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## *Burmese Days*

This desert inaccessible  
Under the shade of melancholy boughs.  
— *As You Like It*\*



## I

U PO KYIN, sub-divisional magistrate of Kyauktada,\* in Upper Burma, was sitting in his veranda. It was only half-past eight, but the month was April, and there was a closeness in the air, a threat of the long, stifling midday hours. Occasional faint breaths of wind, seeming cool by contrast, stirred the newly drenched orchids that hung from the eaves. Beyond the orchids one could see the dusty, curved trunk of a palm tree, and then the blazing ultramarine sky. Up in the zenith, so high that it dazzled one to look at them, a few vultures circled without the quiver of a wing.

Unblinking, rather like a great porcelain idol, U Po Kyin gazed out into the fierce sunlight. He was a man of fifty, so fat that for years he had not risen from his chair without help, and yet shapely and even beautiful in his grossness – for the Burmese do not sag and bulge like white men, but grow fat symmetrically, like fruits swelling. His face was vast, yellow and quite un wrinkled, and his eyes were tawny. His feet – squat, high-arched feet with the toes all the same length – were bare, and so was his cropped head, and he wore one of those vivid Arakanese *longyis*\* with green and magenta checks which the Burmese wear on informal occasions. He was chewing betel\* from a lacquered box on the table, and thinking about his past life.

It had been a brilliantly successful life. U Po Kyin's earliest memory, back in the Eighties, was of standing, a naked pot-bellied child, watching the British troops march victorious into Mandalay.\* He remembered the terror he had felt of those columns of great beef-fed men, red-faced and red-coated, and the long rifles over their shoulders, and the heavy, rhythmic tramp of their boots. He had taken to his heels after watching them for a few minutes. In his childish way he had grasped that his own people were no match for this race of giants. To fight on the side of the British, to become a parasite upon them, had been his ruling ambition, even as a child.

At seventeen he had tried for a government appointment, but he had failed to get it, being poor and friendless, and for three years he had worked in the stinking labyrinth of the Mandalay bazaars, clerking for the rice merchants and sometimes stealing. Then when he was twenty a lucky

stroke of blackmail put him in possession of four hundred rupees, and he went at once to Rangoon\* and bought his way into a government clerkship. The job was a lucrative one, though the salary was small. At that time a ring of clerks were making a steady income by misappropriating government stores, and Po Kyin (he was plain Po Kyin then: the honorific U came years later) took naturally to this kind of thing. However, he had too much talent to spend his life in a clerkship, stealing miserably in annas and pice.\* One day he discovered that the government, being short of minor officials, were going to make some appointments from among the clerks. The news would have become public in another week, but it was one of Po Kyin's qualities that his information was always a week ahead of everyone else's. He saw his chance and denounced all his confederates before they could take alarm. Most of them were sent to prison, and Po Kyin was made an assistant township officer as the reward of his honesty. Since then he had risen steadily. Now, at fifty-six, he was a sub-divisional magistrate, and he would probably be promoted still further and made an acting deputy commissioner, with Englishmen as his equals and even his subordinates.

As a magistrate his methods were simple. Even for the vastest bribe he would never sell the decision of a case, because he knew that a magistrate who gives wrong judgements is caught sooner or later. His practice, a much safer one, was to take bribes from both sides and then decide the case on strictly legal grounds. This won him a useful reputation for impartiality. Besides his revenue from litigants, U Po Kyin levied a ceaseless toll, a sort of private taxation scheme, from all the villages under his jurisdiction. If any village failed in its tribute, U Po Kyin took punitive measures – gangs of *dacoits*\* attacked the village, leading villagers were arrested on false charges, and so forth – and it was never long before the amount was paid up. He also shared the proceeds of all the larger-sized robberies that took place in the district. Most of this, of course, was known to everyone except U Po Kyin's official superiors (no British officer will ever believe anything against his own men), but the attempts to expose him invariably failed – his supporters, kept loyal by their share of the loot, were too numerous. When any accusation was brought against him, U Po Kyin simply discredited it with strings of suborned witnesses, following this up by counter-accusations which left him in a stronger position than ever. He was practically invulnerable, because he was too fine a judge of men ever to choose a wrong instrument, and also because he was too absorbed in intrigue ever to fail through carelessness or ignorance. One could say with practical certainty that he would never be found out, that he would

go from success to success, and would finally die full of honour, worth several *lakhs* of rupees.\*

And even beyond the grave his success would continue. According to Buddhist belief, those who have done evil in their lives will spend the next incarnation in the shape of a rat, a frog or some other low animal. U Po Kyin was a good Buddhist and intended to provide against this danger. He would devote his closing years to good works, which would pile up enough merit to outweigh the rest of his life. Probably his good works would take the form of building pagodas. Four pagodas, five, six, seven – the priests would tell him how many – with carved stonework, gilt umbrellas and little bells that tinkled in the wind, every tinkle a prayer. And he would return to the earth in male human shape, for a woman ranks at about the same level as a rat or a frog – or at best as some dignified beast such as an elephant.

All these thoughts flowed through U Po Kyin's mind swiftly and for the most part in pictures. His brain, though cunning, was quite barbaric, and it never worked except for some definite end – mere meditation was beyond him. He had now reached the point to which his thoughts had been tending. Putting his smallish, triangular hands on the arms of his chair, he turned himself a little way round and called, rather wheezily:

“Ba Taik! Hey, Ba Taik!”

Ba Taik, U Po Kyin's servant, appeared through the beaded curtain of the veranda. He was an undersized, pockmarked man with a timid and rather hungry expression. U Po Kyin paid him no wages, for he was a convicted thief whom a word would send to prison. As Ba Taik advanced he shikoed,\* so low as to give the impression that he was stepping backwards.

“Most holy god?” he said.

“Is anyone waiting to see me, Ba Taik?”

Ba Taik enumerated the visitors upon his fingers: “There is the headman of Thitpingyi village, Your Honour, who has brought presents, and two villagers who have an assault case that is to be tried by Your Honour, and they too have brought presents. Ko Ba Sein, the head clerk of the deputy commissioner's office, wishes to see you, and there is Ali Shah, the police constable, and a *dacoit* whose name I do not know. I think they have quarrelled about some gold bangles they have stolen. And there is also a young village girl with a baby.”

“What does she want?” said U Po Kyin.

“She says that the baby is yours, most holy one.”

“Ah. And how much has the headman brought?”



Ba Taik thought it was only ten rupees and a basket of mangoes.

“Tell the headman,” said U Po Kyin, “that it should be twenty rupees, and there will be trouble for him and his village if the money is not here tomorrow. I will see the others presently. Ask Ko Ba Sein to come to me here.”

Ba Sein appeared in a moment. He was an erect, narrow-shouldered man, very tall for a Burman, with a curiously smooth face that recalled a coffee blancmange. U Po Kyin found him a useful tool. Unimaginative and hard-working, he was an excellent clerk, and Mr Macgregor, the deputy commissioner, trusted him with most of his official secrets. U Po Kyin, put in a good temper by his thoughts, greeted Ba Sein with a laugh and waved to the betel box.

“Well, Ko Ba Sein, how does our affair progress? I hope that, as dear Mr Macgregor would say” – U Po Kyin broke into English – “‘eet ees making perceptible progress?’”

Ba Sein did not smile at the small joke. Sitting down stiff and long-backed in the vacant chair, he answered:

“Excellently, sir. Our copy of the paper arrived this morning. Kindly observe.”

He produced a copy of a bilingual paper called the *Burmese Patriot*. It was a miserable eight-page rag, villainously printed on paper as bad as blotting paper, and composed partly of news stolen from the *Rangoon Gazette*, partly of weak Nationalist\* heroics. On the last page the type had slipped and left the entire sheet jet black, as though in mourning for the smallness of the paper’s circulation. The article to which U Po Kyin turned was of a rather different stamp from the rest. It ran:

In these happy times, when we poor blacks are being uplifted by the mighty Western civilization, with its manifold blessings such as the cinematograph, machine guns, syphilis, etc., what subject could be more inspiring than the private lives of our European benefactors? We think therefore that it may interest our readers to hear something of events in the up-country district of Kyauktada. And especially of Mr Macgregor, honoured deputy commissioner of said district.

Mr Macgregor is of the type of the Fine Old English Gentleman, such as, in these happy days, we have so many examples before our eyes. He is “a family man” as our dear English cousins say. Very much a family man is Mr Macgregor. So much so that he has already three children in the district of Kyauktada, where he has been a year, and in his last district

of Shwemyo he left six young progenies behind him. Perhaps it is an oversight on Mr Macgregor's part that he has left these young infants quite unprovided for, and that some of their mothers are in danger of starvation, etc., etc., etc.

There was a column of similar stuff, and, wretched as it was, it was well above the level of the rest of the paper. U Po Kyin read the article carefully through, holding it at arm's length – he was long-sighted – and drawing his lips meditatively back, exposing great numbers of small, perfect teeth, blood red from betel juice.

"The editor will get six months' imprisonment for this," he said finally.

"He does not mind. He says that the only time when his creditors leave him alone is when he is in prison."

"And you say that your little apprentice clerk Hla Pe wrote this article all by himself? That is a very clever boy – a most promising boy! Never tell me again that these Government High Schools are a waste of time. Hla Pe shall certainly have his clerkship."

"You think then, sir, that this article will be enough?"

U Po Kyin did not answer immediately. A puffing, labouring noise began to proceed from him – he was trying to rise from his chair. Ba Taik was familiar with this sound. He appeared from behind the beaded curtain, and he and Ba Sein put a hand under each of U Po Kyin's armpits and hoisted him to his feet. U Po Kyin stood for a moment balancing the weight of his belly upon his legs, with the movement of a fish porter adjusting his load. Then he waved Ba Taik away.

"Not enough," he said, answering Ba Sein's question, "not enough by any means. There is a lot to be done yet. But this is the right beginning. Listen."

He went to the rail to spit out a scarlet mouthful of betel, and then began to quarter the veranda with short steps, his hands behind his back. The friction of his vast thighs made him waddle slightly. As he walked he talked, in the base jargon of the government offices – a patchwork of Burmese verbs and English abstract phrases:

"Now, let us go into this affair from the beginning. We are going to make a concerted attack on Doctor Veraswami, who is the civil surgeon and superintendent of the jail. We are going to slander him, destroy his reputation and finally ruin him for ever. It will be rather a delicate operation."

"Yes, sir."

"There will be no risk, but we have got to go slowly. We are not proceeding against a miserable clerk or police constable. We are proceeding against a

high official, and with a high official, even when he is an Indian, it is not the same as with a clerk. How does one ruin a clerk? Easy: an accusation, two dozen witnesses, dismissal and imprisonment. But that will not do here. Softly, softly, softly is my way. No scandal, and above all no official inquiry. There must be no accusations that can be answered, and yet within three months I must fix it in the head of every European in Kyauktada that the doctor is a villain. What shall I accuse him of? Bribes will not do, a doctor does not get bribes to any extent. What then?"

"We could perhaps arrange a mutiny in the jail," said Ba Sein. "As superintendent, the doctor would be blamed."

"No, it is too dangerous. I do not want the jail warders firing their rifles in all directions. Besides, it would be expensive. Clearly, then, it must be disloyalty – nationalism, seditious propaganda. We must persuade the Europeans that the doctor holds disloyal, anti-British opinions. That is far worse than bribery – they expect a native official to take bribes. But let them suspect his loyalty even for a moment, and he is ruined."

"It would be a hard thing to prove," objected Ba Sein. "The doctor is very loyal to the Europeans. He grows angry when anything is said against them. They will know that, do you not think?"

"Nonsense, nonsense," said U Po Kyin comfortably. "No European cares anything about proofs. When a man has a black face, suspicion is proof. A few anonymous letters will work wonders. It is only a question of persisting: accuse, accuse, go on accusing – that is the way with Europeans. One anonymous letter after another, to every European in turn. And then, when their suspicions are thoroughly aroused..." U Po Kyin brought one short arm from behind his back and clicked his thumb and finger. He added: "We begin with this article in the *Burmese Patriot*. The Europeans will shout with rage when they see it. Well, the next move is to persuade them that it was the doctor who wrote it."

"It will be difficult while he has friends among the Europeans. All of them go to him when they are ill. He cured Mr Macgregor of his flatulence this cold weather. They consider him a very clever doctor, I believe."

"How little you understand the European mind, Ko Ba Sein! If the Europeans go to Veraswami, it is only because there is no other doctor in Kyauktada. No European has any faith in a man with a black face. No, with anonymous letters it is only a question of sending enough. I shall soon see to it that he has no friends left."

"There is Mr Flory, the timber merchant," said Ba Sein. (He pronounced it "Mr Porley".) "He is a close friend of the doctor. I see him go to his

house every morning when he is in Kyauktada. Twice he has even invited the doctor to dinner."

"Ah, now there you are right. If Flory were a friend of the doctor, it could do us harm. You cannot hurt an Indian when he has a European friend. It gives him – what is that word they are so fond of? – prestige. But Flory will desert his friend quickly enough when the trouble begins. These people have no feeling of loyalty towards a native. Besides, I happen to know that Flory is a coward. I can deal with him. Your part, Ko Ba Sein, is to watch Mr Macgregor's movements. Has he written to the commissioner lately – written confidentially, I mean?"

"He wrote two days ago, but when we steamed the letter open we found it was nothing of importance."

"Ah well, we will give him something to write about. And as soon as he suspects the doctor, then is the time for that other affair I spoke to you of. Thus we shall – what does Mr Macgregor say? Ah yes: 'kill two birds with one stone'. A whole flock of birds – ha, ha!"

U Po Kyin's laugh was a disgusting bubbling sound deep down in his belly, like the preparation for a cough – yet it was merry, even childlike. He did not say any more about the "other affair", which was too private to be discussed even upon the veranda. Ba Sein, seeing the interview at an end, stood up and bowed, angular as a jointed ruler.

"Is there anything else Your Honour wishes done?" he said.

"Make sure that Mr Macgregor has his copy of the *Burmese Patriot*. You had better tell Hla Pe to have an attack of dysentery and stay away from the office. I shall want him for the writing of the anonymous letters. That is all for the present."

"Then I may go, sir?"

"God go with you," said U Po Kyin rather abstractedly, and at once shouted again for Ba Taik. He never wasted a moment of his day. It did not take him long to deal with the other visitors and to send the village girl away unrewarded, having examined her face and said that he did not recognize her. It was now his breakfast time. Violent pangs of hunger, which attacked him punctually at this hour every morning, began to torment his belly. He shouted urgently:

"Ba Taik! Hey, Ba Taik! Kin Kin! My breakfast! Be quick, I am starving."

In the living room behind the curtain a table was already set out with a huge bowl of rice and a dozen plates containing curries, dried prawns and sliced green mangoes. U Po Kyin waddled to the table, sat down with a grunt and at once threw himself on the food. Ma Kin, his wife, stood

behind him and served him. She was a thin woman of five-and-forty, with a kindly, pale-brown, simian face. U Po Kyin took no notice of her while he was eating. With the bowl close to his nose he stuffed the food into himself with swift, greasy fingers, breathing fast. All his meals were swift, passionate and enormous – they were not meals so much as orgies, debauches of curry and rice. When he had finished he sat back, belched several times and told Ma Kin to fetch him a green Burmese cigar. He never smoked English tobacco, which he declared had no taste in it.

Presently, with Ba Taik's help, U Po Kyin dressed in his office clothes, and stood for a while admiring himself in the long mirror in the living room. It was a wooden-walled room with two pillars, still recognizable as teak trunks, supporting the roof-tree, and it was dark and sluttish as all Burmese rooms are, though U Po Kyin had furnished it "Ingaleik-fashion"\* with a veneered sideboard and chairs, some lithographs of the royal family and a fire extinguisher. The floor was covered with bamboo mats, much splashed by lime and betel juice.

Ma Kin was sitting on a mat in the corner, stitching an *ingyi*. U Po Kyin turned slowly before the mirror, trying to get a glimpse of his back view. He was dressed in a *gaungbaung* of pale pink silk, an *ingyi* of starched muslin, and a *paso* of Mandalay silk,\* a gorgeous salmon-pink brocaded with yellow. With an effort he turned his head round and looked, pleased, at the *paso* tight and shining on his enormous buttocks. He was proud of his fatness, because he saw the accumulated flesh as the symbol of his greatness. He who had once been obscure and hungry was now fat, rich and feared. He was swollen with the bodies of his enemies, a thought from which he extracted something very near poetry.

"My new *paso* was cheap at twenty-two rupees, hey, Kin Kin?" he said.

Ma Kin bent her head over her sewing. She was a simple, old-fashioned woman, who had learnt even less of European habits than U Po Kyin. She could not sit on a chair without discomfort. Every morning she went to the bazaar with a basket on her head, like a village woman, and in the evenings she could be seen kneeling in the garden, praying to the white spire of the pagoda that crowned the town. She had been the confidante of U Po Kyin's intrigues for twenty years and more.

"Ko Po Kyin," she said, "you have done very much evil in your life."

U Po Kyin waved his hand. "What does it matter? My pagodas will atone for everything. There is plenty of time."

Ma Kin bent her head over her sewing again, in an obstinate way she had when she disapproved of something that U Po Kyin was doing.

“But, Ko Po Kyin, where is the need for all this scheming and intriguing? I heard you talking with Ko Ba Sein on the veranda. You are planning some evil against Doctor Veraswami. Why do you wish to harm that Indian doctor? He is a good man.”

“What do you know of these official matters, woman? The doctor stands in my way. In the first place he refuses to take bribes, which makes it difficult for the rest of us. And besides – well, there is something else which you would never have the brains to understand.”

“Ko Po Kyin, you have grown rich and powerful, and what good has it ever done you? We were happier when we were poor. Ah, I remember so well when you were only a township officer, the first time we had a house of our own. How proud we were of our new wicker furniture, and your fountain pen with the gold clip! And when the young English police officer came to our house and sat in the best chair and drank a bottle of beer, how honoured we thought ourselves! Happiness is not in money. What can you want with more money now?”

“Nonsense, woman, nonsense! Attend to your cooking and sewing and leave official matters to those who understand them.”

“Well, I do not know. I am your wife and have always obeyed you. But at least it is never too soon to acquire merit. Strive to acquire more merit, Ko Po Kyin! Will you not, for instance, buy some live fish and set them free in the river? One can acquire much merit in that way. Also, this morning when the priests came for their rice they told me that there are two new priests at the monastery, and they are hungry. Will you not give them something, Ko Po Kyin? I did not give them anything myself, so that you might acquire the merit of doing it.”

U Po Kyin turned away from the mirror. The appeal touched him a little. He never, when it could be done without inconvenience, missed a chance of acquiring merit. In his eyes his pile of merit was a kind of bank deposit, everlastingly growing. Every fish set free in the river, every gift to a priest, was a step nearer nirvana. It was a reassuring thought. He directed that the basket of mangoes brought by the village headman should be sent down to the monastery.

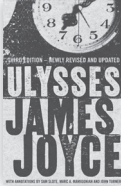
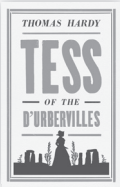
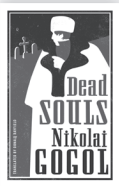
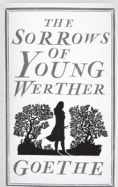
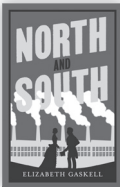
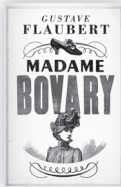
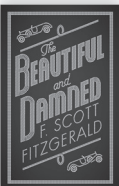
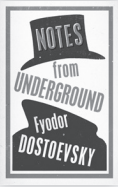
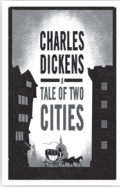
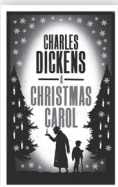
Presently he left the house and started down the road, with Ba Taik behind him carrying a file of papers. He walked slowly, very upright to balance his vast belly, and holding a yellow silk umbrella over his head. His pink *paso* glittered in the sun like a satin praline. He was going to the court, to try his day’s cases.

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