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WHERE CHINA MEETS BURMA

Life and Travel in the Burma-China
Border Lands

1564

BY

BEATRIX METFORD



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Where China meets Burma

CHAPTER I

Rangoon and Mandalay

YEARS have passed since I went to Burma for the first time, and though I have journeyed out and back several times since, I can still recall the excitement and interest of that first voyage East. For I was not only going to Burma, but to live in a remote place on the China frontier, a thousand miles from Rangoon.

Port Said, the Canal, Colombo—each place has its fascination, but none of these rivals Rangoon. Here is the real East, full of colour, mystery, and romance. Burma casts a spell over those who know her and compels them to love her, and that spell will remain on me so long as I live.

The slow voyage up the river with its flat banks is uninteresting; one might be approaching any large port. Then suddenly that wondrous golden temple, the Shwe Dagon, bursts into view. Towering above the city, its tapering dome lit by the rays of the morning sun, it rises from the trees which encircle it, a vision of matchless beauty.

When we landed, my first impression was Colour. The Burmese, both men and women, wear clothes of gaudy hues; even the priests dress in yellow. In the gardens bougainvillæa and poinsettia, hibiscus and bignonia, cannas and orchids added the brilliant reds and yellows of their

blossoms, the vivid greens of their foliage. The many pagodas contributed their shining gold, their staring white. Reds and greens, purples and blues, yellows and whites jostled each other in startling contrast; it was a very riot of colour. And how the sun shone!

I was charmed with the bungalows, each surrounded by its own large garden, and with the still beauty of the royal lakes. A drive in the evening round the outskirts of the city was sheer delight. As the sun set in a flaming sky across the emerald green of the rice fields, there stole on the senses the peculiar smell of the East, which is impossible to describe: a mixture of wood smoke, cooking, and richly scented flowers. And when darkness swiftly fell, the loud humming notes of the cicadas smote my ears with unaccustomed sounds.

Next came the eighteen-hour train journey to Mandalay. We occupied a large compartment like a small room, and as there were no corridors we were ensured absolute privacy. The windows were provided with both wooden and wire-gauze shutters. Notices everywhere warned travellers to keep the windows locked at night on account of thieves. Although policemen travel on every train, it is impossible to prevent thieves from stealing clothes and other belongings through open windows while the occupants sleep. A tale is told of one lady missionary who woke to find all her clothes gone, so that she arrived at Rangoon in her night attire!

Morning, noon, and evening the trains stop at some station for about half an hour, and passengers alight and have a meal at the restaurant. This struck me as very odd after the dining-cars one finds on English and Continental railways. In the early morning, native waiters rush about the platform with trays of early morning tea and coffee, which they push in through the carriage window.

The platforms swarm with people: Burmese and Chinese,

Bengalis, Sikhs, and other natives of India. Water-carriers and vendors of queer eatables walk up and down the platform calling their wares; coolies and passengers stand, squat, and sleep all over the place. Here and there European passengers, the men usually clad in khaki shorts and shirts, stroll up and down to exercise their dogs, while the servants guard the empty carriages. For in Burma no one travels without servants and piles of baggage, including bedding. We had two servants with us, a Burma-born Chinese cook and a Kachin "boy". I am sure they both looked on me as a bit of a nuisance, and I, ignorant of a single word of their languages, wondered how on earth I should manage the housekeeping.

On arrival at Mandalay we were surrounded by a yelling mob of women; they were the porters and carried the luggage balanced on top of their heads. Leaving the servants to deal with the women and the luggage, we pushed our way through the crowd and drove off in a ramshackle cab to the club for a meal.

My first sight of Mandalay was disappointing. The streets through which we drove were dusty and lined with native shops which gave me the impression of incredible dirt and disorder. Pariah dogs lay about everywhere, most of them thin and mangy.

Leaving the native quarter, we approached the old palace grounds, now called the "Fort". Pariah dogs, heat, and dirt were forgotten in a flash as there came into view the long rose-red walls, lapped by the water of the moat, on which gleamed the green and white of lilies. Wooden towers with carved and fretted roofs stood at each corner. Over a wooden bridge we rattled, and then through a narrow gateway into the fort.

Anything more unlike a fort it is impossible to imagine. We were in an immense wooded park. Here and there through the trees I caught glimpses of the officers' bunga-

lows and of the barrack buildings, but, set as they were in the midst of trees and lawns, they lost their severe military aspect. There was even room in the fort for a nine-hole golf course, to say nothing of grounds for polo, football, hockey, and other games.

At last we drove up to the club, a large, rambling, one-storey building with a veranda running round it. I shall always remember my first breakfast in the ladies' dining-room, with its red distempered walls, on which hung one solitary picture, an immense print of a huntsman in pink crashing through a hedge. It was stained brown by the climate. I used to greet that picture as an old friend whenever afterwards I visited Mandalay.

The native servants were still a novelty to me, while the food was quite different from any I had had before. The first course was mulligatawny soup, which seemed odd to me at 9 o'clock on a broiling hot morning! I was told I should soon get to like it, it was the universal dish for Sunday morning breakfast in Burma; after a "late" Saturday night it was almost the only thing one could taste!

The heat was intense, even under a punkah, and after breakfast we went to the rest-house, or dak bungalow, to spend the hottest hours of the day. The dak bungalow was unlike any building I had seen before. Built of teak-wood, it contained three or four bedrooms, very dark inside and furnished with massive dressing tables, chairs, and beds, on which were the filthiest mattresses imaginable. No soap, towels, or bedding were available. Out of each bedroom opened a bathroom, where were a washhand-stand with dingy china, a zinc bath, and large earthenware pots full of water. The water-coolie had cut his foot, and blood was spattered all over the place.

My valise was opened and spread on the mattress, and I lay down to rest, realizing that carrying one's own bedding about had its advantages. Outside, everything was very

still, save for the cawing of the crows which flew round in flocks and occasionally perched on the veranda with a thud.

In those days there were few motors in Mandalay, and the local cab, or gharry as it is called, was used by those Europeans who did not keep their own horses and dog-carts. A gharry is little more than a wooden box on wheels, and rattles so much as the skinny pony drags it along that it is very difficult to make the Jehu on the box hear anything. There is an old story told of an officer who was being driven in a gharry to a party at Government House when the bottom fell out. Hearing shouts, the gharry-wallah whipped his pony into a gallop and the unfortunate officer had to leg it inside the vehicle to avoid being run over.

After tea we hired a gharry to visit the Salin Kyaung, which is reputed to be the most beautiful monastery in Burma. It stands in a grassy space surrounded by palm trees, a mass of exquisite carving in teak; its fretted, tapering roofs make a delicate tracery against the sky. A yellow-robed monk was drawing water from a well nearby.

We then paid a hurried visit to the old palace in the fort, the home of the last Burmese king. It consisted of several pavilions, the heavy roofs supported by massive pillars of teak. All was lacquered dull red and gold, while the throne and audience chamber were decorated with coloured bits of mirror glass. It seemed tawdry—not a bit my idea of a palace. But later, when I got to know more about the country, I could picture it peopled by King Thibaw and his entourage in their fantastic court dress. As someone once remarked to me, it was in just such a palace as this that King Solomon lived, in just such an audience chamber that he received the Queen of Sheba.

After dinner with friends we jolted down the dusty road to the river, three miles away. As we passed along I caught fleeting glimpses of interiors dimly lit by oil lamps,

and wondered what went on in that native quarter, so dark and mysterious, so withdrawn from us Westerners, so secret and brooding. The warm air fanned our faces, and the Eastern smell was strong in our nostrils again.

Behind the fort the sacred Mandalay hill stood out clearly against the deep blue sky, its countless pagodas and its roofed stairway outlined with thousands of lights. An old name for Mandalay was the "Cluster of Gems", and now that electricity has been made available for illuminating the city, this name seems even more apt.

The gharry stopped abruptly and we got out on to the sandy river bank; a few minutes' walk brought us to the steamer which was to take us up the Irrawaddy to the little frontier town of Bhamo. Threading our way among the sleeping native passengers, we ascended a short flight of stairs and entered the saloon. Our servants were waiting outside our cabins. How thankful I was to see the white paint and clean little beds!

CHAPTER II

Up the Irrawaddy¹

I WAS wakened next morning by a knock on the cabin door, and Sao Tung, the Kachin boy, appeared with the tea. It gave me a bit of a shock, as I had not got used to men servants doing the work of housemaids. He looked very clean and tidy in his white shirt and coat and wide black satin trousers. His broad brown face with twinkling black eyes was crowned with a neatly tied white turban, and his large mouth opened in a cheerful smile as he put down the tray and muttered a few unintelligible words.

I was soon dressed and out on the tiny deck in the bows. We had not long left Mandalay, and the pagoda hill was still in sight, a dim blue cone standing by itself in the plain. White pagodas dotted every hill on the horizon, emphasizing the deep green foliage of the jungle.

Breakfast was laid on the long saloon table. It is the custom in Burma to have a large late breakfast, no lunch, a substantial afternoon tea, and a heavy late dinner. Here on the steamer a very long and elaborate menu was offered: soup, porridge, fish, meat, curry, bacon, eggs, marmalade, and fruit! You can have lunch as well if you want it and are willing to pay extra, but it is only breakfast over again with the porridge, eggs, marmalade, and such typically breakfast dishes omitted. I have, however, seen passengers tackle both!

It took me a long time to get used to these queer meal hours, and I always thought it odd that the Government

¹ See folder map at end of volume

officials had to work in their offices all through the hottest hours of the day. Government "office hours" are from 11 to 4, without a break. This, I was told, was to suit the convenience of the Burmese, who eat only two meals a day, one in the morning about 9 or 10 and the other at sundown.

The cabins opened straight into the saloon. This convenient arrangement has its drawbacks, as I found out on later voyages. Some passengers would sit in the saloon talking in loud voices until a late hour, making it impossible to sleep. They never seemed to realize that inmates of the cabins could hear every word they said!

This trip up the Irrawaddy is a favourite one with tourists, and one meets people from all over the world on the steamers. Generally there is also an official or two travelling on duty, complete with servants, dogs, and piles of kit.

The whole of the upper deck is occupied by passengers. The saloon accommodation is in the fore part, while the after part is given up to the deck passengers. Small parties or families appropriate a portion of the bare deck, on which they spread their bedding, barricading themselves in with their boxes. There they cook, eat, and sleep. The Europeans' servants generally get the best spots, using their masters' many big boxes to peg out their claim.

This large deck is always interesting, with its swarming crowd of Burmese and Shans, Chinese and Indians of every caste and race. It is difficult to tell the Shan and Burmese women apart, for both wear similar clothes, and both have the olive skin and slanting eyes of the Mongolian. The Shan men, however, wear very baggy trousers, while the Burman prefers a loose skirt, or *lungyi*, which he twists into a knot at the waist to keep it up. I always wonder how it does stay up; even the wearers seem a bit doubtful on this point, for many of them have adopted a leather belt as well!

There is an express boat every week which makes the journey from Mandalay to Bhamo in less than three days, but the "bazaar" boats are much more interesting; they stop at practically every town and village on the banks of the river and take about a week for the voyage. It was on a bazaar boat that I made my first journey.

Many of the passengers had brought goods to sell to the villagers. The wares were spread out on the deck, and the stall-keepers, who were always women, squatted behind them puffing away at huge white cheroots. The Burman is incorrigibly lazy and leaves all the work he can to his wife and daughters.

Every hour or so the steamer stopped at a village. Long blasts from the siren heralded our approach, our bows were steered towards the bank, and when within forty or fifty yards three swarthy Indian sailors, clad only in thin cotton trousers, jumped into the water with a rope and swam to the shore. Then they pulled in the ship's cable and tied it to some convenient post or tree. The force of the current soon brought the ship alongside the bank, a couple of planks were hurriedly laid as gangways, and the people swarmed aboard. There were fresh passengers with their luggage, but most were villagers who wanted to purchase goods from the stalls on board. The advent of the bazaar boat is the great event of the week, and the whole village turns out to see it and to greet any passengers who may have arrived by it. Gaily painted little boats come alongside. They have brought passengers and visitors from the other bank of the river, and tout for return fares.

It is a regular pandemonium: everyone is yelling and shouting. But ten minutes later the hooter goes again; the visitors hurriedly leave the ship, the gangplanks are removed, the ropes are untied, and we are off for our next port of call.

The bridge is on the lower deck just above the water-line, and there the captain sits all day long scanning the river. At the wheel is a Chittagonian quartermaster, while on either side a sailor sounds the depth with a long bamboo pole. They look as if they are punting the ship along!

The channel is marked by bamboo buoys. It is ever changing, and the Flotilla Company keeps men at work sounding the river and rebuoysing the channel throughout the year. The Burma Government delegates this duty to the company, which alone runs steamers on the river.

During the dry winter season when the river is low navigation is very difficult, for sandbanks abound and the ships often get stuck. A few years ago one ship went aground at the beginning of the low-water season, and there she remained for five or six months until the water rose again. The captain and crew had to stay on board all the time, but they managed, I heard, to make quite a nice garden on the bank and grow a good supply of vegetables!

I was surprised when I heard that as a rule the steamers did not travel at night, though occasionally the express boat does run on as late as midnight, and it is then fascinating to watch the white beams of the searchlight sweeping the water and lighting up the distant jungle-clad banks, while moths and insects fly at the bright light and drop in heaps on the deck below. The beams are so intense that I have often seen them when sitting on a rest-house veranda in the hills several miles away from the river and 4000 feet above it.

Usually the captain arranges to stop shortly before dusk at some village where he can replenish his supply of wood, which is the only fuel burnt in the furnaces. The logs are kept neatly stacked on the river bank, and directly they hear the steamer's whistle, women and girls run from their homes to carry them on board. They help one another to balance the logs, three at a time, on their heads, and

then walk with them on board. Near the engines they drop the logs with a bang on the iron decks and hurry back for another load. It takes about a couple of hours to refuel the ship, and many a curse does the terrible noise call forth from the European passengers, especially when the ship has not tied up until midnight and their sleep is disturbed.

If the ship ties up early there is generally an opportunity for a short walk along the bank before dark. It is strange how the dogs get to know when the steamer is going to stop, and they can go for a run. They dash down the steep stairs and wait anxiously for the gangplanks to be run out. They are always first ashore.

In some places it does not do to wander too far, for leopards, tigers, and elephants, not to mention snakes, infest the jungle. The houses are all made of bamboo and thatched with grass; as a protection they are raised on piles a good dozen feet from the ground and are entered by a ladder.

It is difficult to describe the charm and peace of these villages. Surrounded by dense jungle, they are cut off from civilization save by the river. Women moving with easy grace pass with water-pots balanced on their heads, children play contentedly in the dust, the men squat under the trees smoking and chatting. At sunset nearly everyone goes down to the river to bathe. Both men and women are dressed in their long skirts, which they keep on all the time they are in the water; when they come out they pop a clean *lungyi* over their heads, letting the wet one fall to the ground. It is all done neatly and modestly.

If we are lucky, the refuelling is finished by dinner-time, and in the cold weather it gets quite chilly in the saloon, which is not heated in any way. But during the rains this is the time for the bugs to come out, so the lights are all covered with red cotton, for that colour repels them. Punkahs whirl round, churning up the air and cooling the