

THE WORLD MY COUNTRY

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The story of Daw Nyein Tha of Burma

by

MARJORIE PROCTER

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Note

In Burma, family names are not usual. The wife keeps her maiden name, and does not adopt that of her husband. The children do not inherit their parents' name. Each individual has his or her own name.

In the case of a girl, her name will be prefixed by *Ma* until, at some unspecified stage in her life, the more dignified title of *Daw* is substituted for *Ma*. For the sake of convenience, I have used the name *Ma Nyein Tha* in the earlier chapters of the book, but from Chapter 11 onwards I refer to her as *Daw Nyein Tha* (*Nyein* rhymes with *yen*). To her family and friends she was known simply as *Ma Mi* (pronounced *Mah Mee*). To the younger generation she was *Ma Ma Mi*. The usual prefix for men is *Maung* (pronounced *Mowng*) or *U* (pronounced *Oo*).

Preface

When I first met Daw Nyein Tha in the nineteen thirties, her vivid personality made a profound impression on me. Her gaiety, her reality, the poetry of her expressive hands and gestures—all these are unforgettable. Some people set the pace, some follow it. She was a pace-setter, a discoverer.

Added to all the charm of her race was her deep understanding of the ways of God. She was a transmitter of His love, which gave passion and purpose to her life. Hundreds caught the infection of her message, and the whole course of their lives was changed. Her rule was simple: to be where God wanted her, when God wanted her, and in the best possible condition.

When I saw her for the last time, in Switzerland in August 1968, we spoke together of the possibility of this book. Her many papers, notebooks and letters have been available to me, and out of that meeting this book was born.

I owe an incalculable debt to very many, in the compiling and writing of her story. Chief among them I would like to thank Bishop George West and his wife Grace, who knew her intimately in Burma; John Chidell, late of the India Office, and his wife Barbara; Kenneth Belden, who has a close knowledge of the work and influence of Daw Nyein Tha, and Vera Frampton, who has given valuable editorial help; also Dr Burford Weeks of the World Health Organisation, his wife Catherine, and Harry Addison, author of *Daw Nyein Tha, Joyful Revolution*.

I would like to acknowledge my great indebtedness to those

PREFACE

who have made available to me records and files in London, Switzerland and India, and assisted me in my research, particularly Nancy Walters; to the papers and letters of the late Colonel David Watson and Roger Hicks; to many friends in America, including Lucy Wiatt who grew up with Daw Nyein Tha in Moulmein, and to 'Ma Mi's' family and numerous friends in Burma, who gave such willing co-operation when I visited Rangoon in 1973, especially her friend Daw Nu, who laid herself out in every possible way on that visit, and the Most Rev Francis Ah Mya, at that time Archbishop of Burma; also to my sister, who accompanied me on most of my fact-finding travels in Switzerland, India, Burma, Thailand and Hong Kong, and who has given me constant help and encouragement.

Added to these are friends too numerous to be mentioned by name, in all five continents, who have helped with letters and photographs and personal remembrances. Without the help of these many people, this book would not have been possible.

It is written for the many thousands who knew her and loved her, and the countless thousands who, through reading about her and finding her royal road of obedience, will enter upon a new world, whose Builder and Creator is God.

A child in Burma

Burma is an enchanting country, with her deep ravines and crashing cataracts, her mountain-tops veiled in cloud and cloaked in jungle, her tapering pagodas crowning a thousand hills, her wide rivers and vivid green paddy fields. To the west, north and east her towering mountain ranges screen her from the rest of the world. Behind these barriers she has remained in effective isolation for centuries, indebted to India and China for some aspects of her culture, yet deeply influenced by neither.

To the south, she reaches down into the Andaman Sea, like the fingers of a hand, with one long index finger stretching through the Tenasserim Strip bordered by Thailand, towards the fringes of the Malaysian Isthmus.

Although at times she made marauding incursions across her borders, and was visited by European traders and missionaries, the life of this land was little touched by the outside world until, in the nineteenth century, she was annexed by Britain and added to the Indian sub-continent. Thereafter she was invaded by the modern world, with all its advantages and disadvantages, until in 1946 she gained her independence. Yet the old Burma still remained.

It is small wonder that she has bred ardent nationalists, who love their country passionately and are ready to lay down their lives for her. It is small wonder that so many of the British, Indians and Americans who have served in Burma look back and long to return—Burma, with her luscious fruits, scented

orchids, and above all her people, warm-hearted and gay.

In her past, Burma had always been a free country. Apart from her almost mythical kings with their fabulous wealth, her people in their sturdy independence had neither great poverty nor great riches. There was very little distinction between rich and poor, and no inequality between men and women.

Her thousands upon thousands of saffron-robed, shaven-headed Buddhist monks possess nothing, for they have renounced the things of this world to follow a life of continence, poverty and humility, and they are intimately connected with the life of the people in all its aspects. They are custodians of their country's character, educating her sons, tending her sacred shrines, her monasteries and pagodas.

Near the edge of the Andaman Sea, where the Salween empties its waters into the Bay of Martaban, lies Moulmein, at the head of the Tenasserim. Maul-la-Myaing, as the Burmese call it—which might be freely translated 'the weary may rest'—is a beautiful city, long and narrow, stretching along the river front and reaching up into the pagoda-crowded hills behind. Here, in a roomy house built of teak, lived U Cho and his wife, Daw Thein Chone, and their seven daughters and three sons. It was a typical two-storey Burmese house, built above U Cho's workshop where he practised his hobby of woodwork and carpentry. He took a delight in making his own furniture. Out in the garden, stacked close to the carved balustrade of the balcony, bowered in bougainvillea, was the timber on which he planned to work, kept there until it was well-seasoned.

At the back of the house Daw Thein Chone kept chickens, which she fed with an eye to the cooking pot, that they would be a good flavour. She was a superb cook and her home was her pride. From the shelves filled with spices to the shining beauty of the furniture, the art of housewifery was cherished by her and passed on to her children.

They were lively youngsters who grew up in that house, and

not the least lively was the third little daughter, Nyein Tha, who became lovingly known as Ma Mi by her family and friends. Scampering in and out of the house, chasing the monkeys out of the garden, watching in the evening the long line of elephants coming back through the town from their labours, helping to entertain guests, Burmese, American and English, Buddhist and Christian, in their home with its ever-open door, learning to read and write, and much more, at school, life never ceased to be interesting.

And then there was the river, endless source of joy to the children of Moulmein. They spent many happy hours, playing on the edge of the mighty Salween, watching the great baulks of timber floating lazily downstream or drawn behind some little boat. Sometimes the logs would be lashed together into huge rafts, while the men who steered them would build themselves huts on their floating kingdoms.

The logs had come, maybe for hundreds of miles, swirling down rapids, or drifting down, down, down, ever down towards the sea, past villages where palm-thatched houses were built on stilts for protection from the floods at monsoon time, where children sported in the water, and wild beasts came to drink, and where the great elephants of the jungle were trained to draw the heavy timbers, or carry them with their trunks to the water's edge.

Books and learning held an important place in the estimation of this family, for U Cho's father had been a printer; as a young man back in the last century, he had met the American pioneer Baptist missionary, Adoniram Judson. Greatly stirred, he had accepted the Christian faith, at the cost of being disowned by his family. They held a funeral service over him and cast him out. Judson baptised the young convert and sent him to America to learn the trade of printing. He returned to found the largest printing press in Burma, on which he printed the Bible Judson had translated.

U Cho himself was cashier to a Scottish timber-trading firm, which set a high value on the integrity of this upright Burman. 'He always stood for what is right fearlessly, and he expected us to do the same,' his daughter said once. His children were brought up with the idea of serving God and serving their country.

Ma Mi and her sisters went to Morton Lane School, which stood in a big compound at the foot of the hills. There was much to enjoy, from the lessons in the class rooms to the trees and flowers growing in the grounds. The great branches of the banyan trees sent down their pendent rope-like roots on which the children could swing. They loved to climb the frangipani trees and sit on the long, leaning boughs, swinging their legs, or to scramble among the fragrant blossoms in flowering time. Ma Mi was usually top of her class, and her eager mind explored all that was presented to it with unflagging zest.

The school was always expanding, and with the coming of a new teacher, a vigorous-minded Scot, a new 'high school' class was created, and Ma Mi was chosen as one of the first to go into it. She was elated, and prayed, 'Lord, if You'll let me pass the high school in three years, I will serve You to the end of my days.' 'It was just a little girl's promise,' she remembered afterwards, 'because she wanted to pass an examination. But I've never forgotten it.'

She came flying home one day with her long black pigtail swinging behind her. She had startling news for the family. Miss Hughes, the Canadian superintendent of the school, had called her into her office and said: 'When you graduate from here, I want you to go to college, get a degree, and then I want you to become headmistress of this school.'

So now Ma Mi worked harder than ever, and she and her class mistress, Miss Lilian Lutter, became firm friends. Miss Lutter encouraged her pupil in every way she could, indeed she considered herself almost a member of the U Cho family. She

often shared the life of that hospitable home. Like them, she would take off her shoes and leave them on the threshold, for in Burma shoes are never worn in the house. The teak floor of the wide room where they ate their meals had a glow in it which was quite extraordinary. It was not produced by any manufactured polish, but took on a natural gloss simply by the bare feet constantly passing over it. Family portraits looked down from the walls, and at the back of the room the stores were stacked in neat piles, each bought at the cheap season of the year—tamarind, sesame and peanut oil, dried fish, prawns and *ngapi* (a fish paste), red and green chillies, nuts of all kinds, and big green water melons.

‘I don’t think I have ever tasted any Burmese food as delectable as the food prepared by Ma Mi’s mother,’ Miss Lutter once commented. But it was more than the superb Burmese food that she appreciated. Often she would be there at their time of ‘family worship’, and would always be included.

As the family grew, Ma Mi and her two older sisters began to take responsibility for the younger ones. But still she continued studying, and by the time she was seventeen, her hard work was rewarded, and she had passed all her examinations.

Now a new life opened. Her gay *longyis* (Burmese skirt) and blouses, her little jackets and her other clothes were carefully folded and packed, with the help of her family, in the big lidded basket of woven cane used for hand-luggage in Burma, and she set off for Rangoon. She had been enrolled at Judson College, one of the only two colleges in the Rangoon of that period.

Rangoon was a new world to her. The magnificent university of the present day, whose colleges are widely spaced round the shores of Inya Lake among the leafy coconut palms and jacaranda trees, had not yet come into being. Ma Nyein Tha revelled in her studies and in the student life of the college, as well as in Rangoon’s magnificent buildings. Between the college

and the city lay the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, built on an eminence above the Royal Lake. Always its slender, tapering spire, set on the inverted lotus-flower of its base and covered with gold leaf, seemed to swim, a shining symbol, in the translucent blue of the sky, like a golden-handled bell, and was reflected in the still waters of the lake.

They were stimulating years, and Ma Nyein Tha made many new friends among her fellow students. One of these was a young Burman. They had attended lectures together. In their last year they fell in love and became engaged. He was an attractive young man, and his gifts matched her own.

It seemed an ideal betrothal, and unusual in Burma, where marriages were mostly arranged. The Principal of the College was very pleased and promised the young fellow a place on the college staff as lecturer after the two were married.

Ma Nyein Tha passed all her examinations with distinction, and returned to Moulmein to teach in Morton Lane School for two years, before taking up the headship as Miss Hughes had promised. And then one day the bottom fell out of her world.

The young student teacher came to see her. He told her that his parents wanted him to give up teaching and go into government service, to which there was a good deal of prestige attached. It was not highly paid, but to the ambitious it was considered an enviable position.

Ma Nyein Tha stared at him aghast. Government service was the last thing she wanted for him. Government service! And he a man who had, like herself, dedicated his life to education. Besides that, one of Burma's chief problems was corruption, and she was very critical of government servants who, she felt, were involved in that corruption.

She confronted him, eyes flashing.

'I won't have anything to do with it!' she declared angrily. That he, a Christian, should seek such a position! He must choose between pleasing his parents and pleasing her.

He pleaded with her, miserably, but she hardened her heart, and when he seemed to be set on doing what his parents wanted, she turned on him.

'All right,' she told him stiffly. 'You go your way and I go mine. I will not marry you.' With an aching heart but steely face she broke the engagement.

He went away, but he sent his mother to the school to plead with her. He sent his sister. But she would not give in. Every year for ten years he wrote to her with a fresh proposal of marriage, but she was adamant. At last he wrote asking if he could marry another girl, and she wrote back that he was free to do as he chose.

School in revolt

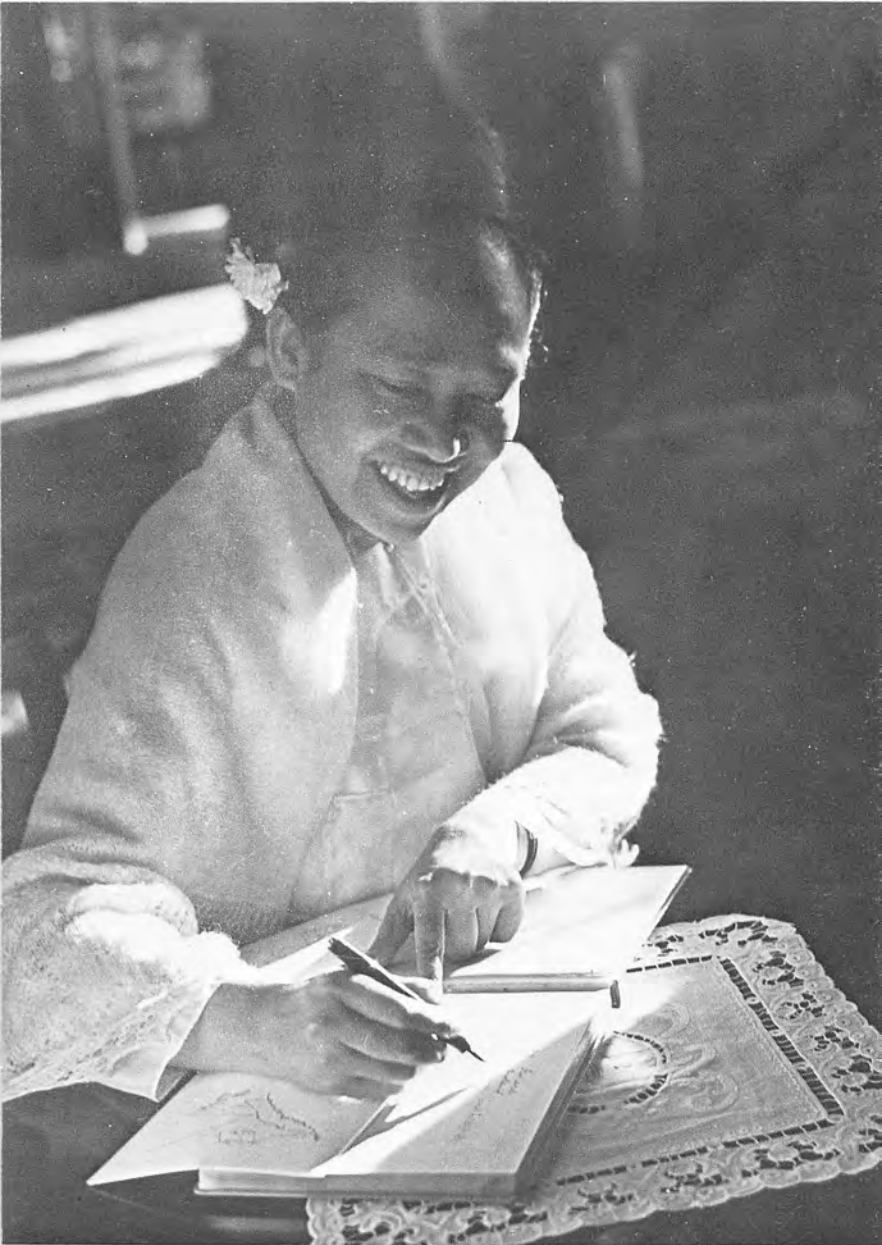
That door in Ma Nyein Tha's heart was closed and barred. It was the end of a chapter in her life, and she was determined to make a success of the next one.

There was no reason why not. Family and school were both proud of her. She was the first in her family to graduate, and the first graduate among the Morton Lane pupils. She was proud of her school. In 1867, it was one of the first of such schools to be established in the country. It ranged from kindergarten to high school and teachers' training school. The girls came from all over Burma, and from all the different ethnic groups—Shans, Chins and Kachins, Karens, Mons and Talaings, and of course the Burmans themselves. Indians too were among the pupils.

In 1921 Miss Hughes fulfilled her promise, and when Ma Nyein Tha had obtained her teaching diploma, she became headmistress of this school of six hundred and fifty girls, two hundred and forty of whom were boarders. Miss Hughes remained as superintendent.

At twenty-one Ma Nyein Tha had reached the zenith of her ambition. She was the youngest headmistress in Burma. But in spite of everything she was not happy. She worked hard, thinking that this would take the ache out of her heart, emphasising discipline and efficiency. She became very strict, quite different from the care-free girl of earlier years; and although her pupils respected her they were all afraid of her.

A visit to her office was an ordeal. 'What have I done now?'



Daw Nyein Tha

Photo: Strong



Daw Thein Chone, U Cho and some of their family

**The frangipani tree in the compound of Morton Lane School,
where the children loved to scramble**



the scared girl who had been summoned to see her would ask her friends, so that she could have her excuses ready when she entered the dreaded presence. When one girl lost her watch, Ma Nyein Tha had each girl into her room separately. One of them must have stolen the watch, she said, and as she questioned each girl closely, there was not one who did not feel suspected of being the thief. The more sensitive wept, and went out, red-eyed, to send in the next unfortunate.

She had been headmistress for ten years when the smouldering resentment in the school exploded into flame, and she found herself in the midst of a revolt. It began when some of the Buddhist girls, who formed eighty-eight per cent of the school population, decided that they would defy the traditions of the school and keep one of their main fast days. Nationalism in the country had grown to large proportions. If you were Burmese and Buddhist, you were a nationalist. If you were Burmese and a Christian, you were considered a foreigner. So, to show what good nationalists they were, the Buddhist girls decided to stage their fast.

Ma Nyein Tha was enraged. She looked on it as a deliberate defiance of her authority. This was a Christian school, she said. If the girls wanted to keep their Buddhist practices, let them go to a Buddhist school. They did not need to come to Morton Lane. Her Christian principles, she felt, were at stake, and it was only afterwards that she realised how narrow she had been.

Strong words were said on both sides; and then the rocket went up.

Opening the morning paper, Ma Nyein Tha glanced at its contents. 'What's this?' she exclaimed. Morton Lane School was in the news. The girls had sent a long list of their grievances to the paper. There they were, in glaring black and white.

Such a thing had never happened before, and it became the talk of the country. Religious and nationalist passions were aroused, and rumours flew around that the Buddhist girls were

being persecuted. The storm rose to such a height that it was thought the school would have to be closed. The country demanded an investigation.

Ma Nyein Tha had reached a climax in her life. Her carefully built reputation had collapsed. Where were her vaunted discipline and efficiency now? What followed can best be described in her own words.

'I was so upset I could not eat or sleep. I was so angry I didn't know whether I was standing on my head or on my feet. I thought, "Those girls! We have done so much for them, and just look at the way they behave! What ingratitude!"

'So I thought I would run away from it all. One afternoon I packed some things in a bag and caught the night train for Rangoon.

'You know, when there is a feeling inside you, you can't leave it behind. It goes with you wherever you go. And there I was, thinking I needed new perspective. Somehow the perspective didn't come.

'I stayed with a friend of mine, and I told her everything. And then she took me to the Presbyterian Church, to hear an organ recital. They had a lovely organ there, and a man from Scotland who was an excellent organist. It was a powerful organ, but I didn't hear a sound. I could only think of those girls. I was boiling, and I whispered to her, "I don't know how I am going back to face those girls. They've brought so much trouble on me, I hate them."

'She turned to me very sadly, and she said, "You need new vision."

"What do you mean?" I said, with a good deal of heat. I saw everything clearly. They needed new vision, not I.

'My friend said nothing, but she took me down to the station that evening, and just before the train left, she said something that drummed in my head all night.

"Our sins separate us from God."

'So I went back to school with these two things: I need new vision, not the girls or the teachers or anyone else; *my* sin separates me from God—not the sins of my father or of my mother or my brother or sister, or the teachers, or the girls, but *mine*.

'That very day, as I got back to school, I received a delegation from the Government, four inspectors of schools, all Buddhists, and we sent the girls in, one by one, for them to question. We did not know which one had sent the letter to the papers. At the end of the day, when they had completed their investigations, these four men said that there was no foundation for the grievances of the girls. So we were all right with the Government.

'You know it's a terrible thing to think you are all right and the other is wrong. You are so self-righteous—there is no living with you; and it goes on in you: "You were right, they were wrong." I was more angry still. So I poured it all out to another friend, our school doctor. All she said was: "You need to surrender all of yourself to God."

'I said to God, "Lord, I hate these girls, and I don't know how to surrender myself to You. If You don't take this hatred from me, I don't know what will become of me. Please take it from me, I don't want it; and give me Your love." I kept on praying and praying. Every few minutes I had off from my office I'd go back to my room and kneel down and pray: "Take this hatred from me and give me Your love."

'One night I couldn't sleep at all, and I kept on praying, "Take this from me and give me Your love."

'Suddenly—it was as if somebody was speaking to me—the thought came, "Why don't you accept it?" I had been praying for love but I hadn't accepted it. I said, "Yes!" And then God's love came just like a great big volume of water pouring right through me, from the top of my head to my toes and fingertips, every bit of me; and all the bitterness and resentment, standing

on my own right, everything was gone in the twinkling of an eye. And only love remained. I felt I couldn't contain all the love that flooded into me.

'In the morning when I got up and saw the girls, I thought I had never seen them before, they all looked so fresh and lovely. When they looked at me, they said, "What has happened to you?" And I said, "I'll tell you when we get into the classroom."

'So I went into the different classes. I told them what had happened to me in the night, and how sorry I was. Every classroom seemed bathed in light. I apologised to them for not having loved them as God wanted. It wasn't that the girls were right and I was wrong, or that I was right and they were wrong. It was just that I didn't have love in my heart for them at all, but hate. And as I poured out my heart to them, they poured out their hearts to me. My whole relationship with the girls became different at once.

'And then there were the teachers. I never quarrelled with them. The surface was absolutely smooth. I had always said they were jealous of me. They had made it difficult for me to get along with them. Most of them were older than myself. I was only twenty-one when I was head over all of them, and some of them had been my own teachers; and therefore it had not been easy for them or for me. But when God cleansed my heart, and gave me that overpowering love of His, His Spirit, I saw that it was my pride and my conceit that made it difficult for them to get along with me.

'So that same day I called all the teachers together for a staff meeting, and I told them what had happened and, with tears pouring down my face, I apologised to all of them for my pride and conceit. I went to the individual teachers and apologised to each one, and my whole relationship with them, and the atmosphere in the school, became different. And now I knew why Christ put me in this school, not just to be headmistress, but to learn to love people.'

'You are for the world'

Very soon afterwards, Dr Stanley Jones came to Burma. Author of the best-seller, *The Christ of the Indian Road*, he was concerned to bring together the great faiths of the world. For some years this distinguished American Methodist missionary had been travelling through India, initiating a series of 'Round Table Conferences', in which men of different religions met and, in an atmosphere of freedom from the inhibitions and misunderstandings which kept them apart, talked with each other on the subject of 'Does religion work? What does it produce in experience?'

In the course of his visit to Burma he came to Moulmein. What better place could there be than Morton Lane School for the public meetings? The school hall was the largest auditorium in the city, holding more than a thousand people.

Day after day the magnificent hall filled. Ma Nyein Tha was invited to join a small group of seven or eight people, including a tall Englishman with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, whom she had never met before. She asked who he was, and was told he was George West from Kappali, a Karen village near the Thai border north-east of Moulmein. She was to work with him all her life.

He has recorded his memory of the meeting:

'There we were, sitting round the table, such a collection! I doubt if they had ever met in Moulmein. There was Stanley Jones at the end of the table. There was a Buddhist, another Buddhist. There was a Hindu, a Muslim and a lady, Burmese,

from that famous school, Morton Lane, I learnt. A few more, and then myself. We had to say what in our faith meant most to each one of us, whatever we happened to be. Some were a bit disappointing. I don't think they had ever thought the thing out at all. But others were real, illuminating. Then it got round to the lady.

'She began briskly enough, recording an experience she had had in her school. We were a little apprehensive—or, rather, wondering what was happening—for there was a long pause, and then a sound of sobbing, and we found that this lady had actually broken down, a rather embarrassing thing at any time. But it made people listen a good deal more than to each other's pronouncements, and it helped people to understand what repentance is, even if they didn't know what the word means.'

Some weeks after Stanley Jones had returned to India, an invitation came from him to the headmistress to join a group from Rangoon University and to go to India for a four-month campaign.

She took two months' leave of absence, and went.

The campaign took the Burmese team all over India, from Nepal in the north to Kerala—then called Travancore—in the south. Never before had Ma Nyein Tha had the chance to see so much of that immense land, of which Burma, at that time, formed a part. She had visited India two years earlier, but as a tourist, when she had seen the great tourist attractions of India—the sacred city of Benares, Agra with its fabulous Taj Mahal, the magnificent buildings of Delhi, both modern and ancient, Darjeeling on the slopes of the Himalayas, with the view of the mighty Kinchinjunga, carved in perpetual snow, hanging in the sky, its lower ranges concealed by mist.

But this was different. She saw the contrast between the splendours of the last years of the British Raj and the extreme poverty of the masses, the beggars in the streets of crowded Calcutta, the lepers with their open sores. She watched the

pilgrims crowding the temples. In the schools and universities which they visited she met the youth of India, in their eager, restless search for knowledge, truth and freedom.

Christmas came, and the group had three free days. It was 1931. They were in the south of India, and went down to Cape Comorin, where the Indian Ocean laps the foot of India, and sat on the rocks.

For nearly two months they had been out on the Indian road, and Ma Nyein Tha's leave was almost spent. The question arose, should she go back to her school in Burma, or stay on in India? The tour of the country was a four-month one, but she had only taken two months' leave.

'I prayed and I prayed,' she said. Her friends knew the battle going on in her heart. One of them very quietly observed, 'Some people are for villages, some for towns; some are for countries, and you are for the world.'

What did this mean? The school was her world. Here she was a person, known, respected, secure. Her strong sense of duty, of loyalty, had full scope, and a new love was growing up between her and the children—her children. They needed her. Burma, the loved, familiar country, she knew and understood; even India, though so different from her own country. But—the world? That vast, unknown beyond, from which came the Americans and British whom she had known from her childhood, but whose ways seemed often so peculiar and so different from her own.

Two sentences in the book which her friend was reading at the time threw more light on it. They came in a letter from Gladstone to his wife in 1844. 'Our duties can take care of themselves when God calls us away from any one of them.... To be able to relinquish a duty upon command, shows a higher grace than to be able to give up a mere pleasure for a duty.'

She read it, and then and there decided that she would obey God, whatever people might think.

She sent in her resignation and, as she expected, there were many critical voices. But she held to her decision and her closest friends stood by her. Looking back on it afterwards, she was able to say that from that moment her family, her friends, the school, knew that when she felt that anything was what God wanted, she would obey, no matter what happened to her. 'My family have always, always understood and stood by me, for which I am most grateful.'

Within two weeks of making that decision, she received another letter from Dr Stanley Jones. A suggestion had come from Dr William Temple, Archbishop of York, that 'in order to make more real the fellowship in the Gospel of East and West, the younger churches in the mission field should be invited to share with the older churches what they have learned of God through Jesus Christ'. The International Missionary Council, meeting in Jerusalem in 1928, had accepted his suggestion and had chosen India, Burma and Ceylon as the first countries to undertake this mission. In his letter, Dr Jones invited her to go to Britain in August, with three Indians, on a Mission of Fellowship. The thought of the project took her breath away. Travel in 1932 was a very different matter from today, when the other side of the world is only a few hours away, and television brings far countries into your sitting-room. But again she said 'Yes.'

The little group from Burma learnt much together. Among them was Ma Nu, a friend with whom Ma Nyein Tha had spent many happy holidays. The leader, who had known her for some years, was startled by the change in Ma Nyein Tha's character. From being an expert, cold disciplinarian with a brilliant mind, he recognised that she was now becoming a genius for transmitting the love of Christ. When he had to return to Burma, it was the commitment of these two women that gave the rest their power and held them together.

When the four months' campaign in India was over, Ma

Nyein Tha and her companions returned to Burma, until the time came for her to leave for England, in August 1932.

Her companions in the delegation were the Rt Rev J. S. C. Bannerji, Assistant Bishop of Lahore; the Rev A. Ralla Ram, Secretary of the Student Christian Association of India, and A. M. Varki, Principal of the Union Christian College, Alwaye. They were men with theological and political expertise, and deeply imbued with India's legitimate and growing desire for self-determination and independence. In addition, the cause of Christian missions was very near to their hearts. The opportunities presented by this Mission of Fellowship were invaluable. On the voyage to England they tried to prepare their companion for the issues they felt they would have to face. They gave her books to read to widen her knowledge. 'But I couldn't read them at sea—I was too sick; and I couldn't read them when I arrived, for somehow I lost them. So I was left to face England, the centre of the Empire, all the wisdom of a mature people, I, so ill-equipped, and yet with all the equipment I needed—a real experience of forgiveness and a God I knew would see me through.'

Before she left Burma, one of her friends had given her a letter of introduction to take with her to England. It was to the Oxford Group, and as soon as she arrived in London she posted the letter to Oxford. A telegram came back, inviting her there for the weekend. One of the secretaries from Edinburgh House, London headquarters of the International Missionary Council, took her to Oxford, and asked them to see that she got back on Monday morning.

She had heard of this Oxford Group in Burma. Her two friends, whose challenges had brought her to the moment of change when the school rebellion flared up, had spoken of it. So she went to Oxford with a sense of expectancy. She was not disappointed. 'I just sat down naturally with them and had guidance with them,' she said. For she had discovered that one

of the radical beliefs of this group was that 'when man listens, God speaks; when men obey, God acts'.

When Monday came, true to their promise one of the young men from Oxford, Roland Wilson, a graduate in his twenties, delivered her safely back to Edinburgh House, from where the four delegates were taken to Old Jordans in Buckinghamshire, owned by the Society of Friends. Here they met all the leaders of the Protestant denominations, to be briefed for their mission.

'You are not here for missionary propaganda,' the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Cosmo Gordon Lang, told them, 'you are not here for political propaganda; you are here to share with us what it means to you to be Christian out there.'

Some of the party were somewhat discomfited. They were fully prepared to make this campaign a success, but in the way they visualised it. They would need to rethink their whole approach. Was their Burmese companion right after all? Their efforts to instill their political outlook into her mind had met with little success. She just couldn't get politics into her head, she told them. The only thing she knew was that God had changed her.

Was the wisdom needed not learned from books but given from above? One of them stood up. 'It's all right for Ma Nyein Tha,' he said honestly, 'but how about us?'

Those days of preparation in Old Jordans brought new reality into the mission, as they took on the challenge of the Archbishop.

There was no doubt about the interest they aroused as they went up and down Britain. 'Here is the message we have been waiting for,' said a woman to Ma Nyein Tha, after she had been telling about the way God taught her to love people. She found herself often intensely lonely, often scared as she faced large crowds, but always finding that God never let her down.

They went to the principal cities of England, Scotland,

Ireland and Wales, spending about a week in each place. They spoke to every section of the Protestant community. Ma Nyein Tha, a Baptist and a woman, was given permission by the Archbishop to preach in Anglican churches. There were civic receptions, public meetings, meetings for ministers and clergy, Chambers of Commerce luncheons, meetings for teachers, schools, universities, women's meetings, children's meetings. The two main impressions left on Ma Nyein Tha's mind were the kindness of the English people, and their hunger for reality.

In the midst of all their engagements, two days were set aside for rest, and these were spent in the home of Dr Temple outside the ancient city of York. Those two days were an oasis of quiet and peace.

The tour ended in London where one of Ma Nyein Tha's assignments was to speak at a school. She prepared what she should say to the children, only to find when she got there that the 'school' was the London School of Divinity, and her listeners far from being children. So she had to speak without any premeditation.

She spoke in Spurgeon's Tabernacle to her own denomination. Then followed a big public meeting in Westminster Hall, led by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The four Asians and the Archbishop were sitting in the front row of the platform, and behind them were about twenty bishops. After the meeting, a little old lady came up to her and asked her had she not been afraid with twenty bishops at the back of her? Ma Nyein Tha assured her that, being a Baptist, she had not known that she should be afraid of a bishop.

Not long after, the Archbishop said to her, 'Thank you very much for what you gave at the public meeting, you have helped an old sinner like me.' It made her feel very humble. 'It wasn't me,' she said later. 'Every time I spoke I asked God to tell me just what to say, and that touched the Archbishop.'

Then came what Ma Nyein Tha felt was the highlight of the

tour. As soon as they returned to London, they were told that the King had asked to see them, and that they were to be presented to him.

She was a little awe-inspired at the interview in prospect. Afterwards she described it:

‘When we went, just before eleven o’clock on the twelfth of December, the footman came down, opened the door (all the guards were changing outside), and then, as we went in, we were told to go up the stairs.

‘We got to the first big room, a beautiful room. There was a grand piano there, and on the grand piano was a sprig of poinsettia. In Burma poinsettias grow almost wild, high up, you see them everywhere. And here for the first time I saw a poinsettia. I was so touched when I saw that. It was quite a welcome to me.

‘Then one lady and three men came out—I suppose they were lords and ladies-in-waiting; and I asked the lady if there was anything I should think of; and she said, “No, this is a very private audience, so you just be yourself.”

‘The Archbishop came and went in ahead of us, and we were taken to another room with all kinds of paintings on the wall. Right on the dot of eleven o’clock the glass doors opened, and we were told to go in. Since I was the only woman there, I had to go in first. We were told ahead of time that the King spoke very gruffly, and that we were not to be afraid of him.

‘The Archbishop presented me to the King, and then to the Queen. So I shook hands. I had never been told that I was supposed to curtsy or anything. I stood by the Queen. And then the men came in with their folded hands. They were presented and we stood around and talked. The Queen asked me about the school. The King was talking to the men and the Archbishop about the Indian students in England. He was concerned for them; he just didn’t think that the living conditions were adequate for the students.

'Then the King suddenly turned to me.

"What is this I heard about you?" he said. "I thought you wanted separation, and what is this now?" Just at that time Burma was saying that she no longer wanted political separation from India under the British Raj, and before that she was saying that she wanted it.

"Your Majesty," I said, "whether we are politically separated or not, we should all work together for the Kingdom of God. And this is it, what we are doing here is it."

'I was in Florida in January 1936, when the news came through that King George V had passed to his rest. I had only seen and spoken to him for fifteen minutes in my life, but I felt as though my own father had died.'

The jungle village

When Ma Nyein Tha returned to Burma, early in 1933, she went to teach in a Women's Bible Training School, where her friend Ma Nu was also on the staff.

The school was a pleasant two-storeyed building. A quiet garden was surrounded by a wide cloister-like veranda, off which opened class-rooms, kitchens, workrooms and a long refectory. The food was plain; sometimes Ma Nyein Tha sighed for the delicious cooking to which she had been accustomed, the chicken *kowshway*, the *mohinga*, the rice cooked as only Daw Thein Chone could cook it, and served with *balachaung* (dried prawns).

For the next years this place became her headquarters. From here she went into action with the Burma Gospel Team, travelling in their privately-owned bus first up through Burma to Taunggye, then across into Thailand at the invitation of the Thais, moving from place to place in the steamy heat—it was the hot season from March to May.

They returned to Rangoon through the Shan States of Upper Burma, and then were off on a further tour to Malaya, Singapore, and from one end of Indonesia to the other.

Back in Burma, Ma Nyein Tha received an invitation from the friend who had told her so bluntly that she needed new vision. Miss Lucy Bonney was now working in Thamin-in-Gon, a village up country on the banks of the Sittang River, four miles from the Rangoon-Mandalay railway. Although quite a small village, it was a cosmopolitan one, with Indian,

Chinese, Burmese and Karens living there; and it was a centre for other villages round about.

To the city-bred Ma Nyein Tha with her comfortable home background, such an invitation was a jolt. 'I had never had anything to do with villages,' she said. 'I'd grown up used to servants, sanitation, and a *gharry* or car to get about. We'd never lived luxuriously, but we'd never been spartan, and hadn't the attitude towards jungle and villages that country lovers have in the West. I looked on the villages as rough, uncouth places to keep away from.'

What was she to do? Discarding her personal inclinations, she waited quietly for God's directions. The thought came, 'Stay one year.'

She accepted the invitation, packed up and went. It was May 23rd, 1934.

There were no 'surgery hours' at the dispensary. Sick people came all day long before she got up in the morning and after they went to bed at night. Their patients ranged from the intolerable 'itch', to casualties from battles between rival gangs at festival time. Ma Nyein Tha was surprised that the little medical knowledge that she had could go so far.

They lived in a two-storey house. It was a building without windows, and a door that kept sticking. A family occupied the ground floor, and they shared their noises and disturbances. 'The roof was corrugated iron. The weather was blisteringly hot—the sweat just ran off me all day long. But the trying time was in the rains. We were surrounded for three months by flood water, the village itself was mud-slush. And all through the rain from leaden skies—pattering monotonously on the iron roof—most of the villagers were out working in the fields. There were other discomforts. Tree snakes were common in these parts. One day I saw a little girl in a garden, and a foot away from her was a viper. I quickly pulled her away. There were leeches (which caused me qualms), scorpions and bugs.'

Eventually her father, U Cho, came from Moulmein and built them a good teak house.

Then one day Lucy Bonney went down with diphtheria. They had never seen a case of that disease, but they had a medical book, and she and Ma Nyein Tha, studying it, reckoned that this was what she had. Lucy was very ill, but Ma Nyein Tha acted promptly and saved her life, by getting her to the Mission Hospital in Moulmein with all possible speed. They drove by ox-cart to the railway, and she wired her cousin who was the Medical Officer in Pegu. He met the train there with some of his hospital orderlies who took the patient through the train window on a stretcher. He gave her her first dose of anti-toxin and put her on the train for Moulmein.

The American doctors couldn't believe that she had diphtheria, for they had never seen a case of it in Burma. But the laboratory confirmed that she had the disease, and she was in hospital for many months. Ma Nyein Tha had to be immunised, and then she returned to take charge of the work in the village.

That period in Ma Nyein Tha's life tested all her commitment. She said of it that she had 'no companionship, no mental stimulus, often a meal of rice and an egg—never knowing where the next rupee was coming from, no medical knowledge, no training, and the dead weight of ignorance and inertia all around—but always God. God for companionship, for information, for courage, for strength.'

One result of living in Thamin-in-Gon was that forever after villages were written on her heart, the villages of Burma, the teeming villages of India and of all Asia. She knew that they were the life-blood of a country. Although she never again lived for so long as this in any village, she loved to visit them in Burma and elsewhere.

While she was in Thamin-in-Gon, the thought came to one of her friends that she should go to an assembly of the Oxford Group in Oxford that summer.



The Metropolitan of India, Dr Foss Westcott, with (l to r): Ma Nyein Tha, Nelun Sena, Surya Sena and Ma Nu, 1937



With Dr Frank Buchman



Daw Nyein Tha,
the Bishop of Rangoon,
the Rt Rev George West,
and Francis Ah Mya, 1947

‘What nonsense!’ was her immediate reaction. ‘I am working here.’

She was thrown into a turmoil. What would her friends say? That she was ruining her career. That she was unable to settle down. That she was wasting her training, deserting her post. That she had no sense of duty.

There was a further consideration—money. There was her provident fund—but what would she do when that was used up? In unknown England without an anna, or back in Burma and no job?

She had a book of daily readings by Oswald Chambers.† The passage for that day, May 20th, read: ‘If a man is going to do anything worth while, there are times when he has to risk everything, and in the spiritual domain Jesus Christ demands that you risk everything you hold by commonsense.... Immediately you do, you find that what He says fits on as solidly as commonsense.... Trust entirely in God, and when He brings you to the venture, see that you take it.’

She had her answer. She packed up, handing over the work to others. The day came for her to go. She put her stuff on the bullock cart, and said goodbye to her many friends.

‘That morning, when I looked at the calendar, it was May 23rd, 1935.’ It was one year to the day since she came to the village.

She had to cross the river by ferry to get to Rangoon. On the ferry boat she met someone whom she highly respected. She told him what she was doing, and he was aghast at her temerity.

‘But, Ma Mi,’ he said, ‘are you going to spend all your money you have saved up, to go to England? What if you get there, and you find that you are disillusioned? What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said simply. ‘But I believe that this is what God wants me to do, and I am going to do it.’

† *My Utmost for His Highest*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott.

Learning to be a revolutionary

Arriving in Oxford, fresh from a year in a remote jungle village, Ma Nyein Tha felt bewildered at first. Here was something she had never seen before: hundreds of people from many nations, speaking many languages, were attending the Oxford Group Assembly, filling colleges vacated by students for the summer vacation.

She unpacked her cases and laid her belongings out in the room she was to occupy. She looked out of the window over the city. In place of the coconut palms and pagodas of the Burma skyline she saw innumerable spires and towers and chimney stacks set in leafy green. She tidied her smooth black hair and went downstairs.

In the next days she attended the crowded meetings, watching, listening, opening her mind to new impressions. There was a tremendous hunger for God, not in terms of emotional feeling or of theological argument, but of a living experience of a living God.

Among them, Ma Nyein Tha met some with whom she was destined to work in later years: Devar Surya Sena and his wife Nelun, distinguished musicians from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), who dedicated their music to interpret the East and the West the one to the other; and Takasumi Mitsui, Chairman of the Mitsui Foundation of Japan, with his wife Hideko.

Her savings did not last long, although her convictions grew with the passing days. She had had enough money for her journey and for some weeks in England. But one day she found,

after paying her weekly bill at the bursar's, that she had only a few shillings left. 'I showed them to the Lord,' she said, describing this incident, 'and I said, "Lord, this is all I have left. So, please."' Then she went downstairs with a quiet mind.

At lunch that day she was invited to sit beside Dr Frank Buchman, initiator of the Oxford Group. During the meal he turned to her. 'How much money have you?' he asked. She told him. 'I will give you fifty pounds,' he said.

This was her first experience of God's provision. For Frank Buchman, it was not the casual gesture of a wealthy man, but the characteristic generous giving of one who had no salary or resources of his own, but who had found that he could trust God for his needs and for those of others for whom he felt responsibility.

At one session, when attention was beginning to flag, she was put on to speak. How could she get the attention of her audience? She paused for a moment and studied them.

'I know what you are all thinking,' she said unexpectedly. 'You are wondering how I do my hair.'

She was dressed, as always, in Burmese costume and wore her hair in Burmese style, a *sadone*, that is a coil of hair built up round a cylindrical frame of combs and hairpins, and usually supplemented by additional tresses. She had a switch of her grandmother's hair built into her own *sadone*. A flower tucked into her coiffure was the crowning touch. She gave a demonstration to a fascinated audience, now fully awake, and she had their full attention as she spoke.

Among the many at the assembly was the man she had met at the 'Round Table' in Moulmein. George West had recently been appointed Bishop of Rangoon, a position he was reluctant to accept. He would have much preferred to stay in the village of Kappali, where he was building up a growing church among the Karens.

'At Oxford,' he said, 'I met a crowd of people who seemed

radiantly happy and to be entirely sure of God. They believed God could use anyone completely surrendered to Him to change the lives of others. To change a life meant to be so used by the Spirit as to bring another to the point of being in turn able to change other lives. All this meant beginning with oneself and being absolutely honest.'

Here at Oxford a new relationship was forged between himself and Dr Foss Westcott, Metropolitan of India, Burma and Ceylon, a great churchman and statesman of whom he was frankly afraid. He decided to do something about it. He went and knocked hesitatingly on the Metropolitan's door. A voice said, 'Come in.'

He entered and stood behind the old man's chair. 'There is something I would like to tell you,' he said. 'Do you know that ever since I met you I have always been afraid of you?'

His reception was surprising. 'I am so sorry,' Dr Foss Westcott said humbly. 'I seem to produce that effect on many people.' Barriers of age and position, of shyness and reserve, rolled away and new horizons opened up for their work in the East.

In March of that year Copenhagen had opened its doors wide to the Oxford Group, at the start of a campaign which culminated on Whit Sunday, when ten thousand people crowded the open-air courtyard of Elsinore, Hamlet's castle. At the close of the Oxford assembly three hundred were to go to Denmark to follow up this initiative, Ma Nyein Tha among them. She coveted such a force for her own country, and she approached Dr Buchman. 'Frank,' she said, 'we must take a team to Burma.'

'Fine, fine,' he answered. 'Whom do you want?'

'This one, this one, this one,' she said, naming some.

'Yes, yes, yes,' he said. 'How about Denmark? You ask God. That country needs the Oxford Group. You from Asia can be gloriously used there.'

Later she went back to him, 'Yes, Frank, I will go with you.'

Denmark was an amazing experience to this Burmese woman. The London correspondent of *Dagens Nyheter* wrote: 'They say the Jutlanders are sober and hard to move, yet they came in thousands to Aalborg, Sonderborg and Aarhus.'

The impact on Ma Nyein Tha was immense. But Burma still occupied first place in her thoughts. Stirred by all she was witnessing, she again asked Dr Buchman if a team might visit her own country. He replied as before, but this time he asked her, 'How about Switzerland?'

It was not until long afterwards that she came to understand what he was doing. 'He wanted us to give our hearts to other countries as well as our own, so he trained us outside our own countries. He was aiming at forging a committed international force ready to go to any country, to give the universal message, and change people. He was preparing us Asians to be world revolutionaries.'

They came to Switzerland, to Geneva, the seat of the League of Nations. She went to a debate in the magnificent buildings which housed such frail hopes. Abyssinia was on everybody's lips, and the atmosphere was tense. This city of hope for the world was fast becoming a city of disillusionment. Dr Edouard Benes, President of the Assembly of the League, invited delegates to a special luncheon, to hear what the Oxford Group had to say.

Five hundred came, and Ma Nyein Tha was among those who were to speak—a Burmese schoolmistress to talk to the distinguished diplomats and statesmen of all countries. She was the second last speaker, and by this time it was an easy audience to speak to. After the first speaker or two, cigarettes and cheroots had gone out, and it didn't occur to the smokers to re-light them. They were listening to a new kind of speaker, a new kind of speech. So simple. Could it be true?

On her way to the microphone a man jumped up and, beaming, shook her hand, saying, 'Oh, you're one of us, you're

one of us!' It was the Siamese delegate. 'I prayed that every word might tell,' Ma Nyein Tha recalled. 'While speaking, I felt completely free, and saw the need of the world written across the faces of those men wrestling with apparently insoluble problems.'

'The pace of those days was tremendous,' she commented. 'I passed from the bullock cart age to that of the airplane at a sweep.' In addition, European food, no doubt excellent, was unpalatable to one used to an Asian diet. Many a time she would gladly have fallen on a great plate of rice such as her village used to provide, and the urge would be so potent that she could hardly continue to eat. 'It all helped me to depend on God for everything, money included. Sometimes Burma seemed a long way off and the approach of the hotel bill much too near.' One morning she found herself out of toothpaste, toothbrush and coconut oil. She made her needs known to God. On going downstairs, she found a woman to whom she had never spoken, waiting for her. She drew Ma Nyein Tha aside and told her, rather shyly, that she had had the thought to give her twenty francs. Ma Nyein Tha could not help laughing. God always seemed to have a surprise packet for her round the corner.

In those crucial days Dr Buchman was moving with a group of people from country to country in an attempt to create a new climate of living and thinking in a world where tensions were mounting daily. After a short visit to America—her first—Ma Nyein Tha travelled with the Oxford Group through Europe, living in many different homes. Sitting with Scandinavians and Germans around their big stoves, with Americans round the coffee tables in their apartments, or with the English, Scottish and Welsh at their firesides, she was learning to understand other people and other countries. She heard Europeans and Americans who, in Burma, had seemed so superior and remote, being open and honest about themselves. Gradually she was building up a network of relationships with people where there

was a give and take, and where a unity was created that held against all testing.

Before returning to the East, London was to be her home through the autumn and winter of 1936-7, the first time she had settled down for any length of time anywhere since she had left Burma. For a while she stayed in the YWCA. So much had been happening, and her mind was full; sitting in the forecourt of the nearby British Museum, she wrote long letters to her friends in Burma and India. Someone cut stencils for her, she bought a little hand mimeograph, and sent out her news across the world.

Surya and Nelun Sena were also in London, living in a flat in Holland Park. They invited her to stay with them, and furnished a room especially for her. When Nelun heard that Ma Nyein Tha's friend, Ma Nu, was coming to London, she invited her too. They asked Nelun how much they should pay her. 'One guinea a week each,' was her reply. So after two weeks, Ma Nyein Tha produced four guineas. But when she went to pay her the next time, Nelun would not take it. 'No, no,' she said. 'Don't pay anything. The Lord has been very good. Our plantation is producing more coconuts than usual, so you don't need to pay any more.'

King George V had only recently died, and Ma Nyein Tha remembered his concern for Indian students in London. Could something be done for them? She expressed her thought to her Ceylonese friends, and the seed-thought sprang to life.

That winter and spring many came to share the hospitality of the two from Ceylon, with their gifts of music and of friendship, and their home with a wide-open door.

‘Nothing but a miracle’

Returning to Rangoon after those eventful months, Ma Nyein Tha stayed for a time in Bishops court, the Bishop’s residence. That spring a cleansing wind had been blowing through a conference of nine hundred people meeting in Central Burma. ‘In fifty years in those hills none had seen the like before,’ wrote Bishop West.† ‘Beneath a thin veneer of Christian profession in the largest Anglican mission in Burma had lain the same evils that once affected the early Church,’ and he quoted the list given by St Paul in Galatians 5, 19-21. Where there had been fifty years of dissension between the Anglican and Baptist missions, there was an honest facing of past failure, old rivalries were healed, and a spirit of unity dawned.

In Rangoon, leaders from all communities and ethnic groups flooded in to see Bishop West all day long. ‘Everybody who came went away different,’ Ma Nyein Tha reported. ‘People came to him with their personal problems. They told him things they had never told any human being before. Instead of giving good advice, he put people in touch with God. He was a bishop, but he was not too proud to tell us where he was wrong, and where he was changing all the time. He went about with only one thing in mind—he was going to give this ideology of unity and honesty to the whole country, from the Prime Minister down.’

An ardent young nationalist came to Bishops court one day. He was talking in a very fiery manner against the British. The

† *The Church of England Newspaper*, 13th August, 1937

Bishop came in and listened to him. ‘Yes, that is true,’ he said. ‘The British are like that. I am like that. I am very sorry about all this, we need to change.’

It was as if water had been poured on the fire. ‘You are not the only ones,’ the young man said. ‘We are wrong too. We Burmese need to change.’

In December Ma Nyein Tha was invited to visit India, and the next five months were spent there. The Metropolitan, Dr Foss Westcott, who had been called by Mahatma Gandhi ‘the one Englishman whom all Indians trusted’, was deeply concerned with the burning need of the European and Indian communities. He was one whose profound wisdom and immense humanity endeared him to all, of whatever religion or race. He initiated a series of weekend conferences in which people of all races and creeds could be brought together, and age-old divisions healed.

This was not to be easily done. They were up against entrenched selfishness and antagonism, or sometimes sheer indifference. In the face of this, they realised that they must forge a united team of deeply committed people, free enough from themselves to take responsibility for others.

‘A person’s change may take only a moment, but building into a person to produce leadership is a process and takes time. To reach out for crowds without such a team to take responsibility means building with shaky foundations,’ wrote Ma Nyein Tha.

‘Nothing but a miracle could have reconciled the people here,’ the Metropolitan cabled to England. ‘A man was here from secret Tibet; an Arab who had a burning hatred of the Jews; a Bengali from the district of the riots.’

Perhaps the greatest refreshment for Ma Nyein Tha was the weeks she spent in Peshawar in the home of Mr and Mrs Lionel Jardine, where he was Deputy Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province. People often came to her as she sat

quietly in the garden, under the shade of a spreading banyan tree—perhaps a soldier in trouble about his wife; or a woman would rest her brass water-pot for a moment as she paused to talk.

To stay in the Jardines' home was an illuminating experience for her. She had met members of the Indian Civil Service in the course of her life, but never one like this. Like her, Lionel Jardine had had a change of heart, so remarkable that the Indians noticed it, and one said that 'from being an absolute autocrat he became an actual servant of the people'.

The Jardines took her by car up the tortuous mountain road of the Khyber Pass with its wild, incredible scenery, to the frontier of Afghanistan, that forbidden country. There were soldiers on duty and a guard hut close by. She took a few tentative steps forward, until she found her way barred by the menacing bayonet of a fierce Afghan, prepared to attack her. She retreated to the shelter of the car, considerably shaken. It was the first time she had come up against violence. She told her host afterwards that everybody felt safe in Burma.

One day, after Ma Nyein Tha had returned to Burma, she and Ma Nu received a message from Bishop West. He had gone up river to a certain town, and asked them to join him. The young man to whom Ma Nyein Tha was engaged in her student days was now serving there as a government official. She knew this, and that she might see him and his wife. But she had dismissed him from her mind long ago, and she had no qualms.

As they sailed up the river and came in sight of the wharf where they were bound, he was there waiting to meet them. He took them to his home to meet his wife and children, and the years between slipped away. Ma Nyein Tha was relieved to feel a warmth of friendliness, and nothing more.

On the last day, he and his wife took her and two of her friends for a drive in their car. He was driving, with his wife beside him, and she and her friends were in the back. Sitting

there, relaxed and off her guard, suddenly she looked up and saw his reflection in the car mirror. He looked exactly as he had in college. All her old feelings swept over her, too strong for her to control. She had not realised how much she loved him, when she broke the engagement off all those years ago—and still loved him. That corner of her heart, she had thought, was securely locked. But the lid had flown open. She was in a panic.

'You are a stealer of someone else's husband,' a voice said in her heart. But she had loved him first, and he had loved her first.

So strong was the turmoil in her feelings that, when she and her friends were shown round a beautiful garden, it made no impression on her. They had dinner in the home of their old college matron, who had been a friend of his mother and had always wanted Ma Nyein Tha to marry him. It was a long evening of strain, and she was thankful when it was over.

In bed that night, all her pent-up emotion found expression in a flood of tears. She told Ma Nu, who was sharing a room with her, about the feelings that had overpowered her; and they prayed together.

The next morning he came in his car to take them to the boat, and they said goodbye. Going down river, the battle still continued. 'Lord,' she prayed, 'I do not want to love him any more. Please take this from me.'

The astonishing reply came, 'Of course you can love him.'

'What!' she exclaimed.

'With all your heart—but through Me.'

It was as if she was released from prison. God wanted her vulnerable heart to be available for Him to use as He chose, for anyone anywhere. It was soon after this that she wrote: 'To accept Christ's love for definite individuals changes the whole attitude of each to the other. This removes the fear of loving the other person—man or woman—or wanting to love someone in our own way for ourselves.'

Ma Nyein Tha was now free for fresh initiatives.

Not long after, an invitation arrived from the Metropolitan and others in Calcutta for Bishop West to go there for a series of meetings, along with his chaplain, Ma Nyein Tha, a Hindu headmaster, and a Muslim, M.A. Rashid.

On its heels came a cable from Dr Frank Buchman, inviting Ma Nyein Tha to go on to America from India. She was becoming more experienced in the ways of God with man, so she was at least ready to give the matter a thought, though her inclinations agreed with the commonsense of some of her friends—stay at home for a while. All the old reasons began assuming new forms of plausibility, especially the one that said, 'Six days by air to America, and sick, sick, sick all the way!' She was never a good traveller, and air travel then was not as easy as now. But finally came the direction, 'Go.'

She telephoned her family to say goodbye. 'We are with you,' they said. 'Do whatever God tells you.' She remarked later, 'I have a wonderful family, who expect me to do only what God wants, and I am most grateful for them.'

She went to the travel agent who suggested that she should take a round-the-world ticket. At that moment she had not much more than a taxi fare to the airport.

The last day arrived and her friends said to her, 'Ma Mi, we have just got a thousand dollars from home, and we think you should have it for your ticket.'

They stayed with Dr Foss Westcott in Calcutta, for the series of meetings that were being held, and at the conclusion Ma Nyein Tha went to get her visa for America. The Consul needed to know how she would support herself in America. 'Do you have fifty dollars?' he asked.

'No, I'm sorry,' she said.

'What are you going to do in America then?'

'God will provide,' she replied confidently.

The Consul was puzzled. 'Come, come,' he objected, 'the

streets here are crowded with people for whom God is not providing.'

'I know,' she said. 'But God will provide for me.'

'I'd like to have a certificate to that effect,' he remarked dryly. So she told him how the money had come for her ticket.

He looked at her. He didn't meet many people like this in the course of his work. 'Guess I'll have to have a guarantee, all the same. Do you know anybody here?'

'Yes,' she answered. 'I'm staying with the Metropolitan of India, and the Bishop of Rangoon is there too.'

So he asked for a letter from them. She obtained it and he gave her the visa. As she arrived back at the Metropolitan's house once more, Bishop West came running out. 'Ma Mi,' he said, 'we've got the money.' They went straight to change it into American travellers' cheques, just in time before the office closed. The Consul had wanted her to have fifty dollars, and she had three hundred and fifty.

The next day she left for America.

It was July, 1939, and an assembly had been planned in the Hollywood Bowl, a natural amphitheatre in California. Thirty thousand people crammed the vast area, and thousands more were turned away. Europe stood on the brink of the Second World War, which broke out less than seven weeks later.

'Leaders and citizens alike are longing for permanent peace,' said Dr Buchman. 'But longing is not enough. There must be a new spirit. There must be a fight against the causes of conflict, against selfishness, greed and hate.'

Ma Nyein Tha was called upon to speak. She stood on the platform, a small figure in a spotless white jacket, red silk *longyi*, and with a white flower stuck jauntily in the high crown of her jet-black hair. Behind her, four giant searchlights beamed straight up to the sky, representing the four absolute standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love.

The message given to her for that expectant crowd, demon-

strated with her scarf, was the way to deal with conflict. It was one she used, with variations, on many occasions.

'It takes two to clash,' she said. 'When I insist, you resist, and there's a clash. When I do not insist, you cannot resist, and we can find out together what is right, what God wants. When one decides to stop clashing and to get back to God, it makes it easier for the other to get back to God. Enemies become friends.'†

The Hollywood Bowl was the beginning of a nation-wide campaign, in which Ma Nyein Tha took an active part. But in the midst of it all, something was wrong. People still came to her for help. She talked, words came, but they came from a heavy heart. Words had lost their music.

She was walking in the garden of the hotel where she was staying. A friend joined her. They went to Ma Nyein Tha's room to listen to God together. She found herself writing down, 'You ungrateful wretch. You are sand and not salt.'

When sand is put in water it sinks to the bottom and remains gritty. It keeps both its identity and its personality. Salt dissolves. It loses its identity but keeps its personality. She was not salt, she was sand. She had not wanted to identify herself with America. She was an individualist, she was lonely, and she wanted to go home.

'Lord,' she said, 'I am sorry. Please forgive me. If You want me to, I will stay in America all my life.'

She was no longer a Burman visiting America. 'This is my country. These are my people,' she said. Her malaise was cured. Yet she was always herself, with her distinctive Burmese personality. A secretary, who was taking dictation from her one day, carries in her mind a memory of Ma Nyein Tha curled up with her feet tucked under her in the corner of a red plush sofa, Burmese fashion, her sandals placed neatly on the floor, completely oblivious of the people milling around.

† See photographs, facing page 96

‘These are my people’

The time came for Ma Nyein Tha to return home to Burma. She travelled via Japan and China. As her ship sailed out of the Golden Gate, San Francisco’s lovely harbour, she looked back with affection upon the shores of America. Crossing the Pacific she had leisure to think. In Morton Lane School God had shown her how to open her closed heart. Now He was showing her how to open it wider still, to take the whole world into it.

In Shanghai she stayed for some days, seeing many of the Chinese whom she had last met in America. She was invited to broadcast.

Japan had been at war with China for three years now, and the sight of the devastation in Shanghai brought the grim reality of war home to her. She thought feelingly, ‘These are my people.’ Her great-grandfather had come to Burma from China and had married a Burmese woman. She was very proud of her Chinese ancestry.

From Shanghai she went to Hong Kong, where she met Dr Catherine Woo, headmistress of a leading girls’ school and the first Chinese woman to be decorated by King George V for her public services. A warm friendship sprang up between the two women, who had much in common.

Kay Allen, wife of an American professor in Rangoon University, had come from Burma to join Ma Nyein Tha. Together they visited Dr Woo’s school and spoke to her girls. Ma Nyein Tha went to the heart of young and old with her marvellous demonstrations with her hands.

From Hong Kong a flight over the Japanese lines brought Ma Nyein Tha and Kay Allen to Chungking. 'We never knew when the Japanese planes would attack the planes going to Chungking,' Ma Nyein Tha remarked later.

At Chungking she was guest of the Chinese Government, staying in the Government Guest House. News had gone ahead of her to this wartime capital of China, and a luncheon was given for her.

It was while they were in Chungking that a merchant sea captain met them. Captain John Storey, whose boat, *The Wanchien*, was anchored in the Yangtse off Chungking, was so intrigued by what he heard from them that he offered the use of his boat for a 'house-party'. People came from far and wide—Chinese, Americans, British—for training in a new way of living.

Soon after her return to Burma, the Bishop of Rangoon invited an English school inspector to meet Ma Nyein Tha. He describes the encounter: 'We were seated round the table discussing the state of affairs in Burma in those comparatively palmy days. The English woman turned to Ma Nyein Tha.

"Why don't you Burmese like us?" she asked, genuinely puzzled. "Look what we have done for your country. We have given you railways, newspapers, radio, river steamers, hospitals, schools, justice, vaccination, telephone and telegraph, cars and machinery, not to mention the cinema."

'While delicately avoiding an argument, Ma Mi managed to say, "I agree with so much of what you have been saying. But I would just like to put one question. True, you have given us all these things, and maybe more. I am very grateful. I believe many of my people are." She paused. "But have you given us your hearts?"'

It began to come clear that the increasing group of those working in Rangoon needed to find a place where they could make a home together. A flat was found in the heart of the city,

in Sule Pagoda Road, and here Ma Nyein Tha, Ma Nu, and Daw Saw Nyein, an older Burmese woman, settled down. Very soon others were added to them. There was Francis Ah Mya, the son of mountain Karens from a remote village, who was now becoming a leader of his people, with his wife Catherine and their baby daughter. There was Tajima, a young Japanese from Tokyo, James Tong, a Chinese student from Peking, and Sarah Yiu from Peking also. 'Ma Mi was just like a mother to the whole crowd of us,' said one. They learned to live and work together in a very simple way.

Francis Ah Mya, later to become Archbishop of Burma, described that time as 'most difficult but very interesting, and most valuable in that it had given us the secret of how to work together, how to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the result of that there have been very remarkable fruits of the Spirit.'

Among those who came from time to time was Captain John Storey, when his ship put into Rangoon port. He paints a word picture of what went on in the flat. 'I think of all the places I have been anywhere in the Far East, that flat impressed me most, particularly because of the contact Ma Nyein Tha had with members of the Burmese Government. These men were subjected to many pressures from all sides. She felt they had need of some place where they could just rest. Many who came used it as a place where they could pray.'

Ma Nyein Tha was the perfect hostess. There would be a knock at the door, and a Cabinet Minister would be there. No word would be said, but he would slip into the room and be quiet; and then he would go away. And this was happening all the time. At Christmas time a young Karen, who had been beaten up by Burmans, brought out his blood-stained jacket and burned it on the fire, as a token of a new relationship of love and forgiveness between Karens and Burmans.

A birthday party on the flat roof of the house in Sule Pagoda

Road opened the way for launching a campaign for national construction and unity in the country. It was November, 1940, and the centre of a laughing group standing round the table was Ma Nyein Tha, with her tall young friend, Ma Nu, beside her. Why were they all laughing, the puzzled Ma Nyein Tha wondered? And why were they looking with such amusement at the high crown of her hair? Then she realised what was happening. In place of the flower that adorned her *sadone*, Ma Nu had stuck in her hair a miniature flag—the flag of Denmark.

Ma Nu put another flag, and another—Norway, Switzerland, Holland, the Union Jack, the Stars and Stripes, the flags of Japan, China—every country to which she had been sent was flying its flag in her hair. The flags made a good setting for the evening. Three Buddhist monks were there, a British ‘Tommy’, the English Bishop of Rangoon, a Greek family, an Australian doctor, a party of men from the Netherlands, Burmese officials, and others.

During the party a leading nationalist and educator asked Bishop West if he would propose the toast of ‘Burma’ at the National Day dinner the following week, and if Ma Nyein Tha would respond. Burma National Day had hitherto been highly explosive. Could Burma demonstrate instead the possibility of national unity, even among heterogeneous races, through a constructive programme which enlisted everybody within her borders?

The programme began with a nation-wide broadcast, when the Director of Public Information, U Ba Lwin, spoke of ‘The Eight-fold Path to Burma’s Freedom’, modelled upon the Buddhist Eight-fold Path of Right Belief, and making practical the relationship between what men believe in and the way they live. That evening over three hundred people came to the National Day dinner in Rangoon City Hall. Everybody seemed to be there—the Premier of Burma, the Advocate General, members of the Cabinet, the Bishop, the Mayor, judges. A

picture of the Burmese hero and liberator, General Bandoola, riding on horseback at full gallop, dominated the hall, displayed in a poster on the stage. He was riding again to fight greed, fear and hate, and set Burma free. 'Bandoola rides again.' The same picture appeared in newspapers and on hoardings, and on the screen in cinemas.

Then came something new, an English bishop giving the toast of 'Burma'. 'We can make this National Day not only a day of celebration,' he suggested, 'but the launching of a nationwide campaign against personal and communal selfishness.' Ma Nyein Tha replied to the toast. She was speaking to the leaders of her own people. She had to come to grips with the intangible forces bidding for their hearts and minds. The Government had recently published the report of an enquiry into bribery and corruption, but she made no direct reference to it. Her manner was disarming.

'This is the beginning of a new era,' she said, 'of national unity and freedom. Some of us like to think that our troubles are very complicated. Actually they are very simple. What is the answer to all this dishonesty? The answer to dishonesty is an honest man. I would like to see honesty walking about on two feet. Gentlemen, I would like to remind you, you all have two feet. There is nothing complicated about absolute honesty, it's just a matter of being absolutely honest in everything with everybody all the time. Some of us are partly honest with some people some of the time.'

Ma Nyein Tha knew the tricks of the mind. Each would be thinking, 'I certainly do a bit of it. But I am nothing like U Maung or Maung Gye.' So she continued, 'We do not want people who are moderately honest, who reject most of the bribes. Who wants to draw most of his salary? To eat an egg that is moderately good? To live in a house that keeps out most of the rain? To travel in a ship that floats most of the time?'

'I'm talking about honesty, not because it is the only quality

we need but because it's basic. We can't build a house on rotten posts.' That illustration told, in a country where many houses are built on posts out of reach of flood water. 'We can't build on corruption.'

The effect of these speeches began to appear in a country where corruption was rampant. In Moulmein a pawnshop keeper refused to take a hammer he believed to be stolen. Police north of Mandalay had been stopping trucks on the Burma Road with lend-lease goods for China, levying their own toll. Now these trucks passed unmolested.

People in the villages were affected. Thai Thu, a Karen far away in the delta, was fired with the idea of building unity. One day there had come to his house a Burman who had been walking a long way and wanted water. But Thai Thu was only conscious of his resentment against the Burmans — they had oppressed his people and done them down. The hate inside him made him say, 'No, get away from my house.'

A night or two later he had been on his veranda just before bedtime. There were steps in the dark. 'Could you give me a place for the night?' It was the voice of an Indian. 'I am a long way from home, and it's too late to get back.'

Thai Thu thought of Indians as moneylenders who had kept his people impoverished and in debt. 'No! Get off the step of my hut,' he called.

Recalling these incidents, he regretted his behaviour. They stuck in his mind. At last he decided to seek out the Burman. 'I'm sorry,' he said when he found him. 'I shouldn't have behaved like that.' From that day they became friends.

Encouraged, he went to the Indian. He apologised. Not many days later, that Indian was staying with him in his hut.

The Karen leaders caught the spirit. This most isolationist of minorities came out into the open. They celebrated their New Year's Day in a new way. They arranged a dinner in the City Hall, and leaders came to it from all ethnic groups. Francis Ah

'THESE ARE MY PEOPLE'

Mya was Master of Ceremonies; Burma's elder statesman, U Tin Tut, spoke, and a prominent Karen leader, the grand old father of their race, presided. He referred to the Karens' long-standing aloofness, apologised for it, and said that now his people would bring all their assets and join in with the main stream of Burmese life.

Mission to the Mahatma

Early in the summer of 1941 there came to Ma Nyein Tha one of those experiences which she described as 'adventures in obedience'. This, in her own words, is how it began:

'I was working with the Bishop of Rangoon. One morning as I sat on the big veranda at Bishopscourt the thought came to me, "Go and see Gandhiji." I said, "How ridiculous! Who am I to go and see this uncrowned king of India?"

'I mentioned it to John Tyndale-Biscoe, the Bishop's chaplain. "Don't brush it aside," he said. "Maybe God really wants you to go and see him."

'We thought we would take the first step and find out if there was a plane going. We telephoned the travel agency. "Yes," they said. "There is a plane going tomorrow morning early, and there is a seat."

'Just two days before, an old friend had sent me thirty pounds from England. So here was the money for the ticket, and here was the seat on the plane. Next morning I started out. When I got into the plane, there was one Indian man and myself, only two from Asia. All the rest were white people and they were all put into the regular seats, while we were put into the baggage compartment on two chairs. Everything rose up inside me, and I said, "These people! Just look at the way they treat us! I paid just as much money as they did."

"Are you going to see Gandhiji with that in your heart?" God said to me.

"Lord," I said, "I am very sorry. Please forgive me."

'The Bishop had cabled the Metropolitan of India, saying that I was coming to see Gandhiji. He had sent friends to meet me at the airport and take me into their home.'

Before leaving Burma, Ma Nyein Tha had sent a cable to the Mahatma, saying that she was coming to see him, and giving the time of her arrival. Roger Hicks, an old friend of hers, was staying at the ashram at the time, sharing the Mahatma's life and entering into his thoughts and problems. At one time Hicks had taught in Always College, Travancore, where he inspired the young Indian students to go with him to a neighbouring community of Harijans ('Untouchables'), visiting their mud huts, working with them in their villages, and washing the lepers' wounds. The Viceroy of that time said that the work in that college was the finest thing he had seen on his tour of India.

Mahadev Desai, Gandhiji's secretary, came into his room. 'Bapu is very cross with you,' he said.

'What have I done now?' Roger Hicks asked.

'You must not invite your friends here without first asking his permission.'

'But I have done no such thing,' Hicks answered in surprise.

Mahadev then produced Ma Nyein Tha's cable. Roger Hicks had just been telling the Mahatma stories about her, but he had no idea that she was coming, nor could she possibly have known that he was staying in the ashram.

Gandhiji consulted Hicks where she should stay. Should it be in a hotel in Wardha, or in the ashram with himself and his disciples?

'She will be quite happy with a little space three feet by six,' Hicks replied.

It was a day and a night's journey by train from Calcutta. Ma Nyein Tha spent the long hot hours in prayer, as she travelled on into the heart of India across the dusty plains. The monsoon was not due until June and it was now April. India looked very arid after her own green country. At last they reached the

station of Wardha and there she saw Roger Hicks' smiling face as he waited for her with a companion. The light two-wheeled tonga in which they travelled bumped over the rough road, while Ma Nyein Tha plied the two men with questions about the ashram and the way the Mahatma lived.

They arrived just before evening prayers and took their place on the ground among the worshippers. Gandhiji and his wife sat together at one end of a hollow square, with the men on the right and the music-makers opposite them. Ma Nyein Tha sat praying among the women on the left. She stole a glance at the man she had come so far to see. In the darkness she could hardly make out his face; only a white figure sitting alone with people grouped around.

Presently the silence was broken by a fine voice chanting prayers; then the musicians gave the lead and the whole group joined in the singing. A further prayer, quiet, and it was over.

'At the end of the prayers Gandhiji came towards us, and as he shook hands, he said, "Hullo, stranger! And now you are in my house—hullo, friend!"

"Mr Gandhi," I said, "I don't feel like a stranger any more. I feel very much at home here."

'So he said, "You have come to see me?"

"Yes. God sent me to you."

"Have you had any supper?" he next asked.

"Not yet."

"All right," he said. "Come along with me."

He took her along to his single-roomed hut, bare of table or chair, with only a thin mattress in the corner. He had nothing he called his own but his stick and his spinning wheel, his watch and a few other items.

'You never saw Gandhiji by himself, but with everybody. His doctor, his secretary, everybody was sitting there. He gave me my supper of mush and milk (corn meal boiled in water) and dates. Then he said, "Now tell me what God said to you."

'I said, "Mr Gandhi, God told me to tell you to call all India to return to Him." This was 1940, so Pakistan and India were not divided.

'He was very quiet for a moment, then he said, "That is a very difficult thing for one man to do. I don't know how to do it."

'That gave me my chance to tell him that it was not what one man could do, but what God could do through one man. I told him what God had done through Frank Buchman and many other people. I told him about the villages in Burma and what God was doing everywhere.

"Have you been to India?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Where?"

"All over India."

"Why haven't I heard about you? You must be a very rich woman to be travelling like this."

"Yes," I said. "I have a very rich Father." And I told him about the Englishwoman obeying guidance and sending a Burmese woman thirty pounds, not knowing what it was for. And then God telling the Burmese woman to go and see Gandhiji, to give him a message.'

This greatly intrigued the Mahatma and he asked Ma Nyein Tha to tell him more about her belief that 'when God guides, He provides'. She told him story after story of how God had provided not only travelling expenses, but for all her other needs as well. And how she had taken the message of God's love around the world and seen many discover for themselves the secret that was the spring of her life: 'When man listens, God speaks.' He drew her out to tell many a story of how she had seen human nature change, and bring a new factor into apparently impossible situations. She explained with the use of her handkerchief what happens when tensions occur between two people, each wanting his own way; and how those tensions are resolved when each instead seeks not his way but the right way.

'Yes,' said Gandhi with a twinkle. 'It works very well with a handkerchief, but does it work with people?'

Ma Nyein Tha had discovered that it did. She told him she had found that anyone, whatever his race or creed, could listen to a wisdom greater than his own and obey; that the guidance of God must be tested by the four standards of absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love, and it was necessary to decide to accept these standards as a test for every action.

At one point Gandhiji, who was a great tease, interrupted her and said:

'I have just had guidance.'

'What is it?' Ma Nyein Tha asked innocently.

'Half of everything you get you give to me!' was the reply.

They joked and laughed together until it was time to go to bed.

'He asked me how long I could stay. I said, "Mr Gandhi, my work is done. I must go back tomorrow morning."

'So he said, "You must come back and stay here with me as long as possible."

"When God sends me again," I said, "I will come."

'Later Mr Desai, Gandhiji's secretary, said to me, "Mr Gandhi never asks people to come and see him, but here he is asking you. So you must come, back."

'I said to him, "When God sends me back, I shall be most happy to come."

'Presently Gandhiji looked at his watch and said, "We all go to bed at eight-thirty. Now, we sleep on the ground. It is the finest bed in the world. There is room for everybody. Mother Earth. Where would you like to sleep? On the ground or on a cot?"

'So I said, "Mr Gandhi sleeps on the ground. I'll sleep on the ground too."

"No, no," said Gandhiji. "We can easily find you a bed."

“Really,” I said, “I’d just as soon have the ground.”

‘He looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and wagged his finger at me, and he said, “What was the first standard you told me about? Absolute honesty? When you are not used to it, it is very difficult all at once to sleep on the ground.”

‘So I said, “Mr Gandhi, may I have a cot?”

‘He wagged his finger at me again and said, “You see, the difficulty with you is, you only know what God says. I hear what the devil says also.”

‘In Asia we travel with our own bedding. So I had taken just two sheets and a little bit of a pillow. I went and got that. A cot was brought, and he sent me to get a warm blanket from his wife. Then he took hold of one side of the sheet and I took hold of the other, and he helped me to make the bed up.

“Now,” he said, “You sleep here and I’ll sleep right there,” ten or twelve feet away from me. “The gong will go at four-twenty tomorrow morning. If you think it’s right you can get up for prayers with us; but if you want to sleep on, you sleep on.”

‘He slept in the middle, and everybody slept all around him right under the stars on the ground. I just put my head on the pillow, and thanked God, and slept.

‘In the morning when the gong went at four-twenty, I got up also and sat there for prayers with them, and prayed too. It was then that I saw the secret of his leadership. He lives close to God. He gives God first place in his life. Therein lies his greatness. He was not too busy, nor too sleepy, nor too occupied with things, to give time to God. The greatness of a leader is to be measured not by the thousands he attaches to himself, but by the number of people he inspires with his own source of inspiration.

‘After the prayers, people massaged him every morning. So while he was being massaged there, I went into the hut to have my own quiet time. One of his secretaries, the daughter of a Maharajah, came in and said to me, “You said God sent you.

Don't you think your desire to see the great man brought you here?"

"I said, "I don't know, but I came because my conviction is that God wanted me to come and give Gandhiji a message."

"But how do you know that God guides you?"

"By listening and obeying, I learn to distinguish God's voice."

"Then Gandhiji came in. "What are you doing?" he said.

"I am listening to God." "What did God tell you this morning?" So I read out to him what I had written, and then we had breakfast of oranges and dates together.

"Then he said, "I am going for a walk. Would you like to come along with me? Are you packed?"

"I hadn't unpacked. I was to stay just for the night. I said, "Yes, I would love to go with you." So I trotted after him. He walked very fast. He took me into the village and introduced me to people. When we came back it was about seven o'clock, and the car was there to take me back to the train.

"Can you stay longer with us?" he asked.

"No," I said. "God sent me to give you this message, and now I must go back."

"If ever you come to India again," he said, "you must come and stay with me." So we said goodbye, and I left.

"Very soon after I got back to Burma, the thought came to me one morning, "Gandhiji and the Viceroy listening to God together. God has a much bigger plan for India than either Gandhiji or the Viceroy dreams of."

"So I wrote that quickly, and sent it to Gandhiji by airmail. Shortly after a card came, written by his own hand: "Shri Ma Nyein Tha, I do try to listen to God and to obey Him with all my heart."

"So I think of him as a man who has God as his Guru, his Teacher. Very often we forget the source of Gandhi's power—God. We only see the results. Somehow when you look at him

you see him as if he is waiting on God, waiting for the Lord to tell him something, and that he really makes God his Teacher. We can't all be Gandhi, but together we can give to India, and India give to the world what Gandhi has given, making God our Guru.

'Soon after, I found in the papers that Gandhiji had gone to see the Viceroy. But of course I don't know what they talked about. That's not my business, but God's. That was just before the war, and I never saw him again.'

Adventures in obedience

In December 1941 the unexpected happened. The Japanese struck at Pearl Harbour, and within days had crossed the border from Thailand into Burma.

The invasion thrust of the Japanese army into the Tenasserim area threw the country into the utmost confusion. Thousands of people lost all their possessions, and many were separated from their families. The first thrust of the invaders was directed upon Moulmein, and among the refugees thronging the roads and rivers of the country, fleeing northward towards the mountainous regions of Upper Burma, were members of Ma Nyein Tha's family. From wherever they were living at that time, with one consent they made for the north, where one sister was already working in Myitkyina. U Cho was now seventy-five years old, and his wife seventy-two.

Ma Nyein Tha was in Rangoon when the first bombers raided the city. There was near panic among its occupants. In the next days seventy per cent fled the city, leaving essential work, leaving everything, blocking the roads out of the city. Every ship leaving the docks was crowded.

Captain John Storey was in port at the time. He was leaving for India that evening with a cargo of timber and rice, and he urged Ma Nyein Tha to come with him. But she knew quite certainly that it was here in her own country and with her own family that God intended her to be in this time of peril, and she had no hesitation. When she was alone, she opened her Bible at the ninety-first Psalm. The words she read were a sure descrip-

tion of the days that were to follow:

'He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.... Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.'

These words brought her strength and assurance. 'The terror by night' would be for her and for those with her a literal experience. Only for three days, during those three years of occupation, were they free from planes, sometimes Japanese, sometimes British and American.

She packed a few essential possessions, her Bible among them, and took one last look at the flat which had been home for these last months to her and others, and where she had seen so many miracles take place. The God who did all those marvellous things would still be with her wherever she was. There was purpose still in the days ahead as there had been in the past.

She closed the door behind her and set out on her journey north, to join her family.

When they eventually came together in the river town of Myitkyina, there were twenty-two of them. Throughout the years of occupation they stayed together, a family of three generations: U Cho and his wife, the seven daughters, the two sons and their wives (one son had died in his youth), one adopted daughter, one nephew, three grandchildren, and four girls who had been with the family almost all their lives.

Myitkyina is a pleasant city built at the foot of the Kachin Hills, whose serrated heights rise between Burma and China away to the east of the city. Here the Irrawaddy flows, broad and swift. To the west lies the Hukawng Valley, and beyond are the mountains bordering Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh on

the Indian side of the frontier. The Kachins who inhabit the Burmese side are so closely related to the Nagas on the Indian side that the frontier seems no more than a thin, unreal pen line on a map.

It was in crossing these almost impassable mountains that so many refugees from the Japanese perished. It was here, too, that the Japanese advance into India was finally halted.

Myitkyina lies at the head of the railway which runs for a thousand miles from Rangoon, and of the trunk road which joins the famous Burma Road at Muse on the China border, then continues further south through Lashio. Boasting an airfield with a runway long enough to accommodate medium-sized planes as well as Zero fighters, it was to become the hub of the northernmost Japanese military forces.

A letter from an American Baptist missionary, Frederick Dickason, described conditions there before the Japanese arrived. 'We found that it was being used as the evacuation camp for Upper Burma. In the three weeks that we were there it grew from 500 to 2,500. It was my job to try to find accommodation for the new people as they turned up. Also I was in charge of the camp work brigade digging air raid shelters, carrying water, firewood, etc. For a couple of days I worked out on the airport helping load planes with evacuees. As extras I had general supervision of camp sanitation and latrine digging. When cases of smallpox and cholera appeared in camp, it was my job to drive them to the hospital.

'The American Army and CNAC (Chinese Nationalist) planes did wonderful work in taking our refugees. Towards the end the RAF also helped, but largely with the wounded. We sometimes got as many as 75 persons in the big DC3 planes which normally carry 22 passengers in America. Such loads had to be flown over mountains which went up to 8,000 feet or more, in weather which was often cloudy and stormy.

'Towards the end of April and beginning of May the Japan-

ese advance became as rapid as their armoured cars could drive. Within a week's time the Japanese pushed from the Thai border below Loikaw, south of Taunggye, to Lashio. There were evidently no Chinese troops there to hold them up. Both in this region and on the Irrawaddy front the retreat became a rout.

'This sudden development brought hundreds of refugees crowding into Myitkyina together with large numbers of wounded soldiers. As the latter had precedence on the planes, civil evacuation was considerably slowed up just at a time when it was becoming really urgent for Indians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans to get out of the country. Cross-country treks for men were arranged, though these would be from two hundred to three hundred miles long through malarial, mountainous country, just at the beginning of the monsoon, with practically no food available along the way. With cholera raging along some of the trails, it was likely that only about half of those who started would get to India alive.

'Finally on May 2nd, the Colonel in charge of the American Military Mission in Myitkyina told us that if we intended to leave Burma we must leave at once, inasmuch as the planes on evacuation work would be able to come only a day or so more, as the Japanese had secured an air base less than one hundred and fifty miles away, and we had no fighter or anti-aircraft protection. Regretfully, therefore, we handed over our duties to some of our Burmese and Kachin Christian people who did not intend to leave Burma. Dr Hla Bu and Ma Nyein Tha were two of the faithful standbys who carried on.'

An English officer in the Indian Engineers, Geoffrey Jardine, was stationed at Myitkyina, wrestling with the near-hopeless task of distributing maps of the escape routes to India. The Japanese were advancing so quickly that by the time the maps had been flown over from India, the districts concerned were already in enemy hands.

He had heard of Ma Nyein Tha from his brother Lionel, and

found she was in Myitkyina, working in the American Baptist Kachin School used as a transit camp for the refugees. They met on a raft crossing the Irrawaddy, and that encounter was, for him, 'the one bright spot' in those dark, confusing days. He counted this 'chance' meeting as one of the interventions of a Providence he was beginning to recognise along his way. Perhaps something of her unwavering faith communicated itself to him.

In Myitkyina he met his Colonel, who was leaving the next day by the Homalin-Tamu route. The Hukawng Valley route by which desperate hordes were attempting to escape—which had become known as the Valley of Despair because of the thousands who perished there—had now become impracticable because of the appalling conditions of the monsoon weather. Lieutenant Jardine was instructed to remain behind for the present, and, with the help of a Burmese officer, to carry on with the reproduction and distribution of fresh maps for the refugees. This he did.

The time came when the decision must be made whether to stay any longer where he was, risking capture by the Japanese, or whether to trek by one of the two perilous routes to India, across the mountains on which thousands ultimately perished.

'As I thought about my position,' he recounted, 'the question that occurred to me was this: have I been landed here by blind chance, or is there some positive, directing force behind the world in general and my present predicament in particular? It seemed to me that God had brought me there. I had been kept there. I found, too, that I had left my boots behind—a small point but worth noting.'

He decided to carry on with his work as best he could. 'While others were fleeing,' stated Ma Nyein Tha, 'his clear conviction was to stay with my people.' He was still at his post when the Japanese arrived, and he was taken prisoner.

Just before the Japanese came, Ma Nyein Tha and her family

were advised by an American to escape into the Kachin Hills. For security reasons, all her photographs and passport must be burned.

Hours after their arrival in a village forty-seven miles from Myitkyina and close to the Chinese border, planes bombed the place, killing many. There were no trenches, so they took cover under the house where they were staying. Houses fifty yards away were flattened by bombs, and they lost nine-tenths of all they possessed. They had very little clothing left, but they managed to save their mosquito nets to protect them as far as possible from malaria, and blankets to keep them warm on cold nights.

Sooner or later they would come into contact with the occupying forces. They talked it over together. 'Love your enemies,' Jesus had said. They must have no hatred for the Japanese.

Their decision was soon put to the test, for it was not long before they met the invaders. As Christians they were considered to be pro-Allies. They were followed wherever they went. The Japanese never allowed them to stay more than two or three months in one place. All through the three years of the occupation the soldiers were all around them, and sometimes in the same house. 'Some of them were very good to us,' Ma Nyein Tha said.

After two months they returned to Myitkyina, where they were assaulted by a new peril—malaria. First U Cho became ill, then one of the sisters, and Ma Nyein Tha herself. Later in life she had recurring attacks of the fever.

Planes came every day of the two years that they were in the Myitkyina area, and sometimes bombs fell very close to them. They were always in huts with no doors. Their good watch-dog Pluto had died, just when they needed him to protect them from thieves. But they were unharmed.

Once when they were told they must move, there were two

possible choices. One was to go and stay among the paddy fields with Kachin Christians with whom they had already made friends and who would welcome them; they offered to build them a bamboo and thatch hut and provide bullock-cart transport.

The other alternative was a big unused cowshed on the other side of the river, about a quarter of a mile from a Shan village. It had a thatched roof and a mud floor, but no walls. It was close to the jungle, so that thieves and robbers could molest them, and close to the river so that they would be in danger of malarial mosquitoes. Moreover the people of the village were not likely to be friendly, as they were not of the same faith; and during the war everyone was suspicious of everyone else, especially of strangers. In addition, as there was no one from that village serving in the Allied army—whereas many of the Kachins were—there would be no reason why it should not come under bomb and machinegun attack from the Allied planes.

'No matter which way you look at it,' Ma Nyein Tha said afterwards, 'it seemed most reasonable and sensible to go with the Kachins. However, by that time we had learnt no place or people could give us adequate help and security. The only thing to do was to find out from God what His plan was and where He wanted us. So we all sat down in a circle on the bamboo floor and prayed and listened for His direction.

'Then each one said what he or she felt about it. Some were for crossing the river and some were for the paddy fields with the Kachins. So we listened again. The thought came to someone, "He leadeth me beside the still waters." Everyone had the thought we should go across the river. We hired boats and went across.'

The shed that was to become their home for the next few weeks was a large one. They cut bamboos and made a raised platform running right down the middle of it. Some of the family went out and cut fresh thatch to repair the roof. Mat-

tresses were no problem, for there was plenty of straw to be found; they could have fresh mattresses every time they moved. Bamboo flooring gave adequate space for beds. Within a few days they had settled down in the big hut.

They went calling on their new neighbours in Mina Village, and quickly made friends with them. Though they had been told that there would not be any food for them, they discovered there was plenty to be had, fruit and vegetables, corn and even coconuts which they had not seen for some time; and the prices were reasonable.

A shed with a roof and no walls. Yet they were safe from wild animals and from thieves. They were not a family to sit down under difficulties, and there was no limit to their resourcefulness. They were able to pick edible plants and leaves, blossoms and roots, which grew abundantly in the nearby jungle. They learnt to make *jaggery* (a coarse dark brown sugar) from sugar cane, *ngapi* from fish the boys got from the river. Five of the family went out reaping in the fields and were paid in kind. This was the only way of obtaining rice. They had fresh vegetables and egg plants from their own vegetable garden. Oil was a luxury; but water in plenty they could fetch from the river, and firewood was there for the gathering in the jungle.

To earn money for their other needs they sewed and knitted garments, made face powder from rice powder for sale, *mo-hinga* and biscuits, sold wild spinach and bamboo roots. They even sold their clothes and jewellery.

When it was time for them to move again, once more their 'orders' from God were explicit: to prepare food, for within three days they would cross the river. By now they had learned to move only when they felt God was telling them to do so, and to wait until all were in complete agreement. A Japanese officer brought a permit from the Commander to move to Sitapur, a Gurkha village three miles from Myitkyina. Here there were plenty of vegetables and milk and fish. They cut thatch, got

bamboo from a raft which came in just as they started from the other bank in boats provided by the headman, and built their own hut.

Only a few days after they left Mina Village it was bombed; the cowshed where they had lived was machinegunned, and many more houses destroyed. There were rumours that Christians were to be arrested, and their belongings searched for enemy property.

Ma Nyein Tha and another of the family went to see a cousin who had just returned from a trip down south, where he worked in a sugar mill before the war. He told them he found a great heap of sugar on the floor of the deserted mill, dumped by people living round who wanted the gunny sacks (a strong, coarse jute fabric) to make into clothes. Sugar in the north could not be bought for love or money, and he was given some to bring back with him. He gave a bowl of the precious commodity to Ma Nyein Tha.

When they returned, they said to Daw Thein Chone, 'Mother, close your eyes and open your hands,' and proudly placed the bowl in her hands. To their astonishment, the whole family burst out laughing.

'Come, we will show you something,' they said to the puzzled two, and took them into the kitchen. There was a whole bag of about a hundred pounds of sugar, with a four-gallon tin of cooking butter, and—most welcome sight—a hundred pound bag of salt and a bag of onions—all things that were not to be had.

They told them that a Japanese soldier they had never seen before had come and asked for bananas and pineapples. They had none, but had not God said, 'Love your enemies'? So the eldest sister took him into the hut and showed him all they had.

'Do you want any salt?' he asked her.

'Yes,' she said, and held out a small bowl.

'Oh no, no!' he said, and going outside, he brought his truck

to the front gate. 'Come,' he said to her, 'take all these things. Tomorrow I shall come back. Have bananas and pineapples ready for me.'

With great gratitude to God and to the soldier who brought these luxuries, they scooped up sugar in their hands and ate and ate, and picking lemons in the garden, they made lemonade. The next morning they bought the best bananas and pineapples to be found in the village, ready for the soldier when he returned. But he never came back, and they never knew why he had brought those things to them particularly, rather than to other houses in the village. All they could think of was that God knew their needs, and that He had supplied them through this unknown Japanese.

The time came when the Spirit seemed to be moving them on again, with 'Get up and go south' (in Acts 8: 26), and again 'You have stayed long enough among the hills here' (Deuteronomy 1: 6). They immediately made preparations, and on February 15th, 1944, left for Sagaing, a hundred miles south down the Irrawaddy River. Others who had left earlier had to walk the whole distance; but they set out, with their baggage and the weaker members of the family in two carts, and had only walked nine miles when, through 'another miracle', transport was provided for all of them. They travelled, only by night, in an open railway truck, sometimes attached to a military train; yet no planes pursued them.

In six days they reached Sagaing railway station, four miles from the town, at one o'clock in the morning. They walked to the town and waited at the tollgate, exhausted and huddled together for warmth, until it opened. At eight-thirty the gate-keeper came out. They discovered that his daughter was a graduate of the Mandalay Mission Girls' School and he was at once ready to help. He obtained shelter for them at a nearby monastery.

That night planes bombed some places about three hundred

yards from where they were. It was their first experience of a night raid. 'Another time houses all round us within a radius of a hundred yards were bombed and burnt, and ours was the only one in the area left untouched. These are only a few instances of the way God took care of us.'

When they left Myitkyina to come south, people thought they had made a mistake. But less than two weeks after they left, an American glider-borne and tank force in a surprise attack overran the airfield and almost captured Myitkyina. In the whole town not one building was left standing, and Sitapur itself, where the family had been living, was so badly hit that not even a bush was left unharmed.

They were in the monastery until November. When the bombing became more constant, they moved to a monastery outside the town, where there was a large cave in the hillside.

Everyone advised against the move, because of the danger from robbers in the hills. But, 'Depend on God and not on any human being' came the insistent thought.

By now the bombing had intensified. They had to share the cave with two Japanese army officers, which brought fresh problems. 'In their own way they were quite pleasant, and robbers dared not come so long as there were soldiers on the hills: but it was a bit of a strain, for we had to account for every visitor, patient or friend—our sister-in-law is a doctor—every time we went out, and our income and expenditure. It was no fun living at such close quarters. Only continuous prayer, thanksgiving and trust in God relieved the strain. I was separated from all my friends around the world. I didn't have to know where they were. I just had to think of this one and that one, and send my heart up to God and out to them. We learned to be grateful to God for everything that came our way; for difficulties and hard times, for they made us depend only on God; for the choice bits—a good cave, a package of candles, a chair, a packet of sweets, a box of matches, a reel of cotton, for

clothes and shelter. Saying "thank you" to God before meals really meant a lot.'

During those last two months, when the bombing was incessant, sellers brought vegetables right up the hill where they were. Someone who had to evacuate to a place where he could not take his hens and ducks, left them with the family, so they had a good supply of eggs. Another left them his goats, so the milk supply was assured for the baby and U Cho.

Early in 1945 the tide of war was turned in Burma. Step by step, and constantly harrassed by bomber attacks, the occupying forces were driven back by the Allied armies. But through it all, Ma Nyein Tha and her family were kept safe, as they had been all through the three years of the war.

In May, 1945, they left Sagaing to move to Maymyo, a few miles west. Ma Nyein Tha went on ahead with her mother and father to prepare the place. How the other nineteen were to be moved, not to speak of the livestock, was not immediately clear. But Ma Nyein Tha encouraged her anxious mother with: 'If God wants the family here, there may be a truck to bring them from door to door.'

An evening or two later a friend brought the news that some army trucks were coming up the next morning with all the rest of the family and their belongings—including the ducks. Two British soldiers with time and petrol to spare, stayed with the family in Sagaing, and next morning made a convoy of two 3-tonners to move the main party. They were brought from door to door, across the Irrawaddy, without having to pay anything. Friends who had some money had made the same journey at the cost of four hundred rupees.

Living in close touch with the Buddhists in monasteries showed Ma Nyein Tha, third generation Christian as she was, that she had held somewhat aloof from the ninety-eight per cent of Burmese who are Buddhists. That was to be no longer. The wall had been breached. 'We learnt a lot from them. It was a bit

difficult at first, but we got so adjusted to them and their vocabulary that we found ourselves using it even after coming up to Maymyo. The head monk came up with the family and stayed in the same house with us for a week, a thing he would not have done a year ago.'

It was here that Colonel David Watson, a Scottish doctor with the British Fourteenth Army, found her. When Rangoon was retaken on May 2nd, 1945, one of the first things he did was to search for her, for they were old friends. She was not to be found in Rangoon, a devastated city. No news of her had reached her friends for three years, and there was considerable anxiety about her welfare and that of her family. As his duties permitted, he pursued the search further afield.

'I had looked for her all day,' he wrote. 'I was very tired. I had been driving a jeep on the dusty roads of Burma. At the end of a day's search in Sagaing on Tuesday, May 15th, I found that Ma Mi had moved to Maymyo. So we raced back over the hill road.

'In half an hour, with the help of a Sister and patient in the hospital, we found her. In the gathering dusk I recognised her, though she was not wearing her flower and hair dressed Burmese style. She looked a bit older but her smile flashed, and her old joyous twinkle was as lovely as ever. There she was with her family of twenty-two of three generations, that had not been separated during those three years. The warmth and joy of her welcome I cannot describe.'

They spent a wonderful evening with her family, who got out their guitars and banjos, as they had so often done in the old family home in Moulmein, and they sang together for the first time since the liberation of the country.

'We talked. From everyone we gleaned a story that is a spiritual epic. Abiding with her through it all has been the sense of being preserved for helping in the reconstruction of Burma, through the reconstruction of people.'

'Go and see Aung San'

'When the Eleventh Army Headquarters reached Rangoon, we left behind a devastated country,' wrote Colonel Watson, describing Burma as he saw it, in the closing stages of the Japanese occupation. 'There were no railways; bridges had all been blown; there was no river transportation; all the main cities were destroyed; money was worth nothing. Agriculture had not been operating for two years on its usual scale. There had been no imports of cloth for three years. People in south Burma were starving because it was impossible to get rice from the north. But that was only part of the picture.

'There was also devastation in men's minds. The old time politicians were mistrusted by the people. The new parties that were gathering force were mistrusted by the Government. There was a great problem of the minorities, who mistrusted the majorities. So you had a country that was wide open for any ideology that was out to capture and use people who were on the get, a materialistic ideology.'

Before the occupation, thirty fiery nationalist students from Rangoon University, calling themselves *Thakins*,[†] led a students' strike which was basically anti-colonial. Distrustful of the British, these 'thirty heroes', as they were nationally known, became leading champions of Burma's nationalism, suffered imprisonment, and eventually fled the country and took refuge in Japan.

[†]Masters, a term of respect used for anyone to whom honour is due, and not, these students contended, reserved exclusively for colonial 'superiors'.

One of these students was Aung San, a leader of the Thirty, and General Secretary of the Student Union—an important body in Burma. 'Asia for the Asians' was the attractive theme of their propaganda. He asked Japan for aid in freeing his country from the limitations imposed on Burma's nationalistic aspirations by British imperialism. He underwent training in Tokyo, believing with other Burmese that Japan would give Burma her independence when she drove the British out, and re-entered Burma with the Japanese invaders.

As the war proceeded, the victorious Japanese discarded all pretence of giving Burma her independence, and set up a military administration in Rangoon. Aung San, who headed the Burmese National Army and had been given the figure-head position of Minister of War, now realised that there was nothing in the promise of independence. One kind of imperialism had been exchanged for another. The final element in his disillusionment had been a request made through a Burmese official for 'comfort girls' to be provided for the troops. Aung San must send to the villages to supply them.

'Send your own daughter first!' he exclaimed indignantly, and he and his Patriotic Army went underground. They got in touch with the British, with an offer to help with guerrilla tactics carried on behind the Japanese lines.

After some hesitation, the British accepted this offer, and dropped arms for the use of his fighters, which were to be handed back when the hostilities were over. True to their word, when the Allied forces counter-attacked, these Burmese nationalists, operating as the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, struck at the Japanese rear and hastened their defeat.

The routing of the Japanese left a vacuum in the leadership of the confused and distraught nation. How would it be filled?

To Ma Nyein Tha, even while the war was raging and she was still in Sagaing, came a word from God: 'Give this message to Aung San.'

'But, Lord,' she objected, 'he brought the enemy into this country.' At that time Aung San was still mistrusted as a collaborator with the Japanese.

But again God spoke to her: 'I want you to give this message to Aung San.'

'All right, Lord, I will,' she answered. The thought seemed a foolish one, but she wrote it down, and even as she wrote it she put his initials, 'A.S.', for it was too risky a thing to write his name. But the time was not yet.

Some weeks after she reached Maymyo, and the Japanese had been driven back, another British officer, whose wife she had met in England, drove her in his jeep the four hundred mile journey to Rangoon, over roads pitted with shell holes and bridges newly rebuilt. Here she met her friends again, who were aghast at what seemed to them a crazy idea. But she held steadily to it and, accompanied by Colonel David Watson, went to Tower House where General Aung San and his wife were now living with their children. His wife, Ma Nyein Tha had discovered, was an old Morton Lane pupil of hers, and they were glad to see each other again after the lapse of years. The four sat down together, and she told Aung San and his wife the message that had been given to her for them. That was the first of many visits to that home.

The Civil Government arrived back in Burma on July 9th, and with them was Bishop West who, following a serious car accident some time before the invasion, had gone to America to recuperate. There he had remained until the war situation allowed him to return, via India, with his wife Grace, whom he had married while in America.

The situation in Rangoon appalled him. During the occupation the stately Cathedral had been used by day as a distillery for making saki, and as a cattle-shed at night. Everything had been removed—pulpit, choir stalls, pews. General Symes called for volunteers to clean and restore it. British and

Indian soldiers, helped by Burmese Christians, took on the arduous task. When it was ready, a Service of Reconciliation was held, followed, at the request of the Governor, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, by a Service of Dedication in which he wished, he said, to dedicate himself also for his work as Governor. It was attended by the General commanding the Twelfth Army and other high-ranking officers, by Burman nationalists and many leading Burmans, including the wife of General Aung San. Anglicans and Buddhists alike took part in the simple, heartfelt service. 'It will do a great deal to clear the atmosphere in the country at this time,' said the Chief Justice, a leading Buddhist.

A state of anarchy existed. Towns were in ruins. Robbers paralysed the country. The Bishop and his wife said to themselves, 'What can we do in a mess like this?' Burma was a bitter country without a programme, and they saw that what was needed was not a scheme but people. One of the people that the Bishop looked for as soon as he got back to Burma was Ma Nyein Tha. She had come to be regarded as a national force before the war, and he knew that she would be part of their programme for a new Burma.

It was not long before Ma Nyein Tha joined them in Rangoon and gradually took up the threads again there, meeting old friends. One, now serving in the Army Education Corps, happened to be in Rangoon when she arrived. 'Her laugh was as gay and her faith as invincible as ever,' he wrote in a short biography of her.†

Another was Geoffrey Jardine, whom she had met in Myit-kyina. It was not until some time after hostilities ended that the internees from his particular camp were released. At one time they had been reduced to eating rats, which were not popular for they needed a lot of preparation. He was a skeleton of his former self and was taken straight to hospital in Rangoon. But his faith had been growing during those three years of internment, and to

† *Joyful Revolutionary*, 1969

him this meeting was another God-sent 'chance'.

Later, Francis Ah Mya arrived. He had been a leader in the Karen resistance against the Japanese. He served in the smallest force in the British Army, with its headquarters behind the Japanese lines. This guerrilla band, Force 136, operated at night and caused acute embarrassment to the Japanese, precipitating their retreat.

He and the Wests and Ma Nyein Tha toured the country, united in their common commitment to rebuild Burma's moral and spiritual structure. Constantly they pondered who were the key people to give the leadership needed.

General Aung San was at that time bitterly opposing the British Government who, he and his party felt, offered too slow a road towards independence. But Bishop West and his friends recognised that the General could be the greatest unifying force in the country, and gradually a pivotal friendship was established with him, in which he increasingly found understanding and encouragement from those who cared for Burma as passionately as he did himself.

Very soon he and his wife were in consultation with Bishop West. It was well known that he did not take bribes, and he refused any salary for his services as leader of his party. He dismissed one of his cabinet ministers who took bribes, and before long he took courageous action. He was compelled to expel the Communist Party from his own Coalition Party. That brought a spiritual crisis in his life, for it involved expelling his own brother-in-law.

'Democracy still has to prove itself,' he said. 'It has won the war, now it has to win the peace.' He began to see that he had to draw a new battle line in Burma, not between right and left but between right and wrong. He issued a challenge to the nation, and when Ma Nyein Tha was invited to broadcast on the first National Day after the occupation, she referred to it. 'As Bo (General) Aung San has called us to meet the challenge of our

times, we must all together have the privilege of rising to the challenge,' she declared. 'The call will be—as every right call always is—to sacrifice. The appeal to self-interest is out of date. That appeal has destroyed cities, created havoc and ruined a civilisation. The call is to build. We want no Utopia. We want to pioneer in the great adventure of finding out how to apply at all times, in all circumstances, the great privilege of democracy which is also a law of life—all for each and each for all.'

One of U Aung San's most trusted advisers was U Tin Tut, senior and most able member of that portion of the Indian Civil Service serving in Burma, later the Burma Civil Service. With other expatriates from Burma during the Japanese occupation of their country, he was in Simla, and from here wrote to Bishop West on September 7th, 1944:

'I confess that while in Burma I never thought deeply of the position of our minority communities. The majority race, the Burmese, were fighting for full self-government, and did not have much time to worry about the smaller communities.... Before I left Burma in 1941, however, I was beginning to be a little worried about future relations between the Burmans and the Karens. We are racially not very different, and for many decades the Burmans and Karens have lived side by side in many parts of Lower Burma. I did not detect anything much of race hatred, but in our relationship the Burmans had, I fear, a superiority complex, while the Karens had, I think, an inferiority complex. There was nothing in the way of a conflict of interests; nevertheless the two races seemed in danger of getting further and further apart.

'I felt that it was in the interests of my country that this gulf should be bridged, and had encouraging success in that direction. It was, I think, on account of these efforts of mine that I was asked to speak for the Burmese at the Karen New Year's Day dinner in 1941. It was the first occasion of its kind in Burma, and the message of friendship which I delivered on that

occasion on behalf of the Burmese to the Karens evoked during and after the dinner the warmest possible response from Sir Combie Po, Francis Ah Mya, and other leaders of the Karen Community. Very little divided us, and I am full of hope for future good relationships between the Burmese and the Karens, and indeed between all the races and communities which make up the population of the land we love.'

Immediately on his return to Burma, U Tin Tut invited to his house leaders of the Karen minority who were agitating for a separate Karen state, through fear of Burmese oppression. Although a minority group numbering, at that time, one-and-a-half million out of the sixteen million population, they were influential out of all proportion to their numbers. On their New Year's Day, Karens all over the country usually expressed their national aspirations, largely influenced by the exclusiveness of their race, so incomprehensible and irritating to the Burmans. U Tin Tut discussed with the Karen leaders the possibility of strengthening the Burman-Karen rapprochement, and how to use this occasion to do so.

Francis Ah Mya was chosen to organise the festivities, of which the central theme was 'The Burma we want'. All the positive elements in the two communities were brought together in this major bid to break down the things which divided and to achieve unity. A broadcast was made by a group of prominent personalities including U Aung San and Mahn Ba-Khin, the one Karen on the Government's Executive Council. Ma Nyein Tha, who had organised the programme, herself spoke forcibly, as a Burman, of her deep appreciation of the Karen people and of what they might become.

Reconstruction

Morton Lane School had been closed for the entire period of the war, and latterly the buildings had been used by the military. It was now an empty shell, and needed to be repaired and re-organised to meet the needs of post-war young Burmans. It was to be re-opened as a co-educational school, and pre-war staff of the Morton Lane Girls' School and the Judson Boys' High School were invited to co-operate. Daw Nyein Tha received an appeal to take on the task of restoration, this time as superintendent. She accepted the opportunity willingly until the school was re-established.

The Morton Lane Judson School was reopened on May 18th, 1946. Gifts and offers of help poured in. Chairs and desks were made on the school premises. Friends in America restocked the school library. The Director of Agriculture supplied them with *mamooties* (tools for digging), and coconut palms and other trees to replant the garden. His assistant came to advise them, and different classes took responsibility for each section. Daw Nyein Tha wanted the children to feel that it was their job to take care of the school compound.

Before long she was approached by the Education Officer in charge of the Division with the proposal that the school become a State school. It would mean assured salaries for all the teachers, a cost-of-living allowance, and no financial anxieties. Regular supplies of all necessary equipment would be available. At the same time it implied no Christian teaching. She and her partner put it to the staff, who were unanimous in their

decision. The school had been reopened as a Christian school, and so it would remain. Recognition was granted to them as a privately owned fee-paying school, on condition that the conscience clause in the 1944 Education Act (Britain)† was observed.

'I have a nice bunch of boarders,' she wrote in August 1946. 'Gradually as they began to know me I started having prayers with them each night. We discovered they loved singing, so we taught them, "Lord, keep us safe this night." We sing this every night after prayers. They are learning to be grateful for particular things that happen during the day. And as they learn this, they begin to get the idea that God is living, that He is with us, taking care of us all the time.'

General Aung San, as head of the new Provisional Government, was, at the end of 1946, seeking the way to deal with the aftermath of the occupation and to govern a country teetering on the edge of civil war. He had fully made up his mind, he told Daw Nyein Tha and her friends, that his war career was over, and that he would never in the future take part in any armed conflict. He felt that war settled no problems, and that all that Burma needed and wanted could be gained by constitutional means. This had been the theme of most of his speeches in a recent up-country tour. He was conscious of strong support in the country. But passions had been unleashed, and it was no easy task to hold the rival factions within bounds.

In certain areas the Communists had control, in others the Karens, in others the Government. But there was one place where there was no fighting. That place was the half-dozen villages in the Kappali area.

One morning in Rangoon a thought came to the Bishop's wife. 'Invite Aung San to Kappali.' Her husband agreed. It would strengthen the hands of the Nationalist leader if he could

†This clause allowed pupils to be withdrawn from Christian worship and instruction at the request of their parents.

be shown a village where the qualities of honesty and unity for which he was beginning to look to rebuild the nation were already at work. The General accepted.

The route lay through Moulmein. It was in the Christmas holidays, so Daw Nyein Tha was free to join the General and his wife and son and the Wests.

The party went up the river in a little motor boat. 'All along the route people were waiting for Aung San,' Daw Nyein Tha said. 'They waved and sang and greeted him. There were about twenty parties dancing for him. There was a lovely breakfast laid out, and it was like this everywhere, one big crowd after another. On arrival at Shwegun hundreds of people were waiting to greet him with songs and dances, and great bunches of wild orchids they had gathered in the woods. After the celebrations we got into buses to go the last thirty miles to Kappali.'

Professor Leonard Allen of Rangoon University who had joined the party, describes the scene: 'There were farmers, merchants, teachers, yellow-robed monks. Something so unusual had been happening in this district that thousands decided to find out for themselves the truth of the rumours they had heard. It was known that the Japanese had never broken the spirit of these particular Karen villagers, despite many grim attempts. But now there was talk of a social revolution more remarkable even than these exploits. As a result of the new discipline and outlook, many social reforms which would have remained on paper were put into effect. New schools had been built, new agricultural experiments had been conducted, and cottage industries introduced.'

The story is continued by Daw Nyein Tha: 'As we came to the village, people were on two sides of the road, absolutely packed. Thirty thousand people were waiting for Aung San. They welcomed him with more songs and dances and flowers. They had come from all over that area, bringing with them rice

and vegetables, fish and chicken, coconuts and melons.'

There followed a great feast. All Burmese love a feast. These joyful occasions—from a family picnic to a feast like this one—which they call *Pyaw-pwe-sas* (happy eating gatherings)—can celebrate any and every possible event, or even none at all. For this occasion they chose three hundred cooks. Bullocks were offered. 'It was an avalanche of giving,' said Bishop West.

The police had never known a crowd like this before, so many people in such a remote place, and so well-behaved and happy. There were no brawls, no rowdiness, no broken heads, no quarrels. A quarrel at a village function had more than once ended in a life sentence. In those wild days, when violence was everywhere, the police had to be ready for any eventuality. But no outbreak occurred.

People came not only to hear General Aung San, but also to tell him about the change that had taken place in their lives, which affected all that they did. Debts were disappearing, private feuds, their fear and hatred of the Burmese, their fear of Government officials, especially the police. They were experimenting with new crops, doing better with old ones, and it was easier to keep their village paths and bridges in order. They cooperated better and worked with a will. They were happier, and they wanted to put all that they had discovered at the disposal of other villages.

The Bishop, General Aung San and the Commissioner sat under a *pandal* laced with leaves and supported on bamboo poles. Karens in national costume sang an old Karen lyric. A Karen priest rose to welcome the General.

'We welcome you, Sir, into our midst this morning,' he said, 'not as a great leader, nor as a general, nor as a statesman—though we recognise that you are all of these, famed and followed in peace as in war by the vast majority of the people of Burma. We do not welcome you as such. We want to welcome you as friend.'

U Aung San was on his feet. 'Thank you for calling me friend. But please regard me as one of the family.'†

'General Aung San as I have known him before,' said Francis Ah Mya, describing the scene that day, 'had been more at home at Kappali than anywhere else, even in his own home. He had to have his bodyguards always around him wherever he went. He had them at Kappali also, but our Kappali people, not knowing these official rules, simply penetrated the bodyguards and shook hands with General Aung San. Soon I found—as somebody described him—no more a politician but a statesman. He was a Burman at the head of the Government, and the people who entertained him were Karens, the largest minority in Burma. He addressed the crowd for forty-five minutes, and everyone enjoyed it. He was the hope of Burma.'

Eighty Karen elders were at the celebration, headmen from a circle of villages. While the speeches continued, these men were coming up, one by one, to put their names to a vast sheet of parchment-coloured paper that looked like a page from the Domesday Book. It was a Village Charter, drawn up by themselves. Each who signed it was committing himself to work for real and lasting friendship in place of the curse of communal strife.

'Let them go on,' said Aung San, as someone attempted to stop the flow of signatories. He and the Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner knew the kind of document villagers usually presented—appeals, petitions and requests. This was new.

'We expect from you and from our leaders only the highest,' so had run their manifesto.

'And I will expect from you only the best,' was Aung San's reply.

The Government official responsible for the Kappali area

† *Jungle Witnesses*, Bishop George West, USPG, from which several passages in this chapter are taken.

told General Aung San in front of the thousands of people, that these Karens had made his work of governing easier. This was because, ten years before, they had invited him to the village, and told him: 'We want to stop drinking. We want to stop giving bribes. We want to live in unity with one another. We want to help you to do these things in the whole area.' As a result of this, the officer reported to the General, there were no bribes or corruption in that area. There was no black marketing where before even elephants were smuggled over the border and sold. Ninety per cent of the drinking had stopped. There were no fights, and the lock-up was empty. One after another got up and told of hurts being healed, enemies becoming friends, stolen things being restored to their owners, fear, suspicion and hate turned to caring, sharing and co-operation.

'We want this for our villages,' said the other headmen.

The General could see for himself that what he had been told was true. Bribery and corruption were his headaches. Daw Nyein Tha said that he saw his policy of honesty and unity was already being lived in this area. She had never seen Aung San as free and happy as he was then.

'This is what I want for the whole country,' said the General.

These facts gripped him, more particularly because the Communists at that time were encouraging and using dacoity (banditry), rising prices, and Karen-Burman antagonism to disrupt the Government.

The Commissioner to the Tenasserim spoke last. In all his days as an officer in the Indian Civil Service he had never seen or heard anything like this. He coveted it, and especially the spirit he found there, for his whole division—more, for the whole of Burma. 'Indeed,' he added, 'I believe you have here what the United Nations Organisation needs to make it work; in fact, what is needed everywhere.'

While General Aung San was still in Kappali, he received a

cable from the British Government inviting him to go to London for negotiations for the independence of his country. He took his leave of the villagers with genuine appreciation of all that brief interlude had meant to him.

In January 1947 a delegation set off for London, consisting of General Aung San, Thakin Mya, Thakin Ba Sein, U Tin Tut, U Ba Po and U Saw, accompanied by four advisers. While they were absent, an independent administration was already being set up, in case the delegation did not succeed in gaining its demands. So potentially explosive was the situation that the Rangoon Government had prepared an elaborate system of evacuation.

U Aung San had to make a difficult decision, and he was glad to be able to meet with Colonel Watson and others whom he could trust, who were in London at that time. 'These are the true friends of Burma,' he said.

The meeting between the British Government and the Burman delegation, to work out the terms of independence, took place in Number 10 Downing Street, under the chairmanship of Clement Attlee. The Burmese sat on one side of the table, the British on the other.

Sir Stafford Cripps put forward the proposals of the British Government. His arguments were cogent. There came a crucial point in the negotiations when the British Prime Minister said to U Aung San, 'Are you ready to sign?'

On General Aung San's right sat U Saw, Prime Minister of Burma before the war. On his left was U Tin Tut, considered by many the most brilliant living Burman.

Aung San turned to U Saw, an embittered man who hated the British and was jealous of his able young colleague, then occupying the position he would like to have occupied. When Aung San asked him, 'Shall I sign?' his emphatic reply was, 'Certainly not.' Here was an opportunity to embarrass both the British and his rival.

U Aung San then turned to U Tin Tut and asked him the same question. U Tin Tut had been educated in England but later, because of the way he had been treated by some British in Burma, he also had become embittered. However, he had met Englishmen who had changed their attitudes and apologised for the wrongs that had been done. This had helped him to get rid of the bitterness.

He considered the terms to be reasonable, and replied, 'Please sign.' This U Aung San did, and the principle of independence was quickly agreed upon.

'It was known afterwards,' Daw Nyein Tha commented later, 'that if independence had not been agreed upon, armed Burmese would have risen in rebellion against the British.' She was back in the school again now, from where she wrote to the General and his wife on his return, telling him of her interest and prayers for him and his delegation, and for his wife and children. 'We at the school here find that our faith in *Bogyoke* (chief) has been more than fulfilled.'

Daw Nyein Tha had completed a year at the school when she received an invitation to join the World Assembly for Moral Re-Armament at Caux in Switzerland. It had been a good and happy year, and much had been achieved.

She decided to accept, and handed in her resignation to the Board of Governors. 'You go,' they said, 'but come back to us. Don't resign.' They offered her leave of absence and the matter was left open. There were others who could take her place, notably a sister and brother-in-law. In July she set out on the preliminary stage of her first visit to Europe since the war.

She had told U Aung San and his wife of her plans, and Mrs Aung San thought of going with her to the Assembly, but decided it was not the right time. Daw Nyein Tha went to see them when she arrived in Rangoon. 'After we had talked, Aung San came back from Government House,' she relates, 'and the last picture I had of him was coming up the long steps into the

house. There were his three children running to him, and they all wanted a hand to hang on to. So I said, "There are five fingers. Get hold of one." And there was the little girl hanging on to one hand and the two boys holding the other.'

This was the last time she was to see him. Not many hours later, as General Aung San was sitting with his Executive Council in a room in the Secretariat, two men armed with automatic weapons pushed their way in and opened fire on the unsuspecting men. Aung San and seven of the Executive were killed, with three others.

The man guilty of this murder was U Saw, who had instigated the plot hoping to seize power for himself. He later paid for it with his life.

Governor Sir Hubert Rance appealed to U Nu, one of the three surviving members of the Cabinet, to form a new Council, which he immediately and courageously did. Minutes before the tragedy he had left the room for a short while, to walk in the open air. Another had dived under the table when the shooting began. The third, U Tin Tut, was in England at the time, where he was Acting High Commissioner for Burma. On hearing the news, he left at once for Rangoon to support U Nu in the formation of his Cabinet. He became Minister of Finance in the new administration. His wise and experienced statesmanship was a great strength to U Nu.

When the news was broken to Daw Nyein Tha, she was stunned. It was so short a time since she had seen him with his children clinging to his hands. His death and that of the Cabinet Ministers with him was a bitter blow to Burma. When she reached Caux she spoke of General Aung San to the assembly there.

'I wish you had seen all the crowds in Burma when they gathered together whenever he spoke. I think people loved him because he stood for honesty. In Burma we were tired of graft and tired of politicians. We wanted somebody who would

really lead the people. In him we found this type of leader.'

'Fear is a very wrong thing,' he said to her once. When he was quite young he discovered that he was afraid to go to the graveyard at night. There are many superstitions in Burma about graveyards. So he said, 'I cannot have this fear in me, it must go.' In the middle of one night he got up and went to the graveyard. He lit a candle, then went home again. 'So you see I have lost my fear,' he said.

He told Daw Nyein Tha that when he was at college he had thought of the kind of woman he wanted to marry—somebody he could trust, somebody steady and a bit older than himself. 'That was the kind of wife that he got,' she said. 'I was very pleased because she was already my friend. He was a great family man. He loved his mother and he loved his wife and his three children.' And Mrs Aung San had proved worthy of that love. After the assassination she had spoken brave words. She had talked about the children. 'For their sakes there must be no crying or bitterness,' she had said. 'My husband loved them so and planned for them. What could they grow up to be if they had crying and bitterness now? I want them to be proud of their father, as I am. I still have my children, and I can still serve my husband by helping my country too.' Burmese ladies who went to console her were themselves consoled. Her days were only just beginning.

For a month the bodies lay in state in Jubilee Hall, and every day Mrs Aung San went there before it opened in the morning and after it closed at night, to be sure that everything was in order. 'I have moved the wreaths round,' she said. 'There are too many on his coffin and not on the others. I divide them up evenly. My husband knew how to build a team for the country, and so he even died with his team.'

No easy world

As the days passed, Daw Nyein Tha began to see her country in the perspective of other countries. She spoke of Burma one day in the great assembly hall at Caux, the wide arc of whose windows looked out over the expanse of French Alps on the far side of the lake, and the Dents du Midi crowning the Rhone Valley.

She made the country live for her hearers, as she told of the feelings of a conquered, subject people, proud of their ancestry. They began to understand the indignities suffered by a people living under alien rule, while national consciousness was developing.

Yet were the Burmans wholly free themselves from the things they resented in the British? There was a disarming honesty about this Burmese woman that convinced and convicted where rhetoric would have been powerless. 'In Burma we have minorities—the Karens for instance. We used to say, "What is the matter with those Karens? We don't hate them, but why don't they like us?" We just ignored them. In the same way as we thought the British were crushing us, we were crushing the Karens by our superior attitude.' She narrowed the issue down to the relationship between two people, a Karen and herself.

'I have a friend who is a Karen, and whenever we talked about politics I used to get hot and bothered. One day I thought, "He needs to change his attitude towards the Burmans." I suddenly realised as I said it that, as I pointed my finger at him, three fingers were pointing at me. Burma for me

just meant Burmans, and I was snobbish towards the Karens. The thought came, "Change your attitude towards the Karens."

In October she left Switzerland for America. The leave of absence given to her by the school's Board of Governors was fast running out. Before many months had passed she would have to decide whether to return to the school or to resign.

She was in Los Angeles when the moment for decision came. 'I had been away from my school for some months. When I got to California, I thought, "Now I can go back to Burma by China and Japan." But somehow, inside of me, I knew there was something else God needed me for. And I thought, "If I stay here for a little while, then I can go back to my school." Then I thought, "No! There must be no strings attached." And one word came, "Resign." And I said, "If You want me to resign, what shall I say to the school?" The words came on the tip of my pen and I wrote them down: "In view of serious world unrest have decided to remain and fight with forces of Moral Re-Armament indefinitely. Please accept resignation. My respects teachers, Board of Governors. Believe you fighting with me on a world front against Godless materialism."

Her cable crossed one from the Governing Board, asking her to come back and give the school at least one more year. This was quickly followed by a second: 'Even though we want you very much in Burma, we feel He wants you in America, so we will accept your resignation.'

Although far from her own country, Daw Nyein Tha followed eagerly the news of how Burma was faring. There was a Communist attempt at Easter time, 1948, to seize control of the Government by force. Following this abortive coup, *The Burman Review*, a paper sponsored by U Tin Tut, clarified the issue in this way:

'Independent Burma was born into no easy world. There is already in the world a bitter war of ideas, and a war of ideas is often the precursor to a war of arms.... The real war of ideas is

between the conception of personal liberty, of free democracy and constitutional redress, and the conception of an autocratic state overriding the people, and one party rule attained and maintained by force and bloodshed. This is the choice not only of Burma, but before the whole world.... There is no place for the hesitant, the uncertain and the lukewarm, for he who is not on the side of law and order is against it.'

The wife and two daughters of U Tin Tut were among the many from the East at the conference at Caux that summer. He himself had been there the year before, and had spoken feelingly of his hopes for the future. 'The illumination we have at Caux is the one hope for Burma and Asia,' he had said.

The Burmese left Caux for London, Mrs Tin Tut and her daughters with them. While they were still in London, the shattering news came in September of U Tin Tut's assassination. His life had been threatened by anonymous letters and by posters. But he refused to give way to fear. One night an explosive device blew up inside his car and he died next night in hospital. Would the killings never stop?

'There is blood in my country,' Daw Nyein Tha mourned. Two great Burmese patriots had been assassinated within little more than a year. First U Aung San and now U Tin Tut.

Both these men, Professor Allen wrote, spoke with the clear voice of moral decisiveness on the basic ideological issues. They had been silenced.

At the Rangoon airport, many waited for Mrs Tin Tut on her return from London for her husband's funeral. They wished to show their sympathy and respect. One man was heard to say of U Tin Tut: 'He inspired us frontier people with confidence. When he visited us along with U Aung San we believed what he said. We trusted him. More than that, he has spoken well for our country abroad. His brilliance, his knowledge of the world, has helped others to look on us as their equals. He has made this country to be respected everywhere.'

The following summer Bishop West renewed his acquaintance with Takasumi and Hideko Mitsui.† Mitsui had faced the fact that his country had done things that were wrong, and personally and genuinely felt it. So the Bishop suggested that he break his homeward journey in Rangoon, and see the Prime Minister, U Nu.

The Mitsuis were only in Rangoon one evening; but they had over an hour with the Prime Minister. They were the first Japanese to meet him after the war. Mitsui told him that there were other Japanese like himself who were profoundly sorry for what Japan did. 'I want to apologise for the wrong we have done to the people of Burma,' he said. 'I can only ask you if you will forgive me and people like me.'

U Nu's response was immediate. 'If you are a sample of the new Japan, then that is a Japan everyone can trust,' he said. 'We need to apologise to the people of Japan also, for the bitterness in our hearts.'

That visit, Bishop West noted, paved the way for talks between the two countries, and to the final settlement of reparations in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect.

On the second anniversary of the assassinations of Aung San and his colleagues, U Nu launched a campaign in the country for 'peace within a year'.

In the following spring, a memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey for the men who fell in the Burma Campaign. The idea originated with Bishop West's suggestion of a Remembrance Book to be compiled with the names of all the British servicemen who died in Burma during those years. This was to be presented to Westminster Abbey and a copy kept in Rangoon Cathedral.

Early one morning, the thought came to Mrs West that U Nu should be invited to the service. It seemed a far-fetched idea to invite a Prime Minister, a devout Buddhist, to leave his country

† See chapter 5

and fly ten thousand miles to attend a Christian service. However, Bishop West went to see him. He had not got very far with what he had to say when the unhesitating reply came, 'That is something I would love to attend. I would like to show appreciation to Britain for the sacrifice of her sons. But I would require the permission of the Cabinet.' Two days later, the permission given, the Prime Minister and his wife left for England.

In a moving service in Westminster Abbey, Lord Mountbatten of Burma presented to the Dean of Westminster the Remembrance Book containing 10,693 names. The Bishop of Rangoon preached. Daw Nyein Tha and her friend Daw Nu were in England for this memorable occasion, and received an invitation to a dinner given by the Burmese Community in U Nu's honour. To the students and other Burmese there he said: 'There are two things I want you to do here: First, to honour your country—and if you live honestly you will honour your country. Secondly to live unity with the British.' To Daw Nyein Tha, such an exhortation coming from a Burmese Prime Minister who had at one stage fought against the British as one of the original *Thakins*, was revolutionary indeed.

For three months Daw Nyein Tha and her friend Daw Nu were in England. The Senas† were staying with an artist and her daughter in Kensington; and the two Burmese were invited to stay also in that hospitable home. The house, beautiful with the water colours and oils painted by the old lady, opened its doors wide to the visitors from the East, and all who poured into the house to meet them.

Mother and daughter made their guests feel that the house was their home. And that inclusiveness spread even to the kitchen, where Mary, the cook, reigned supreme. A party of Burmese were invited to a meal one day. Daw Nyein Tha and Daw Nu set out on an expedition to one of London's famous

† See chapter 5

**'When I want
my way and you
want your way,
there is tension
between us'**



**'Before we
know it, there is
a break and
we grow
further apart'**



**'But when we
both get back to
God and want
only what is
right then we are
united'**

Photos: Woolford





With Madame Irène Laure



Into a ruined
Germany after
World War II
with an MRA
task force, 1948

open-air markets to buy chicken. Then they were given the complete freedom of the kitchen.

Mary, the cook, watched them, fascinated by the whole procedure. Every bit of chicken was used, even to the claws of their feet. The resultant meal was a triumph.

There were long evenings spent in the drawing-room round the blazing fire. Daw Nyein Tha's 'visual aids' came into use. This time the fire-irons—those gleaming, typically Victorian brass tools—were her instruments to illustrate what she was saying. They were, she told her small audience, a demonstration of family behaviour, as she piled them one on top of the other in the hearth—poker, shovel, tongs and brush.

'There's Father at the top, and here's Mother, and here are the sons and daughters. Father rules and keeps Mother down, and then Mother gets her own back by dominating the children and taking it out on them. The children bully each other. The result is discord.'

Quickly she rearranged the fire-irons, until all were equally placed side by side. Now they were closely knit in unity, she said. There was harmony in the home.

The Burmese scene was not so easy to sort out as the fire-irons. There were, however, signs of improvement; and that summer, at the end of U Nu's campaign for 'peace within a year', a measure of success was being achieved which, *The Times* reported, was little short of miraculous.

Later that year, Daw Nyein Tha was able to welcome Mrs Aung San on a long-promised visit to Europe. For some time her family and her ministerial duties had claimed all her attention in Rangoon, for she had been elected in her late husband's place in Parliament, as had the wives or daughters of his seven colleagues. She herself was given the position of Cabinet Minister, one which she ably fulfilled. But now at last she felt free to come, and together she and Daw Nyein Tha visited an international assembly at Caux in Switzerland, and

then went on to a mass demonstration of Moral Re-Armament in the Ruhr.

Europe, and Germany in particular at that time, had reached a moment of great division and uncertainty; and Burma, in the person of the widow of the loved hero and statesman General Aung San, had something to offer to meet that need. Speaking on Whitsunday, 1950, to an audience of hundreds of miners, steelworkers and industrialists, she spoke of the unity which she and her husband had seen in the Kappali district amongst the various races and religions, through the acceptance of absolute moral standards.

‘My husband wanted it for the whole country,’ she asserted.

The white elephants

During those post-war years much of Daw Nyein Tha's time was spent in the United States, where she was frequently given a platform to speak for the East to the West. 'She has done a tremendous lot to portray Asia to Westerners,' said Captain John Storey, speaking out of a fairly extensive acquaintance with the East, 'in a way that no other person has ever done. She was both above any class, any race, any creed, yet very proud of her race—in fact one of the most ardent lovers of her nation that Burma has ever had, I should think.'

'She certainly was an ambassadress for her country,' said a British diplomat. 'I met her in New York at the United Nations,' said a younger brother of U Tin Tut. 'I was leading the Burmese delegation and involved in branding the Chinese as aggressors of my country. It was a very delicate task, because I did not want to offend friends. I made my speech, at the close of which some congratulated me on my delivery, or the substance of my speech. But Daw Nyein Tha, who was in the audience, came up to me and congratulated me on the lack of venom and the restraint that I had exercised. I took that as a very great compliment.'

One of Burma's neighbours is Thailand—'The land of the free'—lying along her south-eastern borders. To America in 1952 came the then Prime Minister of Thailand, Field-Marshal Pibulsonggram, with a party which included his son and daughter. He was visiting the United States in his official capacity, and was invited by Dr Buchman to be his guest at a

conference then being held. Dr Buchman asked Daw Nyein Tha if she would cook at least one rice meal a day for their Thai guests. She went off to interview the chef in the hotel on the island which they were using as a conference centre. Chefs are not the easiest people to handle in a delicate negotiation like this one. The kitchen was his domain. However, he took the request in good part. 'Come in any time you like,' he said, 'and ask for anything you want.'

Daw Nyein Tha went into the gleaming hotel kitchen and put her best Burmese culinary art to work. Presently delicious steaming hot rice, with all its savoury accompaniments in separate little bowls, was set before the Thai Prime Minister and his party, served as only a native of South-East Asia knows how to serve it.

Daw Nyein Tha sat beside the Field Marshal's daughter who, after she had eaten her meal, turned to her and said, enigmatically, 'You are not an enemy any more, you are a friend.' Daw Nyein Tha did not understand what she meant; but she thought, 'Well, friendly. That's quite good.'

Burma and Thailand were close neighbours. But, as sometimes happens between neighbours, nearness did not imply friendship. They were akin to each other by race and of the same religion. But there were old unhealed antagonisms, and to Daw Nyein Tha was given the opportunity, on her return to Burma after an absence of nearly six years, to do something about that ancient enmity.

It had all begun with the white elephants, highly prized by both Burmese and Thais and the source of hostility between the two countries. White elephants were comparatively rare in both, though more so in Burma. They were symbols of power, of royalty; kings counted their wealth by the number of albino elephants they possessed. They rode on them on state occasions and when going to war. These elephants also had a religious significance, for the Gautama Buddha was said to have passed

one of his pre-existences as a white elephant. The Burmese, coveting these animals for their kings, would ask the Thais for their white elephants; and when the Thais refused, they went in and took them.

When King Hainbyushin of Burma invaded Thailand in 1767, he sacked and burned Ayudhya, after a siege lasting nearly a year. The walled city, six miles round, had been Thailand's capital for over four hundred years. The king was killed, and thousands of its people, its princes and its nobles, were taken into slavery. This wanton destruction of a city that was a centre of culture and commerce was an act the Thais had never forgiven or forgotten, and it was kept green in their minds by the preservation of the ruins as a national reminder.

In December 1953 Daw Nyein Tha was one of a party from thirteen countries invited to Thailand by the Prime Minister, for a conference to search for a new moral basis to a solution to South-East Asian problems. She stayed in the home of the Director-General of Culture, whom she had met in America. Her hostess took her to the museum. There were many pictures round the walls, depicting the Burmese and Thais fighting each other. 'That's you fighting against us,' she remarked innocently.

'That's Burma fighting against us,' her hostess corrected her grimly.

It seemed as if, wherever the Burmese visitor went, in the public museum, in private homes, there were pictures of Burma fighting against Thailand. Often the subject matter of her conversations with people had that same theme, and she was told of all that Burma had done to Thailand.

Even the students. But surely they would be living in the present? 'What is your history like?' they asked her. 'Ours is full of gun-fights against you.' She had taught Burmese history in her own country, but these wars against Thailand had escaped her notice. The wars had been Britain against Burma. 'We always forget what we do to other people,' she remarked once,

commenting on this episode, 'but we always remember what other people do to us.'

At a reception she met a Thai woman, and they talked together. As they talked, this new acquaintance arranged her food carefully on her plate. Then she said to Daw Nyein Tha, 'I am keeping the other side of this dish for myself. This portion is for you.' It was a Thai gesture of respect and honour. 'That means you're not an enemy any more, you are a friend,' her hostess told her.

'What do they mean?' she asked her host. 'They keep saying to me that I am not an enemy any more, I am a friend.'

'Don't you know?' he answered. Then he told her that the word 'Burmese' had come to mean 'enemy' in the Thai language. 'Whenever we use the word "Burmese" we say "enemies", because Burma invaded Thailand and destroyed our old capital city. They invaded Thailand many, many times.'

Her thoughts dwelt soberly on her marauding ancestors. Was there anything that she could do? The atrocity that weighed most heavily on the Thais' memories was the destruction of their ancient capital. One day the visitors were invited by the Government to visit the ruins of Ayudhya. They drove between paddy fields where the rice had already been harvested and was stacked ready to be carried by women to their homes, slung on long poles. The houses with their wide, shallow roofs were constructed of beautifully woven matting. Long-horned water buffalo grazed, tended by small boys. By the roadside were piles of water melons, pale green and dark green, almost black. Peasants waded in the long canals on either side of the road, among white and pink lotuses, water-lilies, and blue water-hyacinths, catching the plentiful fish in their hands, or throwing out and drawing in the nets with their lively burdens. Thailand was a land of plenty. 'Rice in the fields, fish in the water, what need is there to want?' said their guide.

They were received at Ayudhya by the Governor of the

Province. The ruins stood stark against the sky, a mute memorial, speaking louder than words. It was a city of ruins, tumbled down, grass-grown, bird-haunted, a scene of utter desolation where once there had been life. Defaced, seated Buddhas, isolated in their tragedy; fallen columns; shattered walls; crumbling *jedis*. A city which perpetuated its bitter memories.

'You did this, you did this, you did this,' said a Thai who accompanied them, pointing out the ruins. 'He said it half-jokingly, half-seriously, as if *I* had done it,' she remarked afterwards. 'You can imagine what I felt.'

On another day the party visited the ancient monastery of Wat Mahathad. 'If the Lord Buddha were still alive,' the Lord Abbot said to them, 'he would be most pleased. The absolute moral standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love correspond to the principles of Buddha Dharma. People who practise them practise Buddhism.'

The Prime Minister, Field-Marshal Pibulsonggram, gave a reception in Government House for the visitors. It was the anniversary of Burma's Independence Day, and Daw Nyein Tha, as a Burman, was invited to speak. That morning she asked God what she should say.

When the moment came, she told the assembled company that all she could say was how sorry she felt for what Burma had done to Thailand. 'And why did Burma do it?' she asked. 'Why do I fight against another person? It is always because I want something, so I grab. Then the other person also starts grabbing, and we fight, and both parties get hurt.'

'When I am like this,' she clenched her fists, 'I cannot shake hands, I can't give, I can't accept, I can't worship God, and if I stay long enough like this I get paralysed. And that is exactly where Burma and Thailand are now. So the only thing for Burma to do is to let go. Together we can find out what is right and unite on that basis, and give it to the whole world.'

The Prime Minister, very moved, stood up and saluted. 'Thank you very much. This is all in the past, all in the past,' he said.

Soon after this, she was among those to be presented officially to the Prime Minister at Government House. Again she asked God what to say. The thought came to take him a gift—a small red seed, such as can be bought in any bazaar in India. In its hollowed out interior were three minute white elephants, carved in ivory.

'What a strange gift to give to the Prime Minister!' she thought. But she wrapped the little seed in white paper and took it with her.

After they had been introduced and sat down, the Prime Minister turned to her.

'Your air force have been bombing our villages,' he said, 'and they've killed some of our people. I wrote to your Prime Minister about it, and he hasn't answered.'

At that time civil war was raging in Burma on the borders with Thailand. The Burmese air force had been bombing the rebels, and in that difficult terrain some of the bombs had fallen on the Thai side of the border, killing some villagers.

Daw Nyein Tha fingered the little packet in her pocket and took courage. She apologised to the Prime Minister for what her countrymen had done. She said she was sure it was unintentional.

Then she knelt before the Prime Minister, as is the Asian custom. She unwrapped the paper, shook the tiny elephants out of the seed into the palm of her hand, and held it out to him.

'These little elephants have been away from Thailand for such a long time,' she said, 'nearly two hundred years. They were so homesick, they have gone very thin.'

Field-Marshal Pibulsonggram laughed heartily. His ill mood vanished and for nearly an hour he talked with his guests. When he left, he told the crowds waiting to see him that the Burmese

woman had given him some white elephants. The story went out on the radio.

Daw Nyein Tha wrote and told her own Prime Minister all that had happened, whereupon he apologised over the radio for what Burma had done.

It was the beginning of a new relationship between Thailand and Burma. In April 1955, when the Prime Ministers of India, Pakistan and Burma and President Nasser of Egypt were flying to Indonesia for the first Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Field-Marshal Pibulsonggram invited them to spend the night in Bangkok. At a reception, the Prime Minister of Burma publicly apologised to the Prime Minister and people of Thailand for what Burma had done in the past.

'Even though our generation was not responsible for it,' he said, 'we accept full responsibility.' He gave a cheque in payment towards the repair of the ruins of Ayudhya. And compensation was paid, also, to the villagers who had suffered in the recent bombing incident.

'We can offer you bugs and insects'

The years that followed were spent in constant travel, which carried Daw Nyein Tha to all five continents, frequently with a large group, sometimes alone or with a few others, taking part in conferences and assemblies. The places in which she found herself were many and varied; it might be an old Christian monastery high in the hills of Cyprus, a paper-walled home in Japan, a mud-walled hut in India, or a hotel in a cosmopolitan city. Wherever she went in her travels she carried with her a Moffatt translation of the Bible, and as the years passed its margins began to fill with study notes, and its fly-leaves with outstanding dates, in her exquisite, tiny writing. Every place that she had visited from 1929 onwards was recorded there.

She was little at home during these years; and when her father was eighty-eight and her mother three years younger, the family doctor wrote to her: 'Your place is here, you must come back.' When U Cho heard of it, he asked one of her sisters to write to her and say, 'Don't you come back because people tell you. You come when God tells you.' With such deep trust between them, she was at peace about her family, although at times all that was in her humanly cried out to be with them. But she knew that their deepest unity was in obedience to God, which kept them closer together than any geographical proximity.

Her philosophy and the stories she told were international currency. Burma, like India, was a land of villages, in which ninety per cent of the people lived, and the stories about change

in Burmese villagers had great effect in India. They dealt with such familiar things as quarrels between husband and wife, about a stolen bullock, the land of a neighbouring village accidentally set on fire, the unwillingness to share a water supply, the giving and receiving of bribes, the problems of drunkenness. In Burma people brewed their own drink, and it was very potent. Sometimes a whole village would be dead drunk, men, women, and even children.

She told, too, how the answer was found, sometimes through children; how it spread from person to person, village to village. These simple stories revealed profound truths. They had happened, and they could happen anywhere.

Once she told these stories to Dr Rajendra Prasad, President of India, when he received a visiting group in the grounds of his residence in New Delhi. He wiped his eyes when she, and the Mitsuis who spoke with her, had finished.

On one extensive tour, after visiting Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and Thailand, a World Mission of Statesmen drawn from East and West arrived in Burma. They brought with them a play, *The Vanishing Island*, which dramatised 'the story of every country and every human heart today', said its author, Peter Howard, and offered a basis on which all could unite. Travelling with them was Daw Nyein Tha, and among the first to greet them at the airport was her entire family, who gave a garden reception for them. Daw Nyein Tha's mother brought all kinds of fruit from home, and a wonderful meal was cooked under her supervision.

The party paid a visit to the tombs of General Aung San and U Tin Tut. They were escorted through the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Its marble floors were polished by the bare feet of devout Buddhists walking across them in their thousands through the centuries, visiting the holy shrines, presenting their gifts of flowers and votive offerings, kneeling with forehead touching the cold stone.

On these tours Daw Nyein Tha continued to interpret East and West to each other. She talked to a group of young people, who were about to visit Asia, in these practical terms, preparing them for what they would face:

‘We can offer you bugs and insects, mosquitos and snakes, heat and rain, dust and dirt, all the diseases you can think of— together with all our gratitude and open hearts.

‘We cannot offer you any money or financial assistance of any kind, or comfortable beds and lodgings, neither good plumbing nor hot water, nor food you are used to. But we will offer you the best we have. We will move out of our rooms to give them to you, and give you the best food we have, with all the glorious fruit to go with it.

‘People will watch you twenty-four hours a day to see how you take things, accept things and react to them. They will be suspicious of you. They will laugh at you and with you. There will be no privacy, neither day nor night. And you will have to be disciplined about food and clothing, water and sun. You will be lonely. You will be away from your family, and people whom you consider your friends. But you will have the glorious fellowship of the Lord constantly.

‘You don’t have to know anything or be anything. The one thing we ask of you is that your motive for living be obedience to the living God. We need your open heart that is not too proud to keep clean, nor too soft to learn how to care.

‘We can promise you everything that is hard and difficult and heart-breaking. Your sweat and tears will flow like Niagara. However, just as the Niagara waters give light and power to millions, we can promise you that your victory will be measured in terms of turning the tide of history in fellowship with half the human race. And your only reward will be the deep conviction that you are obeying the Lord.’

1958 was a crucial year for Burma. Crime and lawlessness were increasing again. A split had developed in the Anti-Fascist

People's Freedom League, and in September tension mounted in Rangoon. Rumours swept across the city, armed troops moved into key points, stopping vehicles entering and leaving Rangoon. Three days of uncertainty ended on September 20th with the Prime Minister's dramatic broadcast that he had invited the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Ne Win, to take over the government, restore law and order, and ensure a free and fair election as soon as possible. Tension eased overnight, and General Ne Win became Prime Minister of a caretaker government.

A more stable situation gradually settled down, and by 1960 fresh elections were held. U Nu was restored to power with an overwhelming majority, at the head of a reforming party of moderates known as the 'clean' AFPFL, pledged to fight corruption within the party; and for a while an uneasy calm was maintained.

Daw Nyein Tha was in Europe when her mother died in 1960. Deeply moved, she re-dedicated herself to take on the whole world family and the children of the world, as her mother had so simply and joyously taken on her own family. She returned to Burma, and during the next sixteen months was mainly in her own country.

'These are very critical days in the country,' she wrote in 1961, and through the next months unrest was increasing in Burma. The Shan State in the north was demanding a measure of autonomy, and there was trouble with the considerable Kuomintang forces who had fled from China at the end of 1949, when the Chiang Kai-shek Government collapsed. They had established themselves in the Shan State and proved a constant thorn in Burma's side, with their threat to invade China and so, in all likelihood, involve Burma.

In the early hours of the morning of March 2nd, 1962, the Burmese Army moved into Rangoon and General Ne Win seized power. In a broadcast to the nation he announced that 'in

view of the deteriorating situation' a Revolutionary Council had been formed, of which he was Chairman, to take on the government of the country. Overnight and almost without bloodshed, democratic Burma had been taken over by a military dictatorship. U Nu, several of his Cabinet, and a number of others were arrested and imprisoned.

Daw Nyein Tha was out of the country at the time. After spending Christmas with her family in Moulmein and being in Rangoon for Independence Day, she had gone to India, where news of the coup reached her.

A letter at that time from her friend Peter Howard gave her new perspective and lifted her to further horizons. 'You are a world revolutionary, and must never limit yourself to being an expert on any section of the world or any one country. Your genius, and it is a genius, is to change people so that they are never, never the same again.

'For my part, Ma Mi, I have a deep affection and respect for you, and would like to work with you as a brother in all the years that lie ahead. Have no fear. With God's help we will yet turn the tide in Asia and the world.'

Her time in Asia was drawing to a close. After some months in India and a last visit to Japan, she left Tokyo for Europe in December.

It was to be some years before she returned to Asia, and meanwhile Switzerland became the country where she spent most of her time. Little news reached her of all that was happening in Burma; what she heard was disturbing. Communists, supplied with arms from China, were increasing in numbers; Chinese Communist soldiers, wearing Burmese army uniforms, and others posing as refugees, were constantly infiltrating across the extended frontier with China. If an attack occurred, there would be strong support for it within the country.

It was during this period that Daw Nyein Tha had an

experience which revolutionised her attitude towards China. She described it thus: 'I was sitting all crumpled up in misery one morning. The thought came to me, "You are afraid of China, of what she might do to your country, your people." After a while I admitted it. "Don't you know that what you hate you fear? You fear China."

'I had to think that one over. I thought I was perfectly justified in feeling the way I did, because of the threat to my country. Finally I admitted it. The next thought came with a bang. "How can you give the right ideology to those you hate? They don't need your hate. They need your help."

'I knew I did not know how, or have the capacity or the desire to do it. So I cried in despair, "But what can I do?" With a terrific force He said, "You don't have to do anything. You don't have to be anything. You don't have to know anything. The only thing you have to do is to keep your heart open and clean of fear and hate, and listen and obey, and I will work things out in My own way."

'I thought it over, and finally I said, "Yes, Lord, I will." It was as if a big burden rolled off my heart. All hate and fear disappeared, and instead there comes the outpouring of prayer and the constant longing for China to see her real destiny in the world. Family unity and loyalty were China's great assets and strength. United families are the foundation of a stable society. I believe it is China's destiny to give this idea of one family to all the diverse people of the world, to make Asia the kind of continent where we all live in unity together, not dominating anyone, but as sons and daughters of God the Father, the one supreme Authority. China will then win the hearts and minds of the billions of the world who are looking longingly for real security and peace. China is not our enemy, they are our brothers and sisters whom we need.

'From that time on, every time I go to bed I extend my heart to God and let Him flow through it to one person after another

of these leaders. When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is to think of them, because you never know how God is going to work through them. But He is going to do it.'

She was deeply stirred to hear of an imaginative and bold venture by a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, Rajmohan Gandhi, in India. Thirty-three years earlier the Mahatma had led a protest march against the British to make salt on the seashore. In October, 1963, Rajmohan Gandhi set out with seventy men and women on a march from Cape Comorin at the foot of India to Delhi, a journey—with many divergencies—of a thousand miles, undertaken in part on foot and in part in a cavalcade of coaches and cars. Its purpose was to call all India to return to God.

It aroused intense interest and response, particularly among students. Thousands sent in their names, asking for further training, and in order to meet that response camps were set up in different parts of the country. One of these was in Panchgani, a hill resort in the Western Ghats of Maharashtra. At the request of the Civic leaders of the town a training centre was later set up here on a barren hillside. For more than fifty years the land had been uncultivated. There were no buildings, no road, no electricity, no water.

But now buildings began going up, wells going down, trees were planted, terraced gardens created, and increasing numbers were coming from many Asian countries, to learn to take responsibility for their nations. To Daw Nyein Tha it was a vision fulfilled. She saw in this force being prepared by Rajmohan Gandhi the answer to the revolutionary ideas of Mao's China. 'We need to enlist the youth these days,' she wrote.

For a while she visited England, staying some of the time in a quiet little English village where John Tyndale-Biscoe was Rector, to help look after Bishop West's wife, who was recovering from an accident. At breakfast one morning an engineer, living at the rectory and working in a research laboratory nearby,



Photo: Strong

Madame Aung San



General Aung San



**Daw Nyein Tha
cooking with the
Maharani of
Kutch in the
Asian kitchen
at Caux**

**Asia Plateau,
the MRA Centre at
Panchgani in India.
In the centre is
the circular
Daw Nyein Tha
memorial room**

Photo: Cummock



casually mentioned that a young Burman had come to work in the laboratory, and was in the same room as himself. At once Daw Nyein Tha's attention was rivetted. Who was this Burman? What was his name?

'Aung San U,' was the astonishing reply. Aung San U! Why, he was the son of General Aung San! She could hardly believe her ears. A few days later Aung San U was sitting at table with them. He had much of his father in him. When asked why he had taken up engineering, he replied, 'My country needs engineers.' It might have been his father speaking. He came to stay in the roomy old rectory, to the delight of his mother, now Burmese ambassador in New Delhi.

Daw Nyein Tha, her hair turning grey—though her grandmother's switch remained jet-black—became a familiar figure in the quiet country village, in her brightly-coloured *longyi* and the white shawl she often wore round her shoulders for extra warmth in the chilly climate of the England she was growing to love more and more dearly.

She was given the opportunity one day to speak to a church group, and she brought an enchantment into the parish company with the music and gaiety of her quick, eager voice and her infectious laughter. 'What a wonderful country you have!' she told them. 'I've had the privilege of being around these parts for the past few weeks. What marvellous roses you have—and all the wild flowers! I never knew that such wild flowers existed in England. And your vegetables! What a joy it is just to go into the garden and pick vegetables while you are cooking! And the rain. So many parts of the world are in trouble because they don't get rain. But here you have green fields with the cows and the sheep grazing peacefully.

'And yet, while enjoying all these gifts from God, everywhere people are worried—worried about their children, and the children about their parents; about their relationships at home, at work and with their neighbours. What can we do about it all?

How can we find that peace in our hearts and minds that passes all understanding?

'I believe that something can be done. I have seen it happen.' And she told the story of what Bishop West had done for Burma by turning people to God. 'If one Christian can do this for a nation of twenty million, what can't the Church in this country do to solve the strikes, housing shortages and rising crime—if she accepts seriously her mission?

'We desperately need this to happen because we in Asia, deep down in our hearts, are longing for Britain to give moral leadership. Like naughty children, when we don't get what we expect from our parents we say all kinds of nasty things about them. Please don't take it personally. It is only because we long so much for you to take moral leadership. If that were to begin to happen through ordinary people like yourselves, then we in Asia would rejoice, take hope, and pledge our whole-hearted support for Britain in the crucial days to come.'

For many years she had had recurring attacks of malaria. Dr Burford Weeks, chief of a unit of the Malaria Eradication Division of the World Health Organisation, had treated her in Geneva with considerable success. He and his wife had been in Burma where he was working on a pilot project for a national malaria control scheme. They grew to love the country and its people, and met Daw Nyein Tha's family. She was a frequent guest in their home in Geneva. There were certain symptoms which still gave rise to anxiety, however, and Daw Nyein Tha spent her last few days in England in the Tropical Diseases Hospital, undergoing tests and investigations. These were inconclusive, and she left at the beginning of January to return to Switzerland.

Encounters

It is impossible to estimate the effect Daw Nyein Tha had on the hundreds with whom she came into contact as she travelled around the world. They came to her with their needs and problems. Whether she was talking to a younger person or an older, with an American, a European, an Asian or an African, a man or a woman, she was never afraid to go straight to the point.

She was talking once to a respectable group of missionaries and others. Her subject was sin, and one woman spoke up. 'My sins have all been forgiven.'

'What sins?' Ma Nyein Tha enquired.

'Sin in general,' the missionary replied.

'I do not know "sin in general",' Daw Nyein Tha stated, with a twinkle in her eyes. 'My sins are all specific.'

She stayed at one time in the home of a Ceylon businessman, father of twin daughters, Rohini and Seela. Rohini was a gay young person, filled with zest for life. She loved all sports passionately—swimming, riding, tennis, polo, cricket. She came to the meetings that were being held. She watched Daw Nyein Tha and her friends. She saw something that attracted her deeply. These people really lived what they believed in; they had a quality of life she had never met before. This was what she wanted, and she responded to it whole-heartedly.

If she were to put right what was wrong in her life, where was she to begin? A talk with Daw Nyein Tha helped her to face her relationship with her father. He was an authoritarian, and

Rohini's freedom-loving spirit rebelled. She tried the experiment of listening to the inner voice, took the first step of apologising to her father for her hatred, and a new relationship developed, the beginning of a growing freedom.

Because she never spared herself, Daw Nyein Tha was able to pierce through the defences of others, and to go straight to the root of their need. There was nothing pharisaical about her; she refused to sit in judgement on her fellow sinners. A favourite phrase of hers was 'When I point my finger at my neighbour, there are three more pointing back at me.' Suiting the action to the word, she would invite her listeners to do the same. She herself was always quick to look at those 'three fingers'.

'I discovered that change is fun,' she observed one day. 'When you see where you have to change, be very happy, because it means that you are in the sunlight, in the presence of God. If you think you don't need change, you are somewhere else.'

'In an unfailling, simple way she put me back in touch with God, whenever I took my doubts and difficulties to her,' wrote a friend who saw a great deal of Daw Nyein Tha in those later years. 'Never any advice or discussion. "You don't have to be anything, you don't have to do anything. Just accept God's Spirit. Let Him flow through you." And she would make her often-repeated gesture of acceptance of this Spirit from head to foot.'

A family from England were at the conference centre in Caux one summer.

'I do admire all that you are doing so much and think it is marvellous,' the mother said with vague enthusiasm. 'But I'm getting older, and I've lived a very active life, so you must leave me to look after my cows, bees and chickens.'

Daw Nyein Tha was by no means diverted by these blandishments. 'If you stay with your hens, you will become like an old hen,' she replied crisply. 'Come and work with us, and you'll

grow wings like an eagle.' The challenge was accepted.

Among the many friends she made was a Swedish mother, Majken, who came to the conference centre in Caux, as many from all parts of Europe do, ready to help in any way she could in the running of that building—the cleaning, cooking, laundering. She worked hard, determined not to think of herself and her many difficulties with her teen-age family at home.

One afternoon she had tea out on the tree-shaded terrace with Daw Nyein Tha and several others. What most impressed her was not only what she heard, but the reality of the Burmese woman's relationship with God. It was almost tangible.

The next day she was in the lift and, preoccupied, stepped out at the wrong floor. And there was Daw Nyein Tha standing waiting.

'Oh, it was you!' Daw Nyein Tha exclaimed. 'I was lying on my bed resting, but the Lord said, "Get up and dress. Someone needs you."'

The two sat down together, and Daw Nyein Tha told her the story of her own change, how once she had tried to forget her troubles by working hard and being very efficient. Encouraged by this, Majken poured out her pent-up worries. Then the two were quiet, and wrote down the thoughts uppermost in their minds. Majken wrote a good deal. Daw Nyein Tha looked at her with clear eyes. 'Why don't you say "I am a proud and selfish woman"?' she asked.

The door was opened that liberated the imprisoned Majken. From that time Daw Nyein Tha treated her as if she were one of her own family. Sometimes they were together at meals in the great dining-room. On one occasion Daw Nyein Tha took a paper napkin and rolled it into a tube. 'We are like this channel,' she said. 'Here, from above, God's love and light pour into us, so that they may go through us to other people. But we must be pure within, otherwise what comes out of us will be grey and dusty.' Majken returned home a different woman. She still had

a battle with her human nature, but she was learning to find a way through her difficulties; and another correspondent was added to Daw Nyein Tha's list.

As her host of friends around the world increased, the task of keeping in touch with each one became immense. She put as much thought into her letters as into any talk she might give at a large meeting. Wherever she went she carried a notebook in which to write down the thoughts which came into her mind in the early morning; God's guidance for the day which lay before her, how to meet the need of a particular person, or to address a meeting. She was always seeking after fresh ways of expression and fresh avenues of obedience. In her mother tongue, 'to listen' and 'to obey' is the same word, *na taung ba*.

'How many of us washed our hands this morning?' she asked a startled audience at a meeting. 'Didn't you wash your hands ten years ago? Didn't you wash your hands last week? Why, then, did you wash your hands this morning? Because we use our hands all the time, we need to wash them all the time, and more than once a day. In the same way we need to keep our hearts clean all the time. Through our eyes, our ears, our minds, things go into our hearts.

'We are like pools of water, clear, sparkling water, and everyone comes to drink and goes away refreshed with new life and energy.

'Then one little leaf falls into the pool, it floats on the top and goes down to the bottom. Another little leaf falls, it floats on the top and goes down to the bottom. And so they come, one after another, and all go down to the bottom.

'When you look at the pool, the water looks quite fresh, clear and clean. But stir it up and see how all the leaves come up. It is not clean any more. Would you like to drink that water now? Why, you wouldn't even want to wash your clothes in it. So the only thing is to clean the whole thing out and put in fresh water, clean, clear, sparkling.'

The leaves, she said, are like the thoughts that drop into our hearts. 'One little leaf starts to fall. Pick it up quickly. Ah, what's that one? "I don't do the things they do." What is back of that? Turn the leaf round and look at it. Self-righteousness and dishonesty. Why, of course I do some of those things!

'Another little leaf falls. Ah, what's that one? "I want it quickly! I want it big! I want it now!" Turn that leaf round. Self-will. Why, that's impurity. Throw it away.

'Another little leaf falls. Quickly pick it up. "What are they saying about me? What will my family think?" Turn it round. I am thinking about myself. Self-concern. Throw it away.

'So these leaves do not have a chance to go down to the bottom. The water remains clean and clear and sparkling. There's nothing to be stirred up. Anybody can come and drink without being polluted, and go away with renewed life to take up the task to remake the world. That is the reason why we need to clean our hearts out. We have poison in our hearts with all these things—self-righteousness, self-concern, self-will and self-importance—instead of honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. And when we don't let the poison come into our hearts, then the heart remains clean and pure, and we can hear what God has to say.'

Daw Nyein Tha had a deepening sense of God's purpose for her being in Switzerland these days. Although she was no longer going out to the world, the world was coming to her as it trod over Switzerland's doorstep.

She spent much of her time either in Geneva, in the home of Dr and Mrs Weeks, or in the conference centre at Caux. When Burmese and other Asian delegates to the United Nations visited the Weeks' flat, she would cook a Burmese meal, giving them at the same time new hope for their countries and the world. Her concern was that Switzerland should not merely be a vast international conference ground, but that it become a country where the two halves of the world could come together

'like two praying hands', the two halves of a circle, the one not complete without the other, finding their unity in a common care for the needs of humanity. 'When the East and the West listen to God together, don't you think we could remake the world?' she asked.

The Asian kitchen at Caux was her domain, where she shared responsibility with a Swiss woman. Here curries and aromatic Asian foods were prepared, and a great variety of vegetarian dishes for visitors from the East. When delegates to the ILO (International Labour Organisation) at Geneva came up to the Caux conference, including the whole Burmese delegation, they were given a Burmese meal. As soon as they began to eat, they knew a Burmese had cooked it. Afterwards she was introduced to them, and they told her how much this taste of home in a foreign land meant to them.

In the course of her years of experience in the Asian kitchen, she had worked out some simple principles, which she passed on to those who came to be trained in Asian cooking. They covered such practical points as the meats prohibited to Asians. But her tuition touched on more fundamental principles. Primarily it was the people for whom you cooked that mattered, not the meals you cooked for them. Why you were cooking was more important than what you were cooking. Speed was not the first aim, but perfection.

One day a lady from Italian Radio came to the kitchens. Daw Nyein Tha was introduced to her as a former headmistress. The Italian had been interviewing various people for a programme, and she thrust her microphone in front of Daw Nyein Tha. 'If you were a headmistress, why are you cooking?' she asked.

Daw Nyein Tha drew herself up to the full extent of her not very great height.

'I am not cooking,' she said, deliberately and emphatically. 'I am obeying God.' Every morning, she told her, before she went into the kitchen, she asked God to tell her what to cook, how to

cook it, when to put what on the stove, which hot plate to use at what time. 'No,' she would say, 'I go into the kitchen not to do something, but to obey God.' It was a philosophy Brother Lawrence would have understood because, for both, love issued in obedience.

There were many Swiss homes whose doors were opened wide to her. 'God has been wonderfully good to me all these years,' she wrote. 'He could not have given me a more beautiful country to live in, nor to be amongst so many deep-down warm-hearted and caring people who have taken me in as part of their families.' And in another letter: 'Life is glorious and interesting and full of surprises. The one thing we can all do each day is to pass on to the people we meet the joy of living. The world needs men and women with happy, free and satisfied hearts.'

But life had its dark places too. Her passport was running out when she returned from England, and there were delays, at first unaccountable, in issuing her a new one. The Government of Burma had brought in a certificate of identification, so that if a Burmese had left the country he could not ask to re-enter. To one who loved her country so passionately the sense of rejection was overwhelming. When the time came for the renewal of her permit to stay in Switzerland, she had no passport with which to apply. The authorities offered her a Refugee Identity Card, and this caused fresh heartache. There were times when she touched bottom. 'I found myself thinking of people around me as difficult to live with,' she said honestly.

Then she discovered that the key-word for her was acceptance, not rejection: 'Acceptance of just being a child of God instead of a citizen of a particular country. Acceptance of the place where God puts me as my country because it belongs to Him, and not keep longing to go back "home". Acceptance of the idea that I may never see my family again. Accepting everything that comes as a privilege from God.' For Burford

and Catherine Weeks, the remembrance of those days was that she always eventually triumphed over the things that troubled her, and this strengthened their own faith.

It was at this time that her father, U Cho, reached his hundredth birthday and she could not be with him. Reassuring words were given to her: 'I still have work for you to do here. I am with you. I am with your father and family in Burma. They want you to obey Me. Of course you miss your family. Don't press it down but give it to Me. I will use it.' Less than a year later came news of his home-going.

She accepted again as her own the unending battle going on in the world. For many years she had been a friend of U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations, and his family. Her prayers were often for this distinguished compatriot in his delicate task of steering the United Nations through the turbulent waters of international relationships. She followed his negotiations with deep interest, and kept among her papers an article he wrote that appeared in *Saturday Review* in 1967, entitled: 'What could we build if we worked together?' Referring to the antagonism and distrust in which people lived, he had said: "Human nature" is popularly held to be responsible for this deplorable state of affairs, the assumption being that "human nature" is in some way a force which cannot be controlled or improved. It is high time this comfortable pretext was exploded. Men should aspire to be the masters of their fate rather than the victims of their own "nature". If we presume, as we do, to improve and change everything else in nature, why do we leave ourselves out of the process? Improvement and progress should surely begin at home.'

That August of 1967, when he was involved in the formidable task of trying to settle the Middle East War, she wrote to him: 'When I hear or read news of the world, I have a little bit of an idea of the kind of responsibility you are carrying at the UN. I have been praying for you and extended my *myitta* to you so

that, as you meditate every morning, God may enlighten, direct and show you, in His infinite wisdom, the solution to the problems you are facing at the United Nations. I was grateful to read about you in *The Sunday Times*, especially the last sentence, "It is restful to be sure of one man's integrity."

About this time she received an invitation from Rajmohan Gandhi to the new Asian centre in Panchgani. She asked God for His orders, and the answer came clearly, 'Not yet.' With her reply she enclosed the money she had been saving for an air ticket to Burma. Some months earlier she had committed herself to sending five hundred Swiss francs a month to India for a year for this new centre, which was to be called Asia Plateau. It was a commitment to which she held, although there were times when she had not known where the money would come from until almost the last day. Once, two days before the required time, she had only three hundred francs in hand. 'What will you do?' asked a friend. 'Will you send only the three hundred francs?'

'No,' she replied with quiet confidence. 'It will come.'

On the last morning there was a letter in the post from America, containing just the needed amount.

'The day I sent the last instalment of the gift of five hundred francs a month for a year,' she recorded, 'He sent me ten francs. Twenty francs came the next day. When I thanked Him for loving me and providing me with the necessities of life and the thirty francs, He said, "Of course I will provide you with everything you need—courage, outgoingness, care for people, so you will not let the devil keep you down. The weaker you are physically, the more you need to go out in your heart and mind to people."' "

All through the years she had experienced God's provision. Once, many years earlier, she prayed for money to send a Bible to each one of her family. There were twenty-one of them. A cheque arrived for twenty-one pounds.

'But, Lord, You know that each English Bible costs twenty-one shillings,' she pointed out. 'This is not enough.' Surely the Lord had made a mistake. But no. She discovered that the same type American Bible cost only a pound, and she was able to carry out her thought.

Daw Nyein Tha kept careful accounts, and headed each page, 'God's bountiful care'. Underneath was entered the name of each one who had given to her, and the amount, and her expenditure, of which the chief item was usually 'postage'. The postmaster at Caux was a special friend of hers. One day she arrived with a pile of thirty letters.

'Mr Haller,' she said, 'I have got ten francs. Will you please tell me how many of these letters I can send off?'

He selected some, and returned the rest to her.

'You know,' she said confidently, 'God knows that I have written these letters. He will give me some money.'

The next day she arrived, waving an envelope. 'Mr Haller,' she said, 'I've got twenty francs in this letter, so I can send off the rest of my mail.' There was little left over of change to hand back to her, but she was unperturbed. 'You see, God always sends me the money I need,' she said.

She sent many parcels of food and clothes to her family and friends in Burma, and every parcel was perfectly packed and planned, that it might not be overweight. 'What is the cheapest rate?' she would ask, and the postmaster would co-operate by cutting an inch or so off a newspaper to reduce the weight. God's money must not be wasted.

In the summer of 1968, Daw Nyein Tha would be seen often at meals with a circle of completely absorbed young people of many nationalities around her, holding them with the vividness of her stories. 'Each day, each meal is an adventure,' she said. 'The one thing they want to know is how to listen and change, how God works in countries when you live straight, listen and obey.' She loved the young. 'Each one has been chosen by

God,' she said. They brought their friends and introduced them to her. 'The thought that I am part of your fearless, fighting force makes me feel eighteen not sixty-eight,' she declared.

Many times she would be surrounded by teachers that summer. 'The only way the heart can grow is when you accept all that God has to give you for the children,' she told them, 'because they are God's children before they are yours. How do you think of them? That they are people who are listening to what you are teaching, and that they must behave? Or that here is a group of young people given into my hands by God, for me to give them God, so that God can teach them what to do, and they can pass God on to the whole world?

'Your job is not just to love your children, or to teach them facts, or to make them think, or even to train their characters, or to give them a faith. It is to equip them to remake the world. Do you think of them that way? Or do you think of yourselves as only just teachers? God did not give you His commission for you to put yourselves into a category. He meant you to be a remaker of the world, and that is the reason why He has given you these children.'

She told them in detail what happened when God changed her heart 'and gave me that overpowering love of His'. 'I'm telling you the story to show you the thread,' she went on, 'how God works in adventures in obedience; when you obey God and when you accept, God gives His Spirit, His life overflowing. It is most important that these children think that they are in the school not only to study geometry and algebra and English and things like that. God has His particular commission for every single one of us.'

'Each day a gift from God'

One day at Caux, Daw Nyein Tha received a letter that set her heart dancing for joy. It was from Rajmohan Gandhi, telling her of a plan for a force of forty or fifty people from around the world, moving through South East Asia. 'Would you please consider being a part of this force for a new Asia? It may be that God intends you to use your experience for the Asian lands on this journey.... Our aim will be the winning of men and nations to God, the presentation of the evidence of miracles, the healing of hates between nations and between Asia and the West.

'May I request you to seek guidance on this?'

Daw Nyein Tha had a clear sense that this was God's call for her. Running out of the room in which she had been reading it, she almost collided with someone in the corridor, so excited was she.

'I have had a letter of invitation from India!' she cried jubilantly, 'and I really believe that this time God wants me to go.'

Before the letter came, gifts of money had begun to arrive. Ten dollars from a Canadian friend, twenty francs from a friend in Lausanne, twenty German marks, twenty Swiss francs from an Australian doctor, and fifty francs from another Swiss friend. After the third day, she had thought God must be sending the money with a purpose.

Gifts continued to pour in. They came from seventeen countries. Her fare was covered.

The necessary practical steps followed. Visas would be a

problem, without a passport, but meanwhile she went ahead with her packing. 'I still feel that if God wants me in India, He will send me there somehow,' she said.

Her health, however, was causing concern. Early in October she underwent tests in a Lausanne hospital. She faced the future. Would she be able to go to India? Then, 'Be free to be wherever God wants you,' she wrote in her notebook.

The next words had deep significance. She knew God was speaking to her.

'Write down everything I tell you. You will go. You will be taken to be with Me there. So prepare yourself by living close to Me, and keep giving Me to everybody. You are My chosen through whom I will bring many people to Myself. Open your heart to them in the East just as you have to those here—with no bitterness for rejection but just acceptance of whatever I have for you, and all will be well.'

She penned a frame round the words, and then wrote: 'Now let your heart be at peace.' Beside it she put the date: October 8th, 1968.

The hospital tests were long and painful, and she often had to do battle with herself. 'When I found the pain in my body difficult to accept,' she said, 'after eating or doing tests, the Lord said to me, "Why don't you let me pour My spirit through you to pray for the leaders in Russia and China and the United States and all around the world, as well as in your own country? Then you accept all the pain and discomfort and delays with joy and gratitude." At first I could only see the sense in the gratitude if all this was going to make me fit for the great times that lie ahead. But I am beginning to understand about the joy. The joy of obedience. Joy for what the Lord is doing through those who are committed to Him all over the world, so that His kingdom may come on earth.'

She was to have left for India on October 12th, but the doctor at the university clinic asked her to wait for further tests. The X-

rays revealed that something was wrong, but could not show what it was. So she was sent to the Cantonal Hospital, where the same condition was found. They allowed her to leave after she promised to have another X-ray in Ceylon in December.

The necessary visas had arrived and on October 28th she boarded the plane for India.

The Air India stewardesses welcomed the passengers aboard. All around, planes were arriving and leaving, the air was alive with the sound of them. She took her seat, arranged her belongings and fastened the safety belt. All this she had done often before, but this time it was different. She knew she was saying 'Goodbye' to Europe for the last time.

At Poona, she and four others travelling with her were met by Rajmohan Gandhi. The seventy-mile run to Panchgani took them across the valley of the Krishna and up the long, twisting, rough road through the foothills, where the rocks, through which the road had been cut, rose high above it. Monkeys swung in the banyan trees which thrust their roots deep into the soil, scarred and seared by erosion.

Now at last she could see the place which had come to mean so much to her. It lay 4,300 feet up on a gentle incline under the flat-topped tableland rising just behind. One building had already been erected and the workers were engaged on a second. Below, the land sloped steeply down into the Krishna valley; thirty miles away a further rim of the Western Ghats enclosed the valley like the sides of a great dish. The light that filled it seemed to be continually changing through the day, transmuting the colours of the far hills to pink, heliotrope and cobalt, while the wide dome of the sky spanning it melted from ultramarine to palest cerulean.

They drove through the wrought-iron gates, through the terraced gardens, a miracle of green after the monsoon. In what had been burnt, barren, rocky soil, trees and bushes had been planted to conserve the moisture—eucalyptus, tamarind, jaca-

randa, orange, lemon and oleander, all the old, familiar friends of her childhood. She felt she had come home.

After five days she left for Ceylon, for a conference opening in November.

In Colombo she stayed with Surya and Nelun Sena. Among the many interviews, meetings and visits, she cared for the needs of the young Indian girls who were there with the visiting group. A cable came for one of them, Anju, to say that her grandfather had died. Daw Nyein Tha broke the news to her. 'She was wonderful,' Anju said afterwards. 'She said he had gone one step ahead. She was not very well herself at that time, and she spoke about the pain she was having. She said she trusted God about it, and it was nothing to worry about, that whatever God wanted would happen.'

She was like a mother to these young Indians. Tired and hot, they would come into her room and fling off their saris before lying down to rest, and then change into fresh saris. Immediately she would pick up the discarded saris and fold them with infinite care. 'She would do just the little things which meant a tremendous lot to us,' said one girl.

One day Anju was sitting beside her in a bus. 'Ma Mi,' she confided, 'we are meant to change people, and I just don't seem to do it.'

'It is not we who change people,' was the reply. 'It is God who changes people. Your job is simply to obey guidance and do what God tells you to do, and not anything else. That is all that is required of you. Don't look for results.'

The days were full and, in spite of increasing weakness and pain, Daw Nyein Tha continued to meet people, giving much thought as to what she should say to each. One of these was a councillor.

'There is very little corruption here,' he told her confidently, as they spoke together of Ceylon, traditionally called *Dharma Dimpur*, The Isle of Righteousness.

'If I put one cholera germ in your glass,' she replied, 'would you drink it? Why not? It's so small, you'd hardly notice it.'

She was as quick off the mark as she had been years ago, when a stranger in a New York lift asked her—between floors—'What is Moral Re-Armament?' Her answer was immediate. 'God has a plan. Find it. Follow it.'

Looking back over the years, on her sixty-ninth birthday, she stressed the point of God's continuing strategy. In 1935 Frank Buchman had undertaken the training of seven Asians who had committed themselves to fight for the regeneration of Asia and the world: Dr Katie Woo of Hong Kong, Takasumi and Hideko Mitsui of Japan, Surya and Nelun Sena from Ceylon, Ma Nu and herself from Burma. He took them with him to many countries. She told of her visit to the Mahatma, and now the message she had given him was finding its fulfilment in Gandhiji's grandson.

Soon after her return to Colombo she saw an eminent surgeon, Dr Drogo Austin. He advised an abdominal operation. Dr Roderick Evans, who was with the travelling group, agreed with him. Her friends had to continue on their way, leaving her in Colombo. On December 2nd she entered a nursing home run by nuns. The Mother Superior, the matron and other members of the staff were frequent visitors to the room of this unusually gay patient with an infectious laugh and a heart full of love for others, not centred on herself.

'One good thing about being in bed is it gives you unhurried time for prayer,' she wrote to a friend. 'In my heart and mind I am with the main force that has gone back to India, to Pakistan, to Malaysia, and the force around the world.'

Rajmohan Gandhi gave her encouragement with frequent letters that kept her abreast with all that was happening. 'Whether or not you are commanded to travel with us,' he wrote, 'you will be, in heart and mind and spirit, with us and we with you.' And she wrote to him: 'I am in His loving hands and

that is enough for me. I have a tremendous sense that this is where God wants me at this moment to fit into His purpose. What a privilege it is to be part of His plan for the whole world!’

As she looked back with gratitude for God’s leading in the past, she thought of the American Baptist missionaries. Many of the older ones whom she had known from her childhood were now living in retirement in America. She decided to write to them. In response she received a letter from an old lady of eighty-six, who had been Principal of Morton Lane School many years earlier, expressing her ‘love and admiration for the years of Christian witness you have given in all parts of the world’.

The operation lasted two-and-a-half hours. The intestinal discomfort ceased. But the surgeon found a malignant growth in the pancreas that had spread to the liver. He gave her three months to live.

Dr Evans conferred with the Senas, and they decided that she should be told the truth. They went to the nursing home and sat down with her. Dr Evans broke the news. There was no denying it was a shock. She asked how long she had to live.

‘Dr Austin says about three months,’ Dr Evans replied. ‘But there are some wonderful new treatments these days, and the lives of some patients have been considerably lengthened.’

She was silent for a while. Then she said, ‘Whatever is God’s will, let it be done.’

They were quiet before God together, and the words that came to her were: ‘To those who love God, who are called according to His plan, everything that happens fits into a pattern for good.’ (Romans 8: 28, Phillips’ translation.)

Three months to live. That brought an added urgency to her days. She was full of gratitude to her surgeon, doctors and nurses, and a friend from England, Jill Robbins, who visited her daily and looked after her needs.

‘The Lord is giving me insight into people here,’ she wrote to

Dr and Mrs Weeks, 'and I find myself giving to each one straight as they come in to see me.' Among the frequent visitors to her room from the nursing-home staff was Miss Lockheart, who supervised the food and the domestic staff. On each visit she poured out to Daw Nyein Tha a saga of woe. The butcher supplied bad meat. The cook wouldn't do as he was told. The other servants were bone lazy, and she was at her wits' end to know how to handle them.

Daw Nyein Tha listened patiently one day until the tirade was finished.

'You know,' she said, 'from today I'm going to call you Miss Openheart. You're going to open that big heart of yours to all the people you work with—the cook, the servants, the butcher, and everyone you meet.'

'No, no, no!' protested Miss Lockheart. 'I'm too old for that sort of thing.'

'Nonsense!' countered Daw Nyein Tha. 'You've got a great heart and you're going to open it from this moment. I'll pray for you.'

A week later a radiant 'Miss Openheart' came into her room. 'After you asked me to open my heart, I thought about it and decided to try your way,' she said. 'It is wonderful! It works! When I spoke to the cook and the staff nicely, they were quite different. They are working cheerfully and well. I must thank you for your good advice.'

'I'm so glad,' Daw Nyein Tha said. 'I prayed for you. If you listen to God and keep your heart open, you will be used to change people and start a chain reaction that will be felt in Ceylon.'

A Sinhalese ayah swept her room daily with a coconut fibre broom. She was terribly clumsy. In one week she broke two cups and saucers, and finally a beautiful porcelain vase lent to Daw Nyein Tha by Surya and Nelun Sena. Such clumsiness must have a cause, and Daw Nyein Tha wondered what it was.

She asked God to show her. Next time the ayah came to sweep, she sent for one of the English-speaking nurses to translate for her, for the ayah could only speak Sinhala.

When the nurse came in, she asked her to find out if the ayah was married, and if she was happy. The reply came in a torrent. 'My husband is a drunkard. I'm miserably unhappy. He takes my earnings and even my jewellery, and sells it for drinking and gambling.'

'And what do you do?' Daw Nyein Tha asked through her interpreter.

'I scold him,' came the answer.

'And what does he do then?'

'He beats me.'

'So your scolding doesn't work?'

No answer.

'Wouldn't you like to try a better way to change him?'

'What can I do? He is a brute. I've tried everything.'

'Have you tried listening to your inner voice?'

'No. What is that?'

By now the nurse herself was becoming intrigued as Daw Nyein Tha told the ayah, through her, how she herself began listening to that voice, and what happened in her school as a result. She went on to tell stories of married couples who had separated, and who became re-united.

Two weeks later the ayah had become a very different person. There were no more breakages. Her attitude to her husband changed, after she began listening to her inner voice. Moreover, something happened in him as well.

The hospital doctor asked for a rare drug from Switzerland to treat her case. The American hospital ship, *Hope*, had some ampoules of this drug and supplied it. The course of treatment lasted two weeks. It was severe; but when her mind was clear she used the little strength she had to write letters.

She drafted one to General Eisenhower, former President of

the United States, who at that time was ill in hospital. She had been reading his article, 'Some Thoughts on the Presidency', in the Asian edition of *Readers Digest*. Appreciating this article, she wrote: 'You are in the Walter Reed Hospital and I am in a nursing home having treatment for cancer. The American hospital ship *Hope* very generously gave the drug that I am being treated with. I am most grateful for this.

'Each day we have the privilege to live is a gift from God. He can work out His plan only through obedient people.... May the Almighty, our loving Father, give you all the wisdom and inspiration, His indomitable Spirit, and courage to do what is right for the whole world.'

She was in the nursing home until the treatment was finished, then Surya and Nelun Sena opened their home to her again, and here she stayed until she had gathered sufficient strength to return to India. They were away, but Jill Robbins was with her. For a while, the faith that had buoyed her up at first seemed to forsake her. She became moody, demanding, difficult.

She had placed so much hope and the strength of her will on the expectation that God would heal her, but now that hope was crumbling and darkness came over her. She was not an easy patient to nurse these days. But this final battle was won with the help of her faithful friends.

To Daw Nyein Tha, life had never been an easy passage. She had all the temptations and battles of a strong, tempestuous nature; but though she went down at times to the depths, repentance brought her eventually to lay hold of and accept God's forgiveness.

With Mother Julian of old, she knew the truth of the promise: 'He said not: *Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be afflicted*; but He said: *Thou shalt not be overcome*.'

By February 6th she was strong enough to make the journey to Panchgani.

The next step

Daw Nyein Tha lay in bed listening. The sun had risen and she could hear the bulbuls babbling in the trees. Earlier, before sunrise, the cries of the young jackals playing in the scrub on the steep slopes of the plateau had broken the silence of the darkness. Then the sun rose and took over swiftly from the night.

She was up and doing her hair, sitting in a chair with her feet tucked under her, when an Indian girl, Anasuya, brought her breakfast. 'I hope you are feeling at home,' Anasuya said to her.

'This *is* home,' Daw Nyein Tha assured her.

That room was to be visited by many in the coming month. Her strength ebbed fast, but her heart remained outgoing and free.

A few days after her arrival a conference opened in Asia Plateau with the theme, 'Turning enemies into friends'. It was attended by people from many countries, and from as far away as Ethiopia and the Sudan. Summoning up her strength, she sent this message to the opening session:

'My heart is merry and joyful and grateful to know that nations from all over the world have flocked to Panchgani for this conference. I believe that this is the beginning of the next phase of God's continuing strategy for Asia and the world. At the first opening of Panchgani this thought came to me, "Nations shall run unto you because of the Lord your God", and this is happening.

'My deep wish is that every single one who is here commits

himself a hundred per cent to listen to and obey God, so that God may be able to work out His plan, His continuing plan for Asia, for Europe, for the world, in His own way, in His own time, at His own pace. And as we commit ourselves to obey Him each morning, no matter what, He will do what He wants done in the world. He will give us all the direction, correction, information we need. As we obey, He will work things out.

'I will be thinking of you all during this time. May God bless you.'

Among those who heard this message was the official representative of the Tamil Nadu (Madras) Government, who was a professor of Psychology in Madras University. He wrote to her saying that he would like to call at her convenience.

It was not long before he was standing at her bedside. He was an atheist, but, not knowing this, Daw Nyein Tha told him of her belief, built on experience, in what God would do for Asia and the world through men and women who obeyed Him.

He said little in reply; but as he stood by her bed, for the first time in his life he found himself praying, silently, to the God in whose existence he had not hitherto believed.

The daily visits of the doctor in residence at Asia Plateau, Dr Ernest Claxton, kept her in constant contact with all that was happening at the conference.

Five women came from Ceylon, representing every religion and race of that country. They were deeply divided. They came into the room and stood round the bed.

Daw Nyein Tha had little strength now, but she raised her hand.

'You see my hand,' she said. 'One finger alone can do very little, it is practically useless. It cannot lift anything, it cannot hold anything. But if all five are working together, my hand can do all it should.' They saw the point and went away to work, no longer as five individuals but as the fingers of one hand.

Even greater divisions existed among three men from the hill

area of Assam. She had been told of their enmity, and had thought about them in her time of morning quiet. The doctor said he would ask them to come and see her.

Two responded to the invitation, but the third refused, with the excuse that he would find it embarrassing to visit a sick woman in bed.

The doctor brought the two men into her room.

'I thought there were three,' she said in some distress. 'Where is the third? I must see the three together. Please go and fetch him.'

He went in search of the third, who again refused. 'You are a very selfish man,' the doctor said. 'Fancy refusing the request of a dying woman!'

Shamefacedly, he followed the doctor to the room.

Daw Nyein Tha put the men at their ease by asking about their homes and families. She told them what division had done to a certain country. Then she gave them the message God had given to her for them that morning. 'God has told me,' she said, 'that you three together will be a team to answer the needs of Asia.'

They left her, but her words had gone home. Costly apology on the part of one of them to the others broke barriers built over the years. They saw her more than once, and returned to Assam with determination to bring unity between other hill leaders and between leaders of opposing parties.

Among those staying at Asia Plateau was the French Socialist leader, Madame Irène Laure, a friend of Daw Nyein Tha of many years standing. With her was Marie-Claude Borel, a fluent Swiss linguist who translated for her and worked with her in close partnership. They wrote a joint letter to Daw Nyein Tha's family and to Daw Nu, whom they had met on a recent twenty-four hour visit to Burma. 'She was thinking of everybody in France. She talks about her going as though it would be simply the next step. And so she gives faith to

many. She has been the best ambassador of Burma anywhere in the world.'

Letters reached her almost weekly from George and Grace West, sometimes only a few lines, but always something to strengthen her spirit. As her mind roamed over the vast continent of Asia, certain people stood out for whom she felt special responsibility. Letters must be dictated to some of them. One was to the Mitsuis in Japan, another to friends in Taiwan, and a third to the Philippines. She set before them objectives reaching away beyond their borders. 'You cannot do it, but God will, if you accept His strength and courage, and dare to listen and obey Him. I believe He is waiting for you to ask Him to show you what to do.'

Early one morning Rajmohan Gandhi came into her room. She was awake.

'It is good to see a member of my family,' she said.

He said he had not seen her for days.

'I knew you would come at the right time,' she said. 'I am looking forward to joining Frank, Peter and my parents.'

'You are making me jealous,' he commented.

'But Raj,' she said with her old smile, 'jealousy is a sin!'

She told him of the letters she had been writing to Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines.

'I wanted to write to America,' she said. 'But God said, "Leave America to Me."''

They spoke together of various people. 'God will take me away at the right time,' she said.

'Don't disappear too quickly,' he told her as he left.

Friends the world over were praying for her. In Rangoon Buddhists and Christians gathered in the house of Dr Chan Taik. Here Sayadaw U Narada and two other Buddhist monks prayed for her, and a Christian minister also. All were silent in prayer for two minutes. 'We are proud of her work for all the welfare of the people,' wrote a Buddhist to one who looked

after her. 'May Lord Buddha bless you and Daw Nyein Tha for all your wonderful work.'

Anasuya and Anju were among those who cared for her. 'Just to go into her room meant so much,' said Anasuya. 'The whole room was colourful, with lots of pictures and post-cards—pictures made by children and funny drawings.'

'One didn't get the sense—you know how it is in India usually, when somebody is dying,' said Anju. 'Looking at her you would get faith.'

A letter from Roger Hicks, with whom she had shared many an enterprise in Burma, India, and other parts of the world, was written only three days before she died. He wrote: 'For perhaps the last time on earth, I want to express my thanks and gratitude for all you have done for me. We have all been strengthened through your simple trust in Jesus and your obedience through thick and thin to our heavenly Father. It has opened up the love of God for all those who knew you.

'You will soon be preceding us to the inheritance which God in His love has prepared for you, and of which Christ said, "Where I am, there ye shall be also." How fully satisfying!

'I believe we shall increasingly have a chance of unimpeded response to the love of God, which Christ lived out, and which we have dimly perceived. How we shall be amazed and saddened at our sluggish faith and low expectancy here! But Christ will be with us to sustain and carry us forward on the endless adventure. His forgiveness is total, and His love invincible and everlasting.

'Pray for those of us who remain here for a bit longer, that we may row together to the end of the course, and that however boisterous the surface waves may be, we may know that nothing can ever touch the depths that are the love of Christ, and that we ever know that all things are in His hands, whose kingdom shall come.

'With abiding love and much gratitude for all Christ has

given and is still giving us, as part of this family, through all eternity, Roger.'

All her preparations had now been made, and in her last will she disposed of her few earthly possessions, remembering all her family, friends of days long past, and each of the girls who had cared for her in Asia Plateau.

Two great friends of hers, Archie and Ruth Mackenzie, who had visited her home in Moulmein when he was on the diplomatic staff of the British Embassy in Rangoon, had arrived for the wedding of Ruth's sister. 'We were so grateful for seeing Ma Mi in Panchgani,' Archie Mackenzie wrote to her family. 'It was like being back in Burma. We talked of so many things we had in common. We recalled also our visit to Moulmein and the talks with your father, and the beauty of the woodwork there.

'Ma Mi was radiant, and God was good in sparing her pain most of the time. She was thinking of the whole world. It was a challenging and inspiring experience to be at her bedside. We shared Communion in her room just three days before she died.

'Ma Mi stood for the best in Burma, and she portrayed that best in all five continents. She will live for ever in the hearts of those who knew her and learned so much from her.'

Daw Nyein Tha gave Ruth a little blue handkerchief. She enjoyed much satisfaction in hearing about the plans for the marriage in Bombay to an Englishman. Her friends wondered if she would still be with them after the wedding. She was quite sure that she would.

Most of those in Asia Plateau went to the wedding, leaving two English girls and an Australian, who were nursing her. Anju stayed too. 'I felt it would be nice if one Indian could be here with her,' she said. When everyone had gone, she slipped into the room. 'She gave a wonderful smile, and there was no sense that she was dying. She just lifted her hand, a last goodbye.'

Anasuya had gone to the wedding. When it was over, the

bride handed her bouquet to her and asked her to take it to Daw Nyein Tha. Travelling all night, she arrived at Asia Plateau at about seven in the morning of Sunday, March 9th.

The sun was up, and she ran along to the room with the bouquet. Daw Nyein Tha's face lit as she smelt each flower in turn. 'Wonderful! How wonderful!' she exclaimed, again and again.

Ruth Mackenzie, who had also returned, sat down beside her. 'Do you know the old saying, "Something borrowed and something blue"?' Ruth asked her. Then she told how she had lent the little blue handkerchief to her sister. The handkerchief, both blue and borrowed, was carried up the aisle by the bride. That, too, Daw Nyein Tha was able to enjoy.

The day wore on, and at last, long after darkness had fallen and the sky was brilliant with stars, her friends returned from Bombay. It was ten-thirty and they went quickly to her room. And so, at eleven-fifteen, God said 'Come', and she slipped away home. It was as though she had gone from one room to another, Rajmohan said.

From early on Monday morning she lay in the ground floor room of a newly-built cottage in the garden, dressed in a gay *longyi* which she had been saving for this time, with a little bright rose in her hair. Her hands were folded and her face was radiant.

Anasuya and Anju took turns to be with her. Both spoke Marathi, and were able to talk with those who came. All day long people came into that room, filled with light and flowers: Panchgani citizens, the workers on the building site with their families, the gardeners, nearby neighbours, and people from the villages around. For some it was their first touch with death, and one girl said she would never be afraid of it again.

There was a half-hour's service in the garden, where the bougainvilleas spread their soft rainbow colours. Her coffin was covered by the Burmese flag with its five stars representing

the five states. Two of Daw Nyein Tha's favourite hymns were sung; then, after the hymn 'Now thank we all our God', the company moved off in procession to the cemetery two miles away. Here, among the silver oaks and cypresses, the choir and pupils from a boys' school, and the girls and teachers from a convent assembled, with many more, for another short service.

The sun went down in the west behind the hills, and still they were there talking about her long after the service had ended, and darkness was falling, and the stars appearing. 'She will be with us throughout time,' said one of the elders from the town, 'guiding us like a bright star.'

The groups dispersed and, with the darkness, silence descended over the cemetery among the quiet hills. Far below the lights and fires shone out, one by one, pin-pointing the little homes in the peopled plains of the Krishna valley—in the teeming villages that were for ever written upon her heart, that heart that had poured itself out for the world.