whom Paterson called Nadia, were all that he possessed in the world. No other boy in Burma possessed such things. No other boy ever would.

Paterson's bungalow¹ stood with its back to the river, facing the dry rice-fields and the mountains beyond. At the back of it grew some trees, with bright leaves waving dustily, and beyond them was the rice mill. Now, at the beginning of the hot season, in March, the entire bungalow was like a house of flame, almost hidden by masses of red flowers that flowed down the roof and over the white verandah,² like fire.

¹ Bungalow: Lightly-built house.

² Verandah: Wide, roofed passage outside the windows of a house.

Davidson had been the manager before Paterson, and had made a garden with grass and flowers. Boys had watered the grass in the evenings; but Paterson did not seem to care for gardens and nothing now remained of it except, in the centre, a jacaranda¹ tree that Mrs. Davidson had planted. Now the bright blue flowers had begun to show themselves among the leaves, and their fresh brightness made the dust seem dead.

In the kitchen Tuesday cheerfully began to prepare Paterson's tea. It was a quarter to five. Paterson must be woken at five. Paterson would take tea without milk, and as many aspirins² as the day, or the night before, demanded. One aspirin was merely ordinary; two were not serious; but after three the boy was never sure. Standing by Paterson's bed, smiling, very cheerful, he would wait for Paterson to throw the cup at his head.

After that the day was very simple. Paterson went to the mill, and the boy laid breakfast. When Paterson returned, he did wonderful things with the radio set. In a second the boy could hear the strange far voices, the music, the news of war that came from London and Rangoon. And as he stood smilingly by Paterson's table, serving his breakfast, he could think of only one thing that could delight him more. It was that Paterson should allow him to wait at table in his shirt. This shirt was an old evening shirt of Paterson's, but the boy wore it only on important occasions.

If he desired anything more than this, it was to hear voices in the old radio set that Paterson had thrown away and was now his own. Every evening, in his own hut, he took the set to pieces and then put it together again. Every evening he listened and waited. Nothing had so far happened to break the silence and bring the voices and the music to him as they were brought to Paterson, but he did not doubt that, if he were patient, something would.

¹ Jacaranda: Tree with sweet-smelling wood.

² Aspirins are meant to cure headaches.

The bungalow had two floors and sleeping verandahs back and front. The nights were still cool enough for Paterson to sleep inside. On the upper back verandah slept the boy's sister, and as he went upstairs with the tea at a minute to five he stood on the top of the stairs for a moment and listened and waited. She did not seem to be moving, and he went on. Ever since the day the boy had first brought her to the house, Paterson had called her Nadia, partly because it was a name he liked, partly because he would not worry himself with Burmese names, beautiful though they were. In the same way he called the boy Tuesday: because that too was simpler and because Tuesday was the day he had walked in, tired and smiling, from the country somewhere east of Shwebo.

"Patson sir," the boy whispered. "Patson, Patson sir."

He called once or twice more before he set the tray down by the bedside.

"Patson sir. Tea," he said. "Tea."

When Paterson moved at the fifth or sixth call he sat straight up, as if something had hit him. It was the moment for which the boy was always ready and yet in a way, from one morning to another, never really sure. And now he stood smiling, waiting for Paterson's first act of the day.

It astonished him when it came. Paterson pushed back the bedclothes and got straight out of bed. The boy could remember nothing of the kind ever happening before. He did not move. He watched Paterson walk three times across the bedroom. Paterson did not even touch the aspirins, but came over to the boy and ran one hand through his hair. For a second the boy's heart began beating very fast and his smile widened to a look of fear.

"Tuesday!" Paterson said.

"Yes, sir. Yes, Patson sir."

"The war is getting bad, Tuesday. Things are happening."

"Yes, sir. Yes, Patson."

"I want you to go over to Betteson sir with a message. See?"

"Yes, sir. Getting breakfast now."

The boy made a very quick movement over to the door before Paterson could stop him.

"Don't worry about breakfast!" Paterson said. "Over to Betteson sir, now."

"Yes, sir," the boy said. "No breakfast?"

"Let Nadia get it. Come up in five minutes for the message."

"Yes, sir." Then the boy saw another astonishing thing. Paterson was dressing. He had not taken the aspirins; the tea stood untouched on the table.

"Go on, for God's sake," said Paterson. "The whole war is coming down on top of us!"

The boy knew then that Paterson was not joking, yet the smile did not go from his face. It remained, calm and broad and perfectly trustful, as if Paterson were really joking after all.

Downstairs he laid out by the long chair in the dining-room Paterson's white shoes for the day. It slightly hurt his pride that Paterson preferred Nadia to get breakfast. In the kitchen he cut the papaia¹ fruit into pieces, dusting them lightly with sugar. It was Paterson's favourite fruit; he knew how Paterson liked it. Nadia could prepare the rest. Then Paterson shouted.

The boy ran out of the kitchen and met Paterson at the foot of the stairs, fully dressed, with the note to Betteson in his hand.

The boy began to tremble at the unexpected sight of Paterson already dressed. All the usual morning arrangements were now in disorder. He saw that only something of immense seriousness could cause Paterson to get up so rapidly, without tea, without help and without aspirin.

"Get over to Betteson and come straight back."

"Yes, Patson sir." He took the note.

"Bring Betteson sir with you."

¹ Papaia: Fruit which is orange-coloured inside and green outside.

“ Yes, Patson sir.” The boy began running at once, going out of the back of the bungalow as Paterson went out of the front. Paterson too walked quickly, passing the place where the circle of grass had once grown and where the tender blue flowers of the jacaranda tree made the only colour against the white dust that came right up to the steps of the verandah like a stretch of empty shore.

As he walked across to the dust road leading down to the mill, the girl Nadia watched him from the upstairs verandah. Unlike the boy, she knew what was wrong with Paterson. For a few moments in the middle of the night she had stood by Paterson’s door, listening to the radio he kept by his bedside. From Rangoon the news came first in English that she could hardly understand, and then in the educated Burmese that was only a little less foreign to her. She understood only that the voices were without hope and that they spoke of terrible events. She understood that the war which until that moment had seemed very far away had now begun to come very near her. She knew that it might affect not only herself and Tuesday, who did not matter, but Paterson, who mattered very much.

A moment later she saw that Paterson was running.

2

IT WAS A LITTLE AFTER SIX O’CLOCK when Mrs. Betteson, untidily dressed, saw Paterson’s boy Tuesday running down the road. She was already busy in the front garden of the Betteson bungalow. She wore heavy glasses that hooked back over her ears and gave her eyes a surprisingly fixed expression.

Everyone in the town knew that Mrs. Betteson was mad, and as the boy saw her, he remembered it too. He stopped running. The smile faded from his face and it did not come back until he opened the little gate and began to walk up the garden path. Even then it was not like the smile he gave to Paterson. It was cold and fixed. He had seen Mrs. Betteson before.

On a day six or seven months before, he had brought another note to Betteson, and Mrs. Betteson had taken him into the kitchen because Betteson was not there. Those white eyes, made larger by her glasses, had waved about like flowers, and all that hot afternoon she had kept him in the kitchen until Betteson returned, giving him fruit drinks and sad, sugared little cakes. Ever since then he had been half-frightened of those astonishing flower-like eyes. "Lucky Mr. Paterson to have a boy like you. We never had a boy like you." And as she talked to him, he felt more and more sick with the too-sweet cakes.

"Joe! Mr. Paterson's boy! Tuesday!" She called the news to Betteson, who soon came out of the bungalow, fat and without hair, the lower part of his face burnt by the sun.

"What do you want?" Betteson said.

The boy gave him the note.

"What's the matter, Joe?" she asked.

"Nothing that concerns your nose. Keep it out!"

"What a nice boy he is, isn't he, Joe?"

The boy was glad when Betteson shouted at him to get out.

"Answer please?" he said.

"Get my hat," said Betteson to his wife, "instead of standing there!" He turned to the boy. "Get back before I knock that smile off your face! I'll come. No need to wait for me."

"Yes, sir." He began to run up the street. At the corner he waited for a moment for Betteson to appear from the gate. Beyond the trees in the street lay the plain, and for a moment

as he looked there was a sense of something strange, though no one but himself had moved. A message to Betteson before breakfast was strange. It could only mean that something far stranger was happening. What it was he didn't know, but Paterson would tell him at the right time.

Twenty minutes later, in Paterson's living-room, Betteson sat eating his breakfast. He had worked for thirty years in the dust, the heat and the discomfort of the steamship offices, only to find himself, at the moment of retirement, caught in a trap. War had trapped him into a lengthened service in rather the same cheating way that life had trapped him with Mrs. Betteson. But he had never been lucky like Paterson, fresh out from England and yet made manager. Betteson had no luck like that. Portman had none of it either.

Portman was under-manager of the rice mill, and although he had not been appointed manager, he was not altogether unlucky. Mrs. Portman was a lovely woman of thirty, and Betteson had watched her often at the Swimming Club. Paterson was not a member of the club. This, in everybody's opinion, lowered his social position. When Paterson wanted to swim, he swam in the river. "I like to swim in water, not people," he said.

The Portmans certainly did not like Paterson, but Betteson was not so sure. In a small town it might raise difficulties to dislike a man openly. The whole of Betteson's life had suffered from the fear of raising difficulties. The problems of going back to England before war broke out might have been solved; but they raised difficulties, and the Bettesons had not gone.

Since December the war had come nearer and nearer, sharply affecting the European part of the town, with its pleasant white and red bungalows, its flowers, and its shady squares. The war was slowly coming in, as the sandy dust came in all the summer from the plain, to dry up the grass in the neat gardens. Already most of the Europeans, with the children, had gone. Their bungalows were closed. Only Paterson, the

Bettesons, the Portmans, Mrs. McNairn and her daughter, and Major¹ Brain, secretary of the Swimming Club, remained. Dr. Fielding and some nurses remained over at the hospital, and Caldwell, the district officer, was there too, a sick man. They would probably fly him out from Mandalay.

"I spoke to Fielding on the telephone last night," Paterson said after the boy had left the room. "We'll all be out of here tomorrow morning. Rangoon has almost gone."

"Good God! What do we do?" Betteson was shocked, but it was pleasant to think of himself and Paterson working together.

"Caldwell will be flown out. The rest of us go by road together. I want everyone here by twelve o'clock. I'll give them lunch. I'll tell them what Caldwell plans. The rest of the day they get ready."

"What do you mean by everybody?" Betteson said.

The boy came back into the room. The eggs that he brought were very small, and Betteson took three.

"You and your wife," Paterson said, "of course. The Portmans. Mrs. McNairn and Connie. And I suppose Major Brain. The rest have gone."

Paterson cut slowly away at an egg. It suddenly seemed specially good to him because he thought it might be the last he would ever eat there.

"This thing wants thinking out," said Betteson. "It must be looked at from all sides."

"It's all been thought out. Caldwell has thought it out. I've thought it out. I've been thinking and looking at it for months!"

That was another thing about Paterson: the clear, sure way of going straight for things. It annoyed some people greatly.

"All right, all right," Betteson said. "How do we start?"

"By road. In two cars."

¹ Major: An army rank, above Captain.