

Angawrahita

gama



KHIN MYO CHIT

Second Printing

ANAWRAHTA OF BURMA

KHIN MYO CHIT

COVER DESIGN BY U BA KYI

First published 1970
Copyright 1970 by Daw Khin Myo Chit
All Rights Reserved

၁၈.၂.၇၉

First printing 5000 - 1970
Second printing 2000 - May, 1979

Manuscript approval No. 2242

Cover-design approval No. 339

11250

Price K. 20/-

Published by Daw Khin Myo Chit, (Registration No. 01352)
Theikdi Sarzin, 505-8, Prome Road, Rangoon and Printed by
Maung Thein Tan at Thihayatana Press (Registration No. 0019).
144, Anawrahta Street, Rangoon.

Cover Ptg: Chindwin Press.

Dedicated

to

The memory of my grandfather
U Pe, scholar, archaeologist, writer and poet

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born 1915, Khin Myo Chit started writing short stories in Burmese in the *Dagon Magazine* in 1934. She worked on the editorial staff of *The Burma Journal* during the years when the country seethed with anti-colonial movements for national independence, and after the war, on a Burmese newspaper *The Oway*.

She graduated from the University of Rangoon in 1952 and worked as Features Editor in *The Guardian Daily* when she began writing short stories in English. One of her earliest short stories, *The 13-Carat Diamond* which appeared first in *The Guardian Magazine* was included in *Fifty Great Oriental Stories*, a Bantam Classic published in U. S. A. and Canada. It was also translated into German, Italian, Gujarati and Yugoslav. Another short story *Her Infinite Variety* won a Horizons prize in a contest among Asian countries. *The Four Puppets* was published in *Folk Tales of Asia* sponsored by the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO.

Her English language publications include *Burmese Scenes and Sketches* and *Colourful Burma*, the latter being an enlarged collection of short stories and articles. *Quest for Peace*, which was serialized in *The Working People's Daily* while she was on the staff of that paper, is largely autobiographical.

FOREWORD

by

Chief Justice Dr. Maung Maung
Author of *Aung San of Burma*,
Burma in the Family of Nations,
Burma and General Ne Win, etc.

It is always so tempting to weave history into a romance, but it is only the brave who dare to let that temptation take them, for the risk of failure is great.

Human feelings—the loves, the hatreds, hopes, joys, jealousies, griefs, the ambitions, the greeds, kindness, cruelty—and the acts and omissions which these feelings compel, are, after all, what make the world go round and history go on. Yet those feelings are difficult to fathom, and therein lies the danger that faces the writer who would take historical facts and tell them in tales sweet and sad as only tales of men and women can be. Unless the blend is right and the telling is sincere and skilful, the tales can be just too many dry bones of fact and too little romance, or too much rosy romance and too little history.

Daw Khin Myo Chit, never one to lack courage or audacity, has dared, done beautifully, and as far as eyes can see, come out of the adventure unscathed and intact. She has taken a period of Burma's history which is both inspiring and exciting, a period in which Buddhism in its purity came to the country, a period of unity and strength in which great deeds were done by king and people and heroes rose whose feats have become legendary.

The *dramatis personae* in Daw Khin Myo Chit's story come alive and human. The scenes are vivid, the events as described are plausible and probable. Daw Khin Myo Chit's account of the campaign against Thaton, for example, is a masterpiece in weaving together the known facts and the possibilities as visualized by a rich imagination—assisted by studious research and sheer invention. Military commanders, veterans of many of the famous battles in our contemporary history, have been heard to comment that the account of the campaign, so convincingly supported by realistic maps should find its place in the best military classics.

Daw Khin Myo Chit takes liberties with the facts, but her intentions are honourable, and she does so only to make her story more human. She has obviously done much research, and presses many of our scholars into her service—not to mention the gentle Shakespeare, the dashing Byron, the sweet Shelly and the mournful Keats. But what she has borrowed she has made her own, and done it so well, few will notice and none will object.

There is no venom in Daw Khin Myo Chit's writing. She may hit hard when the mood seizes her, which is often, but she cannot hate. Buddhism, the natural central theme in Burmese history, shines forth from these pages, but it does not burn.

Readers will be happy that Daw Khin Myo Chit has accomplished a task that is so tempting yet so full of peril, and given them a book which they can read and re-read with pleasure and profit over the years. They must also hope, I am sure, that she will dare some more.

October, 1968

Maung Maung

PROLOGUE

“O for the Muse of fire that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention;
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene.”

A poor mortal with only an elevenplus level of history, I have rushed in where savants and scholars fear to tread; I have rushed in there with a prayer on my lips, and a hope in my heart; the hope that my love for the men and women of nine centuries ago, and the overwhelming urge to breathe life into them and recreate the age they lived in would make up for all the things I lack.

Since the days back in nineteen twenties, when I went along with my grandfather. U Pe of Mandalay, on his archaeological expeditions to the ancient city of Pagan, I have fallen in love with the city and her people of the past. He once showed me a terra-cotta plaque with a Pali inscription, which, he said, was written by the hand of Anawrahta, King of Pagan in the eleventh century. He made an exact copy of the inscription on paper and read out to me the name and title of the king. I cherished the piece of paper for as long a time as an eleven-year-old kid could; for, who would not be thrilled to own an autograph of a king of nine hundred year ago?

Grandfather spoke of historical characters as if they were our next door neighbours. He once described Anawrahta as *kalatha* king with a wander-lust. The term *kalatha* is used to describe wild, boisterous young men, or men about the town. Grandfather called Anawrahta a *kalatha* king, because of his shrewdness and insight in the affairs of the state. When he said that, Anawrahta became a real person, not a cold, printed name in a text book.

Trudging through the hot dusty lanes of Pagan, waylaid by thorns and brambles, grandfather made me forget the discomforts by transporting me to the days of the past when the very ground I stood on trembled with the thump of the elephants' tread and horses' hooves, and the air was filled with the war-cries of the spear-slinging heroes who rode on their backs.

Even though the demands of adult life took me farther away from my youthful dreams, the memory of the days

when the splendour that was Pagan opened out to me never forsook me entirely. Every trip I made to Pagan on my hard-earned holidays excited me more than ever and the urge to make those people alive became stronger.

It is one thing to fall in love with an idea and another to carry it out. One is often too restrained by one's own unworthiness to handle so imperial a theme.

But then, love overcomes everything, even one's own limitations. The inspiration has been fed on with lots of love, like for instance, love of legends and folk-lore which I have not outgrown, and love for the men and women in these stories.

To me, Saw Mon Hla, Byatta, Mai Wunna, Shwe Phyin Gyi and Shwe Phyin Lay, Yin Maung, the forester and his wife Mai U are real people, even though historians say that there is little or no authentic proof of their existence, at least, they have not found any. They, the people whom I love, may not exist in inscriptions but they live in the people's hearts—in songs, in plays, in paintings and in folklore. And this is good enough for me.

But when I saw my loved ones in sentimental melodramas being reduced to cheap, tearful, breast-beating manikins, I saw red. I felt that I could do better.

Perhaps, I could raise Shwe Phyin Gyi and Shwe Phyin Lay from their debatable existence as **nats* to the status of human beings with all the fine qualities of heroes and also fatal weaknesses—villain heroes, who were victims of their own power.

I am not too happy about the way Saw Mon Hla is usually treated on *zat pwe* stage—a helpless victim of jealousy and intrigue, a tragic character without the dignity of a tragic heroine, in a sentimental tear-jerker of a story. Why shouldn't she be a potential force not only in the life of Anawrahta but also in the history of the union of peoples in the making?

The story of Anawrahta and Saw Mon Hla is a love story; it is the story of a man's love for his land and his peoples, and a woman's devotion and loyalty to the man and his ideals; it is the story of a love that rose above the common and the earthy to the plane of spiritual heights.

* spirits

There were commoners like Nyaung U Bee, Nga Lone, Nga Htway who shared with kings and princes the mighty task of building a nation. The struggle of Yin Maung the forester and his wife Mai U against the machinations of Shwe Phyin Lay, is a story of love, hate and vengeance and also of the courage of the common people.

You will see that many of the names are more legendary than historical. But then it is through these names that people know **Pagan-yazawin*, the ancient history of Pagan.

What I wish to do is to recreate the spirit of the age, with real people living, hating, fighting, winning, losing, in fact 'doing all the things people at any time, at any place have ever been doing and will go on doing till the end of time.

The story of the people nine centuries ago is a vast jigsaw puzzle with many parts missing. I must thank Dr. Than Tun, Professor of History, Mandalay University, for giving me a chance to view certain assembled parts in the *Story of Burma*, which was serialized in *The Working People's Daily*, and his personal interest in my work and helpful suggestions.

I am deeply indebted to Saya Ba Shin of the Burma Historical Commission who patiently guided me through the wonderland of the past, so that the parts I created to fill the gaps may not clash with accepted historical facts.

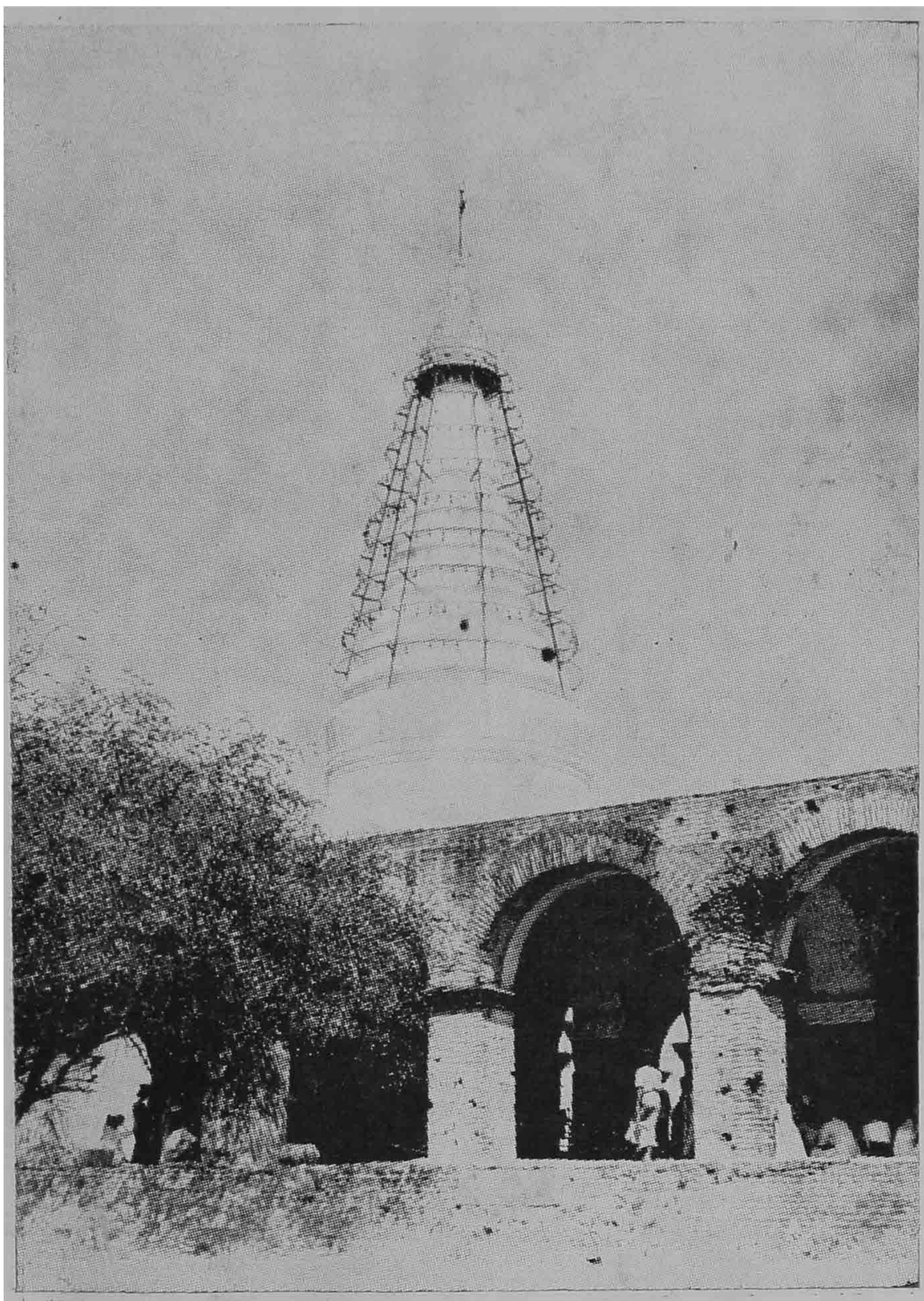
I owe no less for the final editing of the copy to Mrs. E. Gaudoin of the Educational Research Bureau.

* History of Pagan.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	Prologue	
1	The duel at Myingaba	11
2	Conqueror of the Irrawaddy	15
3	A true son of the soil	19
4	Nga Htway, the jolly fellow	24
5	Byatwi and Byatta	29
6	The Popa wonderland	34
7	The ballad of Maung Tint Dai	36
8	Byatta and Mai Wunna	39
9	Byatta lays a trap	42
10	Prince Saw Lu grows up	45
11	The rule of law	48
12	Odds against Kyansittha	50
13	Kyansittha talks to Byatta	52
14	Anawrahta hears Kyansittha	55
15	Anawrahta's quest for truth	58
16	Anawrahta meets Shin Araham	61
17	A great experience	63
18	An important discovery	65
19	March to the south	67
20	Down the river Irrawaddy	69
21	The riverine journey	71
22	Anawrahta at Myingun	74
23	At Thirikettra	77
24	Thirikettra nocturne	79
25	To Raminyadetha	82
26	Campaign to Uttha Pegu	84
27	Princess of Uttha Pegu	87
28	The escapade	90
29	Call to adventure...or love ?	93
30	Moonlight, lilies and politics	96
31	The mission to Thaton	99
32	Cry havoc	103
33	Anawrahta hears the news	107
34	Manuha prepares for war	110
35	Thaton campaign begins	113

CHAPTER		PAGE
36	At Suvannabhumi	118
37	The approach to Thaton	121
38	Inside Thaton	124
39	A sitting-hen's gap in the wall	127
40	The assault	131
41	Calm after the storm	135
42	Common cause	139
43	The spear	142
44	Back to the royal city	146
45	Unity and solidarity	150
46	An affair of honour	154
47	Min Lay and Mai U	158
48	Yin Maung and the foresters	162
49	Minlay and his men	165
50	Kyansittha arrives	168
51	The skirmish	171
52	The plot against Kyansittha	174
53	Character assassination	178
54	A new alliance	181
55	Princess Saw Mon Hla	184
56	Anawrahta's welcome	187
57	Saw Mon Hla's conversion	190
58	Court intrigues	193
59	The king's inspiration	197
60	More problems for Saw Mon Hla	201
61	News from the Nanchao border	204
62	Siuw Lao's other purpose	208
63	Destiny	211
	Epilogue	...



The Shwezaryan Pagoda,
near Mandalay.
built by Saw Mon Hla.

Photo by
courtesy of the Archaeological Department



Votive tablet with the figure of the Bodhisatta, moulded by the hand of King Anawrahta, See p. 60.

Photo by courtesy of the Archaeological Department.

1

The duel at Myingaba

Thick folds of mist hung over the banks of the Myingaba as the stream whirled and eddied into the Irrawaddy.

A sharp call "Ready there" cut through the air as the dark figure of a horseman flitted on to the hazy screen. The next moment a spear came hurtling out of the mist and both man and horse fell headlong into the stream. Tossed by the surging waves they headed towards the river leaving a trail of blood that seemed to spread into the brimming Irrawaddy.

It was not blood that reddened the waters, but the dawn of a new age, as the dead horseman lay wedged between the rocks at the confluence of the rivers.

"King Sakkadae is dead! Anawrahta is king." The news spread like wildfire. To those who believed it a sin to harm a crowned king, the news was a great shock. Regarding the king as their refuge and stay, people felt as if the very ground they stood upon had caved in; and the fact that Anawrahta was the late king's half-brother made the foul deed doubly foul.

Anawrahta himself was none too happy about the whole affair. He had loyally submitted when Sakkadae ascended the throne on their father's death, but he was uneasy about the deteriorating conditions in the country and his brother's obvious inadequacy to cope with them. It was only when Sakkadae, on the pretext of doing his royal duty, had married Anawrahta's mother that the crisis came. In his new exuberance of kingship, Sakkadae assembled his court in honour of his marriage and said to Anawrahta, "Now you're my son as well as a brother."

Burning with shame and anger Anawrahta challenged Sakkadae to single combat. The outcome was death for Sakkadae and a life of guilt and remorse for Anawrahta, whose nights were haunted by the memory of his brother's body tumbling in the foaming waves of the Myingaba stream.

The silence and quiet of the royal bed-chamber was undisturbed except for the wild beating of Anawrahta's tormented heart. He heard again the thundering hooves against the roar of surging waters that mingled with a woman's agonizing shriek. Sakkadae's widow, Anawrahta's mother, had come too late to stop the combat.

Anawrahta woke up trembling and cold with sweat. He sat on the couch thinking how many miserable nights he had passed. After such a night as this he would not pass another night even if it were to buy a world of happy days:

He flung himself on the couch again only to toss restlessly thinking how many thousands of his poorest subjects must be at this hour asleep. Unable to rest, Anawrahta dragged himself to the window. Moonbeams spilled into the chamber on the soft cooling breeze. The scent of * *nanlonekyaing* flowers teased him with memories of the wide open spaces where he was wont to wander in the days when the heavy weight of kingly responsibilities had not yet fallen upon him.

Like one in a dream, Anawrahta slowly turned towards the staircase that led to the high tower from where he could look down on the Irrawaddy river, a vast silver sheet of water gleaming in the moonlight. A tweet from the jasmine bush followed by another from the neem tree proclaimed that dawn was not far away; and there burst upon the scene a rhapsody of tinkling bells and the rumble of wheels.

A caravan of bullock carts laden with goods came into Anawrahta's view as it rolled along the river bank; soon another caravan of mules and horses came alongside. A babel of tongues arose as the people greeted one another. Moonbeams wove eerie shapes in the clouds of dust as the caravans passed on, and a flotilla of boats coming up the river came into view. The peculiar twang in speech with which the boatmen hailed one another revealed them as men of Raminnyadetha, a strange land down south near the sea.

Silhouetted in the half-light Anawrahta slowly descended the tower and moved towards the multitude of men, beasts and vehicles that were filling up the market-place.

Chinese traders with their wares of silk and satin, jade and amber and jewellery had already attracted the attention of the women even before the market had properly started; they were bargaining with the burly, bearded silk-swathed Chinamen, gesticulating to bridge the gap of mutual incomprehension.

A man trying to buy bales of silk yarn from a Chinese merchant had come to the end of his patience and sign language when his wife came and with a subtle use of her fingers and a few words of the merchant's dialect, got the whole transaction done to the satisfaction of both parties.

The man settled the bill in silver bullion and shouldered the merchandise muttering to himself, "Trust women to pick up strange tongues as easily as they pick up pebbles. One of these days she'll be nagging me in half a dozen different lingos."

The sun had risen to the height of a toddy palm when the market dispersed and people began to take refuge under cool shady trees and have their meal.

Away from the crowd, a group of men had gathered under an old gnarled tamarind tree as their horses grazed on the nearby meadow. A young man sat on a tree stump gazing intently on the ground on which he had drawn a map. He was hardly out of his

* vashellia

teens, but his serious face commanded respect. He called his men and spoke in a crisp clear voice that compelled attention.

The young man pointed out with his spear the position of the royal city of Pagan on the eastern bank of the Irrawaddy with the Tankyi Taung range on the other side of the river and Tuywin Taung hill and Mount Popa on the south-east.

The young man then spoke of their ancestors who had come down from the northern regions to settle on the arid plains even though the soil was poor and the rain insufficient. As he went on with his story, the bare outlines of the map on the sandy ground became for them a scene of surging rivers, lofty mountains and hot sandy plains overrun by warlike hordes of horsemen brandishing spears.

The young man's spearhead moved relentlessly over the map, marking the conquests and settlements of the early Burmans, who having won the land with their sword, had set about with sheer force of will and dedication, to cultivate the land and make it burst forth with luxuriant harvests of food and grains.

When the young man spoke of current affairs his voice shook with indignation at the stagnancy and deterioration into which they had been allowed to fall. There was so much to be done, yet left undone; for instance, the fortification of the frontiers and most important of all, the unification of the peoples, far and near, since no clan should be an island unto itself.

"Every danger that threatens any tribe bodes ill for us; every tribe that is harmed lessens us; every clan that is destroyed is our loss, so it is our duty to protect every clan, every tribe from any harm or danger. To be able to do that we must all unite into one force; only then can we be strong. With the strength so attained we can make this earth, this land, this Tampadipa as happy and prosperous as the abode of the celestial beings."

The young man, carried away by his enthusiasm, went on unfurling the tremendous panorama of his dream of a union of peoples with all the glorious colours of peace and prosperity. Vehemently he concluded.

"This task of unification has to be done, by whom we cannot yet say, although the task naturally falls on the shoulders of the reigning king; whether he will take it on or not we can only wait and see. If he means to do this job, we must give him our support, for this he cannot do alone; but if he would or could not..."

Suddenly a shadow fell across the ground and a spearhead fell on the point of the map that marked the city of Pagan and an authoritative voice asked: "Who dare say he would not or could not?"

Surprised, the men turned to face a man who stood with his hand still grasping the spear. Ignoring the others, the stranger looked straight into the young man's eyes and asked, "Who are you?"

"I am the Lord of Htihtline, people call me Kyansittha." The young man stood up and looked the stranger full in the face. Taking

one step back as a mark of respect, he asked, "May I know to whom I have the honour of speaking?"

"We shall talk in a better place." So saying, the stranger clapped his hands and a fine horse trotted to his side.

"Call your horse and ride with me alone," the stranger commanded.

Kyansittha's companions tightened their grip on their spears and looked at their lord's face in silent enquiry. Kyansittha faced his men and said: "Don't move a step until we are well out of sight and wait here till I come back. There will be no questions." He then clapped for his horse and turned to the stranger and said under his breath, "After you, Your Majesty."

Kyansittha mounted only after the king was astride his horse and the two rode away.

2

Conqueror of the Irrawaddy

The Irrawaddy flowed wide and brimming, flanked by sandy beaches and shadowed by dark towering ranges on her banks.

White fleecy clouds sailed past the Tankyi Taung range on the other side of the river that mirrored the wooded slopes. Right where the mountain's reflection lay, a little speck bobbed up and down on the flowing current. At first it looked like a log until it came alive in a struggle with the waves. Gradually it took the shape of a man pitting himself against the relentless waters. There were times when the swimmer sank as if never to rise again but the next moment he popped up like a cork and threw his strong arms forward against the current. Even though the mighty Irrawaddy tried to crush the swimmer and throw him into the gaping whirlpools, the strong muscular arms seemed to fight their way out of the watery jaws. It was a battle between man and river.

When at last he reached the bank, the man stood and looked at the towering Nyaung U cliff as at a formidable enemy and placing his left forearm across the chest at right angles to the upper arm he slapped it with the cup of his right palm making a loud clapping sound. The next moment he ran and scrambled up the cliff, slipping and falling, but persisting until he reached the top.

Once on the crest of the cliff, the man cried, "I've won, I've won, I've won!" He then scrambled down to the river and took his well-deserved dip.

Anawrahta, seated on a stone boulder on the river bank, saw everything. As he watched the man washing off the dust in the cool waters of the river, he remembered what Kyansittha had said,

"Sire, we need the trust of people in all walks of life, courtiers, soldiers and commoners all. Have I not shown my trust in you by coming alone when my men were ready to do as I bade? To win the people's trust we must get closer to the people and try to understand them. We need the support of men who are strong and know how to use their strength."

The man had finished his bath. He came up and sat down on a rock gazing on the river and then up the cliff as a conquering general might on the scene of his great battle. His reverie was interrupted by Anawrahta who stood before him with the question: "Why did you do what you've just done?"

The swimmer looked at him as if he resented the intrusion on the great hour of his triumph. He repeated: "Why did I swim

this river? Because it was there. Why did I climb the cliff? Because it was there." His eyes gleamed dismissal.

Anawrahta did not go away. He asked, "How do you do it?" The swimmer answered: "By doing it again and again. How else?"

Anawrahta murmured as if to himself: "As simple as that."

Something in the mien and poise of the stranger thawed the swimmer. He saw before him a man weighed down as by an immense responsibility.

The swimmer said, "Yes, as simple as that. Look at this River Irrawaddy, mighty and brimming, ready to swallow anyone; but I'm a man, strong and alive, whereas the river is only an inanimate thing. It has no life. I know I can conquer it. This Nyaung U cliff, formidable and grand...but it is a thing I tread beneath my feet. There's nothing that man cannot do, if he puts his mind to it."

Anawrahta laid his hand on the swimmer's shoulder and said, "I admire your courage and strength. Who are you?"

"I am Nga Bee of Nyaung U."

Anawrahta clapped for his trusty steed who trotted up to his side and stood like a soldier awaiting orders. The king spoke to him. "My son, serve this man as you've served me." And turning to Nga Bee he said, "Take this horse. You'll find him a good servant."

Even before Nga Bee could say a word of thanks, the king turned and walked away into the darkening twilight. The faithful horse followed his master with his eyes until he was lost to view and neighed a sad farewell. Nga Bee gathered the noble animal's neck into his arms and fondled his mane whispering words of cheer.

The next day found the king's men in an unexpected quandary.

"We all know that the royal steed, scion of the thoroughbreds who grazed on the feathery tendrils of tireless clouds soaring over the topless mountains of the north, can never be ridden by anyone else unless the king himself has given his gracious permission. So we should be able to catch the thief," the officer told his men as they gathered at an outpost. He then split his men into sections and sent them away in different directions.

Nga Bee had just finished his bath after his daily battle with the Irrawaddy and the Nyaung U cliff, when he heard his horse neigh in an urgent warning note. He ran and jumped to the other side of the rocky tongue of land to see what was the matter when he saw his horse being pulled away by a band of soldiers.

With an angry cry, "What are you doing to my horse," he pushed the soldiers and caught the bridle as if to pull the horse away from them. The commander in charge of the soldiers cried, "Forbear, in the name of the king."

A hush fell as the horse bowed down his head and looked at his master pleading with him to do the same. Nga Bee under

stood and knelt down. The commander read the king's order which said that anyone found with the horse must be brought before the king.

When it was duly reported that the horse had been recovered from the hands of a commoner Nga Bee who declared that the horse belonged to him but refused to reveal how he came by it, the king said: "You know well that my trusty steed would not suffer himself to be mounted by anyone else but my royal person, unless by my consent. Bring all the famous horsemen of the land to the royal courtyard and let them try to mount my steed without my permission, and let that commoner try amongst others."

With a glorious flourish of trumpets, gongs and drums the equestrian contest began. The royal steed stood in the centre of the grounds proud and high-spirited, as the king watched from his throne, surrounded by his courtiers. One by one the horsemen tried to mount the steed and one by one they were thrown off. The people cheered lustily as the noble animal held his own, unbowed and invincible in spite of the brave efforts of the horsemen. Many were the tactics they employed, varied were the wiles they tried, but all in vain.

The excitement was at its pitch when the master of ceremonies cried out asking if there were any more horsemen who wanted to try. As there was no one left Nga Bee's name was called.

A general hubbub of whispering arose as Nga Bee walked into the courtyard; people could not help admiring aloud the magnificent build and muscles of the man who stood with his arms folded, looking at the steed. His cool confidence won him more cries of admiration from the crowd who were moved by the purity and innocence of his face.

Then suddenly there was silence. Nga Bee came up to the steed and patted it on the back and ran his fingers into the skeins of its glorious mane. Man and horse looked into each other's eyes, both understanding they were meant to prove something more than the ownership of the horse.

A cry of surprise rent the air as Nga Bee with one stride mounted the horse and trotted towards the king until he was stopped by a barricade of swords and spears a few yards away from the royal seat.

At the king's order, "Make way!" the swords and spears slid back and the horse bowed its head at the king's feet while Nga Bee dismounted and prostrating himself begged the king to accept the royal steed as a gift.

The king then ordered his men to set a date for Nga Bee to perform his swimming and climbing feat so that people could watch him in action.

The excitement of the people who had already taken Nga Bee to their hearts knew no bounds. No sooner was the news of his coming demonstration made public than the people rushed to the Irrawaddy river bank and tried for places that would command the best view. They sent hurried messages to their women at

home to send food and bedding as they would not stir a step from the chosen spot until the show was over. Many earned silver and gold selling their places to those who had neither foresight nor initiative nor the diligence to go through all that trouble.

On the great day Nga Bee performed his feats to the delight and admiration of the crowds who mobbed him as soon as the show was over. When they asked him to teach them the secret of his powers, what herb, what runic sign, what ritual of offering to which spirit, what talisman had made him so strong and brave, Nga Bee told them to go and ask the king, not him.

So, by popular wish and acclaim Nga Bee became the leader of the physical training camp established under the royal patronage.

To train men whose belief in the power of supernatural agents was dominant, Nga Bee was secretly briefed by the king, "Be tactful. Do not run down their age-old beliefs. Let them do what they believe to be necessary rituals like making offerings to the guardian spirit of the river before they swim."

Nga Bee found that his men, once their superstitious conscience was satisfied, cheerfully accepted the strict discipline of the mind and body and the acts of self-denial that went with the rigorous physical training. Nga Bee's own conduct and dedication to his task inspired the men to give of their best. Enthusiasm spread and people flocked to the camp where they eventually learned that real strength came from within and not from spirits, herbs, talismans or rituals.

3

A true son of the soil

Anawrahta shared with Kyansittha the joy and satisfaction over the success of Nga Bee as leader of the physical training camp. He found Kyansittha had a way with people of all walks of life as he mixed freely with the men in Nga Bee's camp. Nga Bee himself found it easier to talk to Kyansittha to whom he confided his problems and future plans to extend the movement.

Anawrahta heard from Kyansittha first-hand reports of what people were thinking, saying and doing and he realised that it was no easy matter to help them break through the barrier of indolence and inertia which they had built round themselves. Many had been reduced to such a state of inferiority that they resorted to habitual shirking of responsibilities and indifference, and worst of all, to the practice of superstitious rituals. How could such people be taught to develop their minds and bodies and to depend on themselves?

Nga Bee's work, Anawrahta felt certain, was only an initial step in training men to develop their physical powers and to discipline themselves. More ways and means of teaching people to aspire to higher things and nobler actions would have to be sought, if his dream of uniting all the peoples of the land was to be realised.

With this dream of building a stronger and more united kingdom yet unaccomplished, Anawrahta could hardly rest in the lap of royal luxury. He had to leave his palace to go about like a commoner, alone but for his trusty steed, in search of something that might help him.

One day he rode up Tuywin Taung hill to look down on the scene of contrasts, the royal city of Pagan with its many-towered grandeur reflected in the Irrawaddy river, and the neighbourhood of desolation and poverty that crawled at the feet of the royal city's majesty.

Anawrahta's eyes scanned the scene of waste, slackness and poverty. The fair face of the earth lay mangled by drought and gashed with ugly cracks. Herds of hungry cattle staggered about rubbing their hooves into the barren ground and sniffing the cracks for dried-up paddy shoots. **Htanaung* trees glowing strangely in the blaze of cruel sunlight dotted the arid landscape.

Anawrahta wondered what inner power made those *htanaung* trees defy the sun with their luminous green, when all other trees

* *accacia leucophloea*

had withered; he felt there must be some power within humans too to pit against the overwhelming forces that threatened to destroy.

Anawrahta was rudely shaken out of his reverie by a sudden uproar. Galloping towards the fight he rode straight into the affray shouting and brandishing his spear.

Taken by surprise, the men stopped and faced the stranger who had dared to interrupt them. They were armed with sticks and sharpened bamboos and were trying to hold a young man who was much bruised and cut as he kicked and struggled helplessly.

"Let go, you rascals," Anawrahta commanded and the men obeyed not quite knowing why and the young man instantly jumped to Anawrahta's side holding a pointed bamboo stick which he had wrenched from one of his captors the moment he was set free.

The next minute the ruffians, recovering from their surprise, charged the two. Anawrahta whirled his spear and galloped encircling them as the young man made good use of his pointed bamboo stick. Many fell to the ground whilst others ran away.

"Blood, blood, always blood. Will nothing else settle things?" Anawrahta murmured looking at the scene of skirmish. A gentle touch on his knee sent his hand to his spear which was instantly pointed at the heart of the blood-stained young man.

"Forbear, soldier, may I lead you to my place where you can rest," said the young man, as he held the bridle of Anawrahta's horse.

Before the young man could move a step, Anawrahta gathered him up with one arm and lifted him on to his horse's back and told him to show the way to his place.

After trotting a few leagues over the fields, they came to a piece of well-cultivated land and a hut built of toddy palm leaves. Birds twittered a welcome from the cactus hedge as the two rode into the enclosure.

The young man slid down from the horse and held the bridle for Anawrahta to dismount and led the animal to the trough of water. He bade his guest sit down on the bamboo dais in front of the hut and lit a fire to boil water in a black smoky earthen kettle.

Soon a repast of green tea in the same earthen kettle and chunks of jaggery heaped on a banana leaf was laid before Anawrahta. Then the young man began to wash his cuts and plaster them with bits of betel leaves softened by the heat of fire.

Anawrahta drank the green tea out of the small earthen cup and its bitter taste mingled pleasantly with the sweet of chewed jaggery. He asked the young man who he was and how he came to be attacked by the ruffians.

The young man who gave his name as Nga Lone said that the very land with its luxuriant crops was the cause of all the trouble. Asked by the puzzled Anawrahta to explain what he meant, the young man took him round the place and showed

him a pond of water which had been built by damming a stream. Nga Lone told Anawrahta how he had repaired an old dam that had fallen into disuse all by himself so that his fields and garden could be watered in times of drought.

His neighbours, instead of helping him, called him a fool to take so much pains, when rain and good crops could be coaxed by making offerings to the spirits. Scorned and resented for his non-conformist activities, he further angered the neighbours by refusing to contribute to the communal offering of gifts to the spirits.

To make matters worse, Nga Lone ventured to advise them against killing oxen, their faithful servants in the fields, just for the sake of feasting in honour of the spirits. He refused to barter his fine oxen for gold when the neighbours felt it necessary to make their feast more elaborate so that the powers above would give them better rain.

Nga Lone had gone on with his work not caring what the neighbours said, until the drought came, for which he was blamed. He was accused of having angered the **hats* with his irreverence. The men also demanded that Nga Lone give them the water from the reservoir he had laboriously repaired. When Nga Lone refused, they had come and beaten him up. They might have done him to death, had not the stranger come to the rescue.

Nga Lone talked on, his indignation at the injustice heating up afresh, and ended up exclaiming: "Nothing good ever comes out of being in the right. It is always the unjust and the wrong who win, because there are more of them. Now what do I do next? The next time they come at me you won't be here to save me. Tonight I'm going to pack up and go away."

"So you're running away. I thought you were made of sterner stuff." Anawrahta said with a look of disdain.

Nga Lone exploded into a flood of picturesque oaths and cried that he was tired of fighting useless battles. He had thought that being right and just was strength enough for him. But it was not so, when he was all alone among fools and unjust men. No one seemed to be interested in standing by what was right and just.

"So what's the use? I'm going. Do you think it's easy for me to leave this land—the land I've tilled with my bare hands? Look at the peanuts, ready to be picked soon. These mango trees already clustered with young fruits that will grow big and golden, caskets of sweet nectar fit for a king, do you think I want to leave them to the pillaging hands of those ruffians? Those rows of banana trees with the wide green leaves waving in the wind, heavy with bunches of fruits ready to be cut down and covered up for ripening... do you think..."

Nga Lone furiously rubbed away his tears with the back of his hand and said: "Yes, I'm unmanly—a whining old woman. Call me anything you like. But I'm going."

* spirits

11250

Anawrahta's stern face softened with compassion, but his voice was firm when he said: "Nga Lone, if you know you are right, you must fight, even if it is to be one against a hundred."

"It's easy for you to say that, you being a soldier and servant of the king, with all the arms and skill and men to support you. What have I, a poor peasant, against those men with sticks and pointed bamboos? I don't want to fight. I only want to till this land I love and grow beautiful things, useful things, things that give life and strength. What's the use of staying in a country where one cannot do what is right? I'll go south to what they call the golden land where rain is sufficient and crops are plenty."

"Will you stay, if you're allowed to work in peace?" Anawrahta asked. The intense seriousness of his face struck Nga Lone so forcefully that he did not think it an impossible question. He looked at the stranger solemnly and answered: "Yes I will."

With a terse command, "Come with me," Anawrahta clapped for his horse and galloped towards the royal city of Pagan, with Nga Lone on the pillion seat.

Anawrahta left Nga Lone at the city gate telling him to wait. He then entered the palace by the secret door known only to him and sent for Kyansittha to tell him about Nga Lone and his struggle against the ignorance and injustice of his neighbours. Kyansittha was to take Nga Lone under his protection and not only help him do his work in the fields, but also make others follow his example.

Kyansittha learned from Nga Lone the problems honest peasants had to face. Indolence, desire to live on the fruit of others' labour and callousness had eroded the people's fibre and Kyansittha felt that some drastic change would be necessary to put things right once and for all.

As matters stood, Kyansittha could not afford to dwell on distant plans. He had to set himself to the more pressing need of getting the peasants to do the work of repairing dams and canals, and teaching them the ways and means of improving their crops, and above all to take pride in their work, and to be self-reliant.

As usual the traditional rituals of making offering to the spirits were tactfully ignored so that people would not be unnecessarily antagonized. The same rituals with their music and songs and dances later became a call to mass gatherings for team work.

A grand exhibition was proclaimed, with prizes and rewards for the best farm and garden products and also a contest of agricultural skills like ploughing, transplanting and harvesting.

Villagers formed themselves into groups and worked day and night in fields and plantations. The buzz of activity went on regardless of the hours, enlivened by music of the drums and jolly songs.

The plain between the city of Pagan and Tuywin Taung hill was prepared for the exhibition ground. A high tower was erected

for the king and the court. On the appointed day the whole ground became a magic patchwork of colour, music and revelry:

The highlight of the day's events was a ploughing contest and Anawrahta watched with great interest the skills the peasants displayed with their plough and cattle. But he was wondering what had happened to Nga Lone who had not taken part in any of the events. Kyansittha saw his look of enquiry, so he moved closer to him and whispered: "Your Majesty will be pleased to watch the next event."

Even before the king could say anything, there burst forth a clash of cymbals and boom of drums and thirty pairs of oxen each yoked to the plough lined up on the contest ground. The king beamed with pleasure to see the cattle so strong and active, with the bells of their bridles tinkling merrily as they dug their hooves restlessly into the ground.

At a loud call, "Now, my sons, ready!" the oxen moved to take their places like soldiers falling into a formation and the king saw that their brightly coloured reins were held by Nga Lone, intent on commanding his oxen.

Nga Lone's oxen were so well trained that they responded to the slightest pull or loosening of the reins. Nga Lone manipulated the reins with such ease and grace that he looked more like a prince driving his chariot in battle than a humble peasant handling his plough.

Responding to his signals the oxen trotted forward, leaving beautiful furrows behind them. At the corners they manoeuvred in such a way that there was not the slightest confusion or delay; all the thirty pairs moved like parts of a huge machine controlled by one hand. As the audience cheered and waved, the ploughing was completed to perfection.

When Nga Lone, as victor of the day, was led to the royal presence to take his awards, the king commanded, "Commoner, you may raise your eyes." Nga Lone gazed into the face of the stranger who had saved his life. Greatly overcome, he prostrated himself on the ground mumbling words of gratitude. Then he clasped and kissed the king's feet as if he would not hesitate to wash them with his heart's blood:

4

Nga Htway, the jolly fellow

Anawrahta found pleasure and satisfaction in moving among the men unrecognized except by a few trusted men. He dressed like one of them and ate and slept with them and went on long treks over the land, learning more about the people and the land.

One day, Anawrahta and a hundred of his men made a tour on horseback north along the Irrawaddy, until they came to the place where the river was joined by a fast-flowing tributary, the Thanlar, known today as the Chindwin. Anawrahta sent a scouting party over to the other side of the river bank to explore while they camped for the night and waited.

The next day, part of the scouting party came back with the report that the place where Anawrahta and his party stood was the edge of the triangular basin formed by the Thanlar river as it spread out to join the Irrawaddy, and that, if they moved north-east they would find another junction of waters.

Anawrahta and his men rode until they reached the other confluence, where the scouting party had left an outpost on the other side of the river. There, they crossed the river easily on bamboo rafts, with their well-trained horses tied to them. Once they landed on the far bank they rode up to the point where the Thanlar began its flow into the Irrawaddy.

As the party rode along the rocky banks of the Thanlar river, the men were struck by the surging currents that foamed through the rugged reefs that played hide-and-seek along the river's course.

When they had rested for the day, Nga Bee climbed and perched himself on a huge rock, and gazing at his new love, went into ecstasies. The Irrawaddy, his old mistress, though voluptuous and teeming with vitality, seemed mild compared to this slip of a river, with her mysterious undercurrents and whirlpools. The turbulent cataract of waters sang him a siren's song, and Nga Bee felt he had to tame this high spirited stream. He stood up as if to take on the challenge of her treacherous beauty, when suddenly a hand fell on his shoulder.

"There are better ways of conquering rivers—" Anawrahta's voice said with decisive firmness.

Startled, Nga Bee almost lowered his eyes and bent his knees, which the king had forbidden the men to do, when he was incognito.

The two sat down on the rock and looked at the river. Anawrahta said: "Yes, there are better ways of conquering rivers. When you've pitted your strength against the waves and overcome them, you have a sense of power and confidence in yourself. Good in a way. But, if you could make the restless waters serve you, like, for instance, making them bear the burden of rafts and boats, laden with goods and men, think of the power one might have if one could lash the swelling waves with oars until they cower and crawl under the boats."

They were joined by Kyansittha and Nga Lone and the four began to talk of rivers and conquests. Nga Lone looked wistfully at the Thanlar and said: "I wish I could harness those waters as I did my oxen and drive them into fields and plantations."

"My boy," Anawrahta exclaimed, "that's exactly how I'm going to conquer rivers. Why do you think I've been exploring the creeks and streams all along the way? I'm going to make them my servants and send them into the arid plains till they bring forth the choicest crops. What's the use of my being Lord of the Earth and Water, if I cannot tame those streams?"

"I think that is the best way of conquering rivers," said Kyansittha.

Then they rode on, across the sandy plains, until they came to a grove of toddy palms. Tired and thirsty the men dismounted and made preparations to encamp there till next day.

Anawrahta noticed that the grove of toddy palms was not like any he had seen on the way. The rows were neat and well-planned, and the little hut built of palm leaves was well kept. When they called out if anyone was at home, a young man came out prancing like a spirited colt, singing:

"Boozing, boozing, boozing,
Deep in the bitter-sweet draught,
Tinted with blues and greens
Of the jay's wings,
I, beloved of the maids,
Sway and lurch,
Lurch and sway..."

Seeing Anawrahta and his men, the young man stopped and cried, "Oh, spare me, masters, spare my toddy palms, I'll get you toddy as quick as you wish." He would have run up the toddy palms if Kyansittha had not stopped him and asked: "Why all this fright and hurry?"

"Sir, you ask this of me, you of all people. The king's men, your kind, come here and order me to get toddy and beat me up and destroy my palms...now, you want toddy, don't you? I'll get it for you as quick as you wish, only don't beat me and spare my palms."

"Wait awhile," said Kyansittha, "you said your palms are often destroyed by the king's men, but I see no trace of ruin, how is that?"

Nga Htway, for it was the young man's name, explained that of late, the king's men had stopped tormenting him, instead they even rewarded him for his services.

Kyansittha saw Anawrahta's face light up with pleasure, so he put the question that might bring out the answer the king would like to hear, "Since when? Do you mean that the king's men are better in this present regime?"

Nga Htway answered: "This regime or that regime, I know not. The king's men stopped beating me ever since I've trained myself to get toddy as quick as they wish."

And oblivious of the embarrassment of Kyansittha and the suppressed laughter of his men, Nga Htway went on: "I've kept myself in practice. Now I can get toddy for a hundred men while you chew a betel nut and a half. Today I'll break the record to one betel-chew."

Anawrahta, hearing the young man's candid account, slapped his thigh in merriment and broke into peals of laughter, saying: "You should thank the king's men for making you the best toddy climber in the land. If ever you get a chance to see the king put in a word or two in their favour."

The men laughed loud and long and Nga Htway, though he did not quite see the joke, joined in and said: "Ghost of a chance I have of seeing the king. Perhaps, you might see him some time, and when you do, please tell him...no, never mind, no need to worry the king with such a trifle. I'm all right, so long as I am quick with my work."

Kyansittha asked Nga Lone to get toddy for the men assuring him that he could take his own time. But Nga Htway's professional pride was such that he had to break his record that day. Handing a betel nut to Kyansittha to chew he ran towards the palms.

The next moments were hilarious. Nga Htway, singing a jolly song, pranced and danced as he girded his nether garment and juggled his knife before he made his climb. Even as he clambered up the tall straight palm, he managed to do hip-swaying tricks, while the men on the ground chorussed his song and clapped. Once on the top, he unhooked the earthen pot of toddy hung at the sapping point and slid it down by the rope, accompanying every gesture with a clownish act of face or limb or with a witticism.

As the men welcomed the toddy pot with cries of delight many of them almost missed Nga Htway's next stunt until they heard a shout. For, as soon as the toddy pot was aground, Nga Htway swung himself at the end of a huge palm leaf to the next palm tree. The men, recovering from their surprise, had to rush to catch the toddy pot.

Nga Htway's tactics of getting from one palm tree to another were never repeated; like a trapeze artiste he varied his jumps and leaps and dives till the men on the ground gasped in admira-

tion. Nga Htway got the toddy pots from the palms in record time amidst the cheers of the men.

The pots of toddy were lined up bubbling and crested with white froth, which Nga Htway insisted were sprays of silvery clouds from whence the drink had fallen. "Look sirs," he cried, "the heavenly colours that the fairies of the azure skies must have splashed. See how they're flying homewards in tiny bubbles."

As they partook of the drink, Nga Htway praised the qualities of toddy, how its bitter-sweet taste clears today of past regrets and future fears. He said that this particular sparkle could not be found in any other vintage but toddy, which was sent from the celestial regions to this land for the chosen people. This very fact, Nga Htway declared, must be taken as a divine message that this land, their land and the people so favoured would be happy and glorious forever.

Later in the evening, Nga Htway took the men round his plantation showing his nurseries of toddy palms in their various stages of growth: "Look at those spikes of green shooting out of the earth. They are called 'parrot's tail,' an endearing pet name don't you think? Each little slip's a folded leaf of the palm. Come here, you'll see those that have shot up and spread out like a girl's hand beckoning her lover, so 'waving hand,' they are called."

Coming to the next section of the plantation, the men were charmed by the grove of young saplings about the stature of humans, their shapely trunks skirted with thick fronds that were implanted on one another in such a way that they looked like a nest of many-tiered frills turned upwards. Nga Htway asked the men how they liked his "daughters," his beautiful daughters, forest nymphs parading their fluted skirts.

The men caught Nga Htway's enthusiasm and they all began to crack jokes, which sadly must have been swallowed up by the jaws of time; but one riddle was handed down to posterity: "Who is she that wears a skirt when young, but casts it off when grown up?" The solution lies in the fact that the young toddy palm wears a skirt of barks that falls off as the palm grows taller,

Nga Htway showed the men a display of toddy palm products, sweet delicacies like jaggery, treacle and syrup. Fresh kernels of young toddy fruits, transparent, soft and cool as they melt in the mouth were favourites of the young and old. The yellow pulp squeezed out of ripe toddy fruits mixed with rice batter made beautiful steamed cakes.

There seemed to be no end of eatables concocted out of toddy palms; the surplus toddy seeds buried underground gave tender roots which were dug up and toasted on open fires. They were eaten around the bonfire that night, a tasty snack soaked in sesame oil with hot green tea as a chaser.

Nga Htway went on with his praises of toddy palms that gave him everything, his abode, built of toddy palm leaves and trunks used as posts. He said he might build himself a fortress with

the trunks so that he would not have to fear thieves and robbers. But then he had nothing any thief or robber would care to take.

Nga Htway's face glowed with pride as he displayed the array of bric-a-brac, boxes, mats, trinkets and toys all made from toddy palm leaves, dried seeds and stems and offered them to the men as presents to take home.

Anawrahta's hands fondled a toy elephant and thought of his little son Saw Lu at home, how he would one day ride the royal elephant in state: but the boy had been too much with the royal household, being a great favourite with Anawrahta's mother. And Anawrahta, though he did not want the boy to be that way, could not bring himself to face his mother and tell her so.

That night Anawrahta ordered his men to see that Nga Htway was properly rewarded for his services and to make preparations for the homeward journey.

5

Byatwi and Byatta

The women of Anawrahta's household were pleasantly surprised by their lord's unexpected return and they beamed with pleasure when they saw him take little Saw Lu on his lap and give him the toy elephant he had brought.

The child was delighted. He jumped down from his father's knee and pushed the toy on the floor making noises like an elephant's trumpeting. The Queen Mother was delighted, for she rarely saw her royal son in a tender mood.

Anawrahta watched the child's antics for a while but soon began to look towards the doorway and the Queen Mother saw that he had had enough of the soft, sweet-scented comfort of the women's boudoir and that he was going to leave it for serious matters of state. She well knew that once he was absorbed in them, there was no knowing when he would be back.

She approached him and said: "We are having a show tonight in the royal gardens. Some strolling players from Raminnyadetha have come. I wish you could stay."

Anawrahta looked away from her, undecided, but the child nestled close to him and said: "Sire, please stay, please..." He hugged the child and said: "Surely, I will."

Tongues of flame swayed in the wind as they blazed out of the earthen bowls filled with oil and sawdust and coils of blue smoke curled round the tall saplings. Moonlight on the sparks of fire hung over the garden like tinsel. Anawrahta sat surrounded by his courtiers and queens and watched the show.

The players of Raminnyadetha with their drums, oboes, clappers and cymbals, gave a song as prologue, before presenting the play. It was a song in praise of Raminnyadetha. Though a common song in many ways, Anawrahta noticed its solemn accent on the Dhamma, Word of the Buddha, that flourished there with King Manuha as one of the chief disciples.

When the anthem swelled in praise of the Buddha, it was as if a strange world had opened out to Anawrahta and he felt poor and humbled, as one striving only for worldly gains with little thought for the spirit.

After that, the story of the two heroes of Raminnyadetha was presented. Two brothers from India, Byatwi and Byatta, having been shipwrecked were picked up by a monk who was venerated by King Manuha of Thaton, in Raminnyadetha. They had acquired such supernatural powers through eating a strange

meat that they could remove their master's monastery into the forest.

The two brothers became too powerful for King Manuha's peace of mind, so they were outlawed. Byatwi was caught and executed, but Byatta escaped.

The story had been popular with the people of Pagan for some time, having been passed on by the caravanners from the south. They liked this grand saga of men's strength and power, at a time when people worshipped heroes.

Whatever might have actually happened, the dramatist's ingenuity was such that the audience did not stop to think how a hero like Byatwi with his supernatural powers could have been caught and executed. Byatwi's capture was presented as an act of treachery on the part of the commander who had resorted to a base trick.

The dancers playing the two brothers gave with their dance steps the illusion of the spectacular leaps and jumps over the trees, mountains and streams performed by the heroes, an illusion well supported by the orchestra. The comic effect of the scene where the two heroes lifted the monastery into the forest so that their reverend master could not find it, was so hilarious that little Prince Saw Lu jumped and cheered and asked his father, "Sire, could I be strong enough to put the royal city upside down?" Anawrahta replied: "I don't think you need that much strength even to turn the whole country upside down." The seriousness with which he said the words struck the Queen Mother, who gathered the child in her arms and whispered not to ask his royal father silly questions. Then the show went on.

A pleasant interlude came after the boisterous scenes. It was a love duet between Byatwi and the commander's daughter. They sang and danced plighting their troth. The scene ended with Byatwi promising to visit his lady love at night in her home.

The next scene heightened the tension. For the commander came up the stage giving orders to his men to be ready to capture Byatwi. He had already found out that Byatwi was coming to visit his daughter that night. He had soiled cloths used by women in child-bed hung overhead the way Byatwi would come, so that he would lose his supernatural powers as he walked under the cloths.

A slow mournful strain preceded the scene of Byatwi's coming to his mistress's chamber. He had a foreboding of ill, when his flesh began to creep and itch as he walked under the soiled cloths. He could hardly respond to his mistress's loving welcome. As he unhappily confided his fears to her, the men who were placed in hiding fell upon him.

Surprised, he immediately braced himself to jump away, but he found that he could not, for his powers had fled. While his mistress wept and implored her father, the men took Byatwi away bound with ropes.

This was not the end yet; for Byatwi would not die even

though swords and spears were thrust into him. He defied death singing.

“Cut me with swords,
They break to pieces,
Thrust me with spears,
They wilt and droop.
Let mighty elephants trample,
I will not die,
Be it on land, be it on water
I blossom fresh and strong
Like a lotus flower.”

It looked as if Byatwi would not die unless he wished it. The commander was in a fix. If he could not kill the man he had caught, his prestige as a commander would suffer. He had to make Byatwi die. He began to talk to Byatwi against the advisability of living and suffering all the pangs of torture; what had he to live for, with no one to care for or love him? Byatwi raved that he had every intention of living on, even though he had to suffer the pains of swords and spears. He was keeping himself alive for his love. So long as his mistress loved him he would not die.

Then the commander told Byatwi that the girl herself was in league with him to trap Byatwi in their home, so that she could be rewarded by the king who would make her queen. Byatwi would not believe him. Then the commander said: “Will you make a bet? If she did anything that would mean death to you, would you still care to live?” Byatwi accepted the challenge. He said he would certainly not care to live if his mistress wanted his death. “Let her come and tell me herself that she wants me to die,” said Byatwi, “only then will I die.”

“She will surely come if you wish it,” replied the commander, “she will come and say that she wants you to die; she will say it with a gesture.”

The commander explained to Byatwi that it was their custom in social dealings to offer a quid of betel and a cup of water to a guest to say that he was unwelcome; the whole carafe of water and well-filled betel box were offered to show welcome and love.

“If she loves you,” said the commander, “she will come with a carafe and betel box, and if otherwise...”

* ဓါးနှင့်ထိုး
ဓါးကျိုးပါလို့
လှဲခွေ
ပြောင်နာဂိန်ဆင်မင်းတောင်
နင်းလို့မသေ။
ကုန်း တထွေ၊ ရေမှာတဲ တခြား
ပုခွံ ရှေ့ကြာပန်းလို့...
လန်းတဲ့လူစား

“She will come with a quid of betel and a cup of water,” Byatwi finished for him.

Byatwi, being a foreigner, was in no way to know that the said custom was invented by the commander on the spot to suit his purpose.

“Only let her come to me with a cup of water and a quid of betel, and I shall know that she wants me to die. But if she does not wish my death, and does not bring them to me, will you let me be free to marry her?” said Byatwi.

The audience sat, anxious and tense, under the power of the actor who played the commander’s role. His voice, his gestures and movements expressed the man’s wiles and cunning so convincingly that he towered above the Byatwi character, stealing the scene completely:

Next, the commander went to his sorrowing daughter. He played the loving father full of concern. He wiped her tears saying how moved he was by her plight, since he knew only too well what it meant to be young and in love. He told her how he could not bring himself to kill the young man who meant so much to her and how he had obtained a pardon from the king, on the strength of his being his intended son-in-law.

The girl, in her great joy and relief, could not stop to think of the improbability of her father’s change of heart. She could hardly wait to go to her lover. As she was hurrying to go, her father casually suggested that she should take a goblet of water and a quid of betel, which she did.

The sight of the girl coming with the goblet of water and a quid of betel was the climax, for this act of seeming betrayal, stronger than the soldiers’ arms, quite vanquished Byatwi; then burst his mighty heart. The play ended with a note of triumph for the king whose power was stronger than that of the heroes.

Anawrahta came back to his chamber pondering over the story of the two heroes. Even though he did not take seriously the story’s supernatural elements which were only props, stock-in-trade of the dramatic arts of the day, he was intrigued; for he had already gleaned useful information about the land called Raminnyadetha and its people.

Anawrahta sent for Kyansittha and discussed the story, which the latter had already heard from the caravanners. He told the king that the songsters and musicians who sang the ballad of the two heroes, Byatwi and Byatta, at the market place were great favourites with the people.

In some of the songs, Kyansittha said, it was mentioned that King Manuha had buried Byatwi’s insides round the walls of the city and thrown his blood inside the moat so that Byatwi’s spirit would guard the city. Anawrahta remarked that it was a master-stroke of propaganda about the impregnability of the royal city and the power of the king who could make a servant of a hero’s spirit.

Anawrahta confided to Kyansittha that he must have an alliance with or conquest of the southern regions and he needed all the information about the locality and the people. The stories brought over by the caravanners and songsters and players were often based on truth, and if only one could probe beneath the supernatural elements and exaggerations, one might get nearer to the facts.

Anawrahta thought that if there was any truth in the story, the surviving brother Byatta might come north and seek asylum under him. Kyansittha was told to send men to look out for the dark stranger from the south and if he were found he should be taken under his protection.

6

The Popa wonderland

Days later, Kyansittha reported to the king that the dark stranger had been found and taken under his protection. It was true that his brother had been executed by the order of King Manuha of Raminnyadetha, and Byatta had run away. The man's physical strength was something to be marvelled at, Kyansittha said, and the men were already astounded by his spectacular leaps and swiftness of foot, and above all, by his fearless horsemanship. Yes, they could make use of him.

Anawrahta wanted to know what faith Byatta professed and if he knew anything about the Word of the Buddha that flourished in Raminnyadetha. Kyansittha answered that the dark stranger professed a new faith that was spreading from the great desert land in the west of India.

Anawrahta, though disappointed that he could not get the desired information, told Kyansittha that a man's faith was his own personal affair, and so long as he did not harm the state and society, he should be free to practise what he believed. But Anawrahta vehemently declared something must be done about the animistic customs that were draining the people's mental health, when the time was ripe. For the time being, they would see what they could do with Byatta's talents.

Byatta got along with the men who loved to hear his yarns of the hot blazing deserts, whose boundless spaces matched the courage and daring of his ancestors. He told of how the men of the desert plains, scorning the safe shelter of cosy roofs, had chosen the vaulted skies and braved the dangers of the trackless plains. Byatta described the mysterious beauty of the deserts, on whose bosom his forbears had lived and died. He then ended his tale with the philosophy: "Where there is great beauty there is great danger. My forefathers loved both, so do I."

Byatta's equestrian skill impressed men, and he told them stories of thoroughbreds as restless as the winds that sent the sands of the desert plains spiralling up the heavens, and how his ancestors had tamed and ridden them.

Exhibitions of skills and stunts in horsemanship had become daily events since Byatta came, and he inspired the king's men to do breath-taking leaps and jumps that became the talk of the country.

Byatta's fame grew and songs were sung in his praise, with the usual flourishes that fired the people's imagination. All this enhanced the king's prestige, for people declared that only a great king like Anawrahta could have such a hero to serve him.

Anawrahta charged Kyansittha with plans to set up a training camp for men with Byatta in charge. They discussed the site of

the camp and made secret excursions to the Popa countryside to explore the area. They saw for themselves the strange mysterious beauty of the place with its gushing streams that seemed to rise from nowhere.

Anawrahta remarked that in this primeval forest where the tree tops lay like green waves as the breeze murmured over them, it was not surprising that men's imagination should soar high and create beautiful legends and stories of nymphs and gnomes.

Kyansittha said, "It's the unknown that first awes and frightens men, but later the same unknown inspires them to create legends, songs and dances. But I'm afraid it will be quite a while before men probe into the mysteries and arrive at facts."

Kyansittha gazed at the towering tree tops bathed in the golden sunlight and said: "I do hope men's minds will one day probe into nature's secrets and when they do, I'd rather that they do not lose the sense of wonder that first inspired them."

Kyansittha leaned on the gnarled old tamarind tree and muttered half to himself: "I'm afraid when men's knowledge reaches out to the mysteries of nature, he will scorn the base degrees by which he ascended, calling the early aspirations superstitious nonsense."

Anawrahta laid his hand on the younger man's shoulder and said: "This place certainly does things to us, putting uncommon thoughts into our heads. We'd better come back to earth and decide the best site to build our camp."

Somewhat abashed at his own fancies, Kyansittha grinned and said: "Sire, we shall go down this vale. I think the plain below might be spacious enough for our camp. If there are water holes around it would be just perfect."

So saying he took a brisk walk downhill and Anawrahta fell into step with him.

Mount Popa was regarded by the people as an enchanted land, where mysterious dangers lurked in every glen and fell. Stories of how the great mountain was born out of the shattering quake, amidst torrents of boiling lava and avalanches of rocks and stones, were handed down from generation to generation.

People believed Mount Popa to be the abode of the powerful family of *nats* headed by Maung Tint Dai, who in his previous life, had been a blacksmith of great strength.

Every household kept a niche in which to hang a green coconut and a fan in his honour. He was called the Mahagiri, Lord of the Great Mountain, also the guardian spirit of the home. There were stories of how he went on with his blacksmith work on Mount Popa spilling flames and molten metal, until offerings were made entreating him to cease his activities. People lived in fear that he might start up his forge at any time. Ritual feasts were held in his honour.

Anawrahta told Kyansittha to collect all information about Mount Popa; he said that every rumour might have a germ of truth; songs, plays and festivals, being the best mirrors of public opinion, should not be neglected.

7

The ballad of Maung Tint Dai

Of all the songs, the ballad of Maung Tint Dai was the most popular. The ritual feast in his honour was celebrated with colourful dances and boisterous music. One could see how highly people esteemed the hero, Maung Tint Dai, who though dead for hundreds of years, lived in the memory of the people as a *nat*. He was represented by dancers whose dress is described in the song:

* An elegant belt,
Never in the isle
A silk *pasoe* 1 like mine
Nor *khatha* 2 robe
Which falls at the back
To right and left heels
The right hand holds a fan
A golden helmet gleams
With colour of eugenia leaf.

The player sang the ballad of Maung Tint Dai, how the King of Tagaung, jealous of his strength, had trapped him by making his sister queen, of how she had asked her brother to come to the king to be honoured; and how he had been tied to a tree and burnt to death; how his sister learning too late that she had been tricked, had run to the place of execution and thrown herself into the pyre.

Kyansittha going over the subject of the ballad and the ritual feast observed: "This, making their heroes *nats* and having ritual feasts is perhaps their way of remembering and honouring the men they loved and respected. Probably, men will go on remembering such men, even though they may have different kinds of rituals or ceremonies."

* ခါးစည်းငယ်မှ ဝေသီလေ၊
ကြော့ရှာလွန်းသည်။
တကျွန်းတင့်နိုး၊ ဆင်ပုဆိုးမှာ၊
ပိုးထဘီနှင့် အင်္ကျီငယ်မှခါသာ၊
အလက်ဖွာကို၊ ပယ်ညာနောက်က၊
ဖနောင့်ကျနှင့်၊
ညာကယပ်ဆောင်၊ ခမောက်ရွှေပေ၊
ကြော့ရှန်းဝေသည်။ သပြေရောင်နှင့်...။

1. loin cloth 2. very thin kind of muslin.

Anawrahta said: "Perhaps they will go on doing the same thing under different guises. But what I am not too happy about is this why do heroes have to be destroyed? Why can't they be used in the service of the king and country?"

Kyansittha agreed that it might be done.

Some time later in the ritual feasts players who were supposed to be possessed by the Mahagiri spirit sang songs saying that Anawrahta and Kyansittha were kinsmen of the Lord of the Great Mountain in a previous life, and that he was still looking after them.

When Mount Popa was chosen to be the training camp for men, people joyfully welcomed the news, declaring that it was a holy alliance between the king and their hero Maung Tint Dai. Even before they knew, people found themselves accepting Anawrahta as a hero who identified himself with the commoners.

If people believed the Popa countryside to be an enchanted land, their belief was confirmed by the enthusiasm with which the king's men took to themselves the task of exploring the wilderness that challenged their skill and courage.

Byatta's horsemanship was tried and tested by the treacherous gullies and unpredictable climbs and when he showed himself the master of these dangers, the men were inspired to follow his example and prove their skills in horsemanship.

Apart from the spectacular leaps and jumps, the men learned all the techniques of fieldcraft and jungle warfare in the pathless forests, developing an intuitive skill in reading nature's sign-posts. They played games of strength, lifting huge boulders, a feat Byatta excelled in, which earned him the reputation of having the strength of five elephants. Cross-country races trained them to be swift sprinters. People began to say that Byatta could run from Popa to the city of Pagan and back, six times in a day.

Kyansittha visited the camp often and took part in their contests and games. Popa became the rendezvous of the heroes, for Nga Bee came with his men for long stays to practise their climbing skills on the perilous fells and steeps of Popa.

Nga Lone came there regularly with the food supplies that no hero could do without. He too found at Popa much to interest him for the strange plants, trees and herbs fascinated him. He spent days exploring the jungle, collecting saplings and slips and bulbs which he took home to be planted. Within a short time he was able to cross species of mangoes and bananas with sweet results.

Their lighter moments came when Nga Htway and his men arrived. He too had been appointed as coach to train the men in tree-climbing. The first batch consisted of the men who had once beaten him. In spite of the royal edict that he could give those men as hard a beating as he liked, Nga Htway did not take advantage of the right, although he often played jokes on them, go up the highest palms easily by ladder, and having the ladder removed away to leave them stranded on the palms the whole day.

Nga Hitway and his men tried their skill on the lofty trees that hung precariously over the cliffs and their swinging techniques were improved as they played with the giant creepers over the gorges and waterfalls.

Wild life was plentiful. Hunting became one of their favourite activities and their skills in stalking, sprinting and marksmanship were kept in constant practice.

At the occasional contests and exhibitions Anawrahta himself came and rewarded the men who excelled in various branches of jungle warfare.

Even Byatta, in spite of his early misgivings, felt settled, as the people accepted him as one of them. He like the Popa countryside as it gave him inexhaustible opportunities for adventure. He courted danger, as if he saw nothing but beauty in it.

8

Byatta and Mai Wunna

If his ancestors were enthralled by the mysteries of the boundless deserts. Byatta was no less captivated by the sombre secrets of the Popa woodlands. The untrodden ways over the hills and dales beckoned him with promise of such beauty and danger that he could not rest till he had explored every step of that wonderland.

One of the wonders of the Popa countryside was the profusion of springs that gushed out of the rocky ridges, slender brooklets that rippled shyly under leafy branches, and tempestuous cataracts roaring through many a cloven ravine.

Byatta with his insatiable thirst for adventure, often wandered deep into the jungle, courting new dangers. He would not rest even though skins of bears, tigers and leopards lay on his tent floor, and rare horns and feathers hung on the walls. The trophies were all the more beautiful because of the dangers he had faced to win them.

Every time Byatta left camp on his hunting or exploration trips, he promised his men that they would see some rare prize that would excel those already won. That was why one day, Byatta muttered to himself: "It's not one of my good days," after he had wandered in the woods the whole morning without getting anything, not even a puny hare.

He let his horse off to graze and scrambled up a thick wooded hill that overlooked the valley below. He gazed at one silvery cloud that had lost its way between the wooded sides of the long glen, and walked leisurely along the narrow uphill path, often stooping below the jutting rocks that hung above. When the wind arose, the wondering creepers overhead ran riot in many a wild festoon, garlanding the gnarled boughs with flowers. Byatta moved slowly listening to strange sounds, circumspect as a tiger on the prowl.

As Byatta bowed his head to pass under an overhanging rock, he suddenly stopped amazed, for, out of the thicket that covered the rock flowed a tuft of catkins, black and wavy and sparkling with blue tints as the sunlight played on them. He was struck by the varieties of flowers that clustered on the skeins. He had never seen such profusion of colour and exuberance on a single bunch and he thought it must be some strange species of orchid.

Byatta thought it should be his prize for that day. He balanced himself on the ledge and took out his sword with one hand and with the other he grasped the catkins; at that moment a cry of terror arose from the bush and Byatta found himself

looking into a pair of frightened eyes, veiled with black wavy hair.

Byatta's hand still grasped the tuft of hair more in wonder than with a wish to hurt. As the creature let out another sobbing cry, Byatta, moved to unwonted compassion, let go his hand and the next moment jumped up the overhanging rock in time to see a phantom shape dash down the valley.

Petrified, Byatta gazed at the fleeting figure with her black hair flying in the wind and petals of her garlands showering on the grass. He could not decide whether the creature was a human or a nymph; but he was fascinated by the large black eyes fringed with long lashes.

Byatta did not go after his prey. He looked at the wavy wisp of hair and the red flower that remained in his hand. He instinctively knew that his usual hunting tactics would not do, if he wanted to win this creature.

He tenderly packed the tress of hair in a leaf and tied it to the tassel of his sword. He then slowly followed the running creature's footsteps with his unerring hunter's instinct. He knew that the creature could not be far. He stopped when he came to a meadow where the hill sloped down into a vale.

Byatta was sure that the creature must have gone right into the valley beyond the steep cliff on the other side. She could not have gone beyond that. So, instead of proceeding further, Byatta climbed up a tall tree that overhung the valley and began his watch.

He was right. He could see the creature slowing down with one wary look backwards. She sat down on the grass and began to run her fingers through her hair. She then ran towards the stream and gazed at her own reflection.

After a moment, she ran across the stream to where cascades of water fell from a high crag. There she gambolled under the rippling showers, the golden tan of her skin shining through the diaphanous mantle of waters. "My golden girl—Mai Wunna! I've found her! She's mine!" Byatta muttered to himself.

From his hiding place he saw Mai Wunna come out of her shower and gather flowers; she wove them into garlands, singing as she did. Then she carried them to the stone slab by the stream and began her toilet. She bedecked her little body with flowers, and with fastidious care tied the red blossoms to her black tresses, peeking at the effect mirrored in the stream.

With the swiftness and grace of a fawn Mai Wunna ran along the stream, singing and dancing, and smiling at her own reflection. Byatta, watching from his hiding place, forgot everything except the girl's strange wild beauty.

Byatta did not know how long he remained motionless, until a discreet tap on the tree brought him back to reality. Startled, he looked down only to find his trusty steed waiting for him under the tree. He must have followed his master's footsteps as the sun was going down.

When Byatta turned his eyes to where the girl had been, she was no longer there. She must have disappeared in the flick of time Byatta's attention had been on the horse. This did not worry Byatta; he knew he could come back later. It was getting dark and his men must be wondering about him.

Byatta was welcomed back at the camp by his men who clamoured for the trophy of the day. Only then did Byatta remember that he had nothing to show to his men. While he was thinking how he could escape his men's teasings, one of the men cried: "Here it is tied to the sword. Show, please show. It must be something rare and precious."

Byatta smiled and waved away his men saying with mock gravity; "Make way, I'll show you something rare and precious, I warn you, don't ever touch it for fear of your life." One of the men with a sense of fun cried out with an exaggerated show of fear: "Oh, is it a snake then? Let me touch it and put an end to fears."

When Byatta reverently untied the leaf packet and displayed to them the tress of hair and the flowers, many men cried out in wonder and declared that they had never seen such a species of catkins, wavy, black and tinted with blue lights. Byatta explained to them that it came from the head of a strange animal, a golden one, which he meant to get alive and keep as a pet.

The men were fascinated by Byatta's story of the encounter. They asked if he would be needing a cage to keep the animal. Byatta replied he did not think so, for he was going to tame the animal first and keep it in his tent. They were intrigued.

9

Byatta lays a trap

Since Byatta did not know how long it would take to stalk his prey, he told his men not to expect the daily trophy for some time. He would have no time to hunt anything else as he would have to concentrate his efforts on the golden animal. He went daily to trail Mai Wunna. For the first three or four days, he had to be content to watch her antics from a hiding place as he dared not frighten her away.

One day Byatta went off to the city telling his men that he was getting new weapons to stalk the animal. But when he came back he would not show what new weapons he had brought, but told his men to wait and see.

The next day, Byatta started early into the woods. He then put his new weapon, the string of amber beads on the stone slab by the stream where Mai Wunna was wont to prink herself.

As usual Mai Wunna came and had her shower and began her beauty ritual with flowers. Her black eyes grew luminous with surprise when she saw the jewels on the stone slab. First she recoiled as in fear, but at the same time she was attracted by the dazzle. With great circumspection she crawled towards the stone slab like a tiger cub stalking her game.

Her outstretched hand moved slowly and barely touched the beads only to falter and retreat again. Still the jewels beckoned her, scintillating in the sunlight. The next time, Mai Wunna moved closer and her fingers played with the beads. Soon she became bold enough to handle them and try them round her neck. She gasped with delight when she saw the reflection in the stream.

Elated with her own beauty, she played with the string of beads winding and rewinding them around her arms, then her neck, then her black glossy head. She sang and danced as she had never done before. The mountain rills sang to her joy and the birds chorussed and every glen and fell re-echoed.

Byatta watched the tableau, entranced. He hung another amber string on the branch of the bush he was hiding in and let the sparkle attract the girl's attention. As the sun played on the lustrous beads Mai Wunna came towards them boldly and stretched out her hand to pluck the prize.

Byatta still unseen, moved away the beads a little farther and Mai Wunna's hand followed. After playing for a while he let his hand be seen and then his face, but Mai Wunna was no longer afraid, for she was intent on her beads. She was so absorbed in

the cat-and-mouse game Byatta arranged for her that she did not run away when he came out of the bush.

Byatta stretched out his hand offering the beads. When she tried to grasp it, he held it high above his head. With a silvery laugh Mai Wunna pushed Byatta's massive chest and jumped to catch it. Byatta playfully hoisted her on his shoulders and holding her feet tight with one arm, swung the beads with the free hand as Mai Wunna bent and wriggled to catch them.

Mai Wunna threw herself into the game, laughing with glee. She jumped down snatching away Byatta's turban cloth and waved it tantalizingly daring him to come and get it. Byatta played the same game with the beads. The two frolicked together, laughing and shouting like happy and carefree children. When at last Byatta with his own hands put the necklace round Mai Wunna's graceful neck, she did not run away. She looked at him with eyes full of love and trust. Her heart was gladder than the singing birds because her love was come to her.

That night Byatta did not come back to the camp.

When Byatta got back to the camp next morning, Kyansittha was there on one of his unexpected visits. Byatta was somewhat relieved, for he would rather face the fury of his commander than the jests of his men. He begged Kyansittha to give him a private audience so that he could give his explanation.

Like one in a trance, Byatta told Kyansittha how he had met a lady in the meads, full beautiful—a fairy's child; her hair was long and her foot was light, and her eyes were wild. Somewhat surprised, Kyansittha looked at the face of the hardy soldier pale and wan with love, and Byatta went on telling him, how he sat her on his prancing steed and how she bent sidelong and sang a fairy's song.

At the end of the story, Byatta came back to reality and humbly asked Kyansittha to give whatever punishment he thought fit for the desertion that night. Kyansittha more amused than angry, let him off with only a reprimand. He then gave Byatta a weekly night pass, leaving the poor red-faced lover to explain the whys and wherefores of the privilege to the men who asked embarrassing questions about the "golden animal" he had found in the woods and when he was going to bring it home.

Byatta's romance thrilled the men. Stories of his encounter were told and repeated and more colourful touches were added with each repetition. Many people came to believe that Byatta's mistress was a forest nymph who lived on flowers.

Byatta's romance became the talk of the day. At the market-place vocalists sang the ballad of Byatta and Mai Wunna to the great delight of the people, and strolling players represented it in their dances and plays.

When the rumour reached the king's ears, he asked Kyansittha for an explanation. Kyansittha, from what he had gleaned from Byatta's infatuated utterances and the people's fantastic

accounts, ventured to guess that Byatta must have met a remnant of an earlier race who had overrun the land long before the Burmans came, as the facial features and physical build were definitely the characteristics of that race.

The king told Kyansittha that it was good news that the dark stranger had gotten himself a woman, which meant he was settling down; if ever there were children of the union, they should be taken under the royal protection and educated in princely arts, the king said.

Byatta was happy to hear that his union was blessed by the king. Mai Wunna in her primeval innocence lived with no other thought but to love and be loved by her lord, Byatta, who could not get her beyond the sylvan glades that were her home.

Later when two sons were born, Byatta proudly presented them to Kyansittha who duly reported the happy event to the king. The boys received from the king appropriate gifts and the names of Shwe Phyin Gyi and Shwe Phyin Lay. When the boys were five years old, they were brought to the king's household to be playmates of the young prince Saw Lu.

10

Prince Saw Lu grows up

Anawrahta finally managed to get his growing son out of the Queen Mother's pampering hands and place him under Kyansittha's supervision to be trained in martial arts. Saw Lu, having spent his formative years in the women's boudoir, did not take to manly activities and strict discipline too easily.

Already in his teens, Saw Lu had around him "a brilliant younger set" of noble youths who spent their time in revelling and frequenting the festivals. Nga Yaman, son of Saw Lu's wet nurse, was the young prince's favourite and they were inseparable.

As Kyansittha tried to carry out the king's orders to make a man of Saw Lu, he found himself up against difficulties. There was the Queen Mother who took every chance to interfere with the routine of training in spear-throwing, horsemanship and fencing, with the excuse that the boy should not be made to strain himself.

Nga Yaman, it seemed, was Saw Lu's evil genius, for he often tempted the young prince to play truant by feigning illness. Byatta's sons Min Gyi and Min Lay, as Shwe Phyin Gyi and Shwe Phyin Lay, came to be called, although much younger, showed more interest in the manly sports than Prince Saw Lu did.

Even as Kyansittha was consoling himself with the thought that he had at least two good cadets, they were soon won away by Saw Lu and Nga Yaman, who promised fun-packed hours with games of chance like dice-throwing,

Saw Lu and his companions often haunted the market-place and festivals and indulged in games of chance, flinging ingots of gold and silver about.

Kyansittha saw that they were setting a bad example to the young, so he asked the king to issue a royal edict banning all games of chance throughout the country; those who were found at such games were to be punished. Kyansittha was placed in command of the men who were to enforce the law.

Saw Lu and his companions were among the culprits found at a game of dice in the market-place and the lawmen, not knowing what to do when the prince himself was involved, hurried to Kyansittha for orders.

Kyansittha told his men that no one was above the law and that their duty was to arrest anyone breaking the law. He reminded them that they were acting in the name of the king and assured them that he as their commander would take full res-

possibility. Kyansittha himself went along with the men and arrested Saw Lu and his friends, who were astounded by what they took to be unwarranted effrontery.

The culprits were brought to trial and sentenced to a short term of imprisonment, in consideration of their youth. Saw Lu's indignation was aggravated by Nga Yaman's words: "Watch him, Prince, this man's behaving as if he were the next king. Perhaps that's what he's after. Nothing could be more humiliating for a king's son to be ousted by a scheming outsider."

As soon as he was released Saw Lu went to his grandmother and poured out his anger. The Queen Mother had never liked Kyansittha, who seemed to be closer to the king than many of the old ministers who had served his predecessors. She did not approve of the way Kyansittha was introducing what she considered to be plebian activities among the royalty. She did not like the way Anawrahta mixed with the commoners. This unprecedented treatment of Prince Saw Lu was certainly the limit. She decided to speak to the king.

Even before the Queen Mother could seek an audience with the king, a messenger came with the news that some strolling players were going to give a show in the royal gardens and that the king himself was going to be present.

The Queen Mother was delighted, she was sure that she would have a chance to tell the king what she thought of Kyansittha and the lot, who were behaving as if they owned the land. She had been happy that Anawrahta was taking an interest in Saw Lu, but that young man Kyansittha was the fly in the ointment.

The audience that night included not only the courtiers, but many of Anawrahta's men like Nga Bee, Nga Htway, Nga Lone and Byatta who were responsible for defence and administration of the kingdom. And the Queen Mother did not like their presence at all. For one thing, the possibility of speaking to the king that night was remote.

The play presented that night was the story of Shwesitpin *nat*, one of the spirits worshipped by the people. If *nats* like Mahagiri inspired people with awe and fear, this Shwesitpin *nat* was held with affection.

Shwesitpin *nat*, before death made him a *nat*, was the son of Saw Mon Hnit, King of Pagan, centuries before Anawrahta's time. His mother Shwe Sagar was the Chief Queen. The young prince—ling blithe and debonair, was described as "the courtier's soldier's scholar's eye, tongue and sword, the expectancy and rose of the fair state."

His father gave him the state of Hlaingdet as his own territory and he was known as the Lord of Hlaingdet. One day, his father commanded him to go and suppress the insurrection of a vassal named Kyaingthin.

On the way, the young prince tarried spending most of his time in cock-fighting. When the news of his disobedience reached

the king's ears, he was filled with shame and anger that his own flesh and blood should have committed such a breach of discipline.

Thinking that he would set an example to all his subjects, the king ordered that the prince should be "manacled in earth," which means that he would be buried knee-deep in earth and left the whole day, to be taunted by the public.

Prince Shwesitpin never thought that his father would subject him to such disgrace; he was so overcome with shame and sorrow that when the guards went to release him at the end of the day, they found him dead of a broken heart.

11

The rule of law

The story of Shwesitpin was presented with special accent on the love of the king for his son and the conflict in his heart when he was faced with the kingly duty of having to put his own son to public disgrace.

In the scene where the prince's mother begged the king not to humiliate her son in the eyes of the people, the audience was moved by the king's reply in which he related how he had once sat up the whole night with his son's swollen finger in his mouth and how he had swallowed the pus when the swelling burst so that the sleeping child should not be awakened. But he must choose to do his duty.

If the audience was touched by the sorrow and remorse of the lovable young prince, the accomplished actor playing the king won their sympathy with his portrayal of the king whose love must give way to duty.

When the play ended, Anawrahta rewarded the players who had conveyed the message of the story so well; he then commanded all his men, princes and commoners to remember the moral and praised Kyansittha for his integrity and courage saying: "Happy am I that have a man so bold, that dares do justice on my proper son."

As he had high hopes of his son, Saw Lu, one day assuming the kingly responsibilities he addressed him: "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control, these three alone lead life to sovereign power, yet not for power (power of herself, would come uncall'd for), but to live by law, acting the law we live by without fear; and because right is right, to follow right were wisdom in the scorn of consequence."

Anawrahta commanded Kyansittha to tell the men, most of all Saw Lu, why he did what he had done. Kyansittha in a posture of respect addressed Saw Lu and the men: "I then did use the person of your father, the image of his power lay then in me, and in th' administration of his law, whereon as an offender to your father, I gave bold way to my authority, and did commit you..."

Moved by the way the king had conducted the whole affair, the men cheered, and one of the minstrels among the players burst forth into a spontaneous song praising the king and saying how happy they all were to be the subjects of such a sovereign.

If Prince Saw Lu was too young and impetuous to appreciate all this, the Queen Mother was greatly displeased by the unprecedented goings-on. And many of the ministers agreed with her.

In their eyes, the king was doing all the things that had never been done before, which fact they considered was enough to prove that such things were wrong.

One of the things some of the ministers and nobles and courtiers resented was that they were no longer a privileged class. Their duties had become multifarious and they hardly had time to go sporting as in the days of yore. The idea of justifying one's own position by the quality of work instead of by the accident of birth did not appeal to them at all.

Even if Anawrahta's words made an impact on Saw Lu's mind, he was too constantly flattered and fawned upon by the courtiers who could not accept the king's introduction of new ways and customs into their daily life. They were resentful of the way Kyansittha and his men gained popularity among the people. Even as they looked down upon Kyansittha and his men as lowly commoners, they secretly wished for the same repute and honour the heroes enjoyed.

Kyansittha and his men were cheered as heroes wherever they went, their names were on the lips of the people, It was in their praise that songs were sung. Saw Lu, the heir-apparent to the throne was scarcely remembered, except by hangers-on and opportunists.

The courtiers, with an eye on their own advancement, saw possibilities of the situation. With the help of the Queen Mother they formed a clique recruiting henchmen of their own by means of bribes and awards. Clustering around Saw Lu, they too made a show of an enthusiastic body of men-at-arms ready for action.

Anawrahta, his shrewd eyes for once 'dimmed by paternal pride and love, thought his son was at last beginning to grow up. He saw that the men around Saw Lu were awarded and given facilities befitting the retainers of a crown prince.

12

Odds against Kyansittha

Even though Kyansittha could not but see the intrigues and machinations of the people hanging round Prince Saw Lu and the Queen Mother, he hardly had time to brood, so busily was he occupied with the projects he and the king had started. He was constantly on the move, one day at Mount Popa to see how the future warriors were doing under Byatta's care, the next at Nga Lone's farm to help him with the problems of lending their best efforts to the agrarian tasks.

It was during his visit to Nga Bee's camp that a chance remark opened his eyes to a predicament so delicate and dangerous that his peace of mind was greatly disturbed.

A celebration to open the new course with the traditional ritual feast was in progress when Kyansittha arrived; for a new course of training in manning different types of river craft had been introduced at Nga Bee's camp. Rowing and sailing contests were to be attractions at the next annual exhibition of aquatic skills. There was to be a sumptuous banquet attended by music and dances. Kyansittha said to himself: "Such ritual feasts do seem to help to get things warmed up, even though the men may no longer depend on *nats* to help them."

The Irrawaddy lay aflame with the evening glow and the people had already begun to light the torches. Kyansittha suggested to Nga Bee that they should watch the feast from the cliff above and let the men enjoy themselves as they pleased without the restraint of their superior's eyes upon them.

They chose a place that commanded a full view of the festivities and sat down on the boulders. Nga Bee's men brought food and left them.

Nga Bee poured the bubbling toddy into a bamboo tankard for Kyansittha and said: "Votaries and mediums have no chance these days to play their tricks of soothsaying on our men simply because our men have no time to think of anything except their tasks."

"But votaries are still in demand for ritual feasts, aren't they?" Kyansittha asked.

Nga Bee chose a juicy chunk of roasted meat and offering it to Kyansittha, replied; "Yes and it's the only time the poor things can earn something. They certainly give us our silver's worth in music and dances."

A loud boom of drums and cymbals mingling with singsong voices rose from the festival grounds and Kyansittha could see the

votaries and votaresses in their flaming red robes begin their ritual dance. As they swayed and gesticulated like ones possessed by the *nats*, their resplendent jewels sparkled in the red smoky light of the torches. With the resounding beat of music in the background, they danced like tongues of flame in the wind giving the whole scene an eerie effect.

Taking a bite off his chunk of meat and washing it down with toddy Kyansittha gazed fascinated at the scene and remarked: "They wear a king's ransom in jewels. They must earn a lot by their oracles and sooth-sayings."

Nga Bee helped himself to a bite of meat and said: "They are facing a slump, because under this regime people have to prove their worth by work, no amount of offerings at the nat-shrines will get them anywhere in the king's service."

Kyansittha looked worried. He said: "The nat-shrines maintain a host of votaries and attendants. What will happen to them if they don't get enough gifts to support them?"

Nga Bee answered: "Many of them have joined the training camps and made themselves useful; but the trouble is, of late quite a few others have found cosy refuge with the Queen Mother and Prince Saw Lu."

Kyansittha thought for a while and said: "So long as they make themselves useful, it doesn't matter which camp they join. After all, we are all working for the good of the state."

Nga Bee cried indignantly; "Sir, please do not compare our camps with that of Prince Saw Lu. Their men do not come anywhere near ours in strength, courage, industry or skill. They joined the prince's retinue for gold and the fine show they could make with their liveries and horses. Some of them have even tried to entice away our men to their camp."

Kyansittha was silent, for the flow of talk was meandering on to dangerous ground. He could not make any comment without infringing on the bounds of loyalty to the king and his family. He chided Nga Bee for harbouring sectarian sentiments, reminding him that their cause was to build a union of peoples and that if they were vying with each other in distrust and jealousy how could they hope to achieve their goal?

The next morning Kyansittha left Nga Bee's camp for Popa with a heavy heart. He knew only too well that Nga Bee was justified in saying what he had said about Prince Saw Lu's retinue.

"If only Prince Saw Lu were old enough to help his royal father, I'd go back to my beloved place, Htihline and live in peace," thought Kyansittha.

On the way to Popa, Kyansittha's thoughts dwelt on the people who sought status and position in the king's court by means other than honest service. He knew that there was a class of people who were so used to achieving their vaulting ambition the easy way, by simply fawning and hanging on to kings and princes that they had become allergic to work and discipline. Such people, when supported by someone like the Queen Mother and the young crown prince in the background, could be a threat to the stability of the state.

13

Kyansittha talks to Byatta

Trips to Popa training camp never failed to exhilarate Kyansittha and he almost forgot his worries as he approached the many-fountained glades. One of his followers burst into a song full of longing "to touch his mistress's tresses of emerald sheen and crown them with rare flowers of Popa."

For a while they were all entranced by the sentiments so beautifully expressed, but in a man's world like theirs such moments were short, and sweet only while they lasted. The next moment they covered up the lapse with good-humoured banter and jokes. They were now stepping into Byatta's camp, a world of soldiers with their talk of spears, swords and horses, jousting matches and route marches.

Kyansittha and his followers were welcomed by Byatta. The men at the camp were eager to show the progress they had made in arms training and horsemanship.

Kyansittha's spirits rose to see how the cadets were responding manfully to the rigid training in jungle warfare. He was even more gratified to see the *esprit de corps* among the men regardless of rank and station.

Kyansittha, after making routine checks and inspections round the camp at Popa, settled down for a private discussion with Byatta on the problems of management and organization of the training camp.

Kyansittha teased Byatta asking him why he still kept his wife Mai Wunna hidden in the woods. "It's your racial trait... keeping your woman in purdah," he said.

Byatta only laughed, for he had told Kyansittha many times how Mai Wunna would not venture out of her woodlands to the abode of people in spite of his entreaties. Her two sons, now away at the king's court, came back for short stays. Kyansittha remarked: "Byatta, you must be impatient to bring your boys down here and make men out of them."

Byatta looked thoughtful and said slowly: "I'm afraid I might not be able to bring them down here, because the Queen Mother has become so attached to them and Prince Saw Lu cannot bear to be separated from them. The last time I went to see them, she expressed a wish that the boys should remain in the prince's retinue."

Kyansittha tried to keep the edge from his voice when he asked, "Byatta, do you want your sons to be dandified courtiers

strutting about in fine liveries without real skill in arms and horsemanship?"

Byatta was silent, thinking how he could refuse the Queen Mother's wish without incurring her displeasure, even though he agreed with Kyansittha that the boys should not be brought up to be foppish courtiers. Kyansittha saw that the man had been in awe of the Queen Mother. He said: "Don't you know, Byatta who decides such matters? We take orders from no one else but the king."

Kyansittha was satisfied to see the look of relief on Byatta's face: the dark stranger with his inherent love of adventure did not want his sons to be brought up in the luxury of the king's court; so long as he was spared the displeasure of the Queen Mother he would be only too happy to take his sons back to Popa.

Kyansittha feeling more at ease, said: "Anyway, your boys are still too young, so there's time enough before you bring them back to this place. The king will never have them lead idle courtiers' lives. He's still trying to get his mother to allow Prince Saw Lu to join this school of many arts."

"The king seems very reluctant to go against his mother's wishes. It's strange that he should give in so much," Byatta remarked.

Kyansittha replied: "You see, it's not weakness on the king's part that he's reluctant to do anything against his mother's wishes, it's just that he wants to atone for all the unhappiness he has caused her...you know how it is."

Byatta nodded. The king's family affairs were something they did not discuss. They changed the subject and began to talk of other matters concerning the needs of the training camp.

Kyansittha left Popa and made enquiries on the situation as reported by Nga Bee. He was perturbed to see that not only was Nga Bee right, but that things were much worse than he had thought. Attempts had been made by the followers of the Queen Mother to lure the men away from the camps set up by the king and Kyansittha.

Kyansittha went over the intelligence reports with uneasiness. "The class of votaries and mediums, until recently, have lived on the fruits of other people's labour. They used to be influential in high official circles, where people played high stakes for status and position. Such people need these mediums who are supposed to have access to *nats* and can give advice.

"There are some high officials at the king's court who feel neglected because the king has no use for them. Such elements rally round the Queen Mother who holds Prince Saw Lu, though still a youth, for a potential political future.

"Since the king has proclaimed that everyone regardless of birth, station and standing must prove his worth by the quality of his service, those who have profited by their capacity to fawn and flatter naturally find refuge in the Queen Mother's clique.

“There are those who believe in the king’s idea and think that such people should be ashamed of themselves, but there are others who are attracted by the show of grand liveries and empty honours. Even the staunchest of our supporters often say that they feel demeaned to be doing all the dirty work whilst others are enjoying the benefits.”

Kyansittha muttered to himself; “Yes, there will always be two classes of people, those who give and those who take. A man chooses which group to belong to. Though a man might exclaim indignantly... ‘why did I ever choose to be among the givers’...the chances are that he would choose the same again even if he were given another chance.”

14

Anawrahta hears Kyansittha

Kyansittha lost no time in seeking an audience with the king, after rehearsing many times how he would impress on the king the danger of the parasite class, the votaries, mediums and sooth-sayers as they preyed on the people, who were only too ready to believe and do anything to fulfil their ambitions.

Kyansittha steered clear of the matter of the Queen Mother and Prince Saw Lu as he made his report, and he was gratified to see that his words had the desired effect.

Anawrahta said: "We've long realized that the mere directing of people's energies into healthy channels alone will not serve the purpose. What we need is a new ideology that will teach people to seek strength from within themselves and to depend on that strength. We've been searching for such an ideology that will give us a common cause, a common faith as a unifying factor. Unless we have that, our work can't go much further."

Kyansittha felt honoured that Anawrahta considered him to be worthy of his confidence and innermost thoughts. "But, how long will the king remain oblivious of the whisperings of his mother and her satellites," Kyansittha wondered uneasily.

Anawrahta came out of his reverie and said: "Kyansittha, the time has come for us to seek a great truth for ourselves and for our people to live by. It is true that we have strengthened our armed forces, trained our men to be strong and brave, and enriched our granaries...but those things are not enough; we must do something for their spiritual well-being as well."

Kyansittha always had to fight back a wave of drowsiness whenever the king rambled on in this strain. He could not quite follow why the king should attach so much importance to matters that seemed to be so removed from everyday life. As for himself, he was content to participate in any ritual or feast, so long as they helped towards the work he was doing. He would take what was useful to him and leave the rest.

Anawrahta knew only too well what Kyansittha must be thinking. At Kyansittha's age he would not have felt the need for spiritual strength, but he should also know how an older man with heavy responsibilities felt.

Anawrahta became more and more urgent in his search for a truth that would help him and his people to build a better life.

Anawrahta found time to go round and learn about the way of life and thought of the commoners. He made frequent visits to Nga Lone's farm that had become a centre of peasant activities.

Essentially a man of peace, Nga Lone's influence on the peasants was considerable and he had inspired them to give all their strength and energy to make the earth bring forth. Besides organizing men to repair and build dams and canals, Nga Lone took the initiative to try new methods of cultivation so that their farms yielded two or three crops a year.

Anawrahta was happy to see such wholesome activity among his people, but he felt the need for an ideology to inspire men to greater achievements and what was more important, sustain the tradition of dedicated service to the country.

When Anawrahta looked into the animistic rituals and practices of the common people, he found many interesting sidelights. One day, visiting Nga Lone's farm he was surprised to see a ritual feast being prepared there, for Anawrahta still remembered how Nga Lone's scepticism of animistic offerings had once got him into trouble with his neighbours.

Anawrahta asked Nga Lone since when he had been converted to animist worship and he answered: "Sir, I have always done this at planting time and harvest time. This is strictly a private affair, a family custom, kept up for generations."

Nga Lone looked embarrassed as if he had fallen away from his convictions. Amused to see his discomfiture Anawrahta began to tease him: "I thought you didn't believe that *nats* could give you good crops?"

Nga Lone was defiant as he tried to justify himself: "Sir, this has nothing to do with belief or disbelief. I'm just doing a family duty. I do not sit idle hoping that the *nats* will do all my work."

Anawrahta smiled and said: "Well, well, you're a good son, doing the family duty. That's commendable, But tell me what do you get out of the ritual feasts?"

Nga Lone lit a bamboo pipe and handed it to Anawrahta. Lighting another for himself and casting a furtive glance at the crowd of women frying rice cakes, he moved closer to the king and whispered: "Sir, let's go and talk in the shade of that tree."

Comfortably seated with the king on the bamboo dais under the spreading tamarind tree, Nga Lone said. "It's all right to observe family customs, if I do not sit idle depending on the *nats* to work miracles, isn't it? And I find that these rituals have some unexpected rewards."

Nga Lone was interrupted as the women of his household came with trays of food and drink...toddy in bamboo tankards and chunks of roasted meat and chicken. Nga Lone thanked the women and waved them away.

When they had gone out of earshot, Nga Lone said: "These are the unexpected rewards. This is the occasion my women let me eat and drink with right good will and hearty cheer, so you see how it is."

Nga Lone chose a juicy chunk of meat and offered it to Anawrahta and poured toddy into the coconut shell cup. He himself took a bite and a sip and went on: "Sir, some people, especially women, take these rituals seriously. And in many ways they are an incentive to make them work harder. For instance, they reserve a field of glutinous rice for the *nat* and fend it well. Sure enough, it yields a good crop. After offering to the *nat* rice cakes made from the crop, there's a lot left over for home consumption and the market."

Nga Lone went on explaining how ritual feasts led to free and easy relationships among neighbours and how the ritual music and dances helped to lighten the labour in the fields.

15

Anawrahta's quest for truth

Anawrahta listened to Nga Lone with interest and observed: "There's still the danger of simple ignorant folks being victimized by those mediums and votaries; don't they still go about extorting fees and offerings with threats of pestilence and droughts?"

Nga Lone replied: "Yes, they still do that in many places, but their influence is on the wane, thanks to Kyansittha. He has propagated a creed that the king is the most powerful of the pantheon of *nats* and he has also proved it."

"Proved it? How?" asked the king surprised.

"By showing how the farmers and peasants no longer have to fear droughts and pestilence, if they carry out the king's order to build and repair the dams and canals, and give their best efforts to the fields. Now, even as they make offerings to the *nats*, they do it as part of their duty to the king, for the *nats* are now the king's servants."

Anawrahta slowly rocked his cup of toddy in his hand and gazed into the bubbles. "Nga Lone, I don't know how to take what you have just said. First, you encourage animistic rituals just because you get yourself an extra ration of toddy and chunks of meat; then you drag me in...am I to let these simple people go their way?"

Nga Lone sipped his toddy and said: "Sir, so long as there's no harm done, there's wisdom in letting the people go their way."

Anawrahta shook his head slowly and said: "People must be guided in the right way. Of course, I would not dream of tearing down their old customs and beliefs before I can give them something better. There must be a right way, a right path. By the way, Nga Lone, have you not heard of the teaching of the Buddha? He is said to have taught the right path."

Nga Lone answered: "Of course I've heard of the Buddha. My parents were Buddhists too. They taught me to worship the images of Bodhisattas along with *nats*. In my younger days I believed in all the Bodhisattas and *nats*. But now, you see how it is..."

Anawrahta looked dreamily into the fields and said: "It's the same with me. My late father called himself a Buddhist too. He built that huge standing image of the Buddha. But what is the purpose of such deeds? I'm not satisfied with what they say about accumulating merit for the hereafter, so that one will not

be reborn in hell but be reborn in a better life, and so on...but what about this life? What are we to do for this life? What is going to guide us in this life?"

Anawrahta seemed to be addressing himself to some unseen sage rather than to Nga Lone who was drowsily puffing his pipe, leaving the king alone with his thoughts. Anawrahta felt this to be the loneliest moment in a man's life...the moment when he stood alone with his doubts.

Anawrahta slowly stood up and walked away leaving Nga Lone almost asleep. He signalled for his horse and rode away till he came to Myingaba where his pagoda, built in memory of his brother Sokkadae, was being completed. Anawrahta's act of merit, the building of the pagoda had certainly won the commendation of the people for they believed that the king's guilt was purged by the act. "At least it's something," Anawrahta said to himself, "even though it doesn't help much to ease my conscience."

Dismounting near the pagoda Anawrahta walked round the place, absorbed in his own unquiet thoughts. He felt he would never be free from the blood guilt of killing his brother, until he had achieved his purpose in making the people of the land into a strong united nation. This had been one of his reasons for seizing the throne.

As he sauntered round the pagoda, he saw a group of men sitting over a pot of green tea. They were talking of the doctrine taught by the Buddha. Some of the men were making votive tablets with images of the Bodhisattas.

Anawrahta joined them and picking up a chunk of clay, began to knead it. The old man who seemed to be the sage among them said: "You too want to gain merit by making an image of the Bodhisatta? Here are bronze moulds for you to choose. Go on, mould the figure of the Bodhisatta and pray that you too will be like Him."

Anawrahta chose one of the bronze moulds and asked: "Sir, please tell me why one should wish to be a Bodhisatta?"

The old sage said: "Bodhisatta is the one who will one day be the Buddha. The Buddha is the Enlightened One, like Gotama Buddha who was enlightened some one thousand and six hundred years ago in the land called Myitzimadetha. The Buddha is the one who knows the right path and He can teach the multitudes to follow it. Gotama Buddha did this sixteen hundred years ago and there will be more Buddhas like Him. Those who would be Buddhas, they are the Budhisattas, we worship them and we aspire to be like them...and we shall be saved from being reborn in lower regions by doing so."

Anawrahta had heard of this doctrine from his father since his younger days and it had appealed to his instinct of worship and devotion as a young boy. Now that he was older his devotional instinct had given way to reason and subsequent scepticism, but he still liked the idea of being a Bodhisatta, one who would be enlightened and be able to guide the multitudes to freedom. If he had to wait for eons of births and rebirths, before he could,

as the Buddha, save the multitudes from the toils of death and sorrow, he wanted, in this very life, to save his countrymen from poverty, ignorance and disintegration.

With such thoughts in mind Anawrahta stamped the bronze mould on the lump of clay and he was happy with the result. The figure of the Bodhisatta sat on the lotus throne with left leg crossed and the right one down, a kingly posture; the stems of lotus buds lay across the chest under the left arm and rose high above the shoulder giving the figure an exquisite grace, both majestic and gentle. As if guided by divine inspiration Anawrahta's fingers touched up the face capturing on the noble brow the lofty determination to become the Buddha and he gave the whole aspect an awesome look, softened only by the fervent lips that could be compassionate and tender.

Anawrahta took care that the intricate pattern of the jewelled regalia on the figure was done with restraint, so that the personality of the Bodhisatta shone through the array of jewels.

In the Bodhisatta's high pile of hair a tiny Buddha image was enshrined as if the Bodhisatta desired it more than the majesty of an earthly crown.

After giving finishing touches to the decorated vault above and the tiny miniature stupas around the figure, Anawrahta placed the tablet on his palm and inspected it with satisfaction; he felt he had given something of himself to the figure of the Bodhisatta. The old man said: "You've made a beautiful figure of Bodhisatta. Inscribe a prayer on it."

Anawrahta nodded and retired into a secluded corner and composed the prayer which he inscribed on the tablet.

When some time later, the old men and other pilgrims went to see what he had inscribed, they found him gone; the clay tablet lay on a pile of bricks and they picked it up and read.

* Eso Lokanatho Maharaja Siri Aniruddha Devena Kato Vimuttattham Sahatthe Newati."

The men cried out in one voice: "It was the king, the king himself...our great king!...He is a Bodhisatta too..."

* "This Lokanatha Bodhisatta is made by the great king Siri Aniruddha Deva even with his own hand for the sake of emancipation."

16

Anawrahta meets Shin Arahān

Anawrahta rode away from Myingaba pagoda like a traveller who had lost his bearings; sure enough, he was a man lost in a maze of doubts. The consummate joy he had felt in the creation of the Bodhisatta plaque had vanished like the wisps of mist at sunrise and he felt nothing but emptiness in his heart.

With the immense weight of responsibility for uniting and guiding his people to a happier and more prosperous life, he was without a guiding star, except for the ritual worship of the Bodhisattas and doing works of merit like building pagodas and moulding images. He wanted something of practical value in this very life...something that would guide him in his life and work.

He had tried to get help from the Buddhist monks, but he found that they only taught people ritual prayers and worship. His questing heart would not be satisfied with them. He knew there were monks of a different sect, but they lived in the woods away from people; so he had not met any of them.

As he came to a quiet woodland, Anawrahta dismounted and threw himself under a tree, tired and in despair. The cool touch of the soft green grass cushioned his limbs and the smell of the starflowers soothed his nerves. He shut his eyes and let his body absorb the downy feel of the grass underneath and the sweet fragrance of flowers from above.

A feeling of peace and well-being came over him and his eyes opened to a footstep, as soft as the fall of a flower. Strangely enough he did not react as usual by reaching for the spear that lay beside him. Instead he gazed at the green stretch of grass speckled with white starry flowers, where a pair of bare feet stood overhung with neat folds of a yellow robe.

Something stirred in Anawrahta's heart and he stretched out his hand not to the lethal weapon by his side but to the pair of feet to caress them with devotion. He raised his eyes up the folds of the yellow robe that sheathed the stately form and saw a serene face looking down on him with deep compassion. Anawrahta's eyes rested on the shaven head, fresh as a young shoot of banana leaf and the tranquil brow and he guessed he was face to face with a forest dweller monk.

As the monk took a few steady steps away from him, Anawrahta gathered himself up and followed him calling, "Reverend sir, please, please stay."

The monk stopped and Anawrahta knelt down and raising his two palms in the lotus-bud gesture, asked: "Reverend sir, who are you and where do you live?"

The monk answered: "I am called Shin Arahān. I live in the forest."

For once, Anawrahta did not know what to say next. He blurted out: "Reverend sir, compassionate sir, please teach me something of what you know."

Shin Araham replied: "Lay brother, of all things that proceed from a cause, of the cause the Tathagata hath told, and also how these cease to be: this too, the mighty monk hath told."

With eyes downcast, Anawrahta muttered to himself: "Of all things that proceed from a cause, and of the cause one had to know and how these cease to be, one must find out for oneself...this must be the clue to all problems..."

When Anawrahta turned to speak to the monk, he was no longer there. He had disappeared into the woods. But he had left Anawrahta a beam of light to guide him.

The next day, Anawrahta, wishing to see more of Shin Araham went to the same place, at the same time. He dismounted under the starflower tree and tied his spear to the saddle. He patted his horse's back and said: "Son, go and graze. Don't worry about me because I am leaving my spear with you, for once I don't need it. I'm meeting a man of peace, son, and he has taught me to seek strength from within. This way, I'm safer than you could ever wish...go, son..."

The horse, as if unwilling to leave his master unarmed, took a few hesitating steps, turning his head around to look. Anawrahta waved his hand smiling assurance and the faithful horse trotted away.

Anawrahta settled himself on the gnarled roots of the starflower tree and waited. Shin Araham, his alms-bowl cradled in his arms came the same way with his eyes steadfast on the path he was treading. Anawrahta knelt in supplication before him and asked: "Venerable sir, men practise various forms of worship, some give ritual feasts to the *nats*, some make offerings to the dragon, some pray to the Bodhisattas. Which form of worship is the best?"

Shin Araham answered: "Do not go by hearsay, nor by what is handed down by others, nor by what is stated on the authority of your traditional teachings. Do not go by reasoning, nor by inferring, or by argument as to method nor from reflection on and approval of an opinion, nor out of respect, thinking a recluse must be deferred to. But lay brother, when you know for yourself: these teachings are not good; they are blameworthy; they are condemned by the wise; these teachings, when followed out and put to practice, conduce to loss and suffering, then reject them."

As had happened before, Shin Araham went on his way after saying what he had to say, and Anawrahta was left pondering over the words. There was nothing for him to do but ride back to the palace. On the way, he thought: "The reverend *thera* told me not to go by thinking a recluse must be deferred to...does it mean that I am not to accept even what he said? The Buddhism I know teaches dependence on prayers and ritual offerings and I am not satisfied: but the Buddhism the *thera* teaches leaves everything to my judgment, it means whatever there is to be discovered, I shall have to find out for myself."

17

A great experience

Anawrahta sometimes thought of inviting Shin Araham to his palace, but he did not think his royal abode, so full of worldly activities, a proper place for spiritual discussions. The cool woodland glades, he decided, were more right and proper for meeting someone so chaste and serene.

The next time Anawrahta went to meet Shin Araham, he settled himself in a place where he could watch the reverend *thera* unseen, for he wanted to find out more of him.

The *thera* came as usual and walked past the starflower tree and went into the woodland and Anawrahta followed him from a short distance.

The *thera* stopped at a small clearing and sat down under a spreading tamarind tree and had his meal out of the black alms-bowl he carried cradled in his arms.

Anawrahta watched the *thera* and noticed how daintily he gathered the morsels of rice with his fingers and fed himself without fuss; "This *thera* can command such dignity and excellence even in a commonplace act like eating...he must be truly great," the king thought.

After finishing his meal the *thera* went to the nearby stream and washed his bowl and put it carefully on a rustic stand and went to pick up the pieces of cloth that lay scattered on the grass. It looked as if they had been washed and left to dry in the sun by the *thera* himself.

Anawrahta watched intrigued, for he could not guess what the *thera* would do with the scraps of assorted shapes and colours.

The *thera* came back to his seat under the tree and began to sew the scraps into what looked like a patchwork. Anawrahta approached the *thera* and after making obeisance asked: "Venerable sir, what are you doing with these scraps?"

The *thera* unwound the ball of cotton yarn and smoothed out the roughness in his palm and answered: "I'm making a robe, layman."

"For yourself, sir?"

"Yes, for myself to wear."

The king was astounded. "But, Venerable sir, you mean...you picked them up from...oh, no..."

"Yes, layman, I picked these scraps from garbage dumps and burial grounds; I wash them and sew them together and soak them in the dye made from tree bark."

"Venerable sir, how could you...they're unclean, not fit for any use..."

The *thera*, still intent on his work replied: "Layman, they're the cleanest and best for us monks to wear, because there's no taint of lust, envy and greed on these scraps."

Anawrahta was silent and his eyes fell on the alms-bowl on the rustic stand nearby and asked: "Venerable sir, your food too... how do you get it?"

The *thera* told the king how he went on his daily alms rounds so that anyone might put in the alms-bowl any morsel of food he wished, thus giving everyone, however poor or lowly, a chance to do an act of merit.

Shin Araham then quoted a *gatha* delivered by Shin Maha Kassapa, a famous *thera* of the Buddha's time.

* "Down from my mountain lodge I came one day
And made my round for alms about the streets.
A leper there I saw eating his meal,
(And as was meet, that he might have a chance)
In (silent) courtesy I halted at his side.
He with his hand all leprous and diseased
Put in my bowl a morsel: as he threw,
A finger, mortifying, broke and fell.
Leaning against a wall I ate my share,
Nor at the same time nor after felt disgust.
For only he who taketh as they come
The scraps of food, medicine from excrement,
The couch beneath the tree, the patchwork robe,
Stands as a man in north, south, east, or west."

Like a weary traveller, who, after a long journey through a blazing desert, submerges himself in a lotus lake, the king sat silent, suffused with rapture.

At that moment, Anawrahta wished he could give away his crown jewels for a set of prayer beads, his gay apparel for a monk's robe, his golden dishes for a black alms-bowl and his gorgeous palace for a hermitage.

It was a great experience for the king to have felt this urge for renunciation, for, even though the feeling was transitory, it gave him a calm detachment from the world; and being detached he would be able to take life's vicissitudes as they came; and he knew that this wisdom would help him all through his life.

Anawrahta pulled off his commoner's cotton mantle from his shoulder and asked: "Venerable sir, may I offer this mantle to you, will you...will you accept?"

The *thera* remained silent. Anawrahta moved closer to the *thera* and put the mantle reverently in the *thera*'s hands.

The *thera* said: "It is well, layman. May you have your heart's desire."

Anawrahta returned to the palace. He had never felt so strong and confident.

* Mrs. Rhys Davids - *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*

18

An important discovery

One day Anawrahta, accompanied by Kyansittha, was strolling in the market place unrecognized, when he noticed a stall where a woman sat selling pieces of metal plates...silver, bronze and alloy. It struck Kyansittha that the pieces were old and worn; they seemed to attract the bargain hunters who were looking for cheap materials to convert into tools.

Anawrahta wondered where people got all these old pieces and went closer to the stall and asked. The stall-keeper answered that they came from old city sites like Thirikettra in the midlands where the plates were dug up in hundreds.

Anawrahta picked up a bronze plate and examined it closely and saw inscriptions in strange letters. When he turned it over he saw the writing was in Pali. He hastily asked the price and paid the woman without hesitation. When he turned to Kyansittha to show him his discovery, he saw that his companion's attention was elsewhere.

Kyansittha's eyes were on a bevy of ladies jostling at the bargain counter of a Chinese silk and jade merchant; they had done up their hair with such ingenuity that Kyansittha's fingers itched with a longing to explore the sweet mysteries that might lie inside the elaborately sculptured coiffures.

When Anawrahta's gentle nudge at his elbow startled him he immediately collected his wits and surmised that the king wished to buy the bronze plate. Kyansittha, trying to make up for his lapse of attention, instantly sprang into action; he put on his best sales resistance manner and began to bargain with the stallkeeper.

Anawrahta watched amused, as Kyansittha, warming up to his theme, rambled on, how old worn metal plates could be picked up anywhere for less than nothing, how some people would even pay for clearing up the dump. The stallkeeper, wondering what had got into the young man, looked at Kyansittha with a puzzled expression, as she could not get in a word edgewise.

Kyansittha brought his talk to a grand finale saying: "And the prices you charge are nothing short of robbery." The woman cut in: "Young man, what are you prattling about? The gentleman's bought the plate and paid for it already."

Shamefaced, Kyansittha turned to Anawrahta, who was smiling indulgently. Before the younger man could mumble his apologies the king said: "Well, well, if you must practise your rhetoric, why do you choose this woman to be your victim, when

there are so many more attractive ones around.” Kyansittha flushed as they walked away from the stall.

Anawrahta laid an affectionate hand on Kyansittha’s shoulder and said: “I am sorry, we shall have to cut short the roving of your fond eyes, for we’ve discovered today something very important. Let’s go back to the palace.”

Back at the palace, Anawrahta showed him the inscription on the bronze tablet he had bought in the market place.

The inscription on the side was written in the alphabet used by the Pyus of centuries ago, the Pali one on the other side was familiar to the king:

* Ye Dhamma Hetuppa Bhava Tesam Hetum Tatha ... Gato
Aha Tesam Ca Yo Nirdho Evam Vadi Maha Isamano

Kyansittha already knew how the words had made a great impact on the king’s mind. Impressed by the way the king expounded the words in many different ways, Kyansittha caught the enthusiasm, and his curiosity too was roused by the simple words that seemed to be pregnant with the wisdom of the sages.

Anawrahta said: “Just imagine Kyansittha, if these words could excite us so much, think of how many treatises, how many interpretations must have been done by the sages of bygone ages. If only we could find those writings, and scholars who could teach us all...”

Kyansittha nodded thinking that they had come to a stage where physical prowess and material power left off and the need for spiritual strength began.

The king reflected his thoughts:

“We need a new ideology to live by and inspire us to achieve all our plans. The words on the inscription, we believe, hold the key to boundless realms of knowledge. With these words to guide us, we must carry on our search, until we can absorb the wisdom and teach it to our people...but before we teach others, we ourselves must seek further knowledge.”

Anawrahta went on: “We’ve already heard stories of the old Pyu cities down the river Irrawaddy and the bronze plate came from there; we must go there and see if we can get more...and by going there we shall know more about our people and their ways.”

The next few days were passed in more talks and discussions about the march south. It was decided that after reaching Thirikettra they should move down south to Raminnyadetha, Uttha Pegu and then to Thaton.

* “Of all things that proceed from a cause, of the cause the Tathagata hath told, and also how these cease to be, this too the mighty monk hath told.”

March to the south

Anawrahta's decision to journey down south along the river Irrawaddy excited Nga Bee and his men and they could hardly wait to behold the mysterious regions into which the mighty river would carry them. Their enthusiasm for the great river aroused in the people's hearts a deep affection for the historic waterway that had become part of the people's life, itself the life artery of the land.

Byatta's cavalry was included in the plan of the undertaking for the armada of boats sailing south was to be supported by mounted troops riding forth to reconnoitre the terrain and make arrangements for encampment against the arrival of the king and his fleet. The cavalry was preceded by elephantmen on the backs of majestic tuskers ready to break the trail through the dark untrodden forests.

Kyansittha worked day and night organizing the forces on land and water. His enthusiasm for the king's plans, that were meant to lay the foundations of a union of peoples, inspired the men, and his selfless dedication to the service of the king and country became a shining example for others to follow.

The king knew only too well that Kyansittha was the only one who could understand and share his ideals and what was more important, that he was the man who could put them across to the people. Kyansittha realizing how much the king trusted and depended on him, felt that he could not give enough to the cause. His zeal and ingenuity excited the people's imagination and moved them to give all their efforts to achieve the goal.

The purpose of the king's intended journey south was presented to the people in songs, dances and plays in which the rich heritage of the Pyus was highlighted. That the people of the day needed to know and appreciate the cultural roots from whence they had sprung, if they were to build a brave new world of their own, was emphasized in all media of public information.

The public interest in the old Pyu culture was so kindled that people gathered in the market-place to talk about it and listened eagerly to the songs in praise of Thiriketra, the old Pyu city and its glories.

The refrain of the songs was invariably the king's search for the great truth, a message out of the past, that would teach and inspire people to achieve the ideal, namely to build a strong union of peoples.

People talked of the strange words the king had discovered on the bronze plate, a relic of the old Pyu kingdom and even as they discussed the theme, they found themselves in a labyrinth of ideas and concepts that seemed to elude understanding. They hoped that the king would eventually succeed in finding sages' or writings that could give a satisfactory interpretation to the sacred words that had excited the king's mind.

Thus it was amidst hope and promise that Anawrahta and his entourage sailed down the river Irrawaddy to the old Pyu city of Thirikettra.

20

Down the river Irrawaddy

Although Anawrahta had made long journeys on land mostly on horseback, he had never actually taken the Irrawaddy waterway for such a long distance, so it was a new experience for him to be sailing down the river.

He revelled in the panorama of the countryside on either side of the river, as the spray sparkled under the gliding barge.

Nga Bee as the commander of the fleet was happy to win the king's approval of the types of rivercraft he and his men had designed for various uses. No less pleased was the king to see for himself the skill and artistry of the boatmen who plied the oars.

When the boats sailed past the confluences where the Irrawaddy was joined by its tributaries, the Yaw, Pin, Yin and Salin *ichaungs*, the boatmen sang of how those sparkling torrents surged down from faraway peaks to nestle finally in the bosom of Mother Irrawaddy; the refrain of the songs was the theme of the union of all the peoples of the land, who from wherever they came would be united into one great force.

Kyansittha alternately rode with Byatta's cavalry on land and sailed with the king along the river, so that he would not miss any important event either on land or on water. Anawrahta eagerly heard his reports on the areas Kyansittha had traversed: how people lived, what crops they grew, what customs they had, how they irrigated their fields.

Nga Lone was with the royal entourage and he was often sent with Kyansittha to tour the country on horseback so that he could study at first hand how the tributaries had been used to irrigate the fields.

Along the Irrawaddy, watch towers were built at such distances that smoke or torch signals from one to the other could be seen and picked up. The men stationed there had fresh horses ready so that couriers could jump from the backs of their tired steeds and continue without stopping.

As the men from the watch towers signalled to the next station they sang songs to the vibrant rhythms of the victory gongs and drums. The sound of drums and cymbals accompanied the men as they passed from one watch tower to another. Even more glorious and spirited were their songs and music when the royal barge and the fleet of boats came into view. The king was greatly gratified to see how Kyansittha's ingenuity, hard work and organization

had helped to synchronize the land and river forces and above all, inspire men to work for a common ideal amidst music, song and laughter.

Anawrahta's first halt was at Minbu town, situated on the riverbend, a rich thriving town, the headquarters of six *1khayaings*. With a richly cultivated hinterland the town's busy streets and heavy traffic at the market-place had become the subject for figures of speech and daily idiom; it was often said "no fowl can dive down from its flight in the city" meaning there was not space enough for the bird to alight, so affluent was the town of Minbu.

The governor of Minbu gave Anawrahta a rousing welcome with a colourful parade of Sgaw Karens in their picturesque costumes, men in their V-necked *2 thindaings* boldly striped in black and red, and women bedecked with beads and in dappled skirts.

The air was thick with lively folk music and songs as they formed an impressive cordon on the river bank; the glassy mirror of the river reflected the colourful scene and the wind above carried their merry song over the woods and plains.

Anawrahta spent a few days at Minbu. Not content with the governor's report on the locality and its people, he took every opportunity to tour the land unrecognized, attended by his trusted companions Kyansittha and Nga Bee and Nga Lone.

The place was rich with legends of the past and Anawrahta heard from the simple folk at first hand the stories of how the settlements at Laikaing were once the sojourn of the Buddha himself and how a temporary *3 vihara* had been built for him on the very spot now called Kyaungdawyar (the site of the Buddha's *kyaung*).

The folk tales of the place were variations on a single theme of how the powerful *4 belus* and fire-breathing *5 nagas* had been tamed by the Buddha's words and how these beings still protected the people living there.

Anawrahta felt hopeful for his mission, for he knew from the stories that the Word of the Buddha was still with the people and the stories and legends were everlasting monuments of the people's faith.

-
- 1 districts
 - 2 gowns
 - 3 monastery
 - 4 ogres
 - 5 dragons

21

The riverine journey

When Anawrahta left Minbu amidst the cheering crowds with their music and dances, Kyansittha, Nga Bee, Nga Lone and Nga Htway stood on the barge, waving their head scarves, until the thronged banks of Minbu sank into the remote horizon. Nga Htway climbed up to top of the main mast and waved for some time. He came down boasting that the pretty girls went on waving to him until the boat was lost to view. Then with exaggerated longing he sang:

“Maid of Minbu, ere we part
Give, oh, give back my heart!
Or, since that has left my breast,
Keep it now, and take the rest!”

Nga Bee placed a comforting hand on the forlorn lover's shoulder and said: “No, boy, she won't keep your heart, for how on earth could she stand the reeking smell of toddy...”

Nga Htway dropped the forlorn lover act and chased Nga Bee up the main mast, uttering dire threats. Nga Htway was just about to catch hold of Nga Bee's leg, when the latter dived into the river. Essentially a landsman, Nga Htway had to suffer the humiliation of retreating down the mast only to be pushed into the river by one of the men, adding insult to injury.

Nga Bee swam to the rescue and let Nga Htway ride on his back, but only for a while, for Nga Bee made a dive into the depths leaving the poor land-lubber coughing and heaving in the waves. As the men on the boats cheered and laughed, Nga Bee surfaced again with Nga Htway panting on his back.

After harassing Nga Htway to his heart's content, Nga Bee brought his victim aboard. Nga Htway crawled on to the deck of the barge and gazed at the river, as if amazed and said: “Why, there's still some water left in the river. I thought I'd drunk the whole lot.”

Then men settled down to a less boisterous activity. Sitting over the pot of green tea to talk of the events at Minbu the yspoke of the simple lovable Sgaw Karens and their quaint customs, their picturesque costumes and their lively folk music and dances.

Later, they became noisy and argumentative when the conversation turned to the local stories. “Did the Buddha actually come and stay at Kyaungdawyar (the site of the Buddha's monastery)?”

The simple folk accepted the story saying: “Of course, it's true. Buddha was there and stayed for some time. How did he

travel all the way from Myitzimadetha? Why, he possessed all the supernatural powers, he could tread on the clouds with all the celestial beings in attendance. Haven't you heard of the time He came down from the abode of the celestials where He had spent the lenten season? It must have been the same manner of coming,... down the stairway of jewels attended by the host of heavenly beings. Don't you all see even to this day the galaxies, the stars in the skyey regions that mark the trail the Buddha trod? Have you not seen the archway bridge of iridescent jewels, the one that you call the rainbow? The Buddha only had to walk over it to get anywhere he wished."

The stories of how the Buddha came to the place called Kyaungdawyar were told with a multitude of variations, with mythical *nagas* and *belus* playing the roles of the Buddha's disciples.

Every tree, every rock, every stream in the Minbu area bore the imprint of the Buddha's touch in the legends; the grainlike pebbles in the stream were said to have been miraculously formed by the remnants of the meal of rice washed down from the Buddha's alms-bowl...a lasting testament to the Buddha's sojourn.

Such talk was, however, rejected by the sceptics who loudly denounced the stories as fabricated tales, which statement incensed the believers. As tempers rose, Kyansittha said: "Now, stop squabbling—can't you all see for yourself that the Buddha was indeed there and still is with the people there?"

The men were somewhat taken aback by the words. Then eager questions of how and why fell on Kyansittha and he calmly helped himself to a cup of green tea and let the torrent of words die down. Then he said: "What I mean is this: it does not matter in the least whether or not the Buddha came to the place personally; what really matters is that the Buddha is, to this day, enshrined in the people's hearts. The stories of His *vihara* the site of which they still preserve and the stories of how He tamed the dragons and ogres...by preserving these stories they are preserving the memory of the Buddha—all this shows that the Word of the Buddha is with the people, enshrined in their hearts."

Nga Bee put in: "Then, are we to swallow all the fantastic stories of the Buddha's coming over here by the rainbow bridge?"

Kyansittha smiled and asked: "Who's asking you? Take it or leave it. To a devout Buddhist, one who has taken the Word of the Buddha to his heart, everything around him bespeaks the Buddha. When he sees the rainbow he sees the Buddha walking on the jewelled bridge attended by mystical beings—just think of the sublimity of it all. I do not envy the great king in all his glory; I'd give everything to have a heart that could feel the rapture of seeing the Buddha and his celestial entourage on the rainbow, and above all to be able to find His word in trees, treatises in running brooks and His sermons in stones: how I wish I could have a heart like theirs!

"Remember, Nga Bee and all of you, theirs is a realm of faith and sense of wonder and don't you dare to rush in there flinging your earthly scepticisms about."

Feeling that someone was watching him, Kyansittha turned round to find the king watching him from afar with an amused look on his face. Kyansittha flashed a conspiratorial smile, for he was saying exactly what the king had said a little while ago, when he, Kyansittha, in his youthful indignation had raved against the fantasies people had woven about Minbu locality.

When the men withdrew, Kyansittha said: "Sire, you've heard yourself quoted." Both laughed.

The next stop was Myingun, where reports of the old Pyu city of Beikthanoë awaited them.

22

Anawrahta at Myingun

At Myingun Anawrahta was welcomed by Taungdwinmin, the chief of the vast thriving area called the Yin plains irrigated by the Irrawaddy's tributary, Yin chaung. Like Kyansittha, who, as the chief of Htiline was a powerful chief in his own right, Taungdwinmin's power and strength was considerable in his own domain. Seeing for himself how Kyansittha had given his loyal support to the king and his dream of uniting the peoples, Taungdwinmin also swore loyalty to the king.

Attended by his retinue, Taungdwinmin came aboard the royal barge to welcome Anawrahta. He brought with him gorgeously clad men carrying trays of silver, gold and bronze, each laden with gifts, which Taungdwinmin declared as nothing when compared to his everlasting loyalty and dedication to the king's service.

In his speech of welcome, Taungdwinmin touched on the ancient traditions of the locality in which he administered his rule, how, some eight hundred years ago, a great city called Beikthanoe had been built with the mighty Irrawaddy on the east and the highlands on the west, and how blessed it had been by lakes and streams that enriched the fields with luxuriant crops.

Anawrahta was greatly intrigued by the piece of information Taungdwinmin let fall, of how merchants and missionaries and travellers had come from the far away lands beyond the sea, up the river Irrawaddy on their way to the north, from the great empire ruled by the glorious Han Dynasty, and how Beikthanoe had prospered as a centre right on the Indo-China (Han Empire) trade route.

Anawrahta asked if there were evidences of the Word of the Buddha in the area. Taungdwinmin answered that many ancient stupas and temples were scattered all over the place, but so far no written records had been found. There were stories of how merchants from the delta region of the Kinsana river in India had camped up the Irrawaddy river so that they could get to the land of the Hans by the overland route, thus saving themselves several perilous leagues of sea voyage, until the ogres cut them off from the coast.

Somewhat to Taungdwinmin's surprise, Anawrahta waved away the ceremonial and began to mix with the people and talk as if he were one of them. Anawrahta's genuine interest in the people put them at ease and they found themselves responding to his warmth and kindness. Taungdwinmin had heard of

Anawrahta's way with the people, but he had not expected such free and easy camaraderie. Kyansittha moved closer to Taungdwinmin and whispered: "This is the way he works...that's why I believe that he will be able to bring all our peoples together. Don't you see his candour and veracity...that's something very rare these days and what we badly need..."

Taungdwinmin nodded and pressed Kyansittha's hand as if sealing a pact of loyalty and friendship.

Taungdwinmin escorted Anawrahta and his party to the settlements so that they could see for themselves the ways and customs of the Pyus who seemed gentle and cultured in contrast to the virile and warlike Pagan men.

Since Anawrahta could not find any records of the Word of the Buddha, he could not tarry long there; he would have to hurry to Thiriketra where he might find out more about the object of his search.

Anawrahta took leave of Taungdwinmin and left Myingun, commanding the men to hasten to the next stop, Pyidawtha kyun, an island settlement in the middle of the Irrawaddy river.

As usual the men talked of their impressions of the place they had just left. They discussed how much truth there might be in the stories of how the *belus* ravaged the land and some even wondered if they might see real live ones when they reached the south, for it was said that such beings had taken hold of the sea coast and blocked the Irrawaddy river mouth, so that merchants and travellers could not come up.

Kyansittha had a feeling that the so-called ogres might be the tribes who overran the land before the Burmans came, the race now known as Austro-Asiatics: "There're still some of these people...they have high cheekbones, curly hair, prominent eyes, thick lips...like Byatta's wife" Kyansittha mused.

The men talked disparagingly of the Pyus who seemed too soft for their taste. Even Kyansittha could not help saying, "No wonder their cities were destroyed. They were too refined for the business of defending the land," while he was having a private chat with the king.

Anawrahta said: "Easy to conquer by force of arms, maybe. You might raze their cities to the ground, but their fountain of culture will never be dried up. I shouldn't wonder if the same fount of knowledge will overwhelm the conquerors, themselves conquered by the culture of the vanquished."

Kyansittha smiled and said: "I must remember what you say Sire, for I know I shall have to repeat it to the men. Trust me, I'll tell them off whenever they run down the Pyus."

Their next stop, Pyidawtha kyun, known as the Gateway to Tampadipa (the then Burmese Kingdom) was a beautiful place right in the middle of the river. It was also an important seat of administration being a rendezvous for the caravans and boats coming up and down the Irrawaddy.

Anawrahta heard from the officials a report on the Pyu settlements further south. The Pyus seemed to be peace-loving people, mostly farmers, and the rest were potters; masons, smiths and traders. Anawrahta met some of the chiefs of the Pyu settlements and they assured him a safe passage south.

Leaving Pyidawtha kyun was an exciting event to many of them who had never set foot on "foreign soil" the land of the Pyus. Anawrahta too was excited for there in the old city of Thiriketra, he might at last find records of the Word of the Buddha.

23

At Thiriketra

As the barges and boats floated south towards Prome, the excitement of the men ran high, for they were going to set foot on Pyu soil, on Prome and Thiriketra, the land of the golden legends that had been passed on by word of mouth for generations.

Often the discussions dwelt on romantic episodes, of how the two blind princes, as they were put on a raft and pushed into the river, met a forest nymph who fell in love with the younger prince and cured them both of their affliction and how the elder prince had met a beautiful girl named Baydaryi on the river bank where Prome now stood.

Baydaryi, as the story goes, was born of a doe and had been picked up by a hermit and brought up as his own daughter. This particular story aroused a lively controversy among the men as many refused to believe that a doe could bear a human child and that the hermit could make his finger drip milk so that he could feed the infant Baydaryi.

Many theories were put forward and argued exhaustively amidst puns, witticisms and ribaldry, as their conjectures turned to fantasy. The wooing and winning of Baydaryi, who was sent to the river with a dried gourd pierced with a hole the size of a needle's eye, was discussed with all the seriousness and interest the theme deserved. Why the hermit devised such a stratagem to make the girl stay by the river bank the whole day was anybody's guess, and guess they did with a will.

"Why did the hermit do it?"

"Because he didn't want her around."

"Why not?"

"Maybe he sent her out to look for a lover, for how else could she meet a muscle man like our Nga Bee or a good provider like Nga Lone or an amusing clown like Nga Htway..."

"Or a brave handsome knight like Kyansittha...if she were kept in the hermitage..."

"That's it. Of course, the hermit could not possibly say, 'Wait for someone by the river,' so he gave her a hollowed gourd."

"What a way to teach a girl the facts of life!"

"The hermit's plan worked all right. Sure enough the handsome prince came sailing down the river."

"I wonder if we'll meet any girls with hollowed gourds by the river, you know, history repeats itself..."

Kyansittha had led the land forces to reach Prome ahead of Anawrahta so that he could learn about the Pyus and make friends

with them. Kyansittha won the trust of the Pyus by entering the land with his men in the guise of traders, not as armed soldiers. The Pyus took Kyansittha and his men for buyers of their pots, silk-cotton cloths and beads. Kyansittha, even as he bargained with the Pyu merchants, let fall pieces of information about the great king Anawrahta and his high dream of building a strong united state, and how he was coming down to Prome in search of the Word of the Buddha.

By the time the news of Anawrahta's approach reached the Pyus they were full of friendly curiosity to see the great king who sought spiritual strength rather than temporal power.

Anawrahta's entry into the riverine area of Prome was preceded by a flotilla of small, fast-moving boats racing one another to the clang of gongs and cymbals. Next came the stately barges with their towering sails and the sight of men racing up the masts and turning somersaults in the air and making flying dives into the river. The Pyus saw the kind of aquatic revels that they had never seen before.

The Pyus watched from the bank and were struck with amazement when they saw the men whom they had taken to be common traders turn up at the bank in gorgeous liveries, mounted on prancing steeds to welcome their king.

Kyansittha reported to the king his own findings and observations on the land and its people. Thirikettra, the old Pyu capital, was some leagues from the river bank, just a few hours' journey on horseback. The ancient Pyus had built their city as usual on a location sheltered on one side by the river and by the high plateau on the other.

Anawrahta and his party proceeded to Thirikettra where he found old stupas and temples in all stages of dilapidation. He summoned the elders and asked what they knew of Thirikettra and its history. The king found that Hindu influence on the people's religion was stronger there than in his kingdom; many worshipped the Hindu god Vishnu, from whom the name of their city Beik-thanoe was derived. There were also people who as Mahayanists embraced the Bodhisatta cult.

Anawrahta found that the Pyus excelled in astronomy and occult sciences. They intrigued him with their expositions on their theories of the heavenly bodies and their influence on human affairs. Whatever use or abuse there might be in such cults and practices, the king could not help marvelling at the assiduousness and dedication the practitioners gave to the study of their art.

The king could see in them an insatiable thirst for knowledge that inspired ordinary humans to read the language of the stars in the boundless heavens. At the same time he could not help feeling a sense of futility, for he realized such studies could only lead man into a labyrinth of mysteries that had no end. What he wanted was the certainty of knowledge that would guide him to deliverance from all recurring doubts.

24

Thiriketra nocturne

Having come to Thiriketra with high hopes of finding records of the Word of the Buddha and sages who could enlighten him, Anawrahta felt he had come once again to a dead end. But he soon realized that his journey had not been altogether fruitless, for he had had the chance of seeing the ancient Pyu cities and getting to know the people better.

As Anawrahta's men explored the old city site and listened to the wonderful stories of Thiriketra city and its kings and queens, they could not but marvel at the culture and civilization of the people who had built the magnificent cities and towering stupas which now lay in ruins.

Thiriketra lay, silent and dead. Looking on the decay of the colossal wreck, Anawrahta realized that cities and kingdoms must finally tumble down in dust leaving nothing but the wisdom of the sages to guide posterity.

“Of all the beauty and grandeur of the Pyu cities,” Anawrahta mused, “nothing remains for humanity, except a battered metal plate with the words, Ye Dhamma Hetupha Bhava...If only I could find out more about this message, this philosophy, if only I could—”

Anawrahta's heart warmed to the Pyus, who, with all their genteel ways and refined manners, were fiercely protective of their heritage. He saw impoverished Pyu aristocrats making their daily visits to the stupas and how they went in punctilious formality and carried themselves with faultless dignity.

Anawrahta watched such a procession of Pyu pilgrims threading their regal way, looking like phantoms—and phantoms they were, of their former splendour, like the very stupas that towered defiantly above the ruins. Each group of pilgrims cleared the debris to get themselves a place to observe the ritual worship.

Anawrahta saw in the Pyus the quiet courage and fortitude that their faith in Buddhism must have given them and he felt he should save and preserve what he could of the old Pyu civilization by repairing the old stupas and temples.

The simple faith and devotion of the Pyus so impressed Anawrahta's men that they happily rallied round to do the tasks of repairing the old stupas. They were moved by the loving kindness and hospitality their hosts had shown towards them and

they were only too glad to do a good turn by giving themselves in the service of the people.

They worked day and night and the desolate site of the ruined city became a busy hive of spontaneous activity. A feeling of kinship and fraternity pervaded the people as they worked for the common weal in the service of the same ideal.

Anawrahta often walked unrecognized among the bustling crowds. Above all he loved to view the scene on moon-lit nights when the old city lay shrouded in silver beams, like a dead monarch at rest.

One night, Anawrahta walked slowly, enthralled by the mystery of the night, and halted, lost in contemplation, near the massive stupa. He raised his hands in the lotus-bud gesture and in his heart was the ever-present prayer that he might one day understand the Great Truth the Buddha taught.

Suddenly, he was startled by the stealthy movement of a figure lurking among the ruins. Clutching his sword, he watched motionless as a bearded mendicant clad in tattered robes crawled out of the crumbling recess of an ancient building and scrambled up the lofty stupa. Perching himself on a ledge, the mendicant fumbled among his robes and brought out a conch which he put to his lips. A slow mournful sound filled the silent night.

As if in answer to the call, men began to appear in groups and sauntered to the foot of the stupa where they sat waiting to hear what the holy man had to say. Anawrahta watched fascinated.

The mendicant stood on his perch, surveyed the audience with contempt and spoke:

“Be silent and hearken, ye little men of Tampadipa. Ye poor posterity, think not ye are the first. Other fools before ye have seen the sun rise and set, and the moon change her shape and hour. As they were, so ye are; and yet not so great; for the stupas my people built stand to this day; whilst the dust heaps on which ye slave, and which ye call empires, scatter in the wind even as ye pile your dead sons’ bodies on them to make more dust...

“Hearken ye, oh little men of the arid plains, this soil, this earth of majesty, this royal throne of kings, this blessed spot, this realm, this Thiriketra, this teeming womb of royal kings, ye know, nine or ten centuries later will bear forth worthy sons to make this whole land happy and prosperous.”

The mendicant blew his conch to mark the end of his sermon and the congregation dispersed. Anawrahta waited till the holy man came down from his pulpit and approached him with circumspection. The man, on reaching the level ground sighed and muttered: “Another night’s work done,” and began to run his fingers through the matted hair that hung over his shoulders.

Anawrahta was struck by the way the man’s scalp shook as he scratched it. He did not have to wait long to find out why,

for the mendicant, with a burst of strong language quite unsuited to his garb, pulled off the whole mop, which was discovered to be a wig and beard combined.

As the man stood in clear moonlight, Anawrahta could see him shorn of his disguise. The next moment the sham mendicant was caught in Anawrahta's strong grip.

"So, it's you...you...Nga Htway...up to your tricks..." Anawrahta shook him till his teeth chattered.

Kyansittha and his men appeared from nowhere and began to give the charlatan a thrashing. Nga Htway clung to Anawrahta for protection saying that he only meant to create a diversion for the men. He declared that the men got tremendous enjoyment out of his homilies: "Ask my lord Kyansittha," he said.

Shamefaced, Kyansittha and his men admitted that they had been listening to the sage's nocturnal orations for several nights until the king had uncovered his masquerade. Anawrahta reprimanded Nga Htway, but it was not easy for the men to keep straight faces, they were so tickled by the situation. And the whole affair ended in laughter.

Anawrahta remarked: "Sure, Nga Htway's a fool; his brain is as dry as rice sticking to the bottom of the pot, but in there he has strange places crammed with observation, the which he vents in mangled forms. Who knows, out of the lips of fools...some grain of wisdom might fall..."

25

To Raminyadetha

From Thiriketra and Prome, Anawrahta's next move was to Raminyadetha, land of the Mons.

The Mons were by no means strangers to the people of Tampadipa, the then Burmese kingdom, as there was a regular influx of Mon traders, some going up the river Irrawaddy to the city of Pagan and others moving in caravans by land routes.

For some time the intelligentsia of the city of Pagan had already shown a marked partiality for Mon songs, music and dances, brought by Mon strolling players. And Mon language and customs were in vogue among the elite.

Before leaving Prome, Anawrahta discussed with Kyansittha his future plans and sent out reconnaissance parties both by land and river. Every available piece of information was collected, absorbed and digested so that the advance to the land of the Mons would be attended by good-will and amity.

When at last Anawrahta and his men sailed down the river from Prome, they were beside themselves with expectation and excitement.

A few leagues south brought them to a confluence as the Irrawaddy broke into two main streams. Acting on the reports of the scouting parties who recommended taking the eastern tributary which would take them to the vicinity of Uttha Pegu, one of the Mon kingdoms, they sailed down until they reached a settlement where the town of Danubyu stands today. There again Anawrahta and his men halted to await the reconnaissance units sent out to explore the area.

The first thing they heard from the scouting units was that the place they were camping on stood almost in a straight line with Uttha Pegu. Anawrahta wanted to know about communications between Pegu and Thaton, another Mon city, for it was there that he had placed his hope of finding out about the Word of the Buddha.

Anawrahta had been impressed by the reputation of King Manuha of Thaton, whose prestige as a patron of the arts and defender of the Buddhist faith was well known. He wanted an alliance with King Manuha, who he hoped might help him bring the records of Buddha's teachings within the reach of the common people. Anawrahta wondered if he could get in touch with King Manuha through the King of Uttha Pegu so he enquired about the possibility.

The reports on Thaton and King Manuha fell somewhat short of Anawrahta's expectations, for the relations between Thaton and Pegu were hardly cordial. Generally, there was no political unity among the Mon settlements. Thaton was strong and the powerful King Manuha was said to be proud and haughty. The

Mons of Uttha Pegu were obviously estranged by their neighbour's hauteur and they seemed to confine themselves to their province.

The relations between Uttha Pegu and Thaton had become more strained when the Khmers, the warlike tribes from the east, began to threaten the peace and stability of Uttha Pegu.

Geographically, Thaton was nearer to the land of the Khmers which they could easily have entered, but the wily Khmers chose to leave the strong, well-fortified Thaton off their warpath and crossed over to the vicinity of Uttha Pegu.

The Khmers, as if trying the strength of Uttha Pegu's forces:

26

Campaign to Uttha Pegu

When the messengers from the king of Uttha Pegu came to Kyansittha with a formal appeal to help him against the Khmer marauders, Kyansittha and his men were ready and eager to show their valour in battle.

The people of Uttha Pegu had already heard of the warriors of Pagan, for their fame had been carried throughout the land by caravanners, minstrels and strolling players. The stories of men who could run with the swiftness of the wind and steeds who could fly over the rivers and mountains were repeated with awe and wonder. Above all, the incomparable power of King Anawrahta was the refrain in all the ballads and songs. And so the people of Uttha Pegu waited eagerly for the arrival of the men of Tampadipa, the Burmese kingdom.

Forces were not sent en masse. Many went by stealth disguised as caravanners; others went in ordinary merchant boats. Byatta as the one who knew the locality, led the advance parties through little known paths. Everything was done with such discretion that, when the men of Uttha Pegu came out to meet the forces, they saw only a small band of horsemen led by Kyansittha.

The men of Uttha Pegu could hardly hide their disappointment as they led the men to their king, who, somewhat disconcerted, received Kyansittha and his party and bade them make good use of the resources available. He then commanded his own forces to give Kyansittha full cooperation.

In a day or two, the disappointment of the men of Uttha Pegu turned into wonder, when out of the slow plodding caravans and gliding boats came forth fully-armed soldiers, strong, stalwart and ready for action. As the city began to fill with soldiers who seemed to have sprung from nowhere, stories of armies airborne by supernatural powers came to be told:

The people of Uttha Pegu had long been harassed by the Khmers, who had already occupied the outlying areas and were threatening to assault the royal city. Now with their morale at its lowest ebb they looked upon the men of Pagan as their saviours:

Kyansittha conferred with the commanders of Uttha Pegu and impressed upon them the necessity of discretion and the importance of sound intelligence work before they undertook any action. The question was whether to work on the fortifications and wait for the inevitable siege, or go out and storm the enemy encampment.

A few days after Kyansittha and his men arrived, it was rumoured in the market-place that the forces were going to stay within the city and wait for the enemy siege. Naturally, Khmer spies heard and carried the news to their masters. Some men of Uttha Pegu thought that the valour of the men of Pagan did not quite come up to their expectations. They thought that the men had chosen the easy life in the city rather than go out into the muddy battlefield.

Kyansittha, with a few trusted men and a handful from the Uttha Pegu high command, worked day and night on the plan for the campaign. Kyansittha had to control his men's impatience for action and bade them bear the unfavourable public opinion for a while.

The Khmer tribes were masters of jungle warfare; they had come from the other side of the mountain range that walled Raminnyadetha on the west. With many of the strategic areas in their hands, they had only to make the final assault on the city of Uttha Pegu.

Their proposed siege had been put off by the coming of Kyansittha and his men; but the Khmers were biding their time. They harassed the city by cutting the routes used for food supplies. As a safeguard against any offensive Kyansittha might take, they split up and encamped in jungle tracts barricaded by hills and rapids. The thick growth of jungles afforded cover for them.

Kyansittha spread out his intelligence network and through his men learnt the position of the enemy camps. His fighting men, disguised as caravanners, moved in small groups. They sent out minstrels into enemy camps to create welcome diversions. At night the minstrels entertained the Khmers with songs and music. The attacking men were either warned off when the situation was not favourable, or encouraged to advance and take the offensive.

The effect of the surprise attacks on the morale of the enemy was considerable and the rumours of Kyansittha's men having supernatural powers came to be believed more than ever.

The news of the victories of Kyansittha and his men at Uttha Pegu was carried by fleet-footed couriers to Anawrahta at Twante where he was winning the goodwill of the people by helping them build a stupa.

The merry sound of drums and cymbals escorted the couriers as they passed from one watch tower to another. Soon after the couriers had gone, the caravanners and trading boats came and stopped at the watch towers to give the latest news from the war front. People from neighbouring towns and villages would gather at the watch towers to hear the news. The men from one watch tower signalled to the next station, singing songs of inspiration and valour.

Minstrels and strolling players picked up the stories and represented them in their songs, music and dances. Colourful tales of the heroes of Uttha Pegu came to be told and repeated throughout the land.

One of the best loved stories was about Nga Bee and his men. Their diving and swimming skill was such that they moved underwater, under the very nose of the Khmers and surprised them by suddenly springing out of the stream like water sprites.

No less talked of was the account of how Nga Htway and his men followed the enemy troops from the tops of towering trees and showered missiles on them and how the Khmers declared that the men of Pagan could fly from above.

Tales of Byatta's strength and swiftness were often the big news of the day and his supernatural powers came to be believed by friend and foe. Thus did people come to say that each of Anawrahta's commanders had the prowess of a hundred thousand men.

If the stories of the fighting men at Uttha Pegu enhanced the prestige of King Anawrahta, they certainly helped Kyansittha and his men to wage a successful psychological warfare on the enemy. As the morale of the enemy ebbed, the stories became more and more fantastic.

Frightened by their harrowing experiences, the Khmers began to tell strange tales of Kyansittha's birth, how he was born under an auspicious star and how King Arawrahta himself had tried in vain to kill him off as a baby. Thence came the much overworked story, invariably found in all hero-tales of the world of how so many thousand babies were killed in the unsuccessful attempt to destroy Kyansittha.

27

Princess of Uttha Pegu

Once peace and order was restored in the kingdom of Uttha Pegu, the king showered honours and awards on Kyansittha and his men. For the conquering heroes there seemed to be no end of personal appearances, fetes and celebrations in their honour. The grateful people insisted on seeing Kyansittha in the flesh.

Wherever he went Kyansittha was mobbed., Old women tottered to his side and fell on their knees to caress his feet while Kyansittha, greatly moved, helped them to their feet, and embracing them spoke to them in their own tongue: "My mother bows, as if Mount Meru to a molehill should, in supplication nod..."

Even as he wiped the old wrinkled cheeks, tears coursed down his weather-beaten face, and he was not ashamed of them. He that was ready to shed his heart's blood for the people, did not care if his own hero image were smudged with the salt of broken tears.

People cheered, men tearing off their turbans to wave and throw at the heroes, women prostrating themselves at Kyansittha's feet.

What endeared Kyansittha to the Mons of Uttha Pegu was Kyansittha's fluent mastery of their language. He had mixed freely with the Mon merchants, boatmen, caravanners and strolling players who had come up to the city of Pagan. He had such aptitude for music and theatricals that he had even picked up popular Mon songs and folk dances from the strolling players.

Often when entertainments were held for Kyansittha, some knowing men would call him up to give them a Mon song or a dance, and were always delighted when he complied.

Every day colourful parades and rallies were held and the people of Uttha Pegu thronged the streets. It was flowers and flowers all the way, with green ferns and eugenia leaves, mixed with red, white and gold blossoms. The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway and the spires flamed with banners as the air rang with songs. The old walls rocked with crowds and cries.

Kyansittha rode on his trusty steed with the bridle bells ringing merrily and his girdle glittering like some branch of stars hung in the sky.

A few steps away from Kyansittha rode Byatta, the dark stranger, at the head of the prancing cavalry, an impressive array of men on horse-back, and their red-tasselled spear-tips burned like dancing flames in the morning sun.

Soon they were passing the royal place. The king and his family were out on the balcony to view the parade. The procession was greeted by a crescendo of music and songs, banners waved and flowers were showered on the heroes amidst the cheers.

The procession slowed down as Kyansittha and his men made obeisance to the king. Kyansittha turned his eyes to the palace balcony where the royal family stood and was dazzled by the grandeur of the king's court. Then there came a sudden flutter of breeze and something green and gold came flying through the air to rest on Kyansittha's shoulder.

At first, Kyansittha thought it must be a little parakeet that had lost its way, but a whiff of scent drew his attention to the soft green silk scarf flecked with gold.

For a moment Kyansittha was lost in its fragrance and softness until he was startled by the cry, "Help...my emerald scarf oh...it's gone..." And then he saw the young princess leaning on the balustrade stretching out her arms helplessly.

Even as Kyansittha gazed on this vision of delight, his trotting steed carried him away. For the rest of the festive day, Kyansittha went about in a daze, receiving cheers, his hands fondling the emerald scarf. He was wondering who the young beauty might be.

It so happened that Kyansittha had to make a personal appearance at a feast the same evening; it was an informal affair with people of all classes taking part in the folk dances. As usual Kyansittha was more at home with such festivities than he was with stiff court ceremonies.

As Kyansittha changed from his ceremonial livery to more comfortable apparel he fiddled with the emerald scarf, undecided what to do with it.

When Kyansittha's men saw their lord wearing the emerald scarf tied round his massive chest, they nudged one another. Kyansittha, still dreamy with love for the fair face he had but a glimpse of, was oblivious of the whispers and winks around him.

Kyansittha threw himself into the revels and soon found himself surrounded by masked dancers, many of whom were common people; for at such a time courtiers, high officials, aristocrats, trades-people down to the common labourers thronged together for merrymaking: They wore masks and fancy costumes, so that not one person would know who the other was.

While Kyansittha and his men were enjoying themselves at the feast, a heated argument was going on in the chamber of Princess Manisanda, also called Khin U, daughter of the king of Uttha Pegu.

The young princess was having one of her tantrums. With her rose-bud mouth in a pout, she stamped her little foot out of her trailing silk skirt while her nurse tried to soothe and chide her by turns.

"Khin U, you should be ashamed of yourself...making a fuss about a little scarf, when you have thousands as nice, even nicer..."

"Oh, nurse, you never understand...you, stupid old thing, I must get my scarf back...it was a present from my royal father on my sixteenth birthday:..."

"Oh, come, your seventeenth birthday's just a few days off, he'll give you another even more beautiful..."

"But it won't be the same...I must get my scarf back, oh, nurse, how could you be so cruel!...you don't love me...wouldn't care if I fell dead at your feet...."

"Hush, my love, don't say such things...but how could anyone get back your scarf that's flown away in the wind?"

The princess threw herself on the couch muttering tearfully about the soldier from Tampadipa having taken her scarf. The nurse dried the princess's tears telling gently how impossible it was to get the scarf back from Kyansittha.

The princess, her face still buried in the nurse's breast, mumbled something about Kyansittha being at the *kattika* feast that night. The nurse asked, "So what, my dear?"

The princess whispered something in the nurse's ear and the older woman was shocked. "Oh, no, Khin U, not that. Think of your father's anger. If you do that, I...I...won't have any face to wash in the morning..."

The princess pushed the nurse away and hid her face among the cushions sobbing. "I'll die...I surely will and my royal father will know that it was your fault. . . and you won't have any face to wash some morning. . ."

With an air of resignation the nurse gathered the princess in her arms and whispered a few soothing words. Tears were dried and sobs were hushed. As the nurse went away to arrange the night's escapade, the princess looked into the brass-plate mirror and smiled the smile of one who always got her own way.

28

The escapade

It so happened that the night of the festival in honour of Kyansittha fell on the full moon of Tazaungmon, the eighth month of the calendar when the *kattika* feast, "the feast of the stars" was held, and the city of Uttha Pegu was illuminated and decorated like a city of the gods.

Even as the wandering moon rode through the cloudless sky the whole city gave itself up to the festivities. Music filled the air as a thousand twangling instruments hummed and pealing anthems swelled. Citizens of all classes threw themselves into the revelry with carefree abandon, their masks and fancy costumes hiding their identity.

The princess was among the revellers. She was decked in the costume of a *naga* maid (half dragon, half goddess). Her lithe body encased in a green sheath-like dress ruffled and embroidered to give a scaly appearance, she mixed with the merry crowd boldly, her face hidden by a mask attached to the crested head-dress.

With many a stratagem she meandered through the crowd until she came closer to Kyansittha who, as the guest of honour, was surrounded by a crowd of merry-makers.

With a few determined steps she dexterously cut in, even as others were competing with one another to draw Kyansittha into the folk dances. She caught hold of the emerald scarf that was tied round Kyansittha's chest and deliberately nestled her crested head against it, so that the fringe of the scarf got hooked into her crested head-dress.

Taken by surprise, Kyansittha tried to disentangle the scarf but the more he tried the more entangled the fringes became. Other revellers stood apart and cheered crying, "Look, Lord Kyansittha has caught a *naga* maid . . . oh, no it's the *naga* maid that's caught him."

Amidst merry laughter and clapping Kyansittha and Khin U found themselves the centre of attention. As the music rolled and swelled, Khin U danced away, leading Kyansittha away from the others.

As Kyansittha fumbled to disentangle the fringe of the scarf from Khin U's crested head-dress, she teased him about his big clumsy hands "that know only swords and spears, oh, if the heart were as rude and ungenteel as those hands, what a pity."

In answer Kyansittha told her that he saw the face of his sweet maid behind every mask. How could his hands be steady? For a moment, Khin U's heart missed a beat at the thought that he must be thinking of some girl he had left behind in his homeland. But Kyansittha's next words set her heart soaring again, for he spoke of the phantom of delight that gleamed upon his sight just a few hours ago.

Khin U deftly disentangled the fringe from her head-dress and before Kyansittha realized what was happening, untied the knot and pulled it away from him. When Kyansittha tried to catch hold of the scarf, it was too late; Khin U had already thrown it over her shoulders and was waving it so that the golden bells jingled tantalizingly.

Kyansittha pleaded with her to return the scarf. It was a sacred relic of his love.

Khin U jingled the bells on the scarf in Kyansittha's face and walked backwards tempting him with nods and smiles to follow her.

While the two were at the game, a procession of merry-makers came in with tableaux and music troupes, so Kyansittha and Khin U were cut off from the crowd. Khin U, taking advantage of the confusion, ran towards the near-by palm grove, where Kyansittha caught up with her.

The full moon of Tazaungmon shed a lovely light upon the scene and Kyansittha caught the blaze of Khin U's eyes, as they gazed at him through her mask. She said: "Why should the great hero of Pagan be perturbed about this little piece of silk?"

Kyansittha tightened his grip on the scarf and said: "A hero is not without a heart and it's there with the scarf. Give it back to me, I'll send you a beautiful present from Pagan."

Khin U shook her head in contempt.

"Beauty from Pagan to Uttha Pegu indeed! What can Pagan give me, that Uttha Pegu cannot give?"

"You are forgetting the treasures for which Pagan is famous young lady. You cannot get them in Pegu."

"What are they?"

"Her sons, her heroes...I'll send you a big strapping hero whose strong arms shine in the sun and who can wield a spear..."

"How like a barbarian soldier to talk of swords and spears! Your Pagan will never produce art itself...it'll only buy up and take away whatever the Pyus and Mons produce."

"What! Pagan produce no art? Is war not an art? Is peace not an art? Is building a kingdom not an art? All this, we give in exchange for a few ornaments and you'll have the best of the bargain...now give me back my scarf, my dear...before I drown in the depths of your eyes..."

"Could my eyes make you forget her...her, whose scarf I now have round my shoulders?"

For once Kyansittha was tongue-tied. While he was thinking how he could get the scarf back without offending the girl, a group of masked revellers came upon them, crying. "It's not fair, that slip of a girl is monopolizing our hero...Oh, Lord Kyansittha, please give us a chance..." So saying they pulled him away from Khin U, who welcomed the interruption, for things had gone further than she had bargained for.

As the revellers mobbed Kyansittha, she waved the scarf and crying: "I shall see you tomorrow, wherever you are, there I shall be..." she melted into the crowd. Kyansittha thought: "Tomorrow I shall be in conference with the king of Uttha Pegu in his palace, what chance has she to be there..."

29

Call to adventure....or love?

Kyansittha hardly had time to nurse his hangover the morning after the *kattika* festival, for he was soon due to enter the king's palace for an audience. After filling his lungs with the fresh morning air, he went over the despatches from Anawrahta so that he could give the king of Uttha Pegu a comprehensive report on the work and aspirations of his lord who at that time was at Twante, by the sea.

Byatta joined him to discuss the plans for the day and seeing how absorbed his commander was in his work thought: "He's no hermit...he might have time for women, but not for love." Byatta had come in to tease Kyansittha about the *naga* maid at the masked festival and the emerald scarf, but one look at his commander told him that it was certainly not the time.

Kyansittha welcomed Byatta with hearty enthusiasm, for he had something in common to talk to him about...the sea. He said: "Now, Byatta, just hear what the king and his men say about their first glimpse of the sea...they are in ecstasies...they have only just realized what adventurous spirit must have stirred people like you to brave the boundless seas to come to unknown shores. And by the way, our lord the King has met seamen of different nations and he has gathered wonderful pieces of information. I'm sure the king of Uttha Pegu will be interested to hear."

They made ready to enter the king's palace. There the king received them graciously. He was eager for news of Anawrahta whom he hoped to thank personally for helping him to remove the Khmer marauders from his land. He was also intrigued by the ways of Anawrahta, who, instead of staying in the confines of the royal city, preferred to wander and explore the land.

Kyansittha gave an account of the ships and seamen who had come across the sea with the news of the island kingdom of Lanka dipa (Ceylon) and her King Vijayabahu. The island kingdom held a special interest for the people of Raminnyadetha, for, that was where the Word of the Buddha had taken root and flourished after the Great Teacher's death.

Kyansittha elaborated on the theme of Anawrahta's search for the Great Truth the Buddha had taught and his desire to bring the Buddha's Word within the reach of the people.

The king of Uttha Pegu was delighted to hear that Anawrahta had sent messages of friendship and goodwill to Vijayabahu. Kyansittha related the history of Lankadipa so that the king could understand how the disintegrated state of the island

kingdom had paved the way for the invasion of the Colas, the unbelievers from the Coromandel coast of South India.

Listening to Kyansittha, the king of Uttha Pegu began to understand the urgency of Anawrahta's desire to unite the people of the land, not only for the survival of the nation, but also to preserve and propagate the Word of the Buddha, that was to guide all people in their daily life.

Since Anawrahta's next plan was to make friendly overtures to Manuha, the king of Thaton in Raminnyadetha, Kyansittha requested the king of Uttha Pegu for permission to make reconnaissance trips to the outskirts of Thaton.

The king of Uttha Pegu granted the permission but warned Kyansittha that he and his men had to be very careful, for nothing must happen that might estrange or antagonize King Manuha.

Kyansittha gave his word.

While relating these affairs of state, Kyansittha's attention was distracted by a tinkling sound, discreet and low, that came at intervals. He was almost distracted in his discourse for he knew that the sound came from the golden bells tied to the fringe of the emerald scarf. Though Kyansittha could not turn his head to see whence it came, he knew that it came from the corner of the hall where the ladies were sitting.

As the audience came to an end, the king retired giving them leave to go their way. Kyansittha heaved a sigh of relief and began to make preparations for leaving the palace. While he was fixing his baldric his hands suddenly dropped, for he heard once again the tinkling sound that he knew only too well.

Startled, Kyansittha turned his head in the direction of the sound and he saw a bevy of court ladies preparing to leave the hall, with the princess among them, proud and regal as a long stemmed rose among the ferns. The emerald green scarf was thrown over her shoulder, the little golden bells jingling as she moved.

For a moment Kyansittha gazed at the princess as she walked past him, her eyes modestly downcast. Suddenly, the emerald scarf slipped from her shoulder and lay at Kyansittha's feet. The princess and her ladies walked on unconcerned.

Kyansittha picked up the scarf and followed the princess's train. "This property is yours, I believe?" The princess raised her eyes for a moment and turned away disdainfully, but not before Kyansittha had seen the glimmer he knew so well on the night of the festival.

The princess walked away and Kyansittha gazed at her slender expressive back. He clenched his fists in annoyance and his temper hardly improved when the princess's nurse scolded him: "Do you think our princess would deign to touch that rag after it had fallen to the ground? You men of Tampadipa have so much to learn about our civilized ways."

Kyansittha felt his self-control bursting at the seams, for he wanted to catch the old nurse by her shoulders and shake her

until her bones rattled. Byatta touched his shoulder reminding him that it was time for them to return to their camp.

Kyansittha pushed the scarf into his doublet and left the palace with his men. He was silent and sullen and shed his ceremonial uniform for more comfortable clothes.

As he impatiently kicked away the robes and accoutrements, the emerald scarf fell off with the same exasperating jingle. Kyansittha was about to tear it into shreds when something caught his eye and he was struck amazed; for on the green scarf were the words embroidered in gold "Come to the western garden tonight when the tail of the Great Bear stands up...Khin U, Princess of Uttha Pegu."

Kyansittha was intrigued. He could not make out what this move might mean. He was almost sure that it was the princess who had masqueraded as a *naga* maid at the festival, for, was it not the same eyes that had fascinated him through the mask that night?

"I disclosed my feelings too freely that night. What does she mean by this tryst? Does she mean to mock at my fancy? Anyway, I'll not flinch from this call to adventure...or, is it love?" Kyansittha thought to himself.

Elated with the thought of love and adventure, Kyansittha called his men for the usual chat and yarns. Byatta and others came in, feeling more at ease now that their commander's humour had improved.

As usual, the men talked of their amorous escapades adding colourful touches to make them the tallest of tall tales. One of the men said: "People here say that men from other lands should be warned off their women. This land has established a fearful tradition. They say that where this city Uttha Pegu now stands used to be an endless stretch of billowy sea, with only a tiny patch of land in the waters. A pair of *hintha* birds came flying and the male bird dived down and perched on the tiny spot. Since there was no space for the female bird, she flew down and sat on the male's back. From that time, the sages say, the female of the species in this land have been deadlier than the male."

Kyansittha listened to the story with interest and remarked: "Perhaps, the females of Pegu have never met the males of Tampadipa. It seems that defeating the Khmer marauders is not enough to make us heroes. We've still one more conquest to make and I have an inkling that this is going to be as hard if not harder."

The men cheered and laughed gleefully and said Kyansittha should be the one who should break the tradition of the *hintha* birds. Kyansittha laughingly replied: "If I were sat upon on my back by some female, our world would be lost...but then, it might be well worth the losing."

30

Moonlight, lilies and Politics

The Tazaungmon moon, now a perfect circle, was high in the cloudless sky and the tail of the Great Bear stood up right about the spire of the royal palace.

Kyansittha rode to the western gate; there, he was met by a heavily cloaked figure whose face he recognized as the princess's nurse. Without a word she led him through the leafy avenue, silent and solemn except for a rustling murmur of leaves.

The nurse left Kyansittha in the palm grove and slid into the shadows. Kyansittha sat on a marble seat ornately fashioned like a couch and gazed at the lotus lake in front of him. Lotus flowers, red, white and blue, glimmered in the moonbeams as if enchanted by their own beauty.

“At the tender caress of zephyr
The *padomma* lotus petals unfold
And the goddess maiden comes forth.”

The words of a dreamy love-song came to his mind and he hummed the tune, losing himself in the beauty of the scene. Suddenly he was startled out of his reverie by a whiff of jaśmine and he found himself in the presence of Khin U, standing beside him like a moonbeam that had fallen from the sky.

Kyansittha shifted himself to one end of the stone couch and said: “Sit down, Princess. The seat has room for two, I’m luckier than the *hintha* bird that first perched on this land.”

Khin U was somewhat surprised by the casual greeting, but she recovered instantly and sat down in the same off-hand manner, as if it were the most natural thing for her to do. She looked into Kyansittha’s face and said: “Honoured sir, you are my guest. I know not in what way I can show my hospitality.”

“Fair lady, the very sight of you is indeed the highest hospitality. If you will not take it amiss, I would like to ask you something.”

“You have my permission.”

Kyansittha took out the emerald scarf from his doublet and said: “Will you please, Princess, call that hand-maid of yours...the one who flirted so outrageously with me at the *kattika* festival...I want to tell her something...”

Khin U’s eyes blazed with indignation. “She’s no flirt...she’s... well, what do you want to tell her...tell me...”

"I promised her a gift, if she returned the emerald scarf to me. Tell her the gift is here...a true son of Pagan, a hero in person."

Khin U pulled her cloak tight round her shoulders and said. "The mist gathers thick and it's chilly here...I'd rather take a stroll under the palms."

She stood up and glided towards the avenue. Kyansittha walked by her side and asked: "How about asking that maid of yours what she thinks of my gift?"

Khin U stood on her toes to reach for the cluster of jasmine flowers hanging from the pergola and Kyansittha pulled the branch down for her. She put the flowers in her hair and said: "How would she know the soldier's heart when she has only seen him wield the sword and ride into battle?"

Kyansittha grasped the flower-laden branch and shook it so that the white blossoms showered on Khin U and lay at her feet. He said: "Look, this is what my victories and honours are for...to be laid at your feet...humble tokens of my love..."

Khin U bent down to pick up a handful of flowers and pressed them against her heart and whispered: "Victories and honours...that's what you live for, and your heart will ever thirst for them, you'll ride over to strange lands, even sail the unknown seas, to conquer more. How could you spare a niche for love in your restless heart?"

So saying, she walked back to the palm grove by the lily pool and sat down on the marble couch. Kyansittha sat down beside her. He smoothed the unruly tendrils of her hair off her brow and said: "You speak as if victories and honours were meaningless...I, true to the ideals of my king, Anawrahta, do not seek victories for their own sake."

Khin U twirled the tassels of Kyansittha's sword with her fingers and said: "I do not know...I never understand why men seek victories in war. If you do not do it for their own sake, what is the purpose, or is there any purpose at all?"

"Khin U, didn't you hear what I told your father at this morning's audience? We all have a great task before us to achieve. The people of the land must be united as one great force. Look what happened to your Uttha Pegu. Do you think marauders like those Khmers would ever have dared to touch one strip of the land if we had been united? Look what happened to the island kingdom of Lankadipa. Do you think the Colas would have dared to thrust their heathen feet on the land where the Word of the Buddha flourished, if the people had been united? Khin U my dear, don't you realize what it means? We were born in this age to fulfil the great destiny of unifying our peoples, and I have been chosen to do a lion's share, but what's the use of my achievements if I have not you to share them?"

Khin U leaned on Kyansittha's shoulder and said in a low voice, "I cannot understand all this, it sounds awesome..."

"My love, I've told you how a soldier can love, now tell me how a maid, so tenderly reared, that the winds of heaven shall not visit her face too strongly, can love...tell me."

"You have to win victories, achieve great destinies, for love, you say. For me, love makes one little room and everywhere. Let sea-discoverers to new worlds go, let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one."

Kyansittha held her closer to his heart and whispered: "Khin U, my one prayer is that I may be worthy of your love."

A discreet cough disturbed the lovers and the nurse came out of the shadows. "It's time, Princess..." Khin U stood up. "You must go...when shall I see you again...tomorrow night?"

Kyansittha did not answer; he gazed pensively at Khin U and wondered how he could tell her that he would be off to the outskirts of Thaton. Khin U caught the silent message and said: "Oh, I forgot. That matter you told my father about this morning: You'll be on your way...oh, so soon...oh I wish...Do you think there'll be war with Thaton?"

"Not if we can help it. Our lord the King does not want it, your royal father does not want it either. Our lord the King has won the goodwill of the Mons at Twante-Dalla, helping them to build a huge stupa, and we his men have won the friendship of Uttha Pegu, so why should there be a war with the Mons of Thaton?"

"I'm so glad to hear that...now please go...I will remember you in my prayers..."

Khin U stood gazing as Kyansittha slipped into the dark shadows and she melted in the nurse's arms and murmured: "Oh, Nurse, could any girl wish for a more perfect setting for love... moonlight, lilies and palm groves...but, oh would you believe it, he talked of victories, achievements, and great destinies we are supposed to fulfil...Oh, Nurse, where's the love the poets sing so rapturously about?"

The nurse tenderly wiped the tears off Khin U's cheeks and said: "Let's go in, my dear, it's cold here. Remember, man's love is of man's life a thing apart, but to a woman it's her whole existence."

While Khin U lay grieving on her sleepless couch, Kyansittha was back at his camp deep in conference with messengers who had arrived from Anawrahta with more instructions and orders for the intended mission to Thaton.

31

The Mission to Thaton

Kyansittha was happy to learn from the messengers from Twante-Dalla that Anawrahta was satisfied with their reports on Thaton, which was, perhaps, the most well-fortified state in Raminnyadetha; Anawrahta was anxious to make friends with Manuha, king of Thaton, whose fame as a patron of the arts and defender of the Buddhist Faith was known throughout the land.

The batch of couriers included an entourage of envoys on their way to Thaton. Anawrahta had said that the envoys were to go to Thaton and seek Manuha's audience and present him with gifts and messages of goodwill from Anawrahta, and to make a request on his behalf, that they share the Word of the Buddha with the king and people of Pagan.

Since it fell upon Kyansittha to escort the envoys to Manuha's court, the exploration trips to the outskirts of Thaton had to be left to Byatta and the men. Kyansittha had talked to his men many times about the importance of their mission to Thaton, how they, as harbingers of goodwill must win the love and trust of the Mons of that area as they had so far done with the Mons of Uttha Pegu.

It was meet that Byatta, as one who had lived in the locality of Thaton, should be the leader of the reconnoissance groups, but something in his manner made Kyansittha uneasy.

Kyansittha, giving last minute instructions to Byatta and his men, warned them still once more that nothing should happen that might estrange Manuha, king of Thaton.

The solemn conclave was not concluded without a cheery sally from Nga Htway, who put on a mock serious face and said: "Is there to be nothing but work for us? Work...work...always the same loathsome talk about work...why did I ever choose to be born in such times as this! If only I'd known! Oh, let me put my arms round my toddy pot, wake me up only when you've finished all your work."

Nga Bee gave him a sound whack on the back and said: "You lazybones, go to sleep with your toddy pot and wake up after nine hundred years. By the *nats* of Mount Popa. I am sure you'd see people as work-ridden as we are today."

Nga Htway squirmed under Nga Bee's whack and said laughing: "Hey, what an idea! I wouldn't mind going to sleep just now, even if it is to wake up and tell those people of nine hundred years hence that nothing they think, say or do has not been thought, said and done by us before them."

Nga Bee snorted in contempt and said: "As if they would understand you! They would be speaking a strange language, wearing strange clothes...but...by the *nats* of Popa, they'd be doing the same things all over again!"

“A united kingdom is not built in a day, we are just laying the first foundations and it's for posterity to carry on,” Kyansittha put in gravely.

As the men talked and joked, Kyansittha noticed that Byatta sat in stony silence as if his thoughts were far away. At first Kyansittha thought that the man must be missing his wife and sons, but when he saw Byatta, with his face grim, feeling the edge of his sword, Kyansittha was worried.

When the others departed to make preparations for the trip to Thaton, Kyansittha asked Byatta to stay. “I see your sword still thirsts for blood.”

Byatta did not look at his commander. “Yes sir, thirsty for the blood of Thaton.”

Kyansittha knew from the start that Byatta had been enthusiastic for the invasion of Thaton soon after their victory over the Khmers at Pegu, but he knew that Byatta's enthusiasm was prompted by his desire to avenge his brother's execution by the order of King Manuha. Many of the fighting men, flushed with the victories, were eager to march against Thaton.

Kyansittha had told Byatta many times that he had better forget all that nonsense about blood debts; their King Anawrahta's order was to help the people of Uttha Pegu drive away the Khmer invaders and Thaton was far from being enemy territory. He said: “We are not fighting for personal glory or for vengeance; a good soldier never does. When a soldier takes up arms, it is in the service of the king and country, never for personal hatred or ambition.”

Byatta, seeing that his commander was right, did not say a word. Kyansittha looked at his obstinate face and began to have misgivings; should he send the man on the present mission, he wondered. Byatta, as one of the high command, and with the status of a trusted commander, would feel slighted and disgraced, if he were left out.

Kyansittha said: “Remember Byatta, the king trusts you, and I as a brother-in-arms, love you and depend on you. This present mission means everything to our king and he depends on everyone of us to accomplish it. It's up to us to be worthy of our king's trust.”

Byatta knew full well that Kyansittha could leave him out of the mission, which act would be a sign of his disgrace. He realized that Kyansittha was showing his trust in him by not depriving him of the privilege of leading the important mission. Byatta grasped his commander's arm and made a solemn promise that Kyansittha would never have cause to regret his trust.

Kyansittha felt relieved that Byatta had come to his senses. He made preparations to go with the envoys to the court of King

Manuha, whilst Byatta and his men in the guise of ordinary travellers left discreetly to explore the outskirts of Thaton.

As Byatta rode with his men along the less frequented paths in the direction of Thaton, those days of fear and hardship, when he was a hunted fugitive running away from King Manuha's men, came back to him. Hatred rankling in his heart, he remembered every moment of hunger, every pang of thirst, every throb of fear, as he rode over the memory-haunted place.

Even as Byatta gripped his sword until his palms bled, he knew he could not go against Kyansittha's orders, not only because he was his commander, but because he owed everything he had to Kyansittha. And he had given his word of honour as a soldier. There was nothing for him to do but obey.

Byatta led his men without the usual light-hearted chatter, riding hard until they came to a large village not far from the city of Thaton. Dawn was breaking and they had ridden the whole night and Byatta thought his men might rest a while there. The village had bamboo and cactus fencing of a war elephant's height and a strong gate of teak logs, which was still closed.

Byatta and his men dismounted and sat down on the spacious bamboo dais built for travellers under the spreading mango tree and waited for the gate to open. In a few moments four or five horsemen joined them and greeted them, offering their betel quids and tobacco.

While they were having a friendly chat, a file of bullock carts festooned with flowers and streamers came into view accompanied by the sound of music. One of Byatta's men hailed the revellers and asked what festival they were bound for. One of the men, his face painted like an ogre, danced a few steps and cried out: "You men must be strangers here, if you don't know that this village celebrates today the honours received from the king every year... come join us. The gate will soon be open. My!...your horses look grand...you'll be interested in the competition for equestrian skills...there're contests too."

While some of the revellers hailed to those inside the village to open the gate, Byatta's men pressed for more information: "Friend, we're strangers here. Pray tell us for what service does this village receive such honours from the king."

The reveller replied: "Years ago, the people of this village did a service to the king, by tracking down a dangerous man, an enemy of the state and surrendered him to the commander. Every year since, the king has showered gifts on us and the commander himself comes and honours us on behalf of the king."

"What type of man was he that was a danger to the state?" they asked.

"He was an alien, a dark stranger who had come to this land from beyond the seas...his name was Byatwi!"

Byatta, who was sitting unobtrusively apart from others grasped the hilt of his sword hidden under his cloak and muttered under his breath: "So, this is the village..." One of his men came to him with an earthen pot of hot tea saying: "Oh, big

brother, here's hot tea...how's your fever," and turning to the revellers he tactfully added: "You see, our big brother has been suffering from fever all the way...he should rest a while." So saying he drew the cloak round Byatta's face and whispered: "Sir, please control yourself."

Byatta's hand was shaking as he gulped down the hot green tea and his men gathered round him, tense and expectant, ready for action. Byatta was struggling with his sense of duty and loyalty to the king and Kyansittha, when a merry shout roused him, and he saw another train of bullock carts more ornately decorated and attended by liveried men.

"Here comes the commander...kneel...make obeisance..."

Byatta and his men got down from the dais and knelt on the ground. Byatta saw the commander on the decorated cart. Following the cart was a group of men on foot doing a kind of burlesque act. At first Byatta did not quite get the significance of the act, he only watched with interest.

The chief player in the tableau was a young man grotesquely wrapped in a woman's skirt, his face smeared with paint. He was doing acts of supplication, kneeling and beating his chest and singing comical songs, begging for his life, as other players mockingly threatened him with spears.

"Now, Byatwi...you're a great hero...aren't you? Now you wear a woman's skirt...ha...ha...ha!"

The audience laughed and cheered and the one playing Byatwi went into all sorts of contortions to their delight.

Byatta watched petrified. He saw the supercilious smile of the commander on the cart, as he watched the act debasing the memory of his brother Byatwi.

Byatta signalled his men. The next moment, while the revellers were shouting and dancing merrily, they jumped on their horses and charged. Byatta was instantly upon the commander's cart and with one stroke cut off his head. Then after flinging their spears at the merry-makers, they rode away leaving a mess of blood and destruction.

32

Cry havoc

Riding away from the scene of skirmish, Byatta knew that he had committed an unpardonable crime. Some of his men suggested that they take to the woods and live the life of bandits. Byatta shook his head, for, he knew what it meant to live the life of a fugitive, and he could not add one more act of dishonour to his irretrievable misdeed. He did not want his sons to be told that their father, after disobeying his commander's orders, had run away not having the courage to face the consequences.

Byatta called his men and spoke to them. Neither he nor any of his men were running away. If they were to uphold their honour as heroes, they must face whatever was in store for them. He also told his men that he alone was responsible for the wrong, since they only acted under his orders. He was taking himself and his men to their commander to surrender themselves. Byatta's men loyally obeyed him and they all turned their steps towards Uttha Pegu.

On the way, Byatta remembered uneasily that Kyansittha must at that time be away in Thaton with the envoys from Anawrahta. He began to fear what would happen when King Manuha heard of the calamitous incident, so he and his men waited on the banks of the Sittang river to meet Kyansittha and the envoys coming back from Thaton.

Byatta's worst fears were realized. For, while Kyansittha and the envoys were being given audience at Manuha's court, Kyansittha giving a message of goodwill from Anawrahta whose one aim was to unite the peoples of the land under the Word of the Buddha, messengers arrived with the report of Byatta's atrocities.

The messengers presented to King Manuha a graphic account of how the "barbarians of the arid plains had wantonly butchered the harmless villagers enjoying a festive occasion," and how the king's trusted commander was killed while viewing the festival, without a chance of defending himself.

The whole court was shocked. Manuha's courtiers eyed Kyansittha and the envoys as if they wanted to tear them to pieces. Manuha's wrath knew no bounds. He ordered Kyansittha and the envoys to betake their accursed selves from the golden land without a moment's delay saying that such barbarians of the arid plains were no more worthy of the Word of the Buddha than a dog's manger was of the nectar of gods. Manuha added that if they relied so much on their force of arms, they could

come and take what they wanted from Thaton by the same tactics. He commanded Kyansittha and the envoys to convey the challenge to their king, Anawrahta.

Kyansittha and the envoys beat a hasty retreat out of Thaton amidst the jeers of the courtiers. They rode dejectedly towards Uttha Pegu, where they were joined by Byatta and his men on the bank of the Sittang.

Byatta and his men surrendered their arms and horses to Kyansittha and admitted what they had done, ready to submit to any punishment Kyansittha thought fit.

The first thought that came to Kyansittha was to cut off their heads with his sword, which action, he knew, they thoroughly deserved. But Kyansittha as he looked upon Byatta and his men prostrated at his feet, ready to take whatever he decided to give, gripped his sword hard and his eyes became misty, remembering how these men had shared the dangers and hardships with him in the swampy battlefields of Uttha Pegu. And he knew that killing the culprits would not undo what had been done. Kyansittha walked away from them and sat himself down under a tree and held his head between his hands, trembling with sorrow rather than anger, for he knew that this once he and his men had failed their king, Anawrahta, who had counted on them for the success of the mission to Thaton. How was he going to tell Anawrahta that his hopes of a friendly alliance with Thaton had been destroyed beyond redemption?

Kyansittha remembered that he had a more immediate ordeal to face, even before his dreaded interview with Anawratha—the task of telling the king of Uttha Pegu, whom he had promised that nothing that might estrange Manuha should happen during their stay. And how was he going to tell him that his men had wantonly killed those other Mons?

Kyansittha reminded himself that this was one of the crises he must face with the same courage he had when going into battle. "But this is one of the battles where I shall have to depend on my inner strength rather than on my prowess in arms," he told himself.

Kyansittha, commanding his men to follow him, hastened back to Uttha Pegu to reach there before the news of Byatta's action did.

Kyansittha with heavy heart and step, sought a private audience with the king of Uttha Pegu and imparted the sad news. He dutifully placed Byatta and his men in the king's hands to be punished as they deserved, adding that he, as their commander, held himself responsible for whatever they had done.

The king of Uttha Pegu, though much perturbed, was sympathetic. He had not the heart to punish the men who had served him with their lives against the Khmer invaders. So, he suggested that Kyansittha should hand over Byatta and his men to their own lord, King Anawrahta at Twante-Dalla.

As Kyansittha prepared to leave for Twante-Dalla, his thoughts flew to Khin U, whom he would have no chance to bid even a

hasty farewell. "Why has this fragile flower, who has not even known the soft caress of the morning sun, fallen into my uncouth soldier's arms?" he muttered to himself.

He fondled the emerald scarf he wore tied around his chest and wondered what future there could be for their romance. He could only hope that Khin U would get over her fancy, if fancy it was, but if it be love..., Kyansittha tried to wave away the thought. "At sixteen, neither heads nor hearts ache too long," he said to himself, without much conviction.

Although Kyansittha's audience with the king of Uttha Pegu was private, Khin U had means of knowing that Kyansittha was back at Pegu. She did not yet know about the tragic affair and the consequences, so she looked forward to seeing her lover the same evening.

Kyansittha, in the midst of preparations for the journey to Twante-Dalla, was surprised to see Khin U's nurse and hear her message: the princess would be waiting at the usual place at the usual time. Kyansittha was due to leave at dawn, but he pondered over the wisdom of seeing Khin U, perhaps for the last time, and if it would not be better to part without making the wrench harder.

The nurse told Kyansittha how Khin U had been pining for him since he had gone to Thaton, how the news of his return had revived her like a lotus blossom in cool waters. Kyansittha struggled with his better judgment and at last decided to keep the tryst.

Kyansittha found Khin U waiting in the palm grove by the lotus pool. She sat reclining on the stone couch and Kyansittha felt a spasm of remorse when he saw how pale she looked in the dim light of the young moon. Tenderly cupping her face in his hands, Kyansittha said softly; "Khin U, daughter of kings, where's your ancient courage? It does not befit one of the royal blood to droop and fade under the heat of sorrow. Surely you're made of sterner stuff than this?"

Khin U eagerly asked how the mission to Thaton had fared, for she had been anxiously waiting to hear the news. Kyansittha tensed at the question and let fall his hands from Khin U's face and moved away to the other end of the stone couch. With arms folded he hung his head thinking how he could tell her of the unfortunate incident and its consequences.

Khin U, seeing how dejected her lover looked, knew the worst had happened. She asked simply: "So, there's going to be war?" Kyansittha just nodded and told her he would be leaving for Twante-Dalla to make preparations for the campaign.

Khin U dug the finger nails into her palms and cried: "You said nobody wanted this war; your king did not want it; my royal father does not want it; then who wants it? So, this is the way you men run the country; nobody wants the war and yet there's going to be a war. It doesn't make sense at all."

Kyansittha replied sadly: "No, Khin U, it doesn't make sense, but there it is. It's the way things happen. One little

incident and some spirits ranging for revenge, and we have a war on our hands."

"It's the way things happen and we pay with our hearts' blood."

"Khin U, if only you could know how I feel about this... but do not think that I fly to war and arms for personal glory. I am only a tool in the hands of destiny...the destiny of our generation to build a brave new world...the union of the peoples of this land."

"I always feel frightened when you talk of destiny...what has it in store for us?"

"My dear, we are destined to love, don't you see. Don't you dwell on what is to come. We are but men and women in the vast pattern of human affairs and each has a part to play. Whatever role we are chosen for, let's play it. And you, as a princess, will have to play an important role, more important than others, and what's more you will have to give more than others. You will need all the courage that your kingly ancestors have given you."

"But what about our love? Has love no place in our destiny?"

"Yes, Khin U, our love will give us the strength to face the great destiny."

There was a shuffle of footsteps behind them and the nurse appeared out of the shadows. She whispered that dawn would be breaking soon. The lovers broke helplessly apart.

With the break of dawn, Kyansittha and his men were on their way to Twante-Dalla.

33

Anawrahta hears the news

When Kyansittha, Byatta and their men arrived at Twante-Dalla, they found the place a hub-bub of festivity, for a grand festival to celebrate the completion of the great stupa, known today as Maung De Paya, was in progress.

Anawrahta and his men had won the goodwill of the Mons of that area by helping them to build the stupa. The people were also impressed by Anawrahta's eagerness to know more about the Word of the Buddha; he had won the hearts of the Mon scholars and Theravada monks with whom he had held several sessions to discuss matters spiritual and temporal. It was with their support and encouragement that Anawrahta had sent the envoys to Thaton; and they had been anxiously waiting for the news of Manuha's response to Anawrahta's overture for friendly alliance and to his request to share with him the Scriptures of the Buddha.

Kyansittha's arrival with Byatta and his men afforded just one more gala event for the Mons of Twante-Dalla, for they felt sure of hearing good news about the outcome of the mission to Thaton. Moreover, the people had also looked forward to seeing the heroes who had driven away the Khmer marauders from Uttha Pegu.

Kyansittha and Byatta rode at the head of their men amidst the cheering crowds, men throwing their turbans about, women strewing flowers on their path, the air rent with victory gongs and drums. Their valour and exploits were sung to a yet louder strain.

To Kyansittha and Byatta the festivities were but funeral paraphernalia and all the victory songs and music a mournful knell that was tolling them to death and disgrace. With stoic resignation they bore their ironical glory, feeling that if they were going down to an ignominious end they were at least going down in style.

The news of Kyansittha's arrival gladdened Anawrahta's heart, for he felt sure that his trusted men must have excelled themselves as they always had in all their undertakings. He received them with joy and expectation, eager to hear how Manuha of Thaton had responded to his message of goodwill.

Kyansittha sorrowfully reported to his king that he was, this once, a bearer of sad tidings and begged to be given a private audience. Kyansittha, Byatta and their men fell at Anawrahta's feet

and reported the tragic incident exactly as it had happened, keeping back nothing emphasizing their sorrow, not for the disgraceful death penalty they richly deserved, but for the irretrievable consequence it had brought upon their mission to Thaton in the service of their lord the King.

Kyansittha as the commander-in-chief, took full responsibility for what had happened, and Byatta begged that his men might be pardoned, as they had acted only on his orders. Byatta added that Kyansittha had not excluded him from the scouting trip to the outskirts of Thaton, only because he had given him his word of honour that nothing would happen to jeopardise the goodwill mission to Manuha, so he, Byatta, alone was responsible for everything.

Anawrahta listened in stony silence; the news was too tragic for anger. Even as he was overcome by the crushing blow to his highest hopes, he could not but be moved by his men's loyalty... loyalty, not only to him as their king, but to their own brothers-in-arms, and most of all their courage to face the consequences.

Anawrahta left them without a word and retired into the privacy of his own tent, alone with his grief; for the first time since he started to undertake the building of a united kingdom with Kyansittha and the men, he was faced with a serious set-back.

With his hands clenched together behind his back, Anawrahta walked to and fro, thinking how his years of hard work had been wiped out by one cruel trick of fate. He felt that he and his men would have to begin all over again, nay, would have to scramble up from the depths they had fallen into. He wanted to put Byatta and his men to the sword with his own hands, but he knew also the futility of punishment.

He came out of his tent and gazed at the newly finished stupa gorgeously illuminated, as the sound of drums and gongs and merry-making filled the air. Unable to bear the mockery of it all, Anawrahta went inside and flung himself on his couch shutting out the sounds with his palms to his ears.

He did not know how long he lay like that until suddenly he became aware of an uncanny silence, as if he had willed the sound of merry-makings away from his ears. He sat up listening for the sounds of the festival, but everything seemed to have been choked by a thick pall of silence.

Anawrahta tensed, sensing some evil and gripped his sword. As he waited, the grim silence was broken by discreet footsteps and the sentry's challenge answered in Kyansittha's firm voice: "We have to see the King now."

Before the sentry could protest, Anawrahta's voice rang out: "Let them enter." The next moment, Kyansittha was in his presence with the Mon elders of the locality.

Anawrahta, since his arrival in Twante-Dalla, had had several audiences with the Mon elders who gave him moral and spiritual support in his search for the Great Truth the Buddha taught; he, in turn, had impressed upon them the necessity of unifying the peoples of the land.

The Mon elders were convinced, for they had been receiving a regular flow of tidings from Lankadipa, how the island kingdom's disintegrated state had invited the Cola invaders from the Coromandel coast of South India. They had seen for themselves Uttha Pegu harassed by the Khmers, who might have overrun all the Mon settlement but for Anawrahta's help.

Anawrahta looked upon the sorrowful faces of the Mon elders and knew that they too had heard of Byatta's misdeed. But he guessed it was not Byatta's action alone that grieved them, there was something more serious.

Caravans of traders and a flotilla of merchant boats that had been moving regularly among the Mon settlements, Uttha Pegu and Thaton had hastily turned back with the news that King Manuha of Thaton had declared war on Pegu and Twante-Dalla, for having harboured and befriended the barbarians of the arid plains and that no caravan or boats from those areas must be suffered to come as near as a bow-shot from the precincts of the kingdom of Thaton and that they must be driven away by the shower of poison arrows.

Anawrahta, on behalf of his men, expressed regret for what had happened and asked the Mon elders what he should do next. Should he surrender Byatta and his men to Manuha, asking in return, a friendly alliance? But the elders told him that the situation was such that not a single boat or horseman could approach the precincts of Thaton within a bow-shot, and all communication with Uttha Pegu and Twante-Dalla had ceased.

Anawrahta asked the Mon elders for suggestions on the next step, for he was considering the wisdom of waging war at the cost of many lives. He said, "You don't know how many now in health shall drop their blood, in approbation of what we shall incite our people to; we awake the sleeping sword of war."

The Mon elders, in one voice, said that war was unavoidable and that Byatta should be spared any punishment, because he would be more useful alive than dead. They suggested that Byatta, as the one who was familiar with the terrain of Thaton, should be among the advance troops to infiltrate the enemy's defences.

Kyansittha hung his head in shame and sorrow, for he could not help feeling that all this would not have happened, had he been able to manage Byatta and the men. Anawrahta put a comforting hand on his shoulder and said: "You know, Kyansittha, it is easier to lead men into battle and win victories, but it is not so easy to cool their tempers and enforce discipline on them."

34

Manuha prepares for war

Immediately after the departure of Kyansittha and the envoys, Manuha summoned his ministers and generals and began his preparations for the war with "the men from Tampadipa."

Thaton, being the seat whither the Word of the Buddha had come from * Myitzimadetha to be enshrined, was the centre of culture and learning. Manuha, as the Defender of the Buddhist Faith and patron of arts and learning, was regarded by the people as "the deep ocean of knowledge", and "armour of the three worlds and of all the regions of Copper." He addressed his council of ministers and generals thus:

"I say that as a city we are the school of the golden land; and I doubt if the world can produce a man, who, when he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies and graced by so happy a versatility as the men of Thaton.

"Thaton alone of her contemporaries is found when tested, to be greater than her reputation.

"Rather, the admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our power without witness, but have shown it by mighty proofs. We have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, have left imperishable monuments behind us.

"Such is the Thaton for which we must nobly fight and die. If I have dwelt at some length upon the character of our country, it has been to show that our stake in the struggle is not the same as theirs. those barbarians from Tampadipa...who have no such blessings to lose."

The ministers and generals saluted the king as their "Lord" "Pandit" and "Scholar," and said:

** "The king in time of peace would urge his people to do works of merit and give gifts of land to the Sangha; but in time of war he would knap the spear blade of the turbulent enemy, and manfully with arrow-bow and pellet-bow daze and overthrow him.

"He would encircle the city with a great moat as a refuge all around, complete with walls, battlements, glacis and beacon-fires,

* India

** From Shwesayan pagoda inscriptions

signalling to all the world to hearken and obey the orders of the king.”

Now all the youths of Thaton were on fire, led by Manuha's eldest son the Uparaja. Princes and courtiers put away their silken dalliance and donned their armour, and honour's thought reigned solely in the breast of every man.

Commoners sold their pastures and cattle to buy horses, armour and weapons, as the armourers' forges blazed day and night to meet the demands. “Put your shields before your hearts and fight with hearts more proof than shields,” rang the cries.

The clangour of the armourers' forges merged with the sound of drums and victory gongs as the men of Thaton practised their equestrian feats, fencing skills and marksmanship.

Battalions of workmen marched to the camps by the walls to dig moats and build battlements as the torches signalled the alarms. Even as they worked, they sang of their beloved city, “This royal throne of kings, this sceptred land, this earth of majesty, this seat of gods...”

Thaton, lying between mountains rising forbiddingly on the east and turbulent seas on the west, seemed to be blessed with a fortress built by nature against the infection and the hand of war.

Soldiers sang as they sharpened their swords and spears, invoking their arms to defend “this blessed plot, this earth, this Thaton, this nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings, feared for their breed, and famous by their birth, renowned for their deeds in the service of the Buddhist Faith...”

Manuha had inspired his people impressing on them that this war was not merely in defence of their city, but that they were fighting so that the happy breed of Mons should not be swallowed up by the “barbarians of Tampadipa,” and most of all that the precious heritage of the Buddha should not be defiled by the hands of those who practised heathenish rites of spirit - and dragon-worship.

“While the men of Tampadipa worship spirits, our King Manuha makes servants of them,” people said, “Just look how the once reputed invulnerable hero, Byatwi was caught by the order of the king and how his spirit was put to guard the walls of our city.”

Many people believed that the defences of Thaton had been sprinkled with the blood of the invulnerable hero, Byatwi, and that his intestines had been buried in strategic places, so that his spirit, as numerous as the drops of blood, formed an impenetrable cordon against the enemy.

Such sensational stories were retold, with fantastic variations added with each repetition, and their morale rose high.

There was one man of Thaton who looked upon the warlike preparations with foreboding; he was the Maha Thera, the Primate of the Sangha of Thaton. Even though detached from worldly activities, the Maha Thera could not help being perturbed by the king's step in provoking the war with the men from Tampadipa.

He had heard how some of the men from Tampadipa had committed atrocities on the defenceless villagers and how the king had challenged them to come and wage war upon Thaton. The Maha Thera also understood from the king himself how the "barbarians from Tampadipa" had had the impertinence to ask for the Scriptures of the Buddha, and how unworthy they were of the Priceless Gem that was the Word of the Buddha.

As it was, Manuha had to declare war upon the men of Tampadipa in the cause of the Buddhist Faith, and the Maha Thera had no means of knowing Anawrahta's real intentions. Nor did Manuha know or understand the way of Anawrahta, whom he honestly considered to be a man of vaulting ambition and a heathen at that.

From time to time, some thoughtful layman or monk approached the Maha Thera, venturing a suggestion that the king should be advised to try peaceful means, and that there was no one to dare say such a thing but the Maha Thera himself.

The Maha Thera considered the suggestion, but he shook his head sadly, saying: "War between the twain would be as if the world should cleave, and that slain men should solder up the rift. But what could I, a man shorn of all worldly goods but my three pieces of yellow robe and black alms-bowl, say against the harsh and boisterous tongue of war? But let this flaming madness ebb a little and I shall be ready to sprinkle the compassionate words of the Buddha."

35

Thaton campaign begins

As Anawrahta threw himself into the preparations for the march against Thaton, Kyansittha and his commanders worked day and night on plans to be presented to their king for approval.

First and foremost, Anawrahta wanted to know as precisely as possible how the enemy stood...the armed forces, the type of arms and their strength, position of outposts, and how they were reinforced, how they got their provisions both for the fighting men and the civilians.

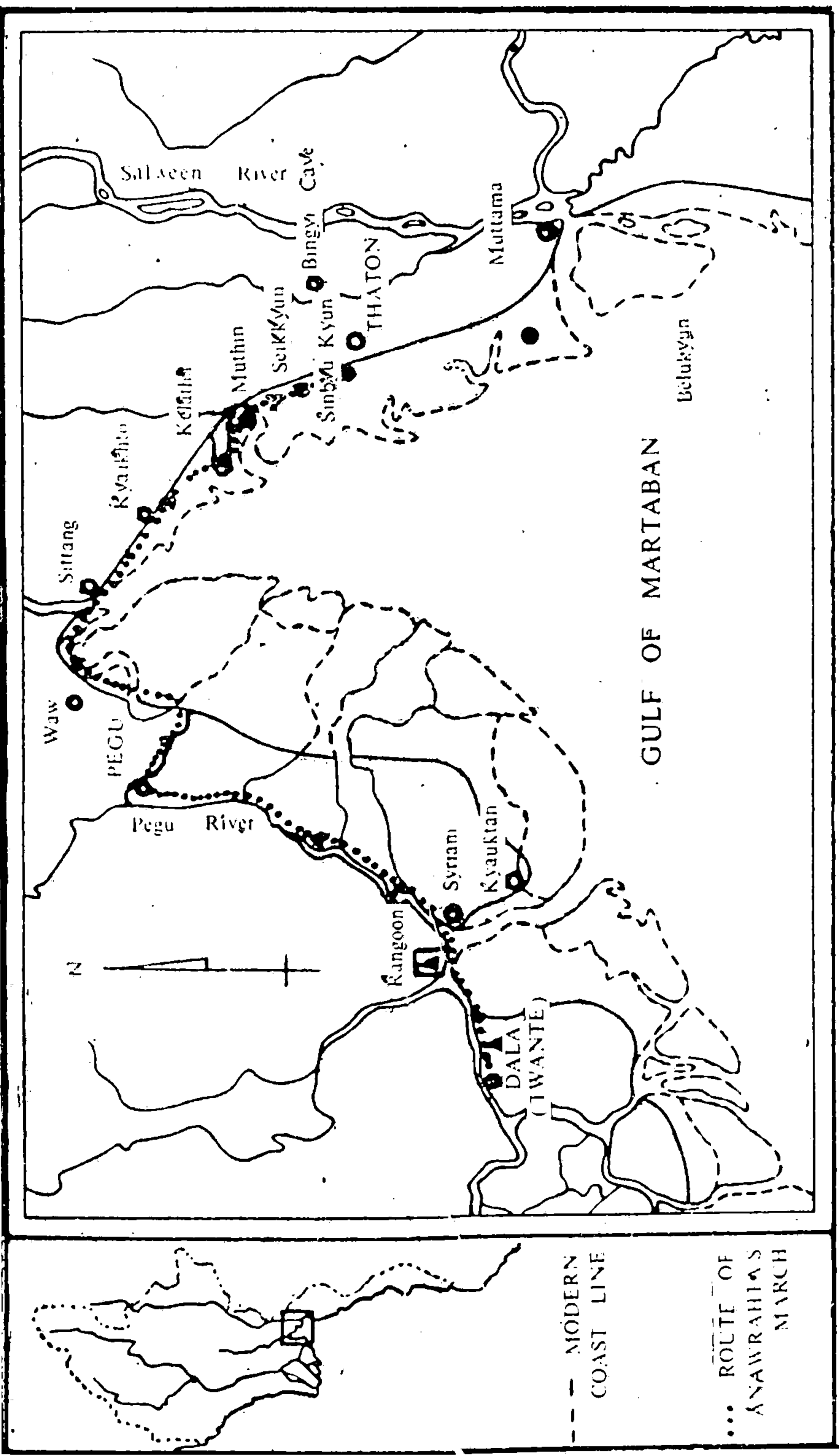
Byatta could give quite an accurate plan of Thaton's position, how it was protected by the sea on the western flank and a formidable range of thickly wooded mountains on the east; the city itself was surrounded by three lines of walls and moats and the north side was fortified by a massive bastion.

The city was well supplied with water from the mountain springs and there seemed no possibility of the citizens being starved out by a siege; the plains on the southern end of the city afforded a rich hinterland of rice fields.

As Anawrahta and Kyansittha together with their commanders made an appraisal of the situation, they realized that their march to Thaton would involve the use of boats as their line of approach lay across the delta area with its criss-cross of rivers and streams. There was to be a major crossing of the treacherous river Sittang, the other side of which was Manuha's territory. They expected to meet with resistance starting from that point.

Nga Bee and his men, trained though they were on the Irrawaddy, had much to learn from the Mons of Twante-Dalla before they could navigate the delta waterways, which had their own peculiarities with the tides coming in from the sea. Since Nga Bee and his men had fought together with the Mon mariners during the Khmer invasion, they had already developed their nautical techniques and what was more, had got acquainted with the ways of the delta streams and their tides.

Land forces were at that time reinforced by the elephants caught and tamed by Anawratha's men during their stay at Twante-Dalla, whose rain forests were the home of these magnificent beasts, useful both as combat-animals and means of transport in war.



With the rich paddy lands of the delta serving as granaries Anawrahta's army did not have to worry much about provisions, and the month of their campaign fell on the month of * *Nattaw* when the fields had been harvested of their grain.

Soon Anawrahta's forces were on the march to Thaton, Nga Bee's flotilla of boats supported by the Mon boatmen on the river and on land Byatta's cavalry followed by the elephants carrying heavy loads of arms and provisions.

Anawrahta, with Kyansittha in constant attendance, alternately sailed with the boats and rode with the cavalry throughout the march. They sailed up the Pegu river until they reached Uttha Pegu, their first base.

The king of Uttha Pegu, already declared an enemy of Thaton for having invited the men from Tampadipa and harbouring them, was indebted to Anawrahta for the defeat of the Khmer invaders.

"At least we have one friendly ally and Pegu is a useful base; we may hope to get more Mons to man our boats and guide us to Thaton territory," Anawrahta said. Kyansittha assured him that the Mons of Uttha Pegu area were well disposed towards the men of Tampadipa, whom they now regarded as their tested kith and kin.

"But the Mons of Thaton may regard us as barbarians and marauders, thanks to Byatta, and what can we do about it?" Anawrahta asked.

Kyansittha replied that he hoped there might still be friendly ones, as the Mon settlements lay far apart from one another, thick forests and streams making communication difficult; most of the village tracts were self-sufficient in field and forest produce, so they had little dealing with one another, except in the dry season, which was a time for festivals.

The march to Uttha Pegu was swift and without resistance and many of the Mons of the delta area joined the forces. The king of Uttha Pegu welcomed Anawrahta with gratitude, rejoicing that he now had a chance of thanking him in person for the services his men had rendered. Anawrahta expressed his regret at having to wage war with Thaton and added that he still would do anything, even at that stage, to reach an amicable settlement with King Manuha. "Tell me, my royal brother, if you see any possibility of making King Manuha understand what I am trying to achieve," Anawrahta asked.

The king of Uttha Pegu shook his head sadly and told Anawrahta that the Mons on the other side of the Sittang river would not suffer those on this side to land on their territory, which they guarded with armies of archers ready to shower poison arrows as soon as the smallest shadow fell on their land.

The king of Uttha Pegu promised to help Anawrahta with men, arms and provisions, and as he looked at this magnificent

* November-December

specimen of a man, brimming with energy as if driven by a divine force, he was enthralled; he offered his right arm as a mark of friendship to be clasped in Anawrahta's own and said: "May Pegu and Tampadipa be joined together as our hands are now joined, and may the two lands be united by stronger ties than two plates of gold welded into one."

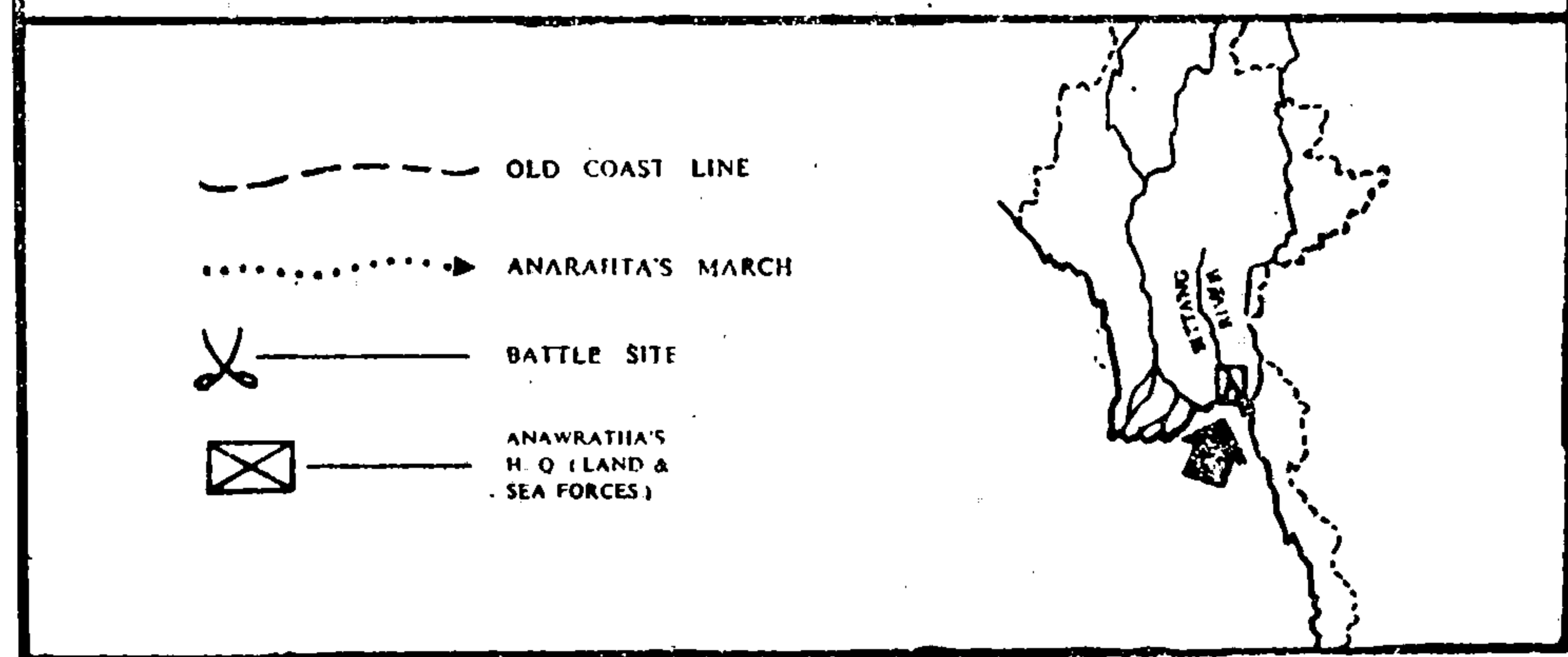
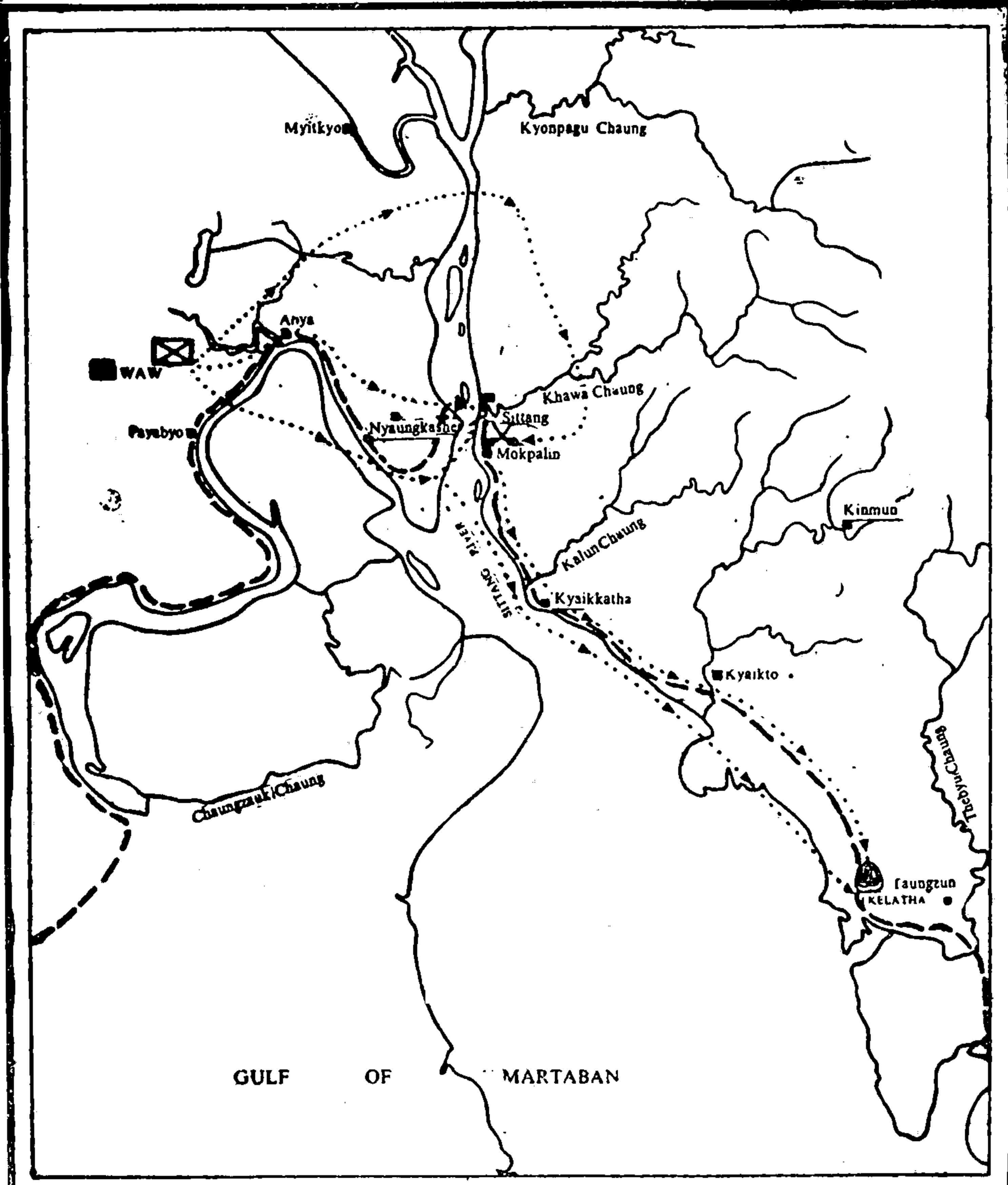
At the Pegu king's signal, the bevy of ladies rose from their place and walked slowly towards where the two kings sat; at the head of the procession was Khin U, the princess. With eyes downcast, she approached carrying a bejewelled cup filled with sweet-scented flowers and knelt at Anawrahta's feet.

Anawrahta took the lotus cup and said: "Princess of Pegu, I can see the flowers are laden with dew...but why are they wilting under the burden? Now do not hang your lovely head, pray raise it and look at me...ah, I see your face is wet as are those flowers crushed by the salt of your hot tears. I hope your tears are tears of joy, not sorrow.

"Now go...live for a while in maidenly meditation until I come back from the war."

Khin U bowed and slowly retreated from the august presence leaving the two kings in deep discussion on the coming war. She realized that she would have no chance to see Kyansittha who was constantly on the move with the forces and she wondered if he had any inkling of her father's intentions...the union of Uttha Pegu and Tampadipa by giving her in marriage to Anawrahta. Her one consolation, however scant, was that the intended alliance, like many less important things, would have to wait till the war was over.

Even as she brooded over the hopelessness of their love, Kyansittha was already on the march with the advance troops.



36

At Suvannabhumi

Kyansittha and Byatta led the advance troops towards the Sittang without much event since the people on the west side of the river were friendly. Once they approached the bank of the Sittang, however, they found themselves up against resistance both human and natural; for, true to the intelligence reports, the people on the other side of the Sittang were hostile and the sailing craft that had skimmed over the delta streams would have to brave the open sea.

The enemy on the other side of the Sittang floated down rafts loaded with dry burning grass and straw so that the flotilla of boats could not advance. This action took the boats by surprise and Kyansittha, forced with the loss of both boats and men, immediately ordered the boats to turn back to the bank while he made arrangements for the cavalry to cross the Sittang on rafts.

The crossing was made difficult by the action of the enemy archers and the blazing unmanned rafts that were floated downstream, and the first trips were disastrous. For the moment, it looked as if they would have to give up, even if it was for the time being.

It was then that Anawrahta's forces arrived and Kyansittha presented the matter to the king. Anawrahta called in all the commanders and discussed the situation and commanded that part of the cavalry and elephants should go northwards by land along the river and cross over where there was little or no resistance, and then come down to fight the enemy from the rear, where they least expected it.

Acting on Anawrahta's orders the forces made a pretence of turning back amidst the jeers of the enemy on the other side of the Sittang. Once they had marched northwards the forces found themselves in deep jungles and hills where they were much at home. It was fortunate that the reinforcements of cavalry and elephants from Pagan that had been sent for, had come down towards the river Sittang as instructed by Anawrahta, and joined them on the upper reaches of the river, from where they were to march down south.

Meanwhile the boats lay low near Waw, replenishing their arms and men, waiting for the troops to clear the way. Kyansittha and Byatta led the cavalry, supported by elephants, marched down south and attacked the enemy from the rear, taking them by surprise.

Once they had occupied the village tracts of Sittang and Kyaikhto, the flotilla of boats could come along the sea coast without resistance. After they had consolidated their positions, Anawrahta called his commanders and instructed them to work out a fraternization plan with the local people, before going further.

Kyansittha and his men made friends with the locals who soon shed their hostility when they saw that the men from Tampadipa were willing to help them in tasks such as digging wells and repairing old pagodas. The men from Twante-Dalla who had come with Anawrahta made good public relations men, for they could not help telling from their hearts how the king of Tampadipa had helped them to build a huge stupa (called today the Maung De Paya), how he was a devotee of Theravada Buddhism, about which he was enthusiastic to know more.

All these stories were new to the men on the other side of the Sittang river, for they had only heard of the men of Tampadipa as barbarians who worshipped spirits and dragons.

Now, they not only heard from the people of their own kind but saw for themselves how helpful and friendly were the men from Tampadipa, and how eager they were to win their goodwill.

Kyansittha explored the area, climbing the Kelatha and other hills, drinking in the superb beauty of the scenery. The picturesque surroundings struck such a chord in his heart that he began to have strange dreams of himself as a hermit resident in those hills in a previous existence. He was so overcome by the experience that he could not help telling his men about his feelings.

Perhaps that was how the rumour that Kyansittha, in a previous existence, had been a hermit living on these hills began, for it was the usual Buddhist way of explaining uncanny feelings like "I've lived here before." Sure enough, Kyansittha loved the locality and its people who responded to him with affection. People were so impressed by Kyansittha's personality that they claimed that the wells (which stand even to this day) just "sprang" wherever Kyansittha's spear tip fell on the ground.

Anawrahta was thrilled to stand on the ground on which Theravada Buddhism had taken root. He gazed in wonder at the old fortress and the Pagoda, with the Buddha images seated on handsomely carved lotus thrones, all in laterite. He listened to the local legend of how Theravada Buddhism had been brought by two *theras*, Shin Sona and Shin Uttara who had been sent to Suvannabhumi, the golden land (generally identified with Lower Burma, including the coast from Rangoon to Singapore) to convert the people. The arrival of the *theras*, as the story goes, coincided with the birth of a royal prince, and the people were in feverish anxiety, because the female demon of the sea was in the habit of eating every heir born to the king. At first the people thought that the *theras* were friends of the demon, but later the *theras*, being told the story, drove away the demon by their power and erected a bulwark round the country by reciting the Brahmajala sutta. Sixty thousand people embraced the new faith. The royal prince and heir was saved and thenceforth all princes born into the royal family were called Sonuthara.

Another legend says that the demons of the sea after being tamed and converted by the two *theras* built a laterite pagoda (known today as the Htisaung Pagoda).

Anawrahta looked at the laterite walls decorated with relief figures of elephants, lions, and tigers, which the legend said had been put there to frighten away the demons of the sea, and he concluded that the coming of Theravada Buddhism must have been a turning point in the lives of the people. The new faith must have inspired them to build and create works of both utility and art, and above all, it must have given the people a new-born courage and hope to build a strong kingdom.

In spite of all the fighting and bloodshed, Anawrahta felt hopeful that, once he could absorb Theravada Buddhism and put it across to his people, his task of uniting all the races of the land into one strong force would be accomplished. He enquired of the local people how far the island kingdom of Lankadipa was from Suvannabhumi, for he hoped to establish contacts with King Vijayabahu, who, he had heard, was trying to unify the disintegrated states of Lankadipa on one hand, and trying to drive away the Cola invaders on the other. The locals answered that Lankadipa was seven hundred leagues away and, with a favourable wind, could be reached in seven days and nights.

"Let us finish this campaign first; there are more things to be done about Theravada Buddhism and our land," Anawrahta thought to himself.

One moonlit night, as he wandered alone on the platform of the laterite pagoda of the tamed demons, he took a handful of earth in his right hand and made a vow: "Let this earth, this hallowed earth, where the Maha Theras Sona and Uttara once stood and tamed the demons be my witness. I will, until my last breath, dedicate myself to the service of the Theravada Buddhist faith and to the task of unifying my peoples and nothing shall stand in my way."

The next day the forces were on the march to Thaton.

37

The approach to Thaton

Manuha's men after withdrawing from the areas around Kelatha hill, gathered all their land and sea forces on the banks of Belin chaung and made plans to halt Anawrahta's advance to the city of Thaton.

Knowing full well that Anawrahta's greatest strength was in his land forces, in his cavalry, elephants and men well-trained in jungle warfare, they decided to concentrate their efforts on harassing the navy, using the same strategy of floating burning rafts down the Belin chaung, by which means they successfully blockaded the naval approach to Thaton.

As they had once been attacked from the rear, Manuha's forces took care to station strong outposts along Belin chaung, so that their adversaries could not attempt an upstream crossing as they had done at the Sittang River.

Anawrahta's forces, while consolidating their positions, had spread a network of intelligence teams made up of men of extraordinary discretion, courage and shrewdness, who with resourcefulness and stratagems managed to infiltrate the enemy lines and get useful information for Anawrahta's men. Kyansittha's work in winning the goodwill of the local people of the occupied areas contributed much to the success of the military intelligence work.

Since they could not very well repeat the same tactics of the Sittang river battle, Anawrahta and Kyansittha held a council of naval and army commanders. Among the naval men were the mariners of Twante-Dalla who had experience of the open seas, having sailed up to the island kingdom of Lankadipa. Such men could make a detour by the open sea, instead of sailing along the coast.

This plan seemed to solve the problem of evading the enemy blockade, but the number of boats and men that could sail into the open sea was comparatively small and there were not enough to engage the enemy sea power along the coast of Thaton, so that any landing could be accomplished. So they decided to do something about the enemy blockade itself, instead of evading it.

Soon after the conference, Kyansittha and his men organized the local people to gather lumber and bamboo from the jungles nearby and began building rafts carrying high bamboo structures.

The rafts also carried men with bamboo pipes and piles of sand and stones. The men riding on the high towers had long wooden poles.

The rafts were rowed right into the cordon of burning rafts and the men on the rafts began extinguishing the fires with their bamboo

pipes while those from the high towers threw stones and sand upon the fire rafts. They finished off the action by either pushing the fire rafts away or pushing them under water by means of the long wooden poles.

The "fire-sweeping units" were closely followed by fighting boats, that made good the way paved for them and immediately went ahead with the action against the enemy ships along the sea coast.

Again the enemy was taken by surprise, for they had counted too much on their fire rafts to ward off Anawrahta's navy, and the ingenuity and valour of the "fire-sweeping units" had broken what they had considered to be an impregnable line of defence.

Anawrahta's navy made their way to the mouth of Belin chaung and accomplished the landing. They crushed the floating fire raft base and cleared the stream for the crossing of cavalry and elephants.

Pressed from both land and sea, Manuha's forces made haste to concentrate their efforts on defending the royal city. Anawrahta's navy made for the Thaton coast adopting the same enemy tactics of floating fire rafts down to disperse Manuha's navy that guarded the city.

Anawrahta's naval objective was to occupy the string of islands off Thaton and consolidate them as a naval base. The islands were not strongly fortified except for a small flotilla of boats and men, for Manuha's commanders had underestimated their adversary's naval strength.

As Thaton rose within sight like a city of the gods out of the billowy sea, Anawrahta's men were elated. It was a proud moment in their lives to look upon the noble city that stood high above them forbiddingly, as if challenging them to come and conquer. They cried out lusty war cries vowing to make the city theirs; they had come, they had seen and it was up to them to conquer.

With all their jubilation, Anawrahta's navymen knew full well that the city stood on vantage ground, where their movements could be seen, for the hills flanking the city served as good look-out posts both by land and sea.

Anawrahta's land forces, cavalry and elephants, seeing their own disadvantage of being in full view of the enemy, immediately broke into small units and discreetly moved under camouflage. The navy occupied the islands known today as Seikkyun, Sinpyukyun and many other unnamed ones. Within the view of the enemy, they floated a ring of small rafts laden with fires smouldering under wet grass and straw so that a thick pall of smoke was formed around them.

Once they had occupied the islands, the navy did not have any more engagements with the enemy boats that lay anchored along the coast. Manuha's navy had left their adversaries to themselves, leaving the sea strip between the islands and the mainland free as no man's domain.

For the time being, the two navies stuck to their own positions, like two mighty lions snarling at each other from a distance, neither taking the initiative to attack.

Kyansittha made swift trips to the navy lying at anchor at the islands and saw the futility of attacking the city from the sea, but he decided that the Thaton navy should be harassed as often as possible, while the land forces made plans for the assault.

Meanwhile Manuha's psychological warfare units were working too well for the good of Anawrahta's men, who were weary with the long tiring march and the strife. At nights, when silence reigned supreme, Manuha's men stationed on the city walls sang songs in praise of their king, and how the city was fortified by the triple walls and moats, and how the spirit of the hero, Byatwi, was guarding the city, with every drop of his blood ready to turn into a thousand fierce demons thirsting for blood.

The songs were sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments and the same tune was repeated with different words every night, so that Anawrahta's men found themselves whistling or humming the tune, which seemed to warn them of the fearful ordeal the city of Thaton promised them.

Kyansittha immediately went into action. Byatta and his men went round the camps weaving interesting yarns of how Byatwi's spirit came to him in his dreams and visions with the assurance that the men in Anawrahta's service had nothing to fear, for the fierce demons created out of the drops of his own blood would be more on their side than Manuha's. That Byatwi's spirit had a grudge against Manuha for having him executed, and, as the story went, forcing him to guard the city, seemed plausible to Anawrahta's men.

Ritual feasts in honour of Byatwi were held and stories went round of oracles possessed by his spirit, who gave instructions of how they should assault the city, and the morale of the men began to rise once more.

38

Inside Thaton

With all their ingenuity, it was not easy for Anawrahta's forces to undermine the morale of the Thaton people.

The story of Maha Ummagga Jataka was presented in songs, tableaux and plays, and the people likened their King Manuha to the great minister Mahosadha, the hero of the story who saved the city state of Mithila from the invaders. The rout of King Culani's forces was presented with variations that lost no drollery in the telling.

King Manuha, in the meantime, made good use of the terrain around his city both strategically and psychologically. The Lawa range on the eastern flank of the city was one of impenetrable jungles and forbidding heights. Ballads telling how the spirits of the jungles and hills would not suffer their domain to be trod by the enemy's feet were sung by minstrels who wandered the city and its environs.

The two hills, Myathabeik on the west and Nemeindra on the northwest of the city, served as good watchouts, from where they could see the enemy's movements clearly. From Myathabeik hill, Sinpyukyun island out in the sea lay in full view in spite of the smoke screens and Manuha saw that the island was being used as Anawrahta's headquarters for both his land and sea forces. He saw that his navy was doing good work keeping the invaders from making any attempt to land from the coast, the western flank of the city.

Manuha's favourite post during the campaign was Nemeindra hill where he spent most of his time watching the manoeuvres; from there he could see the hillock known today as Thamidawkon, where his eldest son, the Uparaja was stationed with his forces. It was a well fortified bastion, the headquarters of the forces defending the city.

Through a heavily guarded secret passage running between Nemeindra hill and the royal palace, Manuha made frequent trips to and fro, as the situation demanded. It was from Nemeindra hill that Manuha saw Anawrahta's forces, camouflaged with leaves and twigs, fall victim to the flaming arrows shot down from the city walls. He heard and saw his own people cheering and rejoicing with shouts and cries, declaring that their city would never be won by such ruses.

One great strength Thaton possessed was sufficiency in food and water. The perpetual springs that gushed out from Lawa range

assured the people of a constant supply of fresh water and the regular inflow of caravans brought loads of rice and other farm products from the south, which side of the city was free from the invaders.

Manuha could see that the enemy could never encircle his city, for the narrow strip of coastline on the western flank was well defended and there was little or no possibility that the enemy might land on the southwest and attempt an offensive from the southern side of the city.

From his favourite seat on Nemeindra hill, Manuha watched Anawrahta's forces form three columns on the northern side of the city walls and saw that they were persistent in their attack, even though the archers showered arrows from the walls. They made attempts to scale the walls by means of mobile towers built of lumber and bamboo but were repulsed.

The Uparaja led his forces against the invaders, with archers giving them cover and Manuha watched with pride and satisfaction the valour of his son and his men as they engaged Anawrahta's forces in a terrific combat.

Kyansittha and Byatta, seeing a good chance of capturing the Uparaja, made a pretence of retreating, so that the young prince would be tempted to press farther into the woods. For a moment, it looked as if the Uparaja had fallen into their trap, but Manuha, watching from Nemeindra hill, saw his son's predicament and instantly caused a warning note to be blown from a conch, a signal that both men and war steeds understood. The Uparaja's horse heard the warning note and reared, neighing defiantly and refusing to go farther. The Uparaja, though for a moment astounded by his steed's behaviour, heard the signal and commanded his men to turn back to the city walls.

After that incident, Manuha called a conference of commanders, led by the Uparaja and discussed the situation. Taking all factors into account, they decided that the enemy should only be kept from advancing on the city walls, and no attempt should be made to go after them.

Manuha and his commanders realized that the enemy occupation of the island Sinpyukyun, though quite useless as a base for an offensive against the city, was a strategic loss that should not be underestimated. Manuha commanded that the navy should harass the Sinpyukyun base as much as possible. It was his plan that the war should drag on, so that the morale of the enemy should ebb and subsequent dissension and mutiny make the enemy turn back. Or better still, they could overpower the enemies when their strength had waned. He knew that his people, well supplied with their essential needs, were at an advantage, no matter how long the siege went on.

So, days went on without any decisive victory on either side. It seemed that things were going as Manuha had planned. The people of Thaton began counting the days when the enemy forces, like King Culani's in the Jataka story, would run away stripping off their loin cloths in their hurry. But they had overlooked a

simple human factor,—the woman who had been the mistress of Byatwi.

Many stories were told of the woman whose name was Mai Oh Zar. Some said she was the daughter of the commander who was responsible for capturing Byatwi, but many said that she was only a serving maid of the household, who was used as a decoy to capture Byatwi.

Years after Byatwi's capture and death, Mai Oh Zar lived with her brother, Bo Gyi, a cartman who made frequent trips to the south to procure foodstuffs for the city. She lived, despised and ostracized, as the woman who had been the mistress of a notorious bandit, and an alien at that.

Mai Oh Zar had not forgiven the authorities for the death of her lover or the humiliation she suffered through the years. She had rejoiced at the news of Byatta killing the commander who captured Byatwi. She had been hoping to see Byatta, for her one obsession was to see her lover's brother and tell him that she had been only an unwitting agent in Byatwi's capture and execution.

Since the coming of Anawrahta's forces, Mai Oh Zar had been trying to find means of communicating with Byatta, for she could not die easy without clearing herself in the eyes of her lover's brother, who had gone away believing that she had enticed Byatwi to his death.

Day after day, Mai Oh Zar asked her brother to try and get in contact with Byatta, but he warned her that it would be an act of treason that might involve dire punishment. Mai Oh Zar insisted that once she had seen Byatta and asked his forgiveness, she was ready to face anything.

Whenever Bo Gyi came back from one of his trips south Mai Oh Zar asked if he had news of Byatta. Bo Gyi told her that it was next to impossible to go near the enemy lines, where he might be captured and killed as a spy. "Anawrahta's forces have a tight security belt. Even the Lawa peasants of the eastern slope of the range are thoroughly scrutinized when they go to trade their farm produce at the camps."

"So, Anawrahta's forces too depend on the Lawa farms on the other side of the Lawa range for their provisions..." thought Mai Oh Zar, "I might make use of that circumstance to my advantage."

When Mai Oh Zar asked Bo Gyi to take her on the next trip to the other side of the Lawa range, he tried to dissuade her pointing out the dangers of her plan. Mai Oh Zar replied: "Brother, what more could I suffer? I have suffered heartbreak, shame and humiliation. I have borne all this only because I hope to see his brother one day and tell him...and ask his forgiveness. Once I have done this, I do not care what happens to me. Oh, please, my brother, I have suffered enough. Let me not suffer in the after life, help me to redeem myself."

As Bo Gyi and Mai Oh Zar drove their bullock cart over the Lawa village tracts on the eastern slope of the range little did they realize that they were blazing a trail for Anawrahta's daring bid to infiltrate the city and seal its fate.

39

A sitting-hen's gap in the wall

With little or no chance of a decisive victory within sight, Kyansittha and Byatta tried to keep their men occupied with exploration and hunting trips in the jungles of the Lawa range. They could not afford to lose men any more in fruitless attempts to approach and scale the walls.

Even though they knew that they could not make effective headway against Thaton's northern defences, the three columns of men, cavalry and elephants had to be maintained, with fresh units taking the place of the worn-out and wounded.

Kyansittha sent small units northwards along the Lawa range to find out the best way to cross it and learn from the Lawa people about Thaton. It was from the intelligence of such units that the talk of "a sitting-hen's gap in the wall" began.

Once again they heard the story of how Byatwi, the hero with superhuman powers, had been trapped and killed by the order of King Manuha and how his intestines had been buried in the strategic places and his blood sprinkled over the wall, so that Byatwi's spirit would guard the city; the drops of blood were supposed to be changed into thousands of demons in times of war. This time a new variation had it that there was "a sitting-hen's gap in the wall" not sprinkled with Byatwi's blood; it was said that if they could find that place and use it as a base for attack the city would be theirs.

Kyansittha used that story to the advantage of his forces. When ritual feasts were held the medium supposed to be possessed by Byatwi's spirit told the men that there was indeed "a sitting-hen's gap" in the wall on the southern side of the city and if the men could get hold of it victory would be assured.

In one of the many councils of war with their handful of trusted commanders, Anawrahta and Kyansittha discussed the situation taking into account every rumour, every story, however fantastic it might sound; for Anawrahta understood that out of such stories and rumours they could sift out useful information. He was satisfied with the way Kyansittha used the story of Byatwi's spirit as counter-propaganda among his own men. He had already sensed that the southern part of the city might not be so strongly fortified as the north, as the chance of being attacked from that side was remote.

Anawrahta was sure that if only he could breach the wall from the south, apparently inaccessible either by land or by sea, the enemy would be paralysed by shock. The formidable Lawa range had to be crossed to approach the city from the south. With the story of "a sitting-hen's space in the wall" in circulation, the men

became enthusiastic. "These soaring peaks why shouldn't I conquer, they are not Mount Meru, are they?" Some sang of skipping over the ranges as if they were logs and they could hardly wait to crush the wild jungle beneath their feet.

One day, Byatta and Kyansittha were with the units at the far northern end of their camps supervising the purchase of farm products brought in by the Lawa farmers. They were going round the caravan of bullock carts when a hand was laid on Byatta's arm. He instantly seized his sword with one hand and the heavily shrouded figure with the other.

"My brother...it's me..." said the figure softly and Byatta found himself face to face with Mai Oh Zar, the woman his brother had loved. Mai Oh Zar fell on her knees and raising her hands in supplication said; "Brother, kill me, if you must, but not before you have learned that I am innocent of your brother's death. I never knew they intended to trap him at my house. Pray forgive me..."

Kyansittha was as surprised at the encounter as Byatta was. He touched Byatta's hand as if to prevent any rash action. He then said: "Woman, this is no place to talk. Come with us to the camp. Walk ahead, we'll follow you!" So Mai Oh Zar walked ahead with the two men following her at a circumspect distance. She did not spare a glance at her brother Bo Gyi who pretended to be busy unloading the rice bags from the cart. He sighed and muttered to himself: "She has lived a life of sorrow and humiliation; I only hope death will be more merciful."

In the privacy of his tent Byatta heard from Mai Oh Zar the details of how his brother met his death and seethed the more with desire for vengeance. He now believed that Mai Oh Zar must be innocent of his brother's death and he had nothing but pity for her. After she had said what she had to say, Mai Oh Zar asked Byatta to let her go back.

As Kyansittha had already briefed him the line of action he should take, Byatta refused to let her go.

Byatta glared at Mai Oh Zar and said: "Woman, how can I believe that you were innocent of my brother's death? How do I know that the enemy has not used you to get information from us? Now, listen, I will forgive you for my brother's death when you lead me and my men to the place called... 'a sitting-hen's gap in the wall'."

Mai Oh Zar covered her face and cried: "No...no...not this! Kill me. I will never do that...You're asking me the impossible... I'll never betray my own city."

Byatta gripped his sword and cried: "What! do you still care so much for the people who killed your lover...how can I believe that you are innocent of his death? I know now that you trapped my brother to his death; I will never forgive you. You will pay for my brother's death with every drop of your blood that shall flow out of you as I cut every inch of your body with this sword..."

Mai Oh Zar stood up and looked into Byatta's eyes and said: "Byatta, the brother of the man I loved, spare your threats. I will never do what you ask. Do as you wish. I am ready."

Byatta folded his arms and smiled contemptuously at Mai Oh Zar and said: "Brave little woman...ah...little heroine, yes? Do you know what will happen if I don't forgive you? As the brother of one who has been wronged and betrayed, I will heap curses upon you...may all the contagion of the Eight Hells light on you. May boils and plagues plaster you over, that you may be abhor'd further than seen, and one infect another against the wind a mile! May no sleep close up that deadly eye of yours unless it be that some tormenting dream afrights you with a hell of ugly devils."

Mai Oh Zar smiled defiantly and said: "Byatta, there is no curse you can lay on me that I have not suffered. Have I not been a social leper since your brother died...the woman who has been the mistress of a bandit and an alien? As for sleepless nights and nightmares...you can wish me no more than I have already suffered..."

"So, you think you've borne all suffering in this life? Not for you, woman. May this guilt haunt you, as you go through the round of births and rebirths...May you be born only in the regions of hell...may you be sunk in a slab of stone the length, breadth, and thickness of sixty days' travel and never get free though many Buddhas be enlightened...may you be born as a dog, a pig and such dumb animal and never have a chance to see the Buddha to hear the Word of the Dhamma...may you never be free from hell, so that Buddhas as many as the grains of sand that stretch from our city of Pagan to this Thaton pass you by..."

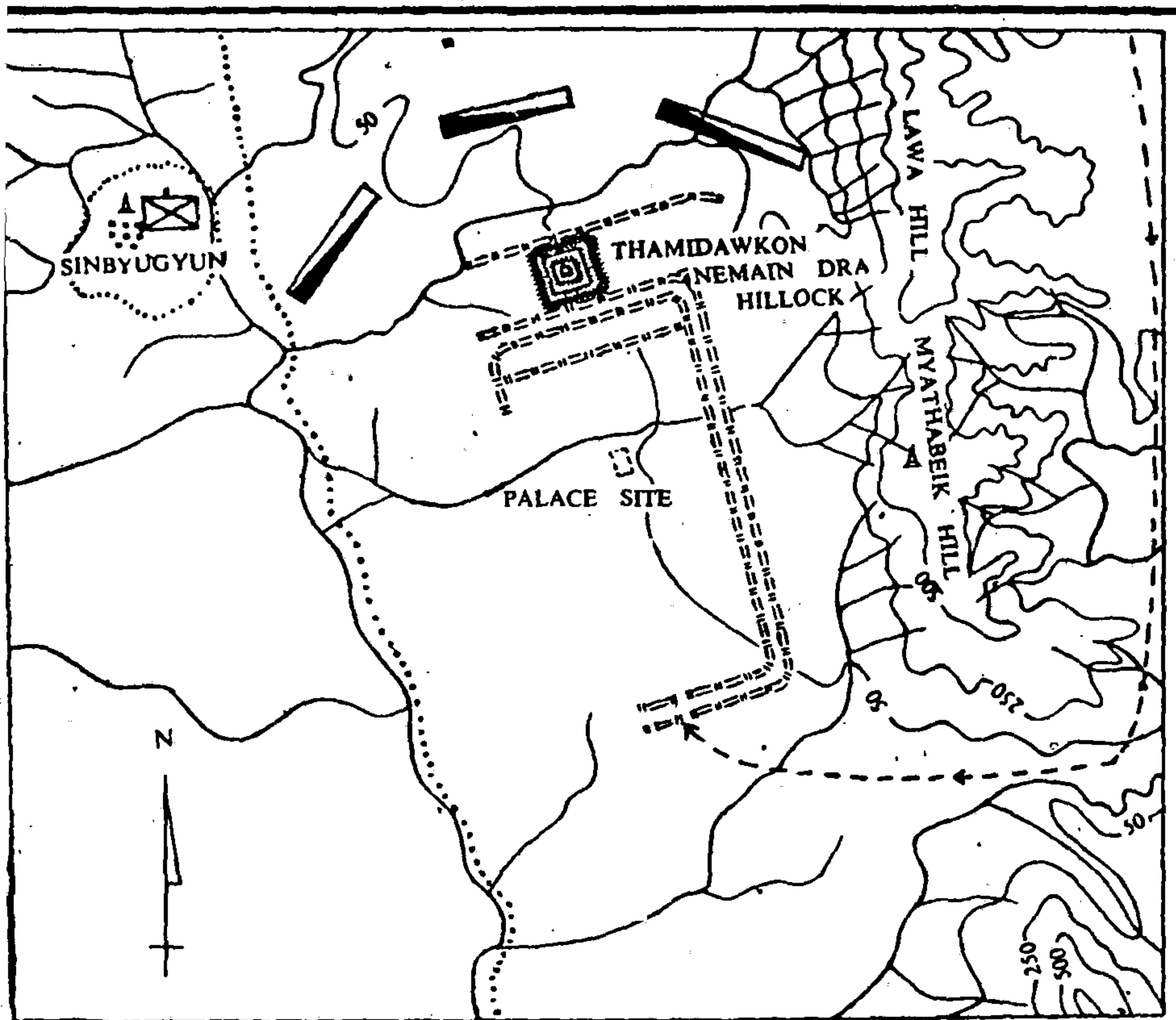
Mai Oh Zar fell at Byatta's feet and cried... "No, no ... you can't do this to me...I cannot forfeit the chance of seeing one of the Buddhas and hear His Word...though I may roast in hell for any length of time, I must have this chance... Oh, please be merciful..."

Byatta said: "No, I'll never lift my curses, until you do what I tell you..."

Mai Oh Zar wept, for she knew that she must give in. She could bear all the curses in this life and even in the after life, she could bear the fires of hell for eons of years, or being born in the world of dumb animals, if she had but the chance to see some day one of the Buddhas who would come to save the world; to be denied the chance of seeing one of the Buddhas and hear His Word of the Dhamma was more than she could bear.

At last she said: "Byatta, I'll do what you say; but you must make one promise...as you know, it is a great wrong to do harm to a king. I cannot let anything happen to him and his family... Promise me that my king and his family shall be spared. I'll show you the place in the wall...the sitting-hen's gap!"

While Byatta was considering whether he should commit himself, Kyansittha who had been watching them unseen came in and said: "Woman, your wish was granted before you asked for it. My lord Anawrahta never meant to harm a hair of King Manuha's head or any one of his family."



 ANAWRATHA'S
H. Q. (LAND &
SEA FORCES)

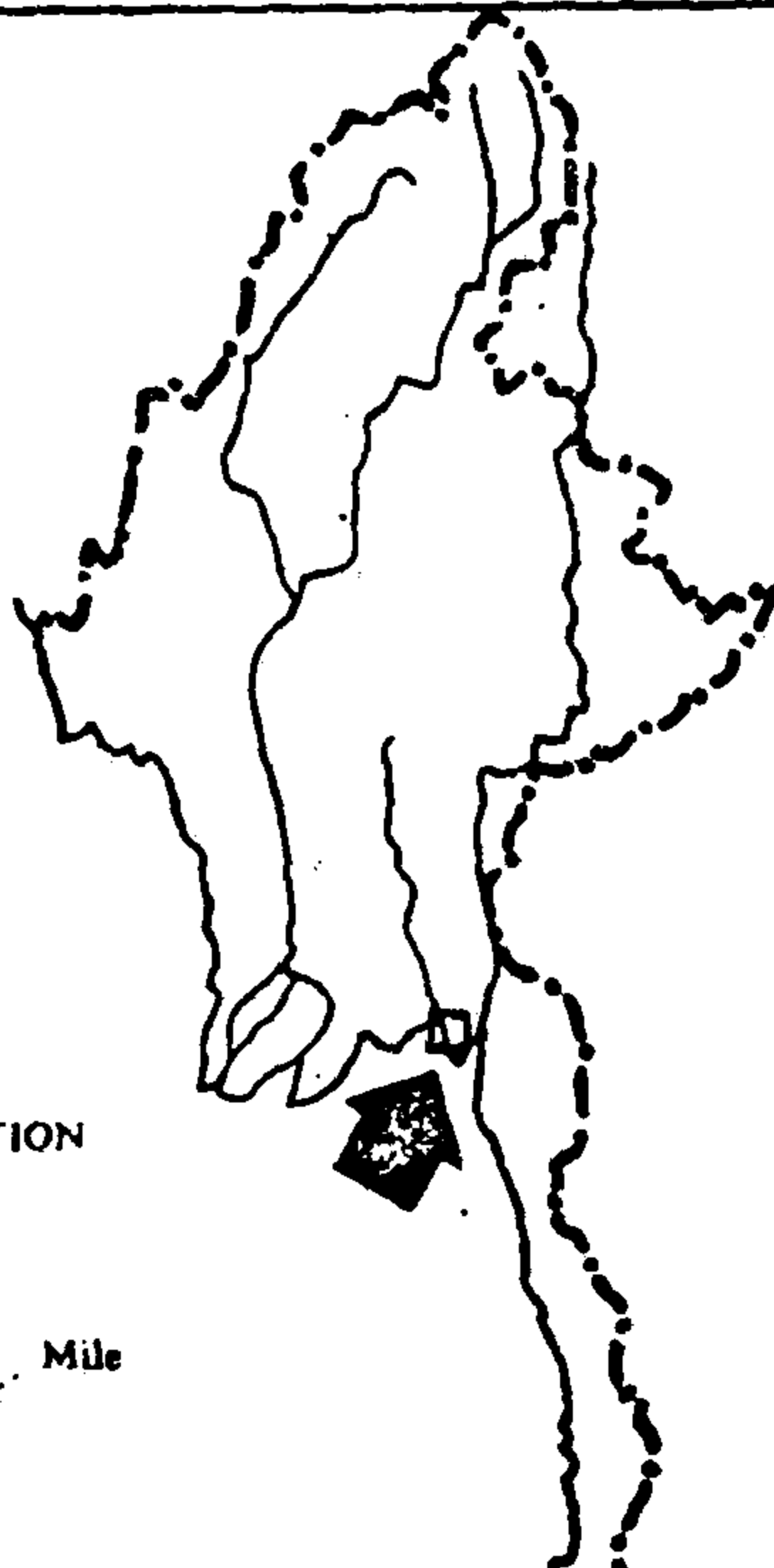
 DISPOSITION OF ANAWRAHTA'S
FORCES IN THE ATTACK ON
THATON

..... OLD COAST LINE

=||= THATON CITY WALLS

- - - - -> ROUTE PLANNED FOR INFILTRATION

 1 0 1 Mile



40

The assault

Kyansittha reported to Anawrahta what had happened and he summarized the intelligence about the "sitting-hen's gap in the wall" thus:

"Sir the 'sitting-hen's gap in the wall' is in fact a conduit of a stream flowing out of Thaton. The people of the city hardly consider it a gap, partly because it is a natural phenomenon, partly because it is filled with water all the year round, and is actually no gap at all. At this time of the year the water is, only waist-deep.

"The defenders of the city must have overlooked the 'gap' as it is on the southern flank of the city where there is little or no chance of being attacked.

"The people of Thaton, both authorities and commoners, must have felt sufficiently safe and secure to be able to coin riddles about the 'sitting-hen's gap', and weave stories of a space unsprinkled by Byatwi's blood and so forming a vulnerable point in an otherwise impregnable city.

"The legend that one must occupy the 'gap' in order to win the city, seems in itself to be a challenge, the people of Thaton believe, that will never be braved, for they are confident that the southern ramparts of the city cannot be approached by any invader.

"Now that our men are properly instilled with the idea that once we can occupy the gap, the city will be as good as won, they are enthusiastic about the undertaking, even though it means crossing the Lawa range and marching through the trackless forests.

"Byatta and his men will be met by the woman called Mai Oh Zar outside the southern walls, and she will lead them to the gap, as she has promised on oath."

Anawrahta said: "Although we have decided to approach the city from the south, our forces on the northern front must go on holding their positions as usual and the navy at Sinbyukyun must harass the enemy boats guarding the coast on the western side of the city.

"I myself shall be leading the columns attacking the city from the north, so that the enemy will be fully occupied with the prospect of a prize no less than King Anawrahta of Pagan."

Anawrahta and Kyansittha went into details of how the plan should be carried out to the best advantage. Anawrahta com-

manded that on no account should Buddhist Scriptures and objects of worship be destroyed and also that no efforts should be spared to save the works of art.

As to King Manuha and his family, "no offence however small, not as small as a drop of water, must be hurled against them."

Kyansittha and Byatta immediately began work to carry out the plan. First and foremost, the troops were to move northwards under cover of night, until they were out of the ken of Thaton's watch-outs, so that they could cross the Lawa range undetected.

Utmost secrecy and discretion had to be observed, for they could not afford to let the enemy have even an inkling that an assault would be attempted from the south.

Byatta, leading a few hand-picked men, was to move along with the Lawa peasants driving a caravan of bullock carts loaded with arms hidden under bundles of hay.

Kyansittha and the men were to follow Byatta who would leave a trail of outposts with intelligence as to what action was to be taken. Cavalry was to be sparingly used as it would arouse suspicion. A few horsemen to act as couriers should be enough for the purpose. Infantrymen and sharp-shooting bowmen were to travel either by bullock cart or on foot.

Byatta was happy that he had been allowed to choose for himself the most dangerous assignment. He had begged Kyansittha, who felt he should go with Byatta on this particular undertaking, to give him the privilege of the sole command in his hour of atonement for the act of flagrant disobedience which had caused the war.

Byatta took leave of Kyansittha saying; "Sir, may I ask you a favour. If anything should happen to me, pray be a foster father to my sons, love them and chastise them as you think meet; I only pray that they may never put you in such a predicament as I have done."

Kyansittha clasped Byatta's arm and said: "Take care of yourself, Byatta, don't take unnecessary risks." With a faint smile on his lips, Byatta waved without a word and walked away to where the bullock carts were waiting.

Kyansittha tried to ignore the premonition that he might never see Byatta again as he went about organizing the men to follow Byatta's trail. After a few days' march, Byatta and his men reached the southern wall, where they were met by Mai Oh Zar, as appointed, and were duly led to the "sitting-hen's gap." Under cover of night they waded along the stream and in no time found themselves within the city walls. Silently they overpowered the guards at the outposts and took their places as if nothing had happened.

Meanwhile, the attacking forces on the northern front were making a grand display with torches and bonfires all through the night, shouting war cries that they meant to storm the city by

dawn. Fires were lit so that Anawrahta was seen on his war elephant commanding his troops.

Even though the enemy hurled flaming arrows at the royal target no harm came to the person of Anawrahta probably because the distance had been calculated so well that the King should only be seen but not within bow-shot range.

As had been expected, all the forces of Thaton were concentrated on the northern walls and the much diminished units on the southern walls fell easily to Kyansittha and Byatta who opened the southern gates to let the rest of the infiltrating forces into the city.

By midnight Kyansittha's forces had occupied the strategic places on the southern half of the city. Soon they were making ready to attack the forces which were resisting Anawrahta's onslaught on the northern walls.

Surprised and shocked by the attack from the rear, the enemy troops panicked and the defences on the walls collapsed. Byatta and his men made for the gates so that Anawrahta's war elephants and cavalry could break in while the archers scaled the walls and gave covering fire to the storming party.

The Uparaja was at that time on Nemeindra hill, viewing the battle. As soon as he saw the city had been infiltrated, he immediately rode by the secret passage to the palace to warn his royal father Manuha. He got to the palace just before Kyansittha's men occupied and surrounded the palace.

By dawn, the city had fallen into the hands of Anawrahta and the men came to Kyansittha to report that Byatta had been killed, as were Mai Oh Zar and her brother Bo Gyi. Kyansittha ordered that special niches to perpetuate their memory be reserved on the southern walls, close to the "sitting-hen's gap", and "let the likenesses of Byatta, Byatwi, Mai Oh Zar and Bo Gyi be cast and placed in the niches and let them stand there as long as this city stands," he said.

Later, as the first rays of the sun gleamed on the fallen city, Anawrahta entered Manuha's palace. He was met by Kyansittha at the entrance with the news that the royal family was assembled in the audience hall but Manuha was in his private chapel, absorbed in his devotions before the shrine.

Anawrahta made a sign to his men to stay behind. In the chapel room he found Manuha at prayer in front of the golden image of the Buddha enshrined amongst flowers, candles and streamers. Anawrahta noiselessly put away his shield, sword, spear and all the paraphernalia of the battle and stood for a moment, undecided what to do next.

As he looked round the chapel room, his eyes fell on a white robe hanging on the wall and he noticed that it was identical with the one Manuha was wearing; so Anawrahta surmised that it must be the robe worn when worshipping the Buddha.

The next moment found Anawrahta swathed in the white robe, sitting by Manuha's side, his hands raised in prayer waiting silently for Manuha to finish his prayers. When Manuha straightened himself to rise, his eyes fell on the stranger by his side.

Anawrahta rose and offering his arm said: "Your Majesty, King Manuha, I am Anawrahta of Pagan, of the kingdom of Tampadipa." Manuha recoiled, his eyes blazing with anger, as words choked in his throat. Anawrahta, without withdrawing his proffered arm said: "This meeting is as I have always imagined it should be—both of us unarmed, robed in white, in the presence of the Enlightened One, the Buddha. First, may I ask your forgiveness for what I have done. And let us converse not as kings, but as disciples of the Buddha."

Manuha was astounded by the way Anawrahta spoke and behaved, for he had expected to meet a ruffianly soldier. He stood petrified, still ignoring the arm offered in friendship.

Suddenly the soft note of a conch was heard, followed by footsteps from outside. While Anawrahta was wondering what it meant, Manuha said abruptly: "It's the signal that the Reverend Primate is coming. We must go and greet him."

Anawrahta followed Manuha into the audience hall where the royal family was gathered with Kyansittha and officers of the high command. The two kings made obeisance before the Venerable Primate and requested him to be seated on the royal throne.

All the people in the hall, both victor and vanquished, bowed down to the Venerable Primate who sat on the throne with the two kings on each side. Shorn of their regalia and warlike arms, the two kings sat with their hands raised in prayer, united in their faith in the Buddha's Word.

A feeling of peace pervaded through the hall, like the calm after a storm.

41

Calm after the storm

It was indeed a great ending to the war between Anawrahta of Pagan, Tampadipa and Manuha of Thaton, Suvannabhumi. On the throne of Thaton sat not the victorious king, but the Venerable Primate, who as one crowned with the Word of the Buddha commanded the respect of both the victor and the vanquished.

From the high throne, the Primate looked with great compassion upon the face of King Manuha, his disciple, the one who had made him offerings of food, robes, shelter and medical care all through the years, and he saw that the king, though worn out with strain, bore a mien of serenity that often comes to great men in the hour of tragedy. The Primate knew that King Manuha had absorbed the teachings of the Buddha so that he had enough strength to submit to his fate.

When the Primate turned his gaze on Anawrahta, the victorious king, he found him bowed down at the foot of the throne, as if the weight of victory lay heavy on him. Or, was he seeking spiritual strength to bear it through the Word of the Buddha, of which the Primate was custodian?

The Primate addressed the two kings thus: "It was when the Buddha was in residence at Jetavana that the king of Kosala fought against his nephew Ajatasattu and suffered defeat three times: As he returned from defeat the third time, he thought to himself, 'Since I have not been able to subdue this milk-faced youth, what is the use of living any longer?' So he refused to eat and took to his bed. The news of what he had done spread throughout city and monastery. The monks reported the matter to the Buddha, saying, 'Reverend Sir, report has it that the king, who thrice suffered defeat has taken to his bed, saying, "Since I have not been able to defeat this milk-faced youth, what use is life to me?"' When the Teacher heard this report, he said: 'Monks, by winning a victory a man produces hatred: and he that is defeated is afflicted with suffering.' So saying, the Buddha pronounced the following stanza:

'Victory produces hatred; he that is defeated is afflicted with suffering.

'He that has renounced both victory and defeat lives in tranquility and happiness.' "

Anawrahta bowed down to the Primate three times and said: "Reverend Sir, I pray that I may live in tranquility and happiness." The Primate and the audience were surprised at the implication of the words, which clearly meant that the victorious king was

ready to renounce both victory and defeat. The Primate then addressed the two kings thus:

“My duty to you both, on equal love. Great kings of Thaton and Pagan: let it not disgrace me, if I demand, before this royal view, what rub, or what impediment there is, why that the naked, poor, and mangled peace, dear nurse of arts, should not, in this best garden of the world, our fertile clime, put up her lovely face? You are assembled; and my speech entreats, that I may know the let, why gentle peace should not bless us with her former qualities.”

Anawrahta, prostrating himself before the Venerable Primate addressed him: “Venerable Sir, may I, through your revered self, recount to His Majesty King Manuha and his peers, the circumstance that led to this unfortunate war. Few, if any, will hear me with credulity, if I say that I had to do what I have done, so that the Word of the Buddha might not be lost in oblivion; but I say it, in the revered presence of a worthy member of the Order of the Sangha.

“I need not dwell on how the Jewel, the Word of the Buddha reached this Golden Land from Myitzimadetha and took root, for it was from you that I learned this fact. The Buddhism we have here is only a sapling which has its tap-root in Myitzimadetha, so we should not neglect to follow the march of events there. As you already know, Buddhism has been all but ousted in the land where it was born and it has been heavily diluted with ritual customs of other religious sects; worse still, such practices under the guise of Buddhism have spread to many lands, including our kingdom Tampadipa, and I shall not dwell on the harm done to my people.

“The only place, according to the reports I have had, where Buddhism in its pure form, Theravada Buddhism, exists is in this Golden Land and in the island Kingdom of Lankadipa.

“As it is, Lankadipa is the only other place where we may look for our sources of Buddhism and at present, it is being threatened with a danger that might affect us.

“Lankadipa, like our land, is split into many provinces, and subsequently the island is torn with civil strife. Added to this, there is even a more ominous menace looming ahead. A tribe of warlike people from South India, called the Colas, have been harassing Lankadipa and the disintegrated state of the island kingdom has favoured their designs.

“At present, a prince named Vijayabahu is trying to unite the forces of Lankadipa against the Colas. The affairs of Lankadipa and Vijayabahu’s action should be a warning and inspiration to us all; for, you have already seen for yourself how our own disunion has encouraged the Khmer marauders to attack Uttha Pegu.

“Now, we have a task before us: it has fallen to our lot to receive and preserve for posterity the Word of the Buddha; this we cannot do, unless we have the strength to resist the invaders; it is therefore a necessity to build a united kingdom of all the peoples of this land, each contributing what the other does not have.

“Now that we are face to face with His Majesty King Manuha of the Golden land, for which circumstance many have paid with their lives,...may we ask Your Majesty to contribute what we, the people of Tampadipa do not have, namely, the Word of the Buddha.”

King Manuha looked at Anawrahta still undecided how to take a warrior king who seemed to be pining for spiritual strength. With a deferential gesture to the Primate on the throne he addressed Anawrahta:

“King of Tampadipa, I shall not dwell on the past. For the Buddha had said, ‘What is past...let that seem best. Before thee let there be nothing. And if thou wilt not grasp what lies between, thou shalt walk in peace;’ I shall only tell you things you should know about us.

“As a city we are a school of Raminnyadetha. We cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without effeminacy; wealth we employ more for use than for show. Above all, we treasure the Word of the Buddha and dedicate ourselves to defend it with our very lives.

“Since you, Anawrahta of Pagan, have declared in the presence of the Venerable Primate that you too are anxious to preserve the Jewel of the Dhamma, the Word of the Buddha for posterity, may I ask what plans you have for the future, and what part I and my peers are to play in the scheme of things?”

Anawrahta replied: “Our forbears came down from the northern highlands to the arid plains and settled there to turn the grim wasteland into a garden of smiling harvests. We have physical strength and warlike skills: we acquire worldly goods with our ingenuity, but we need something more than that. We need spiritual strength, we need culture...these, you can give us.

“True, we have won your beautiful city with our force of arms, but all the warlike arms you see are laid down at the foot of the throne; where sits the Venerable Primate, in whose heart is enshrined the Word of the Buddha...we are laying down our arms at the feet of him, who is a member of the Buddha’s Order. Now, we, you and I, kings of Pagan and Thaton have renounced both victory and defeat, so our people might live in tranquility and happiness.”

A low murmur of approval rose among Manuha’s peers and they looked at Anawrahta and his men with less hostility, for they too were somewhat surprised by the modest stillness and humility of Anawrahta’s men who were once as fierce as tigers in battle.

Anawrahta paused for a moment and resumed: “I request that His Majesty King Manuha and his court be good enough to travel back with us to Pagan to grace the land, which, though rich in worldly goods, lacks spiritual guidance and this, I ask, so that our city of Pagan may, in turn, be won by you with the Word of the Buddha.”

The Primate said: “This is indeed a fitting close to a meeting of two kings. May you meet with success as you go together hand in hand, doing service to the Word of the Buddha.”

The Primate descended from the throne and made his way to the door as the two kings and their peers raised their hands in respect.

As the company moved to disperse, Kyansittha's voice called: "Please stay a while, I have to restore this boy to his parents..." As the people turned to look they saw Kyansittha standing up with a child lying over his shoulders.

"What... what have you done to my son... you... you..." the angry voice of the Uparaja boomed out.

The sleeping child on Kyansittha's shoulders squirmed and slid down and adjusted the sling that supported his wounded arm and ran to his father.

"Father," he cried, "please don't do anything to this soldier. He picked me up when I was wandering in the city streets with this broken arm and he saved me, when a spear came flying at me... look, he took it in his arm, it's bleeding..."

Speechless, the Uparaja hugged his son while the boy's mother tearfully chided:

"Athawut Dhamma, how many times must I tell you, that you're too young yet to go into battle..."

It was Manuha who broke the silence that followed: "Soldier of Tampadipa, you've saved my grandson's life." Then turning to his son the Uparaja he commanded: "What are you tarrying for? See that the soldier's wound is tended, while we...Anawrahta and I...well, leave us alone. We have much to say to each other."

42

Common cause

While Anawrahta was making plans to march back to Pagan, a small armada of ships came into Thaton harbour from the island kingdom of Lankadipa. It was duly reported that a powerful delegation from Vijayabahu of Lankadipa had arrived to seek audience of Anawrahta, whose reputation as a Prince aspiring to build a united kingdom and promote the Word of the Buddha had already spread far and wide.

Eager for news from abroad, Anawrahta received the delegation cordially. The envoys from Lankadipa, after delivering messages and tokens of goodwill, presented an epistle from Vijayabahu.

Anawrahta was greatly moved by Vijayabahu's request for help in his struggle against the Colas, whose frequent plundering forays into Lankadipa had caused the destruction of temples, scriptures and worst of all, the *theras* who were the exponents of the Buddha's teachings.

The letter said:

"Many of the *theras* have been massacred and records of Buddhist writings destroyed during their latest invasion. Today, we do not even have enough *maha theras* to initiate new members and consecrate the ordination halls...the war still goes on and we are fighting hard against the enemies of the Buddha's *sasana*.

"Without presumption may I say that you, my royal brother, have been chosen for the great task of saving the Buddha's *sasana*, ousted from the land of its birth, by enshrining it in the hearts of your people. I am trying to do the same here in Lankadipa in spite of all the internal strife and disintegration. Even though great seas lie between us we are united by a common cause, the task of saving the Buddha's *sasana* from destruction and preserving it for posterity."

Anawrahta, after giving orders that the envoys from Lankadipa be housed and treated as became their station, went into conference with Kyansittha and officers of the high command. Arrangements were made to send to Vijayabahu shiploads of sandalwood, ivory and treasures that might be useful for procuring arms and men for the war against the Colas.

Anawrahta then showed Manuha the letter from Vijayabahu. Manuha was deeply impressed by the words: "Even though great seas lie between us, we are united by a common cause, the task of saving the Buddha's *sasana* from destruction and preserving it for posterity."

Anawrahta asked Manuha to approach the Pimate for suggestions as to what they should do about the dearth of *theras* at Lankadipa. The two kings went to the Pimate's monastery and Manuha requested the Pimate to choose some learned and worthy *theras* to be sent to Lankadipa, so that the preservation and propagation of the Word of the Buddha might be carried out.

Anawrahta happily noticed that Manuha seemed, at least for the moment, to forget his recent misfortune as he bent himself to the discussion of plans with the Pimate on the details of the mission to Lankadipa.

When the Pimate and Manuha had come to the final decision, Anawrahta looked straight into Manuha's eyes and said: "My royal elder brother, what should I do without your help and guidance? May I make a suggestion. We are sending shiploads of treasures to Vijayabahu, such things that might help him in procuring arms and men against the Colas. We need men who are wise, sagacious and discreet to present our contributions, both material and spiritual, to Vijayabahu. My suggestion is that your worthy son, the Uparaja who has recently distinguished himself in the war be allowed to lead the delegation. I believe that the Uparaja will excel himself in matters of statecraft and diplomacy. The delegation shall be composed of the peers of both Thaton and Pagan and I request you to choose worthy men from your court to go with the delegation."

Manuha could hardly keep the tremor from his voice as he answered: "This shall be done."

It took days to equip and load the ships for Lankadipa and Manuha chose the noblest peers to accompany his son the Uparaja. Since his first encounter with Anawrahta he had been revising his earlier impressions of "the warrior king of Tampadipa," who though much younger than himself seemed to be inspired by a higher purpose than conquering lands. He found himself responding to his friendly overtures, in spite of the blow to his pride and dignity...the inevitable circumstance of defeat.

The choice of the Uparaja as the leader of the delegation to Lankadipa eased the tension between the men of Thaton and Anawrahta's men. The news of the Cola menace to the Buddha's *sasana* in Lankadipa brought the two peoples closer in a common cause.

The ideological ties were further strengthened by personal contacts as men got to know one another better. Kyansittha's wounded arm though only a scratch was fussed over by the Uparaja's wife who felt that she could not thank him enough for saving her son Athawut Dhamma's life.

The boy, Athawut Dhamma, had taken to Kyansittha as he would to an indulgent uncle. He showered the soldier from Tampadipa with questions and listened to the stories of "the hot and arid plains where the sun blazed for months and where the many-horned cacti stood on the barren hills like tuskered ogres" and of the virile race of people who had turned the barren lands into a magnificent garden of luxuriant harvests.

When the Uparaja sailed with the envoys to Lankadipa, Athawut Dhamma perched on Kyansittha's shoulders to wave farewell to his father until the ships were lost to view. The Uparaja sailed away with the memory of the look in Kyansittha's eyes...the look that answered his unspoken appeal to look after his family while he was away.

Soon after the departure of the envoys to Lankadipa plans were made for the march back to Pagan. Anawrahta called Kyansittha to decide upon the route for the return. They had to consider many things, one of which was the mode of transportation for the *theras*.

Anawrahta went into many discussions with Manuha who almost believed himself to be planning a campaign to Tampadipa not by force of arms but by sacred destiny. Anawrahta himself was firmly convinced that his conquest of Thaton would be nothing when compared with Thaton's spiritual conquest of Tampadipa.

Anawrahta's own steadfast conviction and enthusiasm overwhelmed those around him, and people, friend and foe alike, found themselves echoing his beliefs in spite of themselves. Manuha found himself falling into Anawrahta's plans in the role of adviser, and many times implementor of the ideas conceived by the warrior king of Tampadipa.

With Manuha's approval, it was decided that artists and craftsmen of Thaton should be included in the entourage that would march back to Pagan.

The Three Baskets of the Buddhist Sriptures were to be carried on a bejewelled howdah on an elephant's back flanked by an army of war elephants loaded with treasures. King Manuha, his family and his peers were to ride on elephants along with Anawrahta and his entourage.

Kyansittha was to be in charge of the land forces as usual, often riding ahead of the march with the cavalry to make arrangements for encampment. Anawrahta, going over the plans with Kyansittha said thoughtfully: "It would be a new experience to travel back home by a different route. We shall be marching up along the banks of the Sittang and proceeding west but let me see, there's something we've almost forgotten..... the Princess of Uttha Pegu.

"We must not let Uttha Pegu feel slighted. You, Kyansittha, must go there with my compliments to the King of Uttha Pegu, and the message that we will, as soon as we get back home, make arrangements to fetch the Princess with pomp and circumstance as befits her station. Take this spear of mine and let it go in my stead as a symbol of our betrothal. We shall march on and you may join us when you have accomplished your mission."

43

The spear

The news of the close of the Thaton campaign and all that followed had already reached Uttha Pegu even before Kyansittha and his men came with the message of goodwill and presents from Anawrahta.

The king of Uttha Pegu and his people were gratified to hear the war had ended without an aftermath of bitterness and dissension. They applauded the appointment of the Uparaja as the leader of the delegation to Lankadipa. The Mons of Raminnyadetha had every reason to be proud of their culture and heritage that had taken its place as the guiding star for the people aspiring to build a united and prosperous kingdom.

Songs were sung in praise of the Word of the Buddha and the sublimity and the spiritual aspirations of such airs were enhanced by the tunes of glory that roused the people, even as the rattling peal of thunder might raise the dead; for the ever present theme of the songs was that the Word of the Buddha was facing a dire threat from the Colas, the ravagers of Lankadipa, the seat of Buddhism, and that it was the sacred duty of the people professing the faith to stand together so that the Word of the Buddha would be cherished and preserved for posterity.

One of the songs that found its way into the hearts of the young was in honour of the betrothal of Khin U the Princess of Uttha Pegu to King Anawrahta of Pagan.

“Lovely Khin U!

In flower of youth and beauty's pride:

Happy, happy, happy pair.

None but the brave,

None but the brave,

None but the brave deserve the fair!”

The sightless couriers of the air carried the strains of the song from the high towered palace to the busy market streets where the instruments picked them up, until they found their way into the rustic bamboo flutes that hung on the lips of cowherds tending their cattle in the faraway fields.

Khin U lay sprawled on her couch with her hands over her ears, as the minstrels chanted the words to the accompaniment of musical instruments and her devoted old nurse tried vainly to comfort her.

“What do I do now, my nurse, tell me what do I do?” Khin U cried, “why should everyone else be so happy when I’m so miserable?”

The nurse tenderly took Khin U in her arms and said, “Listen Khin U, every one’s rejoicing, because it means peace between the Mons and the people of Tampadipa; everyone’s happy, because as we all stand united, we don’t have to fear the Khmer marauders or any other aggressor. People are singing your praises, not only for your beauty but also because you have brought peace and prosperity to the land.”

“But, nurse, I’m unhappy...have I no right to be happy?”

“My child, try to feel happy that you have saved your countrymen from endless days of fear and want. Rejoice in the destiny that places you in such a position.”

“Now you’re talking exactly like my lord Kyansittha, destiny... destiny...You can talk like that, only because this destiny does not demand your heart.”

“Hush, my dear, messengers are waiting in the anteroom... they have brought news from your lord King Anawrahta.”

“Tell them I’m sick or dead ... anything you like ... go, receive the news yourself.”

The old nurse sighed and went to receive the messengers on the princess’s behalf, saying to herself, “Thank the Lord, I still have a good stock of fibs and excuses for her moods and tantrums.”

It was only a few moments later that the nurse came to Khin U agog with excitement. “Khin U, my child, get up ... listen, we’ve wonderful news. Kyansittha will be here tomorrow.”

Kyansittha was welcomed by the king of Uttha Pegu who was happy to hear a first-hand account of the war, the peace and the missions, and he graciously received Anawrahta’s message that the alliance between Uttha Pegu and Tampadipa must be celebrated with pomp and circumstance as befitted the occasion. It was proper that the occasion should not be just an item in the triumphant march that marked the conquest of Thaton and that Anawrahta would send a lordly delegation to fetch the Princess as soon as they got back to Pagan.

When Kyansittha presented to the king of Uttha Pegu, Anawrahta’s spear with the treasures, the King commanded that Khin U should receive them with due ceremony.

Surrounded by men in gorgeous liveries, Kyansittha carried the spear placed lengthwise on a decorated stand to where Khin U stood like a statue amidst her maidens.

Kyansittha held the spear against his breast and his lips moved imperceptibly to whisper to himself: “Forgive my heart, my lord Anawrahta, but it’s only the heart that wrongs you...only my heart.”

Kyansittha did not raise his eyes to her face, but glued them

to the floor where the silken fringe of her * *htamein* lay in billowy folds.

Khin U knelt humbly to receive the spear and as she did, she moved her lips to form the words; "I have to see you...the usual place the usual time..." Kyansittha gave a gentle shake of his head and said aloud: "Madam, this spear represents my royal master, King Anawrahta," and he lowered his voice to a whisper; "and it lies between us." Khin U touched the spear with her head and said: "My lords and ladies, please leave us for a while, for I should like to enquire of my lord Anawrahta. I would fain do that in the presence of you all, but ... you will spare my maiden blushes ... my lords and ladies."

The attendants withdrew and Khin U said: "Oh, how could you ... how could you do this to me! You have no heart."

Without raising his eyes, Kyansittha answered: "I have a heart, Khin U, but it cannot go beyond this spear."

Khin U whispered: "Now, listen. We have very little time. I cannot and will not go on with this alliance. Take me, take me anywhere so long as we are together, I don't care."

Kyansittha replied: "No, Khin U, I will not do that."

"Why not? Because you don't love me?"

"There are things in life ... other than love ..."

"Such as ... ?"

"Honour ... the measure of my love of honour is in itself the measure of my love for you."

"Is this all you have to say?"

"No, Khin U, remember what I once told you. We are just men and women caught in the vast web of history in the making. We are caught up in the destiny of our generation to build a brave new world, the union of our people in the land."

"What about our love?"

"Love should give us strength and courage...it should not be an instrument of destruction...it should not destroy the union of our people, that has cost our lord King Anawrahta his years of work, and the blood, sweat and tears of our people..."

"I see, love has no place in *your* scheme of things."

"Not *my* scheme of things, I am only a servant of destiny. Love has no priority in the life of a princess, nor should it move a man to betray his ideals. We all have to give what our age demands of us. And you, Khin U, as a princess, more is asked of you than you are willing to give. But, have courage, as becomes your kingly ancestors, give as your destiny demands ... No,...no... Khin U, please, please...do not stain this spear of our lord

* nether garment

Anawrahta with your tears, lest he wonder whence the baser gems on the hilt got their lustre.”

“My heart shall never be anyone’s but yours. Your high-sounding destiny may demand anything, but it shall never have my heart...so be it. ”

So saying, Khin U moved away abruptly and placed the spear on a small table. She knelt before it in respect as she might to her lord King Anawrahta.

His mission accomplished, Kyansittha left Uttha Pegu to ride post haste to join Anawrahta on his march back to Pagan. He took one last look at the massive city gates, as they clanged shut on their departing backs: and with it he felt that one chapter in his life had closed for ever.

44

Back to the royal city

The conquest of Thaton marked a new chapter in Anawrahta's reign.

When Kyansittha rejoined Anawratha's forces on their march back to Pagan he found his king in a reflective mood. After hearing the news of Uttha Pegu, he had a long talk reviewing the events that had happened since that fateful day he killed his brother Sokkadae, in single combat.

"We have come a long way, Kyansittha ... it is fifteen years now, although it seemed just yesterday that I met you talking your breath out in that market place. Only when I see how your face has shed its boyish looks, and how lines of care and hard work have taken their place, I feel that years have passed.

"We have done a lot, Kyansittha, but we have more to do. With the end of the Thaton campaign, another phase has begun. It's a pity that life is so short."

Kyansittha listened without a word, for he was thinking how he could ask the King to let him go back to Htihline to lead his own life, now that Prince Saw Lu had seemed quite capable of managing affairs of the state during his father's absence. The Queen Mother was no more and the young prince was entirely on his own. His two faithful henchmen were Byatta's sons, Shwe Phyin Gyi and Shwe Phyin Lay, affectionately called Min Gyi and Min Lay.

Min Gyi and Min Lay, as favourites of Prince Saw Lu, and the sons of the hero Byatta, had won great popularity among the people. Handsome and dashing, they fired the people's imagination by virtue of their parentage and gallantry and many had come to regard them with awe and admiration. The brothers took with pride the death of their father, the honourable death of a true soldier, but they were inconsolable when their mother Mai Wunna died of a broken heart. They spent days in the woodlands of Mount Popa that was her home, building and consecrating a shrine in her memory.

The people living round the Popa woodlands came to include Mai Wunna in their animistic rituals and to revere her as "The Mother" of them all, in sympathy with the two young heroes.

While on the way to Pagan, Anawrahta went over the reports of the events that had taken place and discussed with Kyansittha how they should introduce Theravada Buddhism to a people still deep rooted in their animistic beliefs.

“We must be subtle and diplomatic, we must let the people absorb the new faith as naturally as possible. We must leave their old beliefs and rituals as they are, for we shall not get anywhere if we start antagonizing them,” Anawrahta told Kyansittha.

People at Pagan waited for their victorious king to come home and made preparations to welcome him back on the great day. The streets paved with silvery sands were shaded with green palms, while music troupes stood behind the bamboo trellis fencing along the path.

The citizens of Pagan were somewhat surprised to see that the royal elephant, resplendent with gemmy ornaments did not carry their victorious king but the Three Baskets of the Buddhist Scriptures shaded with royal umbrellas. Right after the royal elephant were the *theras*, yellow-robed, walking bare-foot with their eyes modestly downcast. They were attended by white-robed laymen who walked slowly keeping pace with the *theras*.

It took some time for the citizens to see that it was the king himself and his peers who walked at the heels of the *theras*, like humble attendants. It was a new experience for the people to glorify anything other than royal grandeur and victories of war.

“Why doesn’t he ride on the royal elephant? Why must he walk like a humble commoner? Why doesn’t he wear his glorious regalia? Why the rough colourless robe?”

Amidst all the chattering, they also noticed that the vanquished King Manuha of Thaton and his family were among those who walked in attendance on the *theras*.

The people fell on their knees and raised their hands to their foreheads not so much to pay their respects to their king as to revere the *theras* whose modest mien seemed to radiate compassion and loving kindness.

The procession of *theras* was followed by the minstrels singing praises of the Buddha and His teachings. The citizens of Pagan listened enraptured:

* “Buddha the wake, the son of man,
Self-tamed, by inward vision rapt,
Bearing himself by ways sublime,
Glad in tranquility of heart;
To whom men honour pay as one
Who hath transcended all we know;
To whom gods also honour yield:”

As the multitude rent the skies with loud applause, some shouted:

“Hear ... hear ... how the pealing anthem swells up to the skies! The celestial host in thousand quires must have touched their immortal harps to answer the song:”

* Mrs. Rhys Davies—*Psalms of the Early Buddhists*.

And the people picked up the refrain of the song:

* "As lotus born within a lake,
By water nowise if defiled,
But groweth fragrant, beautiful,
So is the Buddha in this world,
Born in the world and dwelling there,
But by the world no less defiled,
E'en as the lily by the lake."

The next to come in the procession were series of tableaux, presented by the Mon artistes in song, dance and music. Each tableau was either an episode from the Buddha's life or a story from the Jataka. As the people watched enthralled, they absorbed information about the Buddha's life and His teachings.

Once back in Pagan, Kyansittha's hope of going back to Htiline turned out to be a far-off dream; for he found himself more and more involved in Anawrahta's plans. It seemed, as Anawrahta said, their task had just begun.

"What do you think, Kyansittha, we may not be able to make our people understand the teachings of the Buddha so easily. The more I talk with the *maha theras* on the subject, the more I am convinced that it will be of little use to push the doctrines down the people's throats. We must give them what they can swallow... like the Suttas and Jataka stories that will teach them the way to live a good life."

Kyansittha was commanded to get men and materials to build a stupa and have terra cotta plaques of Jataka stories inlaid on the walls, so that the people might know the teachings of the Buddha through them.

Somewhat to his surprise, Kyansittha found Prince Saw Lu a great help in building the stupa. The young prince seemed to have a flair for the arts and he took the Mon artistes from Thaton to his heart and spent most of the time learning their language, songs and music.

Even though Kyansittha found Saw Lu's activities "too soft" for his taste, he had to admit that the young prince too was shouldering a part of the task of building a united kingdom. "It's all right for a commoner to be an artist and live in a dream world, but how will he fare as a king?" Kyansittha thought to himself: "To be a leader and king in such times means more action than dreaming and much less of songs and music."

Kyansittha was, in a way, grateful for the tasks that took him days and weeks from Anawrahta's court, as he was spared the ordeal of being among the peers to welcome Khin U when she arrived in all the pomp and splendour that Anawrahta had promised her.

* Mrs. Rhys Davies—*Psalms of the Early Buddhists*.

The people rejoiced in the Union, for having the Mon princess as Anawrahta's queen meant peace and stability among the people of Raminnyadetha and Tampadipa.

Scarcely were the festivities celebrating the nuptials of Anawrahta and his new queen over than the news of unrest on the northern frontiers came. Anawrahta said: "I have never been easy about Nanchao...it will ever be a menace to our peace and stability. We must, once and for all, settle this. We must build fortresses up there in the north and, win, by all means, the goodwill of the Shan chiefs."

Preparations were made for the Nanchao campaign and Kyansittha as the commander-in chief mobilized the forces. Byatta's sons, Min Gyi and Min Lay, proved themselves to be good cavalymen like their late father, and Kyansittha was happy to have them under his command. He hoped to look after them like his own sons, as he had promised Byatta.

Min Gyi and Min Lay, handsome glamorous sons of the dark stranger and the woodland nymph, had been spoilt by hangers-on who found the two brothers useful in attaining their own ends.

Kyansittha saw this only too well and he felt uneasy. The two brothers were good soldiers, full of courage and daring, like their father. But they needed discipline very badly. It was fortunate that the Nanchao campaign had become imperative, thought Kyansittha, for it would do the young men a lot of good to see action in battle.

45

Unity and solidarity

Reports of the activities of the Nanchao forces on the north-eastern frontiers came intermittently to the city of Pagan even as the armed forces were being rallied for the campaign. The Nanchao forces had started building fortifications in the areas around Katha and Anawrahta took this to be a kind of challenge to the Burmese strength.

In one of the conferences with his commanders, Anawrahta said: "It is only a hundred years since our forefathers came down with the Nanchao army to the arid plains that we call our land. Many of our kinsmen remained on the highlands and they too have made good their settlements. Look at the Kadus and Thets living in the valley of the two rivers, the Irrawaddy and the Thanlar. The city * Thinh-twe is a famous trade centre and according to the reports, they have widened their sway as far as the Manipuri borders on the west. On no account will these people, our kinsmen, suffer the Nanchao armies to come into their domain."

The Nanchao forces, so far, had not yet started any aggressive warfare, save for a few isolated skirmishes on the border. What was more important to Anawrahta was the need to win the goodwill of the Kadus and Thets so that they could all stand together against the threat of the Nanchao invasion.

Anawrahta marched with the forces up the river Irrawaddy until he reached the city of Thinh-twe, where he was welcomed by the chiefs of the Kadu and Thet peoples. From there, he despatched armed forces under the command of Prince Saw Lu and the two gallant sons of Byatta, Mln Gyi and Min Lay, to march as far as the outskirts of Katha, where the Nanchao forces were building fortifications.

Anawrahta commanded Kyansittha to stay with him, as he needed his services to win over the people of the valley of the two rivers, the Thanlar and the Irrawaddy. Through Kyansittha's ingenuity, the ideals of unity and solidarity were put across to the people through songs, music, dances and tableaux, created by the artistes of Raminnyadetha, who formed an important assembly in Anawrahta's entourage.

The harassment of Uttha Pegu by the Khmer invaders and how Anawrahta's men marched down there and drove them away, was one of the themes of the songs and tableaux. The sweet haunting

* Known today as Tagaung

music and songs of the Mons soon found their way into the hearts of the people.

All the songs, music and dances carried a message that the Word of the Buddha must be preserved for posterity, so that the people would be united in a common faith. People heard through the same media the news from across the sea, how the Cola invaders were threatening the island kingdom of Lankadipa, the seat of Theravada Buddhism. The struggle of Vijayabahu, resisting the Colas on one side and trying to unite the disintegrated states on the other, moved the people to deep sympathy.

It was natural that people saw the similarity between Vijayabahu and Anawrahta, who was trying to build a united kingdom amidst overwhelming odds. They felt that they should give full support to Anawrahta in this undertaking, as it was for the good and prosperity of all. The immediate danger from the Nanchao forces alerted the people of the valley of the two rivers and they felt all the more the need to stand together.

Anawrahta and his men helped them to repair the old stupas and build defences. Such good works convinced the people that they had in Anawrahta an enterprising leader who meant to accomplish what he had set out to achieve. They considered themselves fortunate to have such a strong, wise king to lead them to a better and happier life.

Throughout the length and breadth of the land people threw themselves into the task of building defences and growing more crops, so that even the smallest village was well-fortified and self-sufficient and did not have to fear any marauding foe. Rich lumber-yielding forests became centres of activity as more and more materials were acquired for building defences.

Anawrahta himself had his own plans for building fortifications. Monasteries were needed for the *theras* who were brought over from Ramminnyadetha and academies for the study and propagation of the Word of the Buddha. He commanded that certain areas of forests were to be allotted for the state and officials appointed to guard over them.

Anawrahta commanded Kyansittha to make a tour of the forest areas and make plans with the help of the local people as to what areas were to be allotted for the state and what parts for the people. He was to find suitable people to be sent off to those areas as custodians of the royal forests.

While Kyansittha was working on the plan, he came upon a disturbing piece of information: gangs of thieves were trapping the wild elephants and smuggling them across the border to Nanchao. Elephants being one of the sinews of war, it was a serious leakage of the kingdom's military resources.

Kyansittha reported the matter to Anawrahta and immediately a proclamation was made that those found trapping wild elephants without the king's permit would be punished as traitors.

The areas reserved for the king were also proclaimed and the public was warned that on no account should such forests be

tampered with, and that not even a tiny twig the size of a tooth pick should be taken without the king's permission.

Neither Kyansittha nor Anawrahta had an inkling that the action would sow seeds of resentment in some sections of the people, who already had found trading in timber a lucrative business. To those who had enjoyed unlimited freedom to procure timber from any part of the forest, the new edict was most unwelcome.

Before the proclamation, official permits for timber-cutting had been given freely but now the powers of the officials were curtailed. Forest areas for the public were systematically allotted so that everyone, regardless of their station in life could procure timber for their use, even though they did not have access to high officials. In this way many high officials lost authority over people wishing to get forest permits.

Many such officials regarded Kyansittha as an arch enemy and they were the ones who rallied round Prince Saw Lu, with whom they shared the view that Kyansittha, the outsider, was enjoying undue privileges.

At the time of the proclamation, Prince Saw Lu and his henchmen Min Gyi and Min Lay were away on the north-eastern frontier, repelling the Nanchao forces. When the news of the king's proclamation and Kyansittha's actions in implementing the law reached Prince Saw Lu, he was indignant.

Now that he was grown to adulthood, he said, he would no longer stand what he considered to be an indignity and he was determined to assert his rights as the crown prince, and heir-apparent to the throne.

Kyansittha was too busy to realize the seriousness of the situation, as he had to be on the move back and forth between Thinhtwe where his lord Anawrahta was organizing the Kadus and Thets, and the royal city of Pagan to see to administrative matters.

On one of his trips back to Thinhtwe, Anawrahta commanded Kyansittha to march with reinforcements to the Katha front and help Prince Saw Lu and his men; he said, "Reports say, Kyansittha, that there are magnificent forests along the Shweli river and the Nanchao forces are not only extracting timber but also trapping wild elephants. It will not do to let our trees and elephants fall into enemy hands. See that the forests are put under strict surveillance."

Kyansittha's heart was heavy, for he too had had reports from his own sources. He did not know how he could tell the king, that some of Prince Saw Lu's men themselves were involved with the gangs who extracted timber and trapped elephants for the Nanchao forces.

Kyansittha did not think that Prince Saw Lu, with all his frailties, would have stooped to such treachery. "But he was mad about elephants", Kyansittha thought. "Those who wanted to win his favour tried to get elephants for his army, so they

said. Maybe he did not know what his own men were up to. Anyway, I shall find out for myself."

Kyansittha decided not to tell the king anything about the matter until he had investigated it. According to the reports, Min Gyi and Min Lay seemed deeply involved in the matter. Kyansittha was not sure if the two young men realised the seriousness of the affair. The two young heroes, in the pride of power and glory, must have been too naive to see through the machinations of hardened sycophants, who would use them to their advantage.

"I must, by all means, save the two young men before they get deeper into trouble, as I promised their father," thought Kyansittha, as he journeyed towards the north-eastern frontier, where Min Gyi and Min Lay, unknown to him, were cast in a drama of illicit love, hate and revenge. Little did Kyansittha dream that he would be called upon to judge Min Lay's misdeeds that resulted from his infatuation with Mai U, the virtuous wife of a forester named Yin Maung.

46

An affair of honour

The exploits of the two brothers Min Gyi and Min Lay at the Nanchao front under the command of Prince Saw Lu enhanced their already glorious reputation as the sons of Byatta the great war hero. Barely out of their teens, they were looked upon with awe and admiration by the people who wove stories of their prowess and strength.

Sycophants with an eye for personal advancement saw in them a potential source of help in their unscrupulous schemes. The Nanchao enemies on the other side used such men for the procurement of timber and elephants from the Burmese side, and soon the gangs operating on the border got themselves into Min Gyi and Min Lay's circle of followers.

Of the two brothers Min Lay seemed the hardier one; Min Gyi was more in harmony with Prince Saw Lu in his love of fine arts and study of the Mon and Pali languages. Min Lay often scoffed at such activities as effeminate and urged his brother to be more manly and active. Min Gyi treated his younger brother with indulgence and waved him away with a "have a good time yourself and leave me alone."

Some of Min Lay's henchmen, under cover of the illustrious master's name, made fortunes by extracting timber and trapping elephants and smuggling them across the Nanchao border. They thought that no one would dare to arrest and bring them to justice, even though the king had passed an edict ordering severe punishment for offenders.

Many of the foresters could not very well resist Min Lay's men when they came and cut down trees and trapped elephants, even though the orders were "not to let anyone cut as much as a tooth-pick from the King's forest."

Kyansittha had already heard reports of such irregularities and he meant to enforce the king's edict even in the remotest parts of the land. He hoped that there might be some conscientious foresters who would defy even Min Gyi and Min Lay, so that the king's order might be carried out to the letter.

Sure enough there was one forester who was determined to carry out the king's order. He was Yin Maung, a hefty young forester, whose overwhelming love for the stately trees had made him choose his calling. He was placed in charge of the forests on the Shweli river close to the Nanchao border.

Yin Maung hailed from the eastern bank of the Irrawaddy river where Mandalay division now lies. His wife Mai U was

famous for her beauty and skill at the loom and no less for her modesty and virtue.

For some time, Yin Maung had tried to eke out a living by tilling the ground while Mai U wove cotton and silk cloths for the market. Yin Maung was not at all happy about this state of affairs, for he wished he could earn enough for the two so that Mai U did not have to spend days and nights at her loom.

It was then that Kyansittha's men came round recruiting men to be custodians of the king's forests, and Yin Maung saw his chance. He at once offered himself to the service of the king.

Yin Maung was happy when he was assigned to guard the forests along the Shweli River, even though he would have to leave his home. At first, he tried to persuade Mai U to stay back, at least for some time, but Mai U would not hear of it. "The wife's place is with her husband," she said firmly.

So that was how Yin Maung and his wife came to settle in a small hamlet on the outskirts of the Shweli forests. Although Yin Maung had to go into the forest and stay there for weeks, Mai U was content to be at home weaving at her loom. At least she was as close as she could be to her husband.

Yin Maung and his men built outposts and fortifications so that they could deal with any intruders into the king's forest, and patrols were organized so that there might be no loss. He also had to see that only authorised officials got the timber and elephants for the king.

One day, Min Lay came with his men on a tour of the forests and one of his men said that they needed timber to build fortifications and also reinforcements of elephants. "Then why don't we get what we want from here?" said Min Lay casually, not knowing, of course that his men had purposely brought him to the forest area, so that they could procure timber and elephants for their own ends.

Min Lay believed that his men wanted timber and elephants for the use of the fighting forces and he did not think he needed the king's permit to let his men procure them from the forest. He went back to his camp on the border, leaving his men to make preparations to cut trees and trap elephants.

That was how Yin Maung came to a head-on clash with Min Lay's men, who began to go round the forests intent on their purpose. Yin Maung had a small force to maintain law and order in his forest area, but they were helpless against the seasoned fighting men of Min Lay's army. He knew that it was no use telling the men that the king's edict must be obeyed regardless of who they were. The only thing he could think of doing was to go down to the neighbouring hamlets and get men and arms to defy the law-breakers.

Mai U's pleasure at Yin Maung's unexpected return to the village turned to dismay when she learned his purpose.

"My dear, you're up against a powerful man, someone next to Prince Saw Lu ...," she ventured to remind her husband.

"But the king's order must be obeyed. I am here to carry out the royal edict. I was instructed not to allow as much as a small twig, the size of a tooth-pick, to be taken without the king's permit ... I will surely carry it out to the letter, I must ... it is my duty."

Mai U looked sadly at her husband, as he absentmindedly nibbled a few morsels from the meal she had carefully prepared.

"Please have more of that dish. Don't you like the way I cooked the rabbit? It is minced and seasoned with onions and garlic. It goes well with the gourd broth."

Yin Maung tried to swallow the delicacies that seemed to turn to dust in his mouth. In his present state of mind, he could not do justice to his wife's cooking. He came away from the meal and sat on the bamboo dais in front of his hut for a quiet smoke. Mai U soon joined him after putting away the meal he had hardly touched.

"I must get men, Mai U, to drive away the law-breakers—don't you worry, we have law and justice on our side. I feel, in my own small way, I am serving our king and Kyansittha in their great work."

Mai U listened trying to fight back the tears and she found voice to say, "But ... but ... the King and Kyansittha are so far away from us all. They are only echoes that are heard, not seen. Will they, will they withstand the sword of Min Lay that threatens us now?"

Yin Maung knew only too well that the awesome names of King Anawrahta and Kyansittha scarcely protected him against Min Lay and his men.

Mai U said: "Would it not be wiser to keep quiet? After all, you could not be expected to resist people like Min Lay and his men, from a humble position like yours."

"I know, Mai U, anyone would say that. But I was given to understand that the timber and elephants are of great importance to the King and the country and I have been sent here to protect them. I must not fail in my duty. It is a matter of honour."

Yin Maung gathered Mai U tenderly in his arms and wiped away her tears and said: "I want you to be brave, my dear. With luck I shall win, for I believe that what is right must win in the end. Please do not make it harder for me to do what I have to do. It's not that I do not love you, but..."

"But, it is a matter of honour..." Mai U finished for him, "I thought honour was something only for the high ranking peers like Kyansittha, Prince Saw Lu and Min Lay, not for us humble commoners."

"I thought so, too. I never knew what honour meant until now. Mai U, my dear, I should never hold my head high again, if I allowed those people in my forest areas without the King's permit. You don't want this to happen to me... Mai U ..."

"No, surely not, for you will never be happy: I want you to be happy. Only... only... my dear, please take care of yourself ...please."

“I will, my dear, I promise nothing shall happen to me. Now, let’s do something pleasant. I will arrange skeins of cotton yarn on your loom, all my favourite colours, and you will weave a *pasoe* for me to wear when I come home next time. Be sure you finish it then...”

Yin Maung playfully rapped Mai U’s head with his pipe and the two set themselves to lay cotton skein on the loom so that Mai U could absorb herself in the task she loved while Yin Maung was away.

Mai U’s heart was somewhat comforted just before Yin Maung left, for his men from the forest came with the news that Min Lay’s men had departed with their loot, so there was no need for a clash, at least, for the time being.

“I must go on with my plans all the same, for they might come again. I must reinforce my patrols and tighten the security so that such looting of the King’s forests will not be repeated,” thought Yin Maung as he retraced his steps to the forest area. They must be guarded at all costs.

Meanwhile, Mai U worked at her loom, capturing the intricate patterns of clouds, trees and flowers in all their colour and glory, as her fingers guided the shuttle through the warp that her own love had put on her loom. Little did she know then that the same loom would be instrumental in teaching her the meaning of honour and to understand, at last, what Yin Maung meant by “an affair of honour.”

47

Min Lay and Mai U

“In among the reeds and rushes a little canoe pushes.”

So goes a riddle, the answer to which is a weaver's shuttle that pushes through the warp threads.

Mai U murmured the little rhyme, as she sat at her loom to begin the day's work. She rested her feet on the treadle and tried a push or two, to see if the warp threads ascended and descended correctly with the healds to form a shed. She then flicked the batten playfully so that it beat up the weft rhythmically in tune with the jingling bells that were tied to the treadle.

The batten had been made by her husband's own hands of the timber called the “male-teak wood”; it was from a tree allied to the teak, known by this name for its strength and toughness.

“Hark ye, hark ye, my love,
Hear the weaver-maid flick
The batten made of male-teak timber,
Hark ye, hark ye, my love,
Hark to the music of the batten.
The batten made of male-teak timber,
That can be heard ten thousand leagues away.”

Mai U hummed the song, as she began to weave, marking time to the jingle of the bells and the clack-clack of the batten beating up the weft, thinking that the song might be carried to the forest where her husband Yin Maung was working.

She was so absorbed in her work that she did not notice the sound of horses' hooves that clattered through the village. The next moment she was startled by the voice of the village headman calling: “Mai U—Mai U—.”

Mai U turned to look towards the wicket gate that creaked open to admit the headman. Mai U respectfully got down from her seat and asked: “Sir, what brings you here? I am at your service, your humble servant.”

The headman was panting with excitement. He said, “Mai U, it's your husband's doing. Min Lay and his men are here. They want to know what Yin Maung is up to, recruiting men to protect the royal forest. Min Lay is as angry as a wounded tiger and we are trying to pacify him, else, it will be the worse for your husband and for us too.”

“But, but sir, what can I do?” Mai U asked.

"Now, now, there's no time for questions. Just do as you are told. Min Lay and his men are coming here. He wants to have a look at the *pasoes* you've woven—try to please him ... at all costs, and one thing, he does not know that you are Yin Maung's wife. And don't let him know."

Even before Mai U could breathe a word of protest, the sound of the horses' hooves rolled in and Min Lay and his retinue rode into the front yard of the hut. Mai U sat by her loom and hung her head, not daring to look up.

"Why do you not raise your eyes, fair one ... I'm not an ogre, pray look at me. How can I speak to you when you hide your face so?" said a voice which came from the leader of the group.

"He has a kind voice," Mai U thought, "He could not be as bad as they say." She raised her eyes and found herself staring into the face of a young man, barely twenty, dark and handsome in a strange outlandish way. "He looked so young and vulnerable. If only I could appeal to his better nature ... I am sure there must be some inherent good in him, if he were not spoilt by those hangers-on. If only I could appeal to his better nature," Mai U was thinking helplessly, when the voice went on, "Now, let me see you work at your loom, they say that you are the best weaver in ten thousand leagues."

Mai U resumed her seat at the loom and with trembling fingers tried to guide the shuttle through the shed, but as her unsteady feet failed to press the treadle in accord with her hands, the shuttle got entangled with the weft threads.

Discord had fallen on the music of the loom and the beautiful pattern of cloth already woven soon became a mess of thrums. She stopped to disentangle the shuttle from the broken yarns willing her tears not to spill into the tangle of threads and mesh.

"What a beautiful pattern you are weaving,...but perhaps not so charming as its creator—now, don't spoil it by leaving too many loose thrums, the lucky wearer might think something has gone amiss with your love..., for is this not a labour of love?" Min Lay was holding the loom post with one hand and fondling the woven cloth with the other, so that Mai U had to withdraw her hand every now and then, for fear it would be caught in Min Lay's.

The headman said; "Mai U, Min Lay likes the *pasoe* you are weaving. Why don't you finish it this evening and bring it to my house where Min Lay is staying." Then turning to Min Lay, he said, "My Lord, the banquet and the dance troupes await your presence at my place. It seems that Mai U is too overawed by your august presence to go on weaving, so may I suggest that we leave her for a time until ..."

Min Lay caught the meaningful gleam in the headman's eye and he reluctantly tore himself away from Mai U's loom and turned to go with a whisper, "Fair one, I shall see you tonight..."

The headman stayed on as Min Lay and his men rode away, for he felt he had to talk to Mai U. He leaned on the loom

post and rapped his bamboo pipe with undue vehemence and said; "Mai U, don't think for a moment that I like doing what I am doing now."

Mai U turned angrily on him and cried: "Then, why are you doing it? If I were your daughter, would you... would you...do this ... pandering to that son of a drift-wood alien that came from nowhere...that young nobody on whom titles and power hang loose like a giant's robe on a dwarfish thief."

"Say anything you like of me. I have the safety of my village in my hands, men, women and children. I stood by your husband when he wanted my help to get men to guard the royal forest; I am also in the King's service. Now, what am I to do when Min Lay comes raging here, demanding to know what your husband's up to and why I have helped him?"

"But my husband was carrying out the King's orders. Min Lay's men did not have the King's permit, without which not a twig the size of a tooth-pick must be taken."

"You are as dim as your forester husband. I thought I could talk sense with you. Carrying out the King's orders ...ha ... when the King, ... nay ... even Kyansittha ... is leagues away. They are just names ... nothing more. We serve the sword that hangs over us ... Min Lay's sword. Don't you know, while Prince Saw Lu is campaigning against the Nanchao invaders, they are all-powerful in this area? You do just what they tell us."

"But, you owe your loyalty to the King ... where's your sense of loyalty?"

"Now, Mai U, stop talking all this nonsense about honour and loyalty... they are just words, they mean nothing ... especially when our own lives are threatened by Min Lay's sword. Your husband should have allowed his men in the royal forest ... the King would never know ... and do you think the King will ever know how all this talk of honour and loyalty will be silenced in your husband's impudent throat?"

Mai U clutched the reed of the loom till her hands bled and cried: "No—no—oh no—they can't do this to my husband..."

"Yes they can and they will. They will soon be going to the forest to attack the foresters. At present we are trying to prevent Min Lay's wrath from being hurled at our village."

"Then, I must go and warn my husband..."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. You stay where you are. Your husband got us into this trouble and you owe this much to us... to get us out of this predicament."

"But... how... oh, it's impossible..."

"Yes, it is possible... your husband need never know... give Min Lay what he wants, *pasoe* and all, get new skeins of warp of the same colour and lay them according to the same pattern, he will never know the difference, just as the King would not know if your husband had allowed Min Lay's men in the forest... you see what I mean..."

"I see... I see only too well... my husband might never know, but I will know that I have done wrong... the King might never know... never even know a lowly churl like Yin Maung ever existed... but Yin Maung will never be at peace with himself, and the same applies to me... I cannot do it."

The headman bit his pipe hard and walked a few paces to and fro and nodded gravely:

"But, Mai U, our village with all its innocent people, children, babies, women in child-bed... they are all in danger. We dare not think what Min Lay will do if he is not pacified. And another thing, your husband too is in danger. I will send men to warn him off, I promise this in return for what you will do for us. Min Lay might stay here a few days...if you please him...and you will, to save your husband. This is his only chance. Believe me, I do not want any harm to come to your husband; I like him, even though I can hardly follow his pigheaded talk of honour and loyalty."

Mai U laid her head on the batten and sobbed her heart out. The headman patted her on her shoulder and said; "It's just one of those things, Mai U, we cannot help it... try to be brave... remember it's your husband's life," and he walked away, reminding her to come to his house when the children's bed-time cock crowed.

As soon as the headman was gone, Mai U braced herself and decided to go to her husband. She went to the small shed at the back of the hut and there untied the young horse Coconut Shell named after his colour. She threw a sack over his back and whispered: "Son, we must reach your father as quick as we can... they say, my dear, when our forbears came down from the hills to the arid plains, their women rode bareback along with them. I have not ridden often, but...my son, don't fail me. Don't let my forbears be ashamed of me..."

The young horse flicked his ears as if in consent and the next moment the two were on their way.

48

Yin Maung and the foresters

Mai U rode towards the king's forest taking less frequented paths that she knew well, so that if Min Lay and his men discovered her flight and gave chase, she would have a better chance of eluding them; and she had at least half a day's ride ahead of her pursuers.

Coming upon the familiar land-marks such as the centuries-old teak tree that welcomed her with the rustle of its large downy leaves, Mai U paused to touch the blaze Yin Maung had slashed on the knotted trunk so that there could be no mistake about the tree's identity. Even in her hurry, Mai U could not go away without putting a morsel of rice and fruits to offer to the spirit of the tree, praying for the safety of her husband. She then called to the birds whose nests hung on the branches, to come and partake of the food.

The birds came trustingly to take the food out of her hands. Mai U said: "My dears, please make sure you pick up all the scraps so that my enemies will not find any single trace of my having been here... and you will show them the wrong way, won't you?"

The great horn-bill chuckled noisily in assent, as he took the food from Mai U's hand. Mai U pulled his magnificent tail and said: "You, big noise... one of these days I am going to weave a *pasoe* more beautiful than your tail for my husband and then let's see who's handsomer."

The racket-tailed drongo whistled and imitated the horn-bill's bellowing and gave him a peck as he jostled to feed on the scraps. Mai U patted his crest saying, "Now... now... don't you go and start up a fight... eat like a good boy... there you are... take this banana I saved especially for you... oh gallant bird, give me something of your courage, because your kind, though wounded, never gives in, but fights to the death... but I am so afraid, dear friend... give me courage..."

The drongo rustled his tail, chirping sweetly, and Mai U felt brave and strong. She bade farewell to the birds and went on her way.

It was dusk when she arrived and Yin Maung's shocked surprise at her appearance was heightened by her account of what had happened at the village. Yin Maung immediately called his foresters to plan what they should do.

Yin Maung had already sent messengers to Kyansittha to report the desperate situation he and his foresters were in, and

he said: "I hear that Kyansittha and his men are on their way and with luck, they should be here in a day or two."

Some of the foresters feared that Min Lay and his men might play havoc in the village, for Min Lay's drunken bouts and lasciviousness were well known in the villages near the Nanchao border where Prince Saw Lu's forces were stationed. After some discussion one of them said: "Min Lay may not yet know that the lass he has marked for his own is Yin Maung's wife and we can depend on our headman to improvise. He is experienced in such matters, but one thing is sure, Min Lay and his men will be here soon."

Yin Maung told his men that they were running a considerable risk in defying Min Lay and his men. "It is only because I believe that the forest and elephants are important to the king and country, and also because if they keep falling into the enemies' hands, our own existence will be threatened, that we are trying to protect the forests," he said.

"One thing...Min Lay, in all fairness to him,...may not know that his men are in league with the smugglers. It is possible that he really thinks that his men are getting timber and elephants for the King's forces on the Nanchao border. Maybe, he thinks his men do not need any permit... but Kyansittha alone can decide this. Let's hope he arrives in time but before he arrives, anything could happen. Let's not have false hopes, only be prepared for the worst. We shall do our duty to our King and country."

While all the talk was going on, Mai U lay crouched on the moss-cushioned roots of an ancient banyan tree near-by, her thoughts in a turmoil: "What am I doing here among men with their talk of duty, honour and loyalty? I understand only one thing... my love for my husband, if need be, to die with him."

Yin Maung went on:

"We shall do our duty as the King's foresters and defend the royal forest... I am not being heroic, only that I could not choose cowardice under such circumstances. I shall not insist that you all stay with me. You are free to go, if you wish, and I shall not take it amiss... but I, with my wife who would not choose a fate worse than death, will stay here and face whatever there is for us to face."

So saying, Yin Maung went over to Mai U and sat by her side on the twisted roots. Mai U whispered: "Thank you for allowing me to share the danger you're in... and please promise me one thing... that if the worst comes, do not allow me to fall into their hands... alive."

Without a word, Yin Maung pressed his spear into Mai U's hands and she laid her cheek against the hilt saying under her breath, "My love's trusty blade, you will defend my honour, if not my life."

The men of the forest, their dauntless hearts moved, rallied round the couple saying in one voice, "We will defend our sister's honour with our lives and we will all stay here." Yin Maung could only clasp their hands in gratitude, for words failed him.

Then, remembering something, Yin Maung said: "I almost forgot ... we have men who are sick with malaria and some wounded by wild animals ... we must take them to some safe place. Get bullock carts and elephants ready."

When they went round to where the sick men lay, the men demanded why they were being sent away. Hearing Yin Maung explain to them the impending crisis, they were indignant. They said: "You are sending us away to die like women in childbed. Oh Master Forester, you can't do this to us ... you can't deny us our manhood, our right to die like men, especially when our sister herself is staying here to face the danger."

The whole night was spent in making arrangements. The sick and the wounded were placed on * machans with bows and arrows and the able-bodied men took their posts with spears and swords.

Yin Maung put a bow and quiverful of arrows in Mai U's hands and helped her up a machan and said: "Remember, Mai U, when our forefathers came down from the hills to the plains, their women rode with them, wielded the weapons ... I trust that the daughter of the Mang Mans has not gone soft ..."

"No, I hope not ... I will try to be worthy of my forefathers and above all worthy of your trust and love."

Mai U was happy to stay on the machan that commanded a full view of Yin Maung's post and she could see what went on without betraying her presence. She hoped, a forlorn hope though it might be, that Kyansittha would come before anything disastrous happened. Yin Maung and his men knew that they were taking a desperate chance. "But ... why .. it's honour, duty and loyalty ... they say, but I still ask, why ... why ..." Mai U pulled the string of the bow and let it go with a twang and rested her head on the tree trunk, too tired to grieve. "There is time enough for grief and tears ... there is the whole unending ***samsara* for grief and tears," she muttered to herself.

* high scaffolds built high on the trees

** round of rebirths

49

Minlay and his men

The night passed slow and silent except for the occasional toot of night birds and the clacking of the bamboo gong marking time from the sentry posts.

Mai U lay on the machan listening to Yin Maung's footsteps as he did his rounds. She gripped the bow hard wishing she could plead with him to take some rest for the night, but she knew he would not listen to her. Her thoughts crept back to her native village by the hill, a sylvan spot with streams and waterfalls and the happy care-free days they had spent together. "We have had but a short time together, and love is too precious to lose when we are so young..." she moaned silently.

It was past midnight when Yin Maung gave in to the foresters' pleading to get himself some sleep. Mai U heaved a sigh of relief when she saw him reluctantly climb the machan a few yards away from hers. "May he have a good night's rest. Dear Lord, please don't let anything happen to him."

Mai U rested her head against the tree trunk praying with her every breath that the good spirits of the forest might guard over them all. "If only Kyansittha and his men were here," she muttered as she dozed off.

The twittering of birds soon roused her to the dawn of the day and she watched from the machan, not yet daring to come down. The foresters were in deep conference with Yin Maung, who was organizing the day's duties, relieving the night watch. There was not yet any sign of Min Lay and his men, and the foresters were waiting for the couriers from the outposts to hear the developments.

The morning was still young when a horseman came with the news that Min Lay and his men had been sighted about a league away and that they were heading towards the king's forest area.

The foresters were alerted and Yin Maung called his trusted men and said: "Remember, we cannot start hostilities until they prove themselves to be lawbreakers or poachers. I will try to talk to Min Lay and offer him our help to supply his force with timber and elephants, strictly within the bounds of the king's edict. I am sure he will be satisfied. But his men, with their commitments to supply the smuggling gangs, will want their master to insist on getting the trees from the king's forests. Our elephants, branded with the royal seal, are of no use to them. We know their customers, the smugglers, will not accept elephants with tell-tale brands. But... my feeling is that Min Lay's men will not dare to insist on their

demands, for it would give them away. Anyway, even if my explanation fails with Min Lay I hope it will at least give us time... for... Kyansittha might get here while we're still at it."

One delicate problem hardly mentioned, but ever present in their minds, was Mai U, whose presence, if discovered by Min Lay, would spell disaster for all of them. Foresters were instructed to keep Min Lay's men away from Mai U's machan, which was high up in a towering tree thickly mantled with creepers.

Mai U wondered brokenly what cruel twist of fate had brought her into the forest, where the men were having enough troubles even without her. "Perhaps, it's better for me to be dead than alive...", she thought desperately.

Mai U crouched on the floor of the machan listening to the sound of activity, as Min Lay and his men rode in. From her hiding place she could see Yin Maung welcome Min Lay and his men, and play host offering them food and drink. Min Lay looked arrogant and angry, she thought. From snippets of conversation that floated in her direction, Mai U knew that Min Lay was asking Yin Maung why he had told his men that they could not extract timber from this particular forest area.

Yin Maung unrolled a large sheet of hide on which was drawn a plan of the forest lands clearly defining the areas reserved for the king and state, and those free areas from where people were allowed to extract timber without permit. He then explained that he and his foresters would help to get timber and logs from the free areas and the elephants, already tamed and broken into service, were theirs for the taking.

"Even from this distance, I can see that Min Lay's brow has cleared...he seems appeased," thought Mai U. She then saw Min Lay turn to talk to his men and although she could not hear all they said, she sensed that Min Lay's men were far from satisfied.

Mai U saw Min Lay's men silently eat and drink, glowering at Yin Maung. It seemed that they could not say anything against Yin Maung's offer. "Dear Lord, I don't know how long this will hold...please make Kyansittha arrive..."

Yin Maung and his men then tried to attract Min Lay's attention with their talk of the plentiful game in the forest and said, "We hope Your Excellency will spend the day with us hunting, as we are all eager to witness Your Excellency's marksmanship of which we have heard so much."

This was echoed by the foresters who declared that they should not be denied the chance of learning something from Min Lay's techniques in stalking and proficiency in wielding arms. "We never had the good fortune to see your late father in action on the hunting grounds, but we have heard a good deal from our elders. If only we could see you hunt, so that we would be able to cap their much-repeated accounts of your father."

The foresters were on the right track, playing up to Min Lay's pride in his skill at arms and his late father's prowess. He com-

manded that all kinds of hunting weapons be brought to him so that he could take his choice.

Min Lay inspected the array of weapons, bows and arrows, spears, javelins, swords, knives and daggers, like an artist fondling his tools; he was so absorbed in trying the sharpness of the sword blade or the strength of the bowstring or the grip of the spear, that he seemed to have forgotten all about the business of timber and elephants.

Yin Maung and the foresters made hasty preparations for the hunt, sending groups of men out into the jungle as beaters. He then reported to Min Lay that everything was ready for the hunt. Min Lay mounted his steed and rode into the forest guided by the foresters.

Moments later the forest rang with the sound of men beating bamboo gongs as horses' hooves clattered on the ground and the hunters gave chase with barking hounds at their heels. Bows twanged, and cries of "A prize...a prize..." rent the air together with cheers for Min Lay, the hero of the day.

Mai U prayed that the hunt would go on till Kyansittha should come. She was so intent on listening to the faraway sound of the hunters that she did not notice the uncanny rustling of twigs under her machan. Only when her ears picked up a low snarling growl did she stir herself to peep through the chinks of the bamboo flooring.

The next moment she hastily pressed her mouth against the rough cotton blanket, so that a heart-rending scream was choked before it escaped her lips, for, right under her machan among the thick under-growth was a tiger sharpening his claws on the tree trunk.

50

Kyansittha Arrives

The machan was high up in the tree but the lower branches were entwined with creepers making it easy for the tiger to climb and from the way the tiger's nostrils quivered, he seemed to have got the scent of human prey.

Mai U bent her bow with trembling hands, making ready with the shaft. The tiger went on clawing the tree trunk, snarling and starting to snap his tail. Mai U dared not shoot, partly because she could not trust her aim and partly because she was afraid of attracting Min Lay's men to her presence.

"Whom shall I fear more, man or beast?" Mai U thought. She rolled the cotton blanket into a ball and pushed it into her mouth so that no cry should escape in an unguarded moment.

The tiger was still clawing his way up the tree when footsteps were heard from a distance. "Shh-Shh-Shh...beware...the big cat may be quite close from the look of his tracks on the swamp...my...they are as big as a toddy-fruit...he must be really big" came a mumbling whisper:

The tiger tensed, hearing the voices, slid down to the ground and sat grandly on his haunches, confident of his own power. Now that the tiger's attention was diverted and he actually seemed to be guarding the machan against Min Lay's men, Mai U felt like thanking the beast for the services he so unwittingly rendered.

Mai U did not know yet who were approaching. If they were Yin Maung's foresters she was saved. But if they were Min Lay's men...Mai U bit deep into the blanket roll in her mouth and her body shook with smothered sobs.

For some time, it was silence. She guessed that the men must be stalking the animal. She crouched on the machan watching and listening. Suddenly she saw the tiger spring into the bushes and melt away in the waving reeds. She guessed that the wily tiger had given his pursuers the slip.

Later, Mai U saw Min Lay and his men ride in from the bushes. They were discussing how the tiger could have slipped away. Min Lay looked up the tree and remarked: "Look here...an old machan...disused and overgrown with creepers. Let's go up there and wait for the tiger. We shall tie a live calf under the tree, the cat will surely come. We will stay here the whole night if necessary...hey, one of you go up and see if it is strong enough."

Mai U was numb with fear. She felt the blood drain out of her leaving her whole body stone cold. She was only half aware of the man's steps coming up the machan, his cry of surprise at

the unexpected discovery. Like one in a nightmare she was carried down the machan and dropped in a heap at Min Lay's feet.

Min Lay himself was speechless with surprise. He cried: "So... it's you...you...I see now...the maid at the loom...that night I was too far gone with the headman's special drink to remember you... now that we meet again here..."

Mai U clasped Min Lay's feet and begged: "My lord, I am no maid... I am a married woman...oh, no...please no..."

Min Lay helped her to her feet and said: "Married or not, you are beautiful..."

Min Lay's hand gripped hers like a vice as she struggled crying: "My Love...where are you...come and save me...save me..."

As if in answer to her call she heard Yin Maung's voice, "Coming...my dear...you shall be saved." Even as the men stood dumb with surprise, a spear came hurtling and pierced Mai U's breast and the next instant she fell into Yin Maung's arms gasping: "My Love...thank you...you have kept your promise...oh..."

Yin Maung tenderly folded Mai U's limp body to his heart and pressed his tear-stained face against hers. "Mai U, stay a while, I'll be with you...we shall go back to our village by the hill and we shall have some peace..."

Even before Yin Maung could pull the spear from Mai U's breast to stab into his own, Min Lay's men fell on him with swords and spears.

The bloody scene was interrupted by a man carrying the news that Kyansittha and his men were entering the forest. Min Lay turned to his men and said: "Take them away and bury them. Remember, all of you, the two died under the claws of a tiger..."

Min Lay went to meet Kyansittha wondering what had brought him there for he did not know that Yin Maung had sent reports of the men poaching in the king's forests.

Min Lay and his men welcomed Kyansittha and they pretended they were on a routine tour in the forest areas. Kyansittha immediately demanded to see Yin Maung the forester. Min Lay reported that the man had been killed by a tiger and that his men were tracking down the beast. His statement was supported by his men who came in carrying a dead tiger carried on a pole with its feet bound with ropes.

Kyansittha was far from believing the story. He saw Yin Maung's foresters cowering in a corner and from the look of their faces, Kyansittha guessed that it was not sorrow at the loss of their comrade alone that darkened their faces and made them grit their teeth. He saw in their faces a smouldering rage that was ill-concealed.

Kyansittha gave a quick look at the tiger that was supposed to have mauled Yin Maung, but he saw no trace of human blood on its claws. Turning to Min Lay he said: "Min Lay, the reputation of your men as peerless hunters is no more...just look, they have got the wrong tiger, not the one that killed the forester." Kyansittha

pointed his spear point at the claws which were innocent of human blood.

A murmur of satisfaction rose from Yin Maung's foresters and Min Lay glared at them gripping his sword. Kyansittha faced Min Lay and said: "Min Lay, there are certain things I have to ask you, one of them is..." turning to his men he commanded, "bring those men in."

Soon a group of men with their hands bound with ropes was herded in. Kyansittha asked: "Min Lay, who are these men?"

Min Lay choked with rage: "My lord, Kyansittha, how could you... how could you do this to the men... men of Prince Saw Lu's forces... bound like criminals."

Kyansittha replied: "Because they are criminals... look, don't you see among them are Nanchao soldiers. Ask the men yourself what they have been doing on the border, and what they are doing with those elephants not branded with the royal seal..."

Min Lay realized what his men had been up to and he saw that he, as their commander, would be held responsible for their misdeeds. As he stood in stony silence, unable to say a word in his defence, he heard Kyansittha go on: "There's the murder of the loyal forester, the custodian of the royal forest... now I command you, Min Lay to surrender your arms and men to me and I shall take you to the King for trial."

Min Lay and his men were immediately put under arrest. Kyansittha interrogated the foresters, who told him all that had happened. Kyansittha said: "I could have reached here earlier, but I had to arrest the men red-handed while doing business with the Nanchao soldiers, for I must have proofs when I put the case before the King."

The bodies of Yin Maung and Mai U were discovered and their wounds bore out the statement of the eye witnesses. Being told how Mai U died by Yin Maung's hand he said: "He was a brave man, who killed his love with his spear point, for many a man often kills the thing he loves with a bitter look or a harsh word."

Kyansittha spoke to the foresters: "Yin Maung died for his loyalty to the King and country. I will see that he dies not in vain. I will see that justice is done to give heart to those who are loyal to the King and at the same time, warn those who dare to harm his loyal servants."

Kyansittha commanded that the remains of Yin Maung and Mai U be sent back to their native place and a niche be built in their memory. Yin Maung would be remembered as one who died rather than let anyone trespass on the king's law. "As for Mai U," he said, "let her be an everlasting ideal for womenfolk to live by. Put in her niche a loom so that she will be remembered for her womanly industry."

Kyansittha then sent couriers to Prince Saw Lu's camp to report the events and inform the Prince that he would have to take Min Lay and his men to the King to be tried.

51

The skirmish

While Kyansittha was making preparations to journey back to Pagan, the royal seat, Prince Saw Lu heard the news of Min Lay's arrest. Min Lay's elder brother Min Gyi also heard and they knew what they were up against, for the matter of the royal forests and elephant poaching was a grave matter.

Prince Saw Lu's men were indignant that their brother-in-arms should be so shamefully treated, like a common criminal. Nga Yaman, the Prince's childhood friend said: "What is Kyansittha to affront our Lord Prince Saw Lu with this act? He is behaving as if he were the crown prince instead of our Lord Prince Saw Lu."

Such words pricked Saw Lu's old wounds. He rankled with the memory of how he himself as a youth had been punished by Kyansittha for a gambling escapade...the incident Nga Yaman took care to remind the prince of. It hurt all the more because on that particular occasion, his royal father had stood by Kyansittha, even extolling Kyansittha for "daring to bring justice to my proper son."

Prince Saw Lu knew that he would lose if he were to plead with the king for Min Lay. He might even be held responsible for what his men had done, and it was something he did not care to face.

His friend Nga Yaman mocked at him saying: "You call yourself the crown prince, heir-apparent to the throne...you are helpless even though your most trusted men are taken like common criminals by that commoner Kyansittha."

Prince Saw Lu felt that his prestige was at stake. There was Min Gyi, Min Lay's brother, who could cause trouble in the forces if he had a mind to. The prince had to do something, come what may.

Prince Saw Lu commanded Min Gyi to take men, horses and arms, the very best of all, and march post-haste to overtake Kyansittha on his way to Pagan. Min Gyi in the name of Prince Saw Lu was to demand the release of Min Lay and his men, and, if Kyansittha refused, to attack them and take the prisoners by force.

Min Gyi, thirsting for vengeance, rode with his men armed to the teeth to overtake Kyansittha on his way back to Pagan. Min Gyi was seething with rage, for to him, it was incredible that he and his brother, sons of Byatta, a hero and heroes themselves, in the service of Prince Saw Lu, could be subjected to such treatment.

Although Prince Saw Lu had instructed him to demand the prisoners from Kyansittha, Min Gyi thought it unnecessary, knowing full well that his demand would be refused with that high sounding

talk about justice and law. So, as soon as they left the camp, Min Gyi commanded his men to attack Kyansittha's party right away. The command was welcomed by the men who were thirsting for action.

Kyansittha was not too easy in mind about Prince Saw Lu's reaction to the news of Min Lay's arrest. He knew from bitter experience with Byatta, how hard it had been to manage men of warlike spirit and in the height of their glory. Things could get out of hand without a moment's notice and it would take months, nay years, to redress that mistake.

Kyansittha took every precaution, sending out scouts and setting up outposts so that anything unusual could be reported by the swift-riding couriers. So the approach of Min Gyi and his men was sighted in advance. They marched in such a way that only a small party and their prisoners with Min Lay among them, were seen on the path; the remaining units marched discreetly under the cover of bushes and trees.

Kyansittha meant to wait and see what Min Gyi and his men would do, whether they were going to start hostilities right away or not. As he had anticipated, Min Gyi and his men came upon the party shouting defiance and challenge.

The skirmish was inevitable and Kyansittha, even while coping with the attack, cried out to Min Gyi not to be hasty, but it was all in vain. Min Gyi, with his spear carved out a bloody passage to reach his brother who was borne astride a horse, his hands bound.

Kyansittha's men formed a cordon round Min Lay, and Kyansittha cried out, "Boy...Min Gyi...go back...go back...don't make me kill you...". But Min Gyi's answer was fresh assaults on Kyansittha's men.

Seeing that his cries of warning were of no avail, Kyansittha concentrated on preventing his prisoner Min Lay from falling into Min Gyi's hands. It was during the fierce fight that Min Lay was mortally wounded. Enraged all the more, Min Gyi rushed against Kyansittha shouting, "Vengeance...vengeance..." and his spear grazed Kyansittha's shoulder.

Kyansittha swayed, still gripping his spear, and for a moment it looked as if he was going to be unhorsed. Min Gyi, taking advantage of the situation, rushed at him with his sword. Kyansittha's horse suddenly reared on his hind legs so that the sword missed its target by a hair's breadth.

Kyansittha's men, seeing their master's plight, fell upon Min Gyi, killing him on the spot. Many of Min Gyi's men were either killed or wounded or taken prisoner; few escaped.

There was nothing for Kyansittha to do but to make a stop and clear up the bloody mess. As the men tended his wound they were indignant: they remarked, "My lord Kyansittha, you tarried just a whit...and you nearly lost your life...you showed too much consideration for the two brothers... a consideration they poorly deserved."

Kyansittha silently let his men chide him. He was thinking of Byatta, his comrade-in-arms and the promise he had made to him at Thaton, to look after the boys as if they were his own. He murmured under his breath, "I'm sorry, Byatta, forgive me, but I did my best."

The news of the skirmish reached Prince Saw Lu and he felt that the matter of rivalry between Kyansittha and himself must be decided once and for all. He said: "How long must I bear with this interloper... why should I, a prince, be always overshadowed by this commoner? This man Kyansittha and I have too long been in my royal father's court. Two stars keep not motion in one sphere. Two lions do not keep court in one lair. One or the other must make his exit."

Prince Saw Lu realized, however, that the matter of Min Gyi and Min Lay did little to help him in his bid for supremacy against Kyansittha because the law was on Kyansittha's side. Nga Yaman, Prince Saw Lu's childhood friend, suggested that the matter of the two brothers with their involvement in elephant poaching and smuggling should not be stirred up, as it would mean more exposures that might be not only embarrassing but dangerous. They must think of some other way to bring about Kyansittha's downfall. With luck, something might turn up, Nga Yaman said.

It took Kyansittha longer than he expected to reach Pagan as there were the wounded to be cared for, the dead to be buried and at the same time attacks by the smuggling gangs to be fended off. They were determined to do away with him, as an obstacle in their way to easy riches.

Prince Saw Lu and his men were already ahead of him at Pagan, spreading rumours to the effect that Kyansittha had wantonly killed Min Gyi and Min Lay in jealous rage, and this set the admirers of the two brothers against Kyansittha.

When Kyansittha at last arrived and reported the matter to the king, producing the culprits and their damning evidence, the king was satisfied. He had in the past months conferred many times with Kyansittha on the matter of forests and elephants falling into the enemy's hands and they had decided that the matter, being of national importance, must be dealt with severely. The king himself had on one occasion said: "No matter how high his status, an official found involved in wrongdoing must be brought to justice without mercy."

The Plot against Kyansittha

When the people saw how Min Lay's elephant poachers were tried and brought to justice, and how Yin Maung's foresters were rewarded for their loyalty, they rejoiced that the rule of law was established as firmly as anyone could desire.

Prince Saw Lu himself was reprimanded by Anawrahta for not being able to manage his men properly and Kyansittha interceded for him saying how he, Kyansittha himself, had once been guilty of the same shortcoming when Byatta played havoc in the precincts of Thaton, causing a bloody war.

For Kyansittha to intercede on his behalf with the king was to Prince Saw Lu an insult added to injury. Later, Nga Yaman sneered: "Prince, you might have been a lowly commoner and that man Kyansittha, a prince...that's the depth to which you have fallen."

Prince Saw Lu bided his time and went back with his men to the Nanchao border and threw himself into the work of building what was then called "fortress towns" as well as stupas to propagate the Theravada Buddhism.

In his heart of hearts, Prince Saw Lu longed to be a worthy son to Anawrahta and he wanted to show in his own way that he was capable of helping his father in his work. There were times when he felt like asking Kyansittha for guidance and he knew the older man would be only too glad to help him, but with Nga Yaman sneering in the background, all his good intentions faded into nothing but resentment and jealousy against the interloper.

Nga Yaman one day gleefully informed Prince Saw Lu that he had found an infallible way to bring about Kyansittha's downfall; he had, he said, some piece of information gleaned from indiscreet whispers at the court, namely, Kyansittha's relations with Anawrahta's queen Khin U of Uttha Pegu.

Nga Yaman said there had been something between Kyansittha and Khin U, during the campaign against the Khmers, but they could not find evidence of any clandestine affair after Khin U became queen. Prince Saw Lu listened to Nga Yaman with interest and remarked: "We are not charging Kyansittha with something that would besmirch the name of the lady, now queen, but the same information can be used against him and we shall charge him with a crime that is beyond redemption."

Prince Saw Lu then explained his plan to Nga Yaman, how he had hit upon the idea of making a charge against Kyansittha, so serious that Anawrahta, with all his love and trust for Kyansittha,

would not be able to bring himself to pardon him, and above all, the queen, though hardly mentioned, would also be involved, which fact would spur on the king to punish Kyansittha.

Prince Saw Lu came back from the Nanchao border and reported to Anawrahta on the progress of construction of the fortress towns and the stupas. The Nanchao invaders, he said, had ceased their invasions for the time being but more work should be done to maintain peace in that area.

Anawrahta said: "Yes, of course, much more will have to be done. Force of arms alone will not settle matters. We already have reports that Saw Naung, the chief of Mao State, the largest state on the Nanchao border, is friendly to us. We may send Kyansittha there for negotiations, he is very dependable in such matters. You too go along with him and learn how such matters are conducted."

Prince Saw Lu lowered his eyes so that his father would not see the anger in his eyes. The king went on: "Only the other day we discussed the matter. I was telling Kyansittha that there shouldn't be any need for chiefs like Taungdwinmin of the six Khayaings of the Yin Plains, or Kyansittha himself as the chief of Htihline to style themselves as *mins* or chiefs when the union of all the peoples is more or less accomplished."

Prince Saw Lu asked: "What did Kyansittha say?"

Anawrahta said: "Kyansittha seems to think it advisable that such titles should be maintained as symbols of regional authority so that there may be administrative links between the main state of Tampadipa and other states. I am still considering the matter."

Prince Saw Lu could see that there had been a slight difference of opinion between Anawrahta and Kyansittha and he took his chance. He said haltingly: "Sire, I have something to say to you... I pray that I may be spared your anger, even if you think that I should not have spoken."

Anawrahta said: "My son, I have allowed even commoners to say what they have to say without any fear of punishment, why should you ask pardon of me, even before you breathe a word?"

"Sire, it is a matter of great delicacy. I speak, only because I shall fail in my duty to you and the state if I did not. It concerns Kyansittha. I have proof that he is not a loyal subject and I may be given permission to ask him certain questions in the presence of Your Majesty and the peers of the Court."

If Anawrahta was shaken, he did not show it. He said: "Tomorrow the Court of Justice shall be assembled and what is to be done shall be done."

The next day Kyansittha went to the King's Court for the usual audience with ministers and commanders. He took his usual place near the throne where sat the king who opened the proceedings: "Kyansittha, Prince Saw Lu here has some questions to ask of you and we trust that you will answer with untarnished veracity."

Kyansittha, making obeisance to the King said: "Sire, I will speak the truth, and nothing but the truth."

Prince Saw Lu looked at Kyansittha and began his questioning: "My lord Kyansittha, did you or did you not seek an alliance with the king of Uttha Pegu after the campaign against the Khmers?"

Kyansittha looked the Prince full in the face and said: "No. I did not. At that time or any other time. I never did."

"Did you or did you not, at one time, say, after the war with the Khmers, seek a blood alliance with the king of Uttha Pegu, an alliance that would give you the status of a son? You did, let us say, conspire it, without the knowledge of the king of Uttha Pegu. Did you or did you not?"

Kyansittha's gaze immediately withdrew from Prince Saw Lu's face and rested on the floor. A murmur of satisfaction came from Prince Saw Lu's men and Anawrahta commanded in a voice more suggestive of sorrow than anger: "Kyansittha, look into my face and answer the question."

Kyansittha looked boldly into Anawrahta's face and said: "Sire, I have never, at any time, had the slightest thought of betraying Your Majesty or the ideals Your Majesty stands for. This I say on the direct oath Your Majesty may wish to put me on."

Prince Saw Lu said: "But you have not answered my question. Do you want me to produce witnesses and evidence of my accusation?"

Kyansittha knew that he was lost. It seemed that Saw Lu was determined to destroy him even at the cost of dragging Khin U's name into the trial. Kyansittha could not let it happen.

He said: "What matters most is my loyalty to His Majesty the King and the ideals he stands for. If Your Majesty and his peers are satisfied with it, I do not think it is necessary to answer Prince Saw Lu's question."

Prince Saw Lu said: "I demand that my question be answered—as you have promised, truthfully."

Kyansittha said firmly, "No I will not. I am ready to bear any punishment for refusing to answer that question."

Anawrahta said: "Kyansittha, you deny that you are a traitor. What proof do you have?"

"Sire, I have no proof but my own clear conscience. I offer my heart pure of any taint of treachery to you, Sire, to your trusty spear that tastes only the traitor's blood. Pray, let it taste mine..."

Anawrahta said: "You asked for it and you shall have it." So saying, he threw his spear at Kyansittha who straightened himself, baring his chest to receive the thrust. All the peers gasped as the spear landed on the fold of Kyansittha's robe that lay on the floor.

Kyansittha bowed and picked up the spear and bowed again to Anawrahta three times saying: "Sire, it was with this spear that

Your Majesty offered your trust and friendship on that day at the Pagan market years ago and I have remained faithful since then. Now, with Your Majesty's permission I shall go back to my native place...carrying this spear with me. Let this spear be the symbol of your authority and power...this spear shall be my Lord, in Your Majesty's stead, and I vow that I shall ever remain your most faithful servant."

Kyansittha clasped the spear in his hands and moved backwards, his hands raised in respect to the king until he was out of the audience hall.

53

Character assassination

Kyansittha's departure from Anawrahta's court left everyone astounded. Anawrahta took some time to master the conflicting emotions that raged within him. He never thought it possible that the spear he had wielded to hit so many a far-off moving target would miss Kyansittha sitting right in front of him. He felt nothing but satisfaction and joy at the thought that both the life and honour of his trusted servant was saved, the very fact that his spear declined to taste Kyansittha's blood being proof of the man's loyalty.

Anawrahta spoke to his peers: "My lords, my trusty spear tastes nothing but a traitor's blood. You now saw for yourselves how it shied away from Kyansittha. Let him go in peace. Let no one molest him. He may not be in my court but he will ever be faithful to me."

Prince Saw Lu and Nga Yaman were indignant that Kyansittha was allowed to go free. Soon after the incident Nga Yaman said: "This is the last straw. If Kyansittha can get away with such a charge we are all but lost. He must be destroyed once and for all." Prince Saw Lu was silent. He could not bring himself to flout his royal father's word.

Nga Yaman took one look at his master's face and went off thinking: "This is a case where a good servant must act so that his master's hands shall not be stained." He then sent two men to follow Kyansittha and make an end of him.

Kyansittha rode alone towards Htihline, his native place, little knowing that Nga Yaman's men were shadowing him, for he had faith in Anawrahta's love and trust towards him. He believed that the king would not suffer a single drop of water to harm him.

Arriving at a cool woodland spot Kyansittha decided to give his tired horse a rest and give himself a nap under a tree. Before laying himself down on a grassy mound he tried to plant his spear in the ground but it fell flat on the ground. Tired and nervy, Kyansittha impatiently threw the spear into a bush and flung himself down to sleep.

Waking up refreshed a little time later he went to the bush to retrieve the spear. To his surprise he saw two men pierced through like chunks of meat on a skewer.

Kyansittha instantly guessed they must be Prince Saw Lu's men sent out to kill him. He pulled the spear out of the would-be assassins' bodies and went to wash the spear in a nearby stream. He put the spear on a tree stump and bowed three times

muttering: "My Lord Anawrahta's trusty spear, thank you for guarding me against the forces of evil. Long live King Anawrahta."

He then went on his way full of sorrow for having to leave Anawrahta when the task of building a united kingdom lay heavy on him. His thoughts wandered to Khin U, who, although he had rarely seen her since she became queen, had never ceased to haunt his dreams. He could only breathe a prayer that their youthful indiscretion had not besmirched her fair name.

Prince Saw Lu found that Kyansittha's expulsion from Anawrahta's court did not do much to help him gain popularity among the people. Kyansittha, he found, was still regarded by the people as their idol, redresser of wrongs and champion of the oppressed.

Kyansittha's action on the king's forests and elephants established a precedent that the king's edict must be respected anywhere, however far and by everybody, however high.

The story of Yin Maung and Mai U was repeated by minstrels and strolling players and ritual feasts in their memory were held so that their loyalty and devotion to the king was remembered.

Prince Saw Lu and Nga Yaman saw all this and could do nothing to stop it since the idea conveyed in the songs and plays glorified the dedication of duty and loyalty to the king. Kyansittha's name, too, was remembered with love and admiration by the people.

There were yet some people who worshipped Min Lay and Min Gyi as heroes for their short yet eventful lifetime and they were indignant at what they thought to be Kyansittha's ruthless action. Prince Saw Lu and Nga Yaman worked on their emotions, spreading rumours of how the two brothers had become spirits and had presented their case to the king.

This rumour was passed from mouth to mouth with all the dramatization it inspired. The two brothers, as represented in songs and tableaux, caused the royal barge to stop midstream without any visible cause and Anawrahta slashed the river with his cane demanding what evil spirits had dared to obstruct his barge; then the spirits of the two brothers appeared kneeling, hands outstretched, begging for recognition.

The story went on to say that the king in his mercy granted the two brothers the two villages Taungpyone and Wayindok as their domain so their followers could celebrate an annual festival in their honour. On such feasts songs were sung of the valour of the two brothers and their tragic death through the jealousy of Kyansittha.

Kyansittha's followers saw through the tricks of Prince Saw Lu and Nga Yaman and said among themselves: "Just see to what lengths some people will go to destroy a man... all this for the sake of securing themselves a place to wield power."

Many people eagerly listened for the news of Kyansittha after he left Anawrahta's court and the story of how the six assassins

sent by Nga Yaman were pierced through like fish by Kyansittha's spear came to be told and repeated with many colourful variations.

There were some people, especially the followers of Prince Saw Lu and Nga Yaman, who expected Kyansittha to declare his state Htihline independent of Tampadipa, which would be an act of defiance against Anawrahta; for they heard that the people of Htihline were preparing for any decision their lord Kyansittha might make... that is to say, they were ready to rebel against Tampadipa at the least signal from Kyansittha. Prince Saw Lu's men were watching for a sign from the king to start an offensive against Htihline. But the king himself seemed content to watch and wait.

A few days after Kyansittha's departure the news spread of how Kyansittha stood adamant against the majority of his people at Htihline who wished to sever themselves from Tampadipa saying that he expected his people to be loyal to Anawrahta and his ideal of building a united state.

Such news heightened Kyansittha's prestige in spite of all attempts at smearing his name and Anawrahta was satisfied with his conduct. The only thing that perturbed him was how far the charge involving his queen Khin U was true.

A new alliance

Kyansittha's absence affected Anawrahta more than he cared to admit. He walked up and down the chamber clasping his hands, absorbed in his thoughts.

He thought of Khin U, his queen so young and fair, but a pawn in the game where kings played with humans for dices, hither and thither moving, mating and slaying, until they, the kings themselves were snatched away by the hand of death. Anawrahta clasped his hands until his bones ached, and murmured: "I am only an instrument in the hands of destiny... the destiny to build a new state and a new people, the purpose of it all being to preserve and propagate the Word of the Buddha. We all have to give ourselves, our lives to this cause. The king of Uttha Pegu gave his daughter no matter what her own feelings were... for, what does a girl's tears matter in affairs of the state?"

Suddenly Anawrahta's eyes fell on a terra cotta tablet standing on a stool in the far corner of the room and he picked it up to examine it. It was one of the tablets to be put on the walls of the stupa that was being completed and the architects had submitted it to him for inspection and approval.

The tablet represented a scene from the Wethandara Jataka relating how the Bodhisatta king had given away his children to a beggar so that he might attain Buddhahood. Anawrahta touched the children pathetically kneeling at the feet of their father, the Bodhisatta, and Anawrahta thought: "To a man determined to achieve a great thing, like attaining Buddhahood, which meant saving the multitude from the jaws of suffering, even his own children must be given away... the same applies to us... though much lesser in stature. We have to give... give... give ourselves, and all that we have."

He put the tablet in its place and came back to his couch and sat gazing into nothingness for some time before he saw Khin U kneeling at his feet with a tray of refreshments.

Anawrahta took the drink and looked at Khin U's downcast face and decided once and for all to get at the truth. He asked abruptly: "Is it true that Kyansittha ever tried to become your father's son?"

Khin U looked up at her lord's face and answered: "This I cannot say, but he loved me and I loved him, it was long before I had an inkling that I would ever be your queen, and there was nothing wrong between us."

Anawrahta was taken aback by the boldness of Khin U's reply and his hand gripped the goblet as he went on, "You still care for him, don't you?"

"My lord, we cannot master our hearts, but we can at least keep them from leading us astray. This much I can vouch for myself and for Kyansittha."

As Anawrahta gazed silently at her she went on desperately: "Forgive me if I have not given you my love, but what is love to a man like you, a willing servant of destiny? You have given your all to the task of building a united state and the propagation and preservation of the Word of the Buddha...love has no place with you, so why have any regret for something you have never wanted... I am merely a pawn in the game you and my father played..."

Anawrahta flushed angrily at the words,...the words he knew only too well to be true but they were not the ones he cared to hear from the lips of his bold young queen. He threw down the goblet and caught hold of Khin U's shoulders and shook her saying: "What right have you to say such things to me...you know, I would have changed hundreds of your kind for one...one like Kyansittha... women are aplenty but good faithful servants are few..."

Khin U squirmed in Anawrahta's grip and managed to say: "There you are, you neither want nor need love. At least, that's what you think."

"You think you can ward away love like you do your foes with your spear and shield...one day love will steal into your heart and you will know what it means...and all your high and mighty talk about destiny, duty, will be laid aside and nothing will matter for the moment but the touch of a woman's hand or a tender look in her eyes...and I hope you suffer as we have suffered..."

Anawrahta let Khin U go, strangely shaken by her words. He had heard curses laid on people, terrible curses condemning people to the depths of hell and torture, but never once had he been so shaken as by the words: "Nothing will matter except the touch of a woman's hand or a tender look in her eyes..."

Anawrahta retired into his bedchamber, alone with his unquiet thoughts. He was used to having Kyansittha share his thoughts, but now he was all alone. In such a moment as this he wished he could recall Kyansittha to the court and tell him to take that young tigress. Khin U if he wished but then, a king could not behave like that.

Anawrahta's thoughts were interrupted by the discreet step of a messenger who came with the news that officials from the border fortress towns had arrived with reports.

Anawrahta was alert, for his anxiety over the Nanchao border was not yet at rest even though the campaign under the command of Prince Saw Lu and the princes Min Gyi and Min Lay had repulsed the Nanchao attempts to invade the regions along the Shweli river. The building of the fortress towns in the area had successfully stemmed the frequent raids of the Nanchao marauders and established friendly contacts with the states ruled by Shan chiefs, especially the most powerful of them, Saw Naung whose prestige as a wise ruler was well-known.

The officials from the fortress towns had a message from Saw Naung who hoped for closer relations with Anawrahta. The officials said that the chief, Saw Naung, ruled his state with the help of his sister Princess Saw Mon Hla, who, in the regions around, had become a subject of argument as to whether she was more wise than beautiful or more beautiful than wise in the affairs of the state.

Anawrahta lost no time in sending messages of goodwill and valuable presents to Saw Naung the chief of Mao. From the intelligence reports Anawrahta had of the Mao state and its ruler there seemed to be every reason to believe that the chief Saw Naung might become Anawrahta's ally and friend. Saw Naung, in his messages, never omitted to mention how grateful he was to Anawrahta for building the fortress towns on the border, as his state was protected from the Nanchao marauders who often harassed the outskirts of his state. Saw Naung offered full co-operation to fortify the frontiers as the task was of mutual benefit.

Anawrahta realized that the position of the Mao state was strategic; so much depended on the chief's loyalty to the kingdom, as he could easily be swayed or threatened by the Nanchaos to give passage into the land, which meant a threat to the solidarity of the kingdom of Tampadipa.

It would indeed be judicious to form an alliance with the Mao state. Anawrahta thought that the most lasting and reliable alliance between the states would be marriage.

Acting on the intelligence that Saw Naung was not unfavourable to the idea of establishing a blood tie with Anawrahta, elaborate preparations were made to send a mission there to ask formally for the hand of Princess Saw Mon Hla.

Elephants loaded with costly presents flanked by liveried horsemen formed a colourful part of the entourage. Anawrahta's proposal itself was carried by the envoys in a bejewelled casket and presented formally to Saw Naung.

Saw Naung the chief of Mao graciously received the proposal and responded with obvious pleasure "to have glorious connection with such a great King as Anawrahta." Preparations were soon made to send the princess with her retinue to Pagan the capital of Tampadipa.

55

Princess Saw Mon Hla

Meanwhile Anawrahta went over the intelligence received from the border officials and learned all he could about the Mao state, its ruler Saw Naung and his sister Princess Saw Mon Hla.

“Saw Naung and his sister trace back their ancestry to the people who came down from the Mao valley, in the upper reaches of the Taiping. The tradition of sharing with our ancestors the Mang Mans the perils and hardships of pioneering and building settlements is still alive, although there is an undercurrent of conspiracy among certain sections of the people there, to favour an alliance with the Nanchao. Saw Naung is definitely against such an alliance which he rightly takes to be unnatural and therefore not at all advisable. He would rather join Your Majesty for he believes in the ideal of a united kingdom. But some of his advisers are trying to present the image of Your Majesty as a ruler thirsting for conquests and they often play on Saw Naung’s most sensitive spot, namely the loss of regional autonomy. We tried to assure him by word and deed that the idea of all the states and the peoples being united under Your Majesty’s leadership does not mean anything of the kind, only that we should all be working for the solidarity and prosperity of our land. At present he has been won to our side... enough to establish a brother relationship with Your Majesty.

“As regards Your Majesty’s bride-elect, never was there a worthier one to share the throne of Tampadipa. She is in her twenties, well past the conventional marrying age for girls. We investigated the matter and found out that it is not for lack of suitors, her beauty and virtue being well known everywhere, but that she seems to be so absorbed in helping her brother in the affairs of the state that she has become almost indispensable to him. We hear from reliable sources that the proposed alliance with Your Majesty has been discussed between the brother and sister as an important matter of the state and the decision has been arrived at in full consideration of the welfare of the state. We also hear that the princess is as willing a servant of the state as any ruler or minister and that she is one with her brother in considering the cultural and racial ties with our Tampadipa good reason to place the relationship on a more permanent footing.”

Anawrahta went over the report many times and thought: “This princess seems to be a willing servant of destiny... the destiny to build a state. This is a good basis for a political marriage...”

Festivities were prepared to welcome Princess Saw Mon Hla to the city of Pagan. All along the route on her way to Pagan outposts were set up where the princess was to be received with due ceremony by a colourful retinue of courtiers, who would present her with gifts and messages of welcome from Anawrahta, so that the princess's journey should be a trail of gorgeous events, to be crowned with a triumphant entry into the city of Pagan as an unforgettable climax.

All this was done to impress the Mao people as to how highly esteemed their princess was at the court of King Anawrahta not only as the queen-elect but also as an ambassador of goodwill.

The news of such preparations for welcome reached the court of Saw Naung who was gratified that his sister was so honoured and it also helped him to persuade his people that the alliance with Anawrahta was one of the best things that could happen to their state.

When the day came for Princess Saw Mon Hla's departure for Pagan, she took leave of her brother paying her respects at his feet. Saw Naung said:

"Come, leave your tears... a brief farewell... Nay, sister, where is your ancient courage? Have you forgotten our duty to the state, the heritage our forbears have left us to preserve and make prosper?"

"You will be a good wife as you have been a good sister to me all the years, a constant companion, confidante, adviser... and Anawrahta will find in you, as I have, the full sweetness of a man's friend. You shall represent our state in Anawrahta's court and your presence shall be a seal of friendship between Tampadipa and Mao State."

Saw Mon Hla bowed to her brother three times and withdrew from his presence thinking: "I shall be a companion, confidante, adviser to Anawrahta the King, but never a woman, or a lover to the man... so be it."

The journey to Pagan was made as scheduled and as Saw Mon Hla took a last look at the dark brooding hills tufted with trees, she clasped her hands and bowed in respect to her brother and the land of her forbears.

As the cool wooded highlands gradually melted into the arid plains of the Irrawaddy river valley, Saw Mon Hla heard the minstrels sing:

"Come down, O maid from yonder mountain height:
What pleasure lives in height
In height and cold, the splendour of the hills?
But cease to move so near the Heavens, and cease
To glide a sunbeam by the blasted pines,
To sit a star upon the sparkling spire:
And come, for Love is of the valley, come thou down and
find him..."

The entourage journeyed on, attended by cavalry and elephants on land and barges on the river. Saw Mon Hla was thrilled by the sight of the wide brimming waters that had their source in the snow-capped mountains of the north... the mighty Irrawaddy, the life artery of the land feeding the paddy fields, carrying boats and barges laden with rich harvests. She thought, "The people of our land, like the rivulets gushing down from the hills and mountains, shall merge into one great force like the great Irrawaddy... and enrich the land with golden harvests of both worldly goods and spiritual blessings."

Saw Mon Hla had already heard how Anawrahta's conquest of Thaton had laid a strong foundation in Pagan for Theravada Buddhism. And in the fortress towns on the border built by Anawrahta, terracotta tablets with the inscription: * *Ye dhamma hetuppabhava tesam hetum tathagato aha te sanca yo nirodho evam vadi maharaja Aniruddho* had been moulded and placed on the walls so that the ** *gatha*, through repetition, by pilgrims and travellers, had reached even the princess.

"How strange that the simple words should give me a feeling of some unfathomable depth... how strange that they fill me with a longing to know more..." Saw Mon Hla often thought.

Many people, seeing the *gatha* inscribed by the king's own hand, thought that it must have some miraculous powers, so they learnt it and recited it as was the custom of those days.

* Of all things, that proceed from a cause, of the cause the Tathagata hath told, and also how these cease to be this is the creed of the great king Anawrahta.

** incantation.

56

Anawrahta's welcome

As Saw Mon Hla and her retinue approached the city of Pagan Anawrahta sent her silks and jewels and a fully tusked elephant on whose back was a gorgeously ornamented howdah for her to ride in pomp into the city. The ladies presenting the gifts to the princess told her that the king had sent, among other gifts, a cloth of woven gold interlaced with small starry jewels, so that she should wear it as a turban as was the mode of a highland maid; the rest of the clothes were the regal robes of the Queen of Pagan.

Saw Mon Hla was gratified especially by the gift of the turban cloth, which she took to be the king's gracious permission to retain part of her national dress as a Shan princess and to her it was more than that...it meant the king had promised the regional autonomy of her brother's state.

Happily; she changed her native costume into the regalia of the queen consort of Pagan and wound the golden cloth round her head and made ready to ride into the city with her retinue.

Anawrahta himself riding on the royal elephant flanked by the fighting forces, infantry, cavalry and war elephants in their full livery waited at the gate to welcome Saw Mon Hla. Heralded by music troupes and dancers performing the skilful sword dances of the Mao state, the retinue began its entry into the city. Soon Princess Saw Mon Hla's elephant came up slowly and gracefully into Anawrahta's view and he saw, for the first time, his bride.

She sat on the bejewelled howdah, the gold cloth turban scintillating like a halo, two maids shading her with huge yak-tail fans, as the sunbeams stole through the feathers to caress the fair face so serene and chaste.

The white shimmering scarf flew round her regal person like a cloud giving the ethereal effect of a nymph from the skies fallen to the earth.

Slowly Anawrahta's elephant was guided to stand side by side with Saw Mon Hla's and the two royal elephants entered the city, amidst the rejoicings of the people.

It had been a long day for Saw Mon Hla. She had come to the end of her journey to her new home. Even though the evening twilight was gathering, the heat was still oppressive. Used to the coolness of the highlands Saw Mon Hla walked out of her chamber into the garden to seek relief and sat on a stone couch underneath a spreading **htanaung* tree. Taking off her turban she

* *acacia leucophloea*

let down her long hair over her shoulder and let the gentle breeze play with the tresses.

Everything around her was strange, starting from the *htanaung* tree with its branches spreading out gracefully like a dancer. She remembered how she had gazed at such trees on her way, with their bright defiantly verdant sheen against the blazing sunlight when all other trees were withering and drooping in the heat. With all its beautiful colour and grace the *htanaung* tree bristled with sharp blackish spines and Saw Mon Hla had thought: "The people of this land must be like the *htanaung* tree itself...defiant, brave, virile... and colourful."

Stars rushed out as darkness came at one stride and the giant cactus bushes stood out like mighty ogres guarding the palace. Saw Mon Hla gazed fascinated, for she had never thought that the sparse barren landscape of the Tampadipa land could be so picturesque, spread out under the starry cloudless skies. She was surprised that she did not feel at all homesick for the cool green hills she had left behind. She seemed to have fallen in love with this semi-desert land and she shuddered at the thought. "But to fall in love with the man is definitely not in the programme...it's all right to love the land...", she said firmly to herself. She had not seen Anawrahta again after he had formally presented her to the peers of the court as queen, that morning.

Suddenly she was startled by a soft touch on her hair and she turned to face Anawrahta standing by her side. She slid down from her seat and made obeisance to her lord. Anawrahta seated himself on the stone couch and his fingers played with the soft tendrils of her hair. Suddenly he withdrew his hand so abruptly that Saw Mon Hla looked up into his eyes in surprise. "The day will come when nothing matters except the touch of a woman's hand and the tender look in her eyes"...The words echoed with terrifying premonition and he tore himself from her side and walked away. At a distance he stopped and leaned on a neem tree, his head on his breast.

Slowly Saw Mon Hla followed him and knelt at his feet and said: "My lord, what have I done to displease you?" Anawrahta did not reply, but looked at her with unseeing eyes.

"Princess, you can do nothing to displease me"...he said moments later, "but I am not well in health, and that is all."

Saw Mon Hla looked intently into her lord's face and said: "My lord, I am sorry that you are not well. My brother was often thus, stealing out of bed to walk unbraced, daring the vile contagion of the night and at such times I knew that he was sick in mind."

Anawrahta was surprised to hear such words from a woman. He asked: "What did you do then?"

"I begged him to share with me whatever he had in his heart and he unburdened his heart to me and then he was well again..."

"I used to have one who shared my thoughts...now he is gone, and since then I have had no one..." Anawrahta said more to himself than to Saw Mon Hla.

“You had not one, my lord, now you have me...I am not here but to dwell in the suburbs of your good pleasure...I am a woman; but withal a woman that King Anawrahta took to wife. I am a woman well reputed, daughter of a line of chiefs, Saw Naung's sister. Being so descended think you I am no stronger than my sex? I have borne my brother's secrets all along and why should not I my lord's?”

Greatly moved, Anawrahta let Saw Mon Hla's head rest on his shoulder and said:

“You are my true and honourable wife, as dear to me as are the ruddy drops that visit my sad heart...”

“Why sad, my lord,...no, not sad, please.”

“I am sad, Saw Mon Hla, because the task before me is too great and life is too short...”

“No, my lord, you...I mean, we, still have the best years before us, you in your prime...”

“And you in the bloom of youth, I only wish I could leave in you all my ideals and aspirations, that you will bear me sons who will carry on my work...”

“My lord, together we will achieve what destiny means us to achieve...and I am happy to be by your side to share everything and...bear your sons...”

Anawrahta's arms tightened around Saw Mon Hla and for the first time in his life he felt afraid...afraid of losing something he had never had before and therefore never had the occasion to fear its loss.

Saw Mon Hla's conversion

During the days that followed her arrival at the city of Pagan, Saw Mon Hla saw little of her lord Anawrahta, who, she was informed, was absorbed in the plan for building a huge stupa on the river bank about a league farther east of the city.

With the purpose of bringing the people together for one common cause, Anawrahta had begun laying the foundations of a huge stupa on the bank of the Irrawaddy. Fantastic stories of how the site came to be chosen were told, one of them being that the sacred relics brought from Thaton were put on a caparisoned elephant and that the elephant, guided by supernatural powers, had wended its way to the river bank and crouched on the jutting bank. It was believed that the site was so chosen by the powers above.

After the site was chosen minstrels and strolling players were heard to sing songs in praise of the great stupa under construction. The songs told of how the King of the Devas from above begged King Anawrahta to accept a contribution of labour from him and his celestial retinue and how Anawrahta complying with the celestial king's desire had consented; hence it came to be told that the great stupa was built in layers, each layer built alternately by humans and celestials.

The story of the King of the Devas himself begging for a chance to have a share in the meritorious deed of building the stupa inspired the people to contribute their services in the same way. Every day, people gathered at the building site relaying bricks from hand to hand singing songs in praise of the Buddha, the Compassionate One, who taught the multitudes, high and low, the Right Way to deliverance from Suffering.

The hubbub of activity interested Saw Mon Hla and she saw that the new faith, Theravada Buddhism, had given the people a spiritual freedom...from fear of evils that were once believed to be caused by the wrath of the spirits to whom they had to offer ritual feasts. She was interested in this particular role the new faith played in the life of the people, for, she and her brother were not too happy about the animistic practices in their state such as the common custom in the remote areas of making human sacrifices to the spirits.

Saw Mon Hla saw how tactfully Anawrahta had managed to introduce Theravada Buddhism without any obvious attempt to suppress the people's original faith. The people's curiosity was roused by the Jataka tales represented on the walls of the stupas in terra cotta plaques, and the arrival of the Pali Pitakas, the Three

Baskets of Buddhist Scriptures, fired their enthusiasm to learn the new language and literature.

Saw Mon Hla, on her way from her highland home to Pagan, had seen stupas built by Anawrahta's men and she wondered how the green tufted hills of her state might rise to sublime heights if crested with stupas and shrines. Perhaps her people might be guided like those of Tampadipa to free themselves from superstitious fears and taught to depend on their own inner strength, each person determining his way in life and hereafter.

With such thoughts in mind, Saw Mon Hla sat by the window looking out into the moonlit garden seeing visions of her people inspired and rightly guided, building stupas in gratitude to the Buddha, the Great Teacher, who had taught them the Right Way. Suddenly without any thought or intent, her lips formed to recite the *gatha* she had heard from the pilgrims:

Ye dhamma hetuppabhava tesam hetum tathagato aha te
sanca yo nirodho evam vadi maharaja Aniruddho

The next moment she heard Anawrahta's voice asking: "My dear, where on earth did you get this *gatha* from?"

Recovering from her surprise as best she could Saw Mon Hla told her lord how pilgrims and travellers had read and learnt the *gatha* from the terra cotta plaques on the walls of the stupas. "People recite the *gatha* believing that it has miraculous powers, having been inscribed by the king's own hand," she said.

"Do you recite this *gatha* with the same belief?" Anawrahta asked.

Saw Mon Hla hung her head, for she did not quite know if it would be right to say what she had in her mind. "Will the king be offended if I do not believe that reciting any *gatha*, even though inscribed by the king's hand could produce any miraculous power?" she thought.

Seeing her hesitation Anawrahta said: "My dear, say what you have in your mind, do not be afraid."

Saw Mon Hla looked up into her lord's face and said: "Sire, I recite this *gatha*, only because the words thrill me, as if they hold the key to a boundless realm of knowledge; it awakens in me a longing to know more."

Saw Mon Hla felt Anawrahta's hand grip her arm hard and she saw him looking at her so strangely that she was frightened. "My lord, have I... forgive me, if I have said something wrong."

"No, my dear... get ready to go to the monastery, you shall find out more about the *gatha* from Shin Araham."

Saw Mon Hla hardly had a chance to protest the ungodly hour. She was on the road to the monastery with Anawrahta, escorted by a small retinue of trusted men.

From Shin Araham, who, by that time was quite used to the king's unexpected visits at any hour, Saw Mon Hla heard how the *gatha* was first spoken by a young *thera*, one of the five disciples who had the privilege of hearing the Buddha's First Sermon at

the Deer Park and how the words bore the essence of the Buddha's teaching. She was excited to hear how another *thera* who later became Sariputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples, hearing the words, discerned them with a thousand variations and attained Enlightenment.

Anawrahta too listened, as if he had never heard the story before for the words never failed to open the magic casements of his mind every time he heard them repeated. This time as Shin Araham deliberated the theme, Anawrahta felt happier than ever, for he saw that Saw Mon Hla shared his enthusiasm.

Coming back from the monastery in the early hours of the morning, Anawrahta told Saw Mon Hla the story of his search for the Great Truth, inspired by the self-same *gatha* spoken by Shin Araham, and how unfortunate circumstances had led to a clash with Thaton. He talked of the war and conquest and the return to Pagan with the Three Baskets of the Scriptures and the learned *theras*, and how he had asked Shin Araham to be guide and teacher to the *theras*.

Anawrahta paused in his discourse and looked searchingly at Saw Mon Hla and said: "All this talk must be boring to you... it's a long time since I had such a discussion with anyone, since..." Anawrahta stopped, almost angry with himself for remembering Kyansittha.

Saw Mon Hla put a comforting arm around her lord and said: "No, not at all, my lord. I can never tire of hearing you speak, for, I have so much to learn. I feel I must have been dead asleep in some dark cavern not to have known you and your tasks and your ideals. Now that I am here by your side, I want to know everything about you, even things like how you played as a boy... what you thought then... everything that had to do with you is like a panoramic tapestry, ever wondrous and exciting to me..." Saw Mon Hla stopped and hung her head to hide her blushes. She found herself talking like a woman in love.

Anawrahta tenderly cupped her face in his hands and said: "My dear, something wonderful must have happened to you. Stars are shining in your eyes and even your ruby earrings gleam with uncanny lights... It must be the light of the Dhamma shining..."

It was then they both realized that their love had risen above the common and the earthy to the plane of spiritual heights.

58

Court intrigues

The coming of Saw Mon Hla somehow filled the emptiness in Anawrahta's life after Kyansittha's departure, although no one ever thought that the Shan princess would become a potential force in Anawrahta's life, nor a force in the union of states and peoples he aspired to build.

Lords and ladies of Anawrahta's court were surprised that their king should spend so much time with his new queen and the talk prevalent among the ladies was... "What has she got that we haven't?" Some even whispered that Saw Mon Hla must have brought some talisman from her highland home that made Anawrahta so completely enamoured of her.

Saw Mon Hla's adoption of Theravada Buddhist faith won her the love and trust of the people who hailed her as "queen among women," "a jewel of a gift from the celestial abodes bestowed on King Anawrahta." Songs were sung in praise of her piety and virtue and stories of how strange lights shone in her ruby earrings were told and repeated by the people who were full of enthusiasm for the Theravada Buddhist faith.

Anawrahta was delighted that his new queen commanded such esteem among the people, and with her by his side he felt much strengthened in his task of building the union of peoples. He showered honours and gifts on Saw Mon Hla declaring that "no jewel could ever match the Light of the Dhamma that was enshrined in her heart." Such eulogies caused whispers among the women that the new queen must be a witch to be able to produce "such uncanny lights" in her ruby earrings.

Whispers of such nature slithered along the corridors of the scented boudoirs into the solemn council chambers where peers and ministers assembled, but few, if ever, dared to raise their voice knowing full well that the king's love and trust stood as an impregnable bulwark around his queen.

Nga Yaman, Prince Saw Lu's henchman was quick to grasp the situation. He and some of the ministers, who had hoped for a niche in the king's trust and favour after Kyansittha was gone, found themselves up against a more formidable adversary. During the earlier days of Saw Mon Hla's arrival, Prince Saw Lu tried to wave away their fears saying, "She's just one more woman among the king's concubines," but later he began to grow apprehensive.

"All this talk about the queen being a witch might come in useful to us," Nga Yaman said. Prince Saw Lu, however, sternly told Nga Yaman that if he thought for a moment that anyone

could bring about the queen's downfall by this rigmarole about witchcraft, he must be a fool. "What do you take my royal father for? A king in a burlesque act.. ordering his loved queen to exile because some clown told him that she was a witch? You know this could never happen."

Prince Saw Lu felt, however, that the influence of a strange woman from the highlands in his royal father's court was definitely undesirable. Nga Yaman, with hints and insinuations, sowed seeds of doubt as to whether Anawrahta's alliance with the Mao state was a judicious one. "I wish you'd talk to your royal father about it. Saw Naung, the chief of the Mao state, might any day be swayed by his advisers to give passage to the Nanchao invaders into our kingdom. We should not bank too much on his professed loyalty to our king," Nga Yaman said. "We should be all the more careful, with the new queen, Saw Naung's sister, influencing the king."

Prince Saw Lu was honestly anxious about the Nanchao menace on the northern border although he had seen that Saw Naung had firmly withstood the Nanchao invaders, refusing them passage into the Burmese kingdom. Anawrahta also sent forces to strengthen the border fortresses that later came to be managed by Saw Naung who proved to be a capable leader of men. Anawrahta was gratified to know that his men sent to serve on the border fortresses accepted Saw Naung's leadership and worked amicably with the people of the Mao state against their common danger, the Nanchao invaders.

Prince Saw Lu, instigated by his henchman Nga Yaman, felt uneasy about Saw Naung's role in such an important task of consolidating the northern frontier. He was ever apprehensive about the possibility of Saw Naung being persuaded by his advisers to go over to the side of Nanchao. He often wondered how far the new queen was to be trusted in this matter.

Nga Yaman, ever determined to use Prince Saw Lu to attain his own ambition, felt that he would have to oust the new queen as he had ousted Kyansittha, if he were to place his master in the seat of power. He saw that, if he could sow seeds of dissension between Saw Naung and Anawrahta, everything would just fall in place to suit his plan.

Nga Yaman had some of his men in the forces sent to serve on the border and through them rumours of Saw Mon Hla being suspected of being a witch were spread until they reached Saw Naung's ears. Angered, Saw Naung sent messengers to his sister demanding to know "why the peers of Anawrahta's court kept away anything that was touched by Saw Mon Hla's hands for fear of some evil spell; why all this ostracism, why this disgrace?"

It took some time for Saw Mon Hla to understand what her brother was raving about. She instantly sent couriers with her message that all the rumours were false and that she was loved, honoured and cherished by the king and that she was placed in high esteem in his court not only as queen, but as trusted counsellor.

Naturally, Saw Mon Hla in her message to her brother could not help talking about the consummate happiness she found with

Anawrahta and how she shared his ideals, both spiritual and temporal. That hardly helped to convince Saw Naung of the truth of her words. In the next message, Saw Naung reproved his sister for "talking nonsense like a woman in love and forgetting her loyalty to her own brother and her state for the love of a stranger."

Saw Mon Hla was naturally upset by her brother's words as she could not very well deny that she had fallen in love with the man with whom she had contracted a political marriage. Although greatly perturbed, she could not tell all this to her Lord Anawrahta and she had no one to turn to. She tossed on her sleepless couch thinking how she could smooth out matters.

In the early hours of the morning Saw Mon Hla stole out into the garden hoping to seek solace in its quietness. She sauntered along the footpath towards the lily pool only to find that someone was already there on the stone couch under the *htanaung* tree. She saw that it was Khin U, the young Mon queen of Uttha Pegu. She was sitting with her face in her hands, sobbing noiselessly.

Saw Mon Hla approached her softly and sat by her side and said: "Young sister, why are you crying? Can I help you?"

Startled, Khin U uncovered her face and looked at Saw Mon Hla without speaking a word. She resented the intrusion into her private grief and a sharp rebuke was on the tip of her tongue when she saw Saw Mon Hla's compassionate eyes. She heard her say softly: "Young sister, I know what it means to leave your homeland and live in a strange land with a stranger as your lord and husband..."

Khin U found voice to say: "It's months, nay, years, since I left my home, the land of rain and floods...I miss them all. I have stood here day after day amidst the alien trees menacing me with their spiky thorns...how I long for the sight of waving coconut palms and the smell of the sea..."

"Yes, I know how it is. I too long for the hills with their tufted trees, the roaring rapids and the smell of the pines. But since it is our destiny to be here, we have to accept it with grace, if not with enthusiasm."

"I am tired of hearing all this talk about destiny. It's only the men's game, with us as pawns. I cannot be expected to act noble and sacrificing like..."

"Like our lord the King?"

"No...like..." Khin U hung her head, blushing furiously, for Kyansittha's name had almost slipped past her lips. Saw Mon Hla said gently: "So there's some one else in your heart. Then, it must be more terrible...I am sorry."

Saw Mon Hla tenderly wiped Khin U's tears and said: "I never had a sister, my dear, neither an older one to dry my tears nor a younger one to comfort. All my life I have lived in a men's world only hearing their talk about duty and destiny. I have had my fill of it."

Something in Saw Mon Hla's voice made Khin U look up and she saw in the former's face a look of mixed exasperation and weariness, that years of listening to men's high and mighty talk and never having a chance to have a mind or life of her own, could give. Khin U felt like bursting into mirthless laughter, a mocking laughter at the men, as willing servants of destiny, playing the game of war, peace and state-building, using women as pawns, shoving them about as they thought fit.

Khin U pressed Saw Mon Hla's hand and said: "I know what it means. I have had but a small dose but it's more than enough, but you...all your life, as I hear, sharing with your brother the responsibilities of the state...I wonder how you could take it all."

Saw Mon Hla said: "I had been trained and taught to take it all, but I find for the first time that I cannot take any more. I, too, realize that we are nothing but objects to be used by our fathers, brothers and husbands in their own imperial schemes. We are moulded to fit into the pattern of their making, that is to say, we are not to have any feelings except what they want us to feel or thoughts that they want us to think. The moment we start having any feelings of our very own, they turn against us."

Khin U could not quite follow Saw Mon Hla's words. She asked: "Who's turned against you? Our lord the King loves and honours you above all others. Does he not?"

Saw Mon Hla said: "It's my brother. He does not like that I should feel anything except what he wants me to feel. If he could, he would wring my heart dry of any feelings not authorized by him".

Khin U said: "I thought you were a willing servant of destiny... bowing down to it without a murmur. I now see that something has happened to you and that you are suffering conflict in your heart."

Khin U did not know who was the unhappier of the two, she living as a pawn in Anawrahta's court and loving another or Saw Mon Hla loving Anawrahta and in conflict with her own kith and kin.

Before the two could confer further, a messenger came with the command from the king that Saw Mon Hla was to enter the royal presence forthwith. Saw Mon Hla went, wondering why the king had summoned her all of a sudden.

59

The king's inspiration

When Saw Mon Hla entered the king's presence she found him in deep conference with four or five of his men, all poring over a leather strip on which were drawn plans of a terrain. The king and his men were silhouetted against the fitful torch light burning from a stand and Saw Mon Hla could see through the small arched window, figures of men, horses and elephants moving like shadows in the morning twilight.

The first thought that came into Saw Mon Hla's mind was that there might be trouble on the Nanchao border and she prayed that her brother was in no way influenced to give the Nanchao invaders the right of passage through his state.

The king seemed hardly aware of her coming, so absorbed was he in the discussion. Saw Mon Hla recognized one of the men as Nga Lone, the officer in charge of the agrarian plans the king had made as part of the peacetime projects. His presence somehow comforted Saw Mon Hla's heart, for it could mean that the king might not be planning a military campaign.

Moments later the men went out leaving the king still intent on the map, following the plan with his spear. Saw Mon Hla waited until he turned round to notice her presence.

Anawrahta looked at her as if surprised and helped her to her feet and half dragged her to the window and said: "My dear, look. Men, horses and elephants. We're going on a journey. You are coming with me and...my dear, what do you think, you are going to share with me another of my glorious conquests, a conquest not over men but over the elements. Now go, make ready. We are leaving even before this torch light dies out."

Saw Mon Hla took one look at the pale light fluttering in the morning breeze and rushed back to her chamber to come back with a handful of attendants carrying bags and boxes. The king rolled up the map and handing it over to Saw Mon Hla, said: "My dear, you are holding in your hand the destiny of our people for generations to come... I will tell you more when we reach our destination. Now, let's be on our way."

They journeyed eastwards crossing a network of streams that were tributaries of the Irrawaddy river, turned north and crossed the Zawgyi river and reached their destination, the Tharlyaung hill.

Anawrahta and his retinue climbed the hill, partly by elephant and partly on foot, Saw Mon Hla and her women sharing the hardships and earning a grudging respect from Anawrahta's men who whispered among themselves that "the highland princess was made of sterner stuff than they ever thought she would be."

Nga Lone, who throughout the journey was missing his friend, Kyansittha, felt happy in the thought that his lord had found someone who could share his tasks.

The first night they camped on the Tharlyaung hill, Anawrahta led Saw Mon Hla out of the tent to sit on a jutting rock commanding a full view of the countryside swathed in the silvery beams of a full moon.

They sat for some time in companionable silence absorbed in the beauty of the scene. Anawrahta spoke first: "Look, my dear, there on the left as we face eastwards is the Myitnge river, swift and foaming. Turn your eyes southwards, there's the Zawgyi river flowing into Myitnge. Almost parallel with it is the Panlaung river and the hill you see on the bend is Pyetkhayway hill which is in fact two hills, Pyetkha and Yway. You will see the two peaks easily in the already breaking dawn. Look yonder on the other side of the hills, ah, there's the Samon river. It flows into the Myitnge river..."

As Saw Mon Hla listened and viewed the scene with rapt attention, Anawrahta went on telling her the stories of the early pioneers who settled in the river valley, how they built dams and canals until the land burst forth with rich harvests and how the time had come for him and his people to preserve and extend the works laid down by their ancestors.

The next day was spent in sending scouting parties to study the terrain and studying the leather strip on which the plan of the proposed irrigation works had been drawn. Saw Mon Hla watched her lord intent on his task, unyielding in the face of difficulties and though greatly moved, she willed her tears from welling in her eyes, saying to herself: "Moist not with drops of womanly weakness... such are not for me, who am to share a destiny with Anawrahta, the uncontrollable, in whose way nothing can stand."

Anawrahta worked on, oblivious of the passing of time, of his body and mind crying out for rest; he hardly gave as much as a look at the meals Saw Mon Hla had taken care to spread before him. He sat with the map before him, tracing with his spear the lines that marked the rivers and streams, until his eyes were dimmed with fatigue and his spear fell from his nerveless hands. Saw Mon Hla then tactfully rolled the sheet away from him and let him fall into her arms in sheer exhaustion.

Saw Mon Hla dared not move her arm on which her lord's head rested lest he be awakened; she tenderly wiped the drops of perspiration from his troubled brow and prayed that he might be spared of all the ills that the flesh was heir to. She could not sleep. She kept the vigil, listening to the hoot of the night birds and the sound of the sentries alerting one another. She did not

realize that she had dozed off until she was suddenly aware that her lord was groaning like one in a nightmare.

Saw Mon Hla instantly helped him to sit up and put a goblet of water to his lips. Anawrahta gratefully took a gulp and put his arm around Saw Mon Hla's shoulders and said: "My dear, I had a terrible dream...four great serpents stretched before me menacing me with their fangs, breathing fire, daring me to catch them; and I with this trusty spear pierced through the neck of the first one, and then the second...and the third; I saw the serpents' blood turn into gold and jewels and I saw my countrymen pick them up singing happy songs of prosperity. But, my dear, the fourth serpent, the most ferocious of them all...it got away..."

Even before Saw Mon Hla had time to make out what it all meant, Anawrahta jumped up and unrolled the map saying: "My dear, look, here are the serpents...three rivers, the four rivers, Myitnge, Zawgyi, Panlaung, Samon...the rivers I meant to harness for the use of my countrymen. I had reports that all the rivers except Myitnge could be dammed and I fell asleep thinking how I could harness Myitnge and I had this dream..."

Anawrahta traced the lines on the map with his spear and said: "In my dream I saw the vulnerable parts of each serpent, the exact place where I must thrust my spear...now, now, I know where to build the dams, the exact places to lay the waterlocks. You see, although my physical body was slumbering away my mind was still at work. It has worked on the right lines...the dream was nothing but my mind working...now I must mark the places before I forget them."

As Anawrahta knelt down on the mat in a frenzy of excitement, Saw Mon Hla watched him and was suddenly conscious of the tremendous grandeur of the man who was making his dream a reality.

Anawrahta's spearpoint traced over the map until it reached the Myitnge river. He let fall his spear and heaved a deep sigh muttering, "I still cannot find a way to harness this river. In my dream I tried and tried but it escaped me...am I to give in...after all my determination to conquer these four rivers...?"

Anawrahta clenched his fists and bit his lip hard until it bled, unable to accept the inevitable. Saw Mon Hla tenderly wiped the drops of blood that oozed from his lips with her silken scarf and with her soft hands she unfolded his fingers that dug deep into the palms and put them against her cheek. She said: "My lord, a kingdom is not built in a day. Forgive me if I say that you have been trying to do the task of several centuries in your own lifetime...this Myitnge river, perhaps, is a reminder that you have to leave something for your children to carry on: for, if you do everything, what will there be left for poor posterity? Are they to be denied the privilege of achieving something of their own?"

Anawrahta held Saw Mon Hla against his heart and said: "My dear, thank you for reminding me. I learned today that it takes more courage to accept defeat than to go into battles and conquer.

Let posterity have tasks to perform instead of living on the fruits of the labour of their forbears? Have no fear on that score, my dear, they are bound to have many things, and greater things to do...this Myitnge river for one."

Saw Mon Hla felt closer than ever to her lord, for she had shared his defeat as well as his triumphs.

More problems for Saw Mon Hla

The royal camp up the Tharlyaung hill commanded a full view of the area bustling with activity and the air was filled with happy songs and the music of the drums that mingled with the crunch of the bullock carts on the pebbled ground together with the trumpeting of the elephants and the neighing of the horses. Saw Mon Hla, overwhelmed with enthusiasm, could not help saying: "My lord, look... both man and beast seem to be offering themselves to your service!"

Anawrahta smiled as he would at the prattling of a child and said: "My dear, they are not offering themselves to me but to this land, the land of our forbears and the land we are leaving to our children. I am but a mere mortal destined to do the lion's share. That's all."

"But, my lord," Saw Mon Hla insisted, "you are responsible for bringing the people together and inspiring them to achieve things that would help them to prosper for generations to come. How could today's achievements be but for your leadership?"

"True, my dear, I know I have brought them together and led them to work and to achieve. This I say, without any false modesty. But, do not forget one important thing... that I am most fortunate to partake of the wisdom of the Buddha. Without the Theravada Buddhist faith I do not think many of the things we are doing today could be done."

Saw Mon Hla remained silent for a while, not quite following what the king meant. Even as she wondered how the Theravada Buddhist faith could be a potential force in building the kingdom, Anawrahta said: "For the first time in the life of our people, they are taught to depend on themselves. Theravada Buddhism teaches one to depend on one's own ability instead of putting blind faith in rituals and praying to the powers above. Man's dignity is enhanced by the teaching that he alone is master of his fate. Above all, it also teaches those who are to be leaders, not to be misled by outward appearances of seeming truth but to go right to the root, to know the real cause so that they can deal with any problem the right way; for the essence of the Buddha's teaching is, as you know:

'Of all things that proceed from a cause, of the cause the Tathagata hath told, and also how they cease to be, this too the mighty monk hath told.'"

Saw Mon Hla asked haltingly: "But, my lord... may I ask you one thing. Do you think it possible for us humans to do

away with rituals, superstitions and the willingness to hitch our faith to the powers above? Even now..."

Anawrahta nodded, the ghost of a smile hanging on his lips. He said: "Yes, my dear, I know only too well what you mean. Even now, they are offering ritual feasts to some spirit or the other. Man needs rituals to inspire him, to move him to work and achieve. Rituals will ever be part of man's life.

"I know it is not easy to be a Buddhist, for, one needs to be brave, brave enough to depend on oneself and most important of all, to admit his own imperfection and never to give up trying to achieve perfection. With Theravada Buddhist teachings close to them, people will recognize their adherence to traditional beliefs as weakness and imperfection common in those who have not yet the courage enough to depend on themselves. At least this is what I believe."

The king stopped his discourse and tilted Saw Mon Hla's face to look into it intently and said: "I wonder if you have dozed off during my homily... if you have, I won't blame you. As you must know already I never tire of my favourite theme." Saw Mon Hla said: "No, my lord. Your talk interests me greatly, for it makes me think of the people of my brother's state. There, they too have their lands watered by dams and canals but they are still bound down by age-old superstitions and beliefs. I am wondering how we could convert them to the Theravada Buddhist faith."

"Do not worry, my dear, this we shall do. The people of your brother's state... your people... they are my people too. They too shall have Theravada Buddhism enshrined in their hearts, with your help."

"But, my lord, you say that it is not easy to embrace such an ideology that teaches man to depend solely on himself. Do you think it possible for Theravada Buddhism to spread and prosper in our land... by which I mean our union, our united kingdom?"

"I believe that Theravada Buddhism will spread and prosper in the hearts of our people. Do you know why? Never on the face of this earth could be found such a happy breed of men as freedom-loving as ours and never in the record of human thought is there a teaching so liberal and free as Theravada Buddhism. Our people shall never be tied down to any ideology that shackles their freedom of thought and action."

When Anawrahta left her to work on the plans with his men Saw Mon Hla thought with gratitude of her lord's assurance that Theravada Buddhism would spread to her brother's state with her help. A common faith, she felt, would be conducive to a better understanding between the two states.

Her contemplation was interrupted by the arrival of messengers from her brother who had followed her from the royal city to the camp at Tharlyaung hill. Eager to hear the news of home Saw Mon Hla asked after her brother's health and the state of affairs there. She was especially happy to see among the messen-

gers the old minister who had been in service since the lifetime of her parents and who was like a foster father to her and her brother. She said: "Father, I am so glad you could come. You can see for yourself how wonderful things are here and tell my brother."

The old man's face was non-committal and Saw Mon Hla instantly guessed that there was something important for her to know, so she dismissed her attendants and asked him what he had to say.

Saw Mon Hla learned from the old minister that it was worse than she had feared. After hearing the rumours that Saw Mon Hla had been suspected of being a witch, Saw Naung had begun to harbour feelings against Anawrahta, who he thought was putting his sister in disgrace. The false stories of how Saw Mon Hla was shunned by the lords and ladies in Anawrahta's court were played up by some of Saw Naung's ministers and advisers, who took the opportunity to sow seeds of dissension against Tampadipa and make subtle suggestions how an alliance with the Nanchao would have been more sensible. At present the Nanchao had become more ardent in courting the Mao state to give them passage into Tampadipa. "Those pro-Nanchao advisers are now waiting for your brother to turn openly against Anawrahta... something they believe will happen, if things go on at this rate," said the old minister.

Saw Mon Hla said: "The stories of witchcraft, I thought, were meant to destroy me. But now they are trying to destroy the union my lord Anawrahta is building. I will never let this happen. I will do whatever there is for me to do to prevent this. Father, tell me what you think I should do?"

"I cannot say now my child, but remember what you said just now that you will do whatever there is for you to do. Only this, let me tell you, when the time comes, do not shrink."

A cold shudder ran through Saw Mon Hla and she trembled like a leaf in the wind. With great effort she rallied her strength to say: "Father, in the sacred memory of my parents you have served, and upon the love and loyalty I owe to the two great men of our times, my lord King Anawrahta and my brother, I will do whatever I have to do."

Saw Mon Hla was not long in realizing the extent of the sacrifice she was called upon to make in the cause of her lord Anawrahta and the ideals he stood for; for, she was, on the same day, summoned by the king to be present when he received the commanders from the Nanchao border and hear the reports.

61

News from the Nanchao border

When Anawrahta received the commanders in charge of the Nanchao border he was wondering why they had hastened to follow him to his camp on the Tharlyaung hill instead of waiting for him to return to the city of Pagan. Neither did he realize to what extent the evil forces had been working to destroy the amicable relations between him and Saw Naung, chief of the Mao state, Saw Mon Hla's own brother. He was therefore greatly perturbed to hear that the political climate in the Mao state favoured an alliance with the Nanchao.

"Of late, the incomings of the Nanchao people into the Mao state in the guise of merchants and travellers have been too frequent for our peace of mind. Rumours suggest that the chief Saw Naung is estranged from our lord King Anawrahta due to some family discord," the reports said.

The rumour, said the border officials, was supported by the fact that Anawrahta's men on the border were seeing less of Saw Naung, who in the earlier days of Anawrahta's marriage to Saw Mon Hla had not only shown friendliness and hospitality, but had given them all necessary help and advice in matters relating to the border. All of a sudden, during the last few months, Saw Naung had stopped all such friendly contacts and treated Anawrahta's men with cold indifference.

"Many of our men are hurt by the snub, and petty quarrels between the Mao people and our men hardly help matters. At present the situation is far from easy and the people behave as if they were expecting hostilities to start soon," the officials said.

As Anawrahta silently pondered over the news, Prince Saw Lu and some of the ministers took the opportunity to point out the desirability of revising the decision to entrust to Saw Naung the major part of the responsibility of resisting the Nanchao menace; too much depended on his loyalty to the king. With one wave of his hand Saw Naung, as the powerful chief of the Mao state, could give the Nanchaos the right of passage into his state and the whole kingdom would be in grave danger.

Anawrahta listened without a word and thought: "I must weigh this matter as if Saw Naung were not Saw Mon Hla's brother, for it involves the fate of the whole kingdom."

That there were factions of people in the Mao state who favoured an alliance with the Nanchao was no news. But then, Saw Naung had, in the face of such opposition, given his sister in marriage to Anawrahta so that the alliance of the Mao state

and Tampadipa should be consolidated. Anawrahta felt that he must first find out the real reasons for Saw Naung's changed attitude before he could take any action.

Anawrahta said: "My lords, we have here in our court someone representing Mao State. Let her hear the reports and we shall see what she has to say," He then summoned Saw Mon Hla to the audience and commanded that the reports be repeated for her benefit.

Saw Mon Hla listened to the reports and knew that her worst fears had come true. She could not look at her lord Anawrahta's face for sympathy and assurance. She was in the royal audience not as Anawrahta's wife, cherished and adored, but as someone representing the Mao state for whose actions she would have to answer. Even though her eyes were lowered she could feel the stern gaze of her lord King Anawrahta who, she knew, would have to do anything necessary in the interest of the kingdom regardless of his personal feelings. She willed her tears back, and firmly collected herself.

When the officials finished their report Saw Mon Hla looked up at her lord and waited to hear what he had to say. Never in her life had she felt so alone and weak. That it should be so, at such a time when she needed more than the strength and courage her woman's heart could muster!

Anawrahta addressed her: "Saw Mon Hla, Princess of Mao State and Saw Naung's sister, can you throw any light on your brother's attitude as reported by the border officials?"

Saw Mon Hla, paying respects to the king, said: "My lord, I beg your gracious permission to receive the messengers from Mao State headed by Suiw Lao, a trusted minister who has served the Mao chiefs for three generations and give ear to what he has to say."

Anawrahta addressed his ministers: "My lords, it is meet that we hear what the minister of Mao State has to say. We shall hear that side of the story before we consider any action. Let the minister of Mao State enter our presence."

When Suiw Lao the old minister of the Mao state entered the king's presence, Saw Mon Hla greeted him with respect and addressed him: "Father, by addressing you so, let it be known that you are like a parent to me and my brother and that you are one who will put the interest of the state above all else. Here, in this audience we represent our Mao State of which my brother is the chief. Let me repeat in the august presence of our King Anawrahta and his peers that we of Mao State firmly believe that the disintegrated condition of our people in the land is not conducive to peace and prosperity, and therefore, have decided to accept the leadership of King Anawrahta of Tampadipa, so that we can work together for the solidarity of the united kingdom we all aspire to build. We of Mao State have already shown our trust in King Anawrahta by contracting a blood alliance, and you, father, as trusted minister of Mao State, please give a full account of what has happened since then. And, please say all you have to say,

so that King Anawrahta and his peers shall learn the whole truth."

Suiw Lao after giving respects to the king spoke; "Your Majesty King Anawrahta and my lords and peers, we are up against an enemy worse than thousands of murderous hordes, for, this enemy can neither be seen nor caught hold of. Our enemy is the many-tongued rumour to whom people will not stop the vent of hearing when it speaks. Rumour makes the winds his post-horse and upon his tongues ride continual slanders the which in every language he pronounces, stuffing the ears of men with false reports... that our Princess Saw Mon Hla, Your Majesty's queen consort is being disgraced and ostracized here in the court of Tampadipa. This rumour having reached our Chief Saw Naung, he was most sad and unhappy and he has sent me here to learn the whole truth. And I am happy to say that I have not made this journey in vain. I can now go back to Mao State with eye-witness reports of how our Princess is honoured in Your Majesty's court. Under such circumstances the danger of our common enemy the Nanchaos taking advantage of the rift shall be no more."

Anawrahta addressed his peers: "My lords, you now hear the reason of Mao chief Saw Naung's coldness to our men there on the borders. All we have to do is to make plans to refute these rumours and restore the amicable relations with Mao State. Now that the building of dams and canals is well on the way to completion, we shall return to the royal city Pagan. And last but not least, let the minister of Mao State and his entourage be treated with great honour as befits them."

When the audience ended Nga Yaman came away frustrated, for his plans to discredit Saw Mon Hla had been thwarted. Prince Saw Lu was undecided; he was not sure if Nga Yaman's distrust of Saw Mon Hla and her brother was justified or not. He said: "To all appearances, Mao State seems loyal to my father and the ideals he stands for. They could have allied themselves with the Nanchao long before we came on their political scene. But they have all along resisted them."

Nga Yaman saw that Prince Saw Lu was not without principles and that he was ready to put the interest of the union of peoples above everything, even his own personal ambition. He thought: "This prince is a problem. He's too soft. That comes from his spending too much time with the Mon artists and scholars studying and talking of ideals instead of being the power-grabbing lord that he should be."

He said aloud: "Prince, I am your friend and milk brother, my mother being your wet nurse... I want you to be powerful, a worthy successor to your great father. Remember, a prince must not trust anyone... a king has much less to trust. I often wonder if your father trusts Saw Naung or even his own queen as much as he lets others think that he does. He has to play the game. It is up to us to watch and do things as we think fit without letting the king's hand be stained. Let us watch and go about with

great caution. Remember, we too are concerned about the union, our kingdom and our people.” As usual, Prince Saw Lu was shaken and began to be anxious about his father and the state of the kingdom. As Nga Yaman cleverly manouevred this way and that, the prince began to fall back upon him for advice and help. Nga Yaman knew he would win yet, by talking the same language as the king’s men, using words like “loyalty to the king, the union of peoples, and the ideals he stands for.”

62

Siuw Lao's other purpose

Still unaware of the plot Nga Yaman was hatching against her Saw Mon Hla felt hopeful for happier relations between her brother and her lord Anawrahta. She told Siuw Lao about the king's dedication to the ideal of the union of peoples and how the Mons of Uttha Pegu and Thaton had contributed to the cultural and religious life of the Tampadipa kingdom. "Many of the lords and peers of the former King Manuha of Thaton are now working together with those of my lord King Anawrahta in the administration of the kingdom. Only some time ago, Manuha's son, the Uparaja came back from Lankadipa where he was sent as leader of the goodwill mission to King Vijayabahu," said Saw Mon Hla. The old minister was greatly heartened by the information.

Once back in the royal city of Pagan, Anawrahta conferred with Siuw Lao on ways and means of fostering more amicable relations with the Mao state.

Siuw Lao said: "Sire, I have yet another purpose in coming to Tampadipa. I have grown old in the service of the Mao chiefs for three generations and all along been unhappy about the animistic practices in our state. Buddhism is not unknown but it is overwhelmed with animistic rituals of worship. I have heard from travellers and pilgrims how the Great Truth the Buddha taught has taken root and prospered here in Tampadipa and it is my ardent wish that I might hear the Great Truth from the reverend *theras*, and perhaps be able to take it to my people. I am ripe with years and if only I can absorb the sweetness of the Dhamma before I die...I shall be content."

Anawrahta and Saw Mon Hla were very happy to hear of Siuw Lao's enthusiasm for Theravada Buddhism, which they both saw as a means of bringing together the peoples of the land into one great force. Anawrahta immediately made arrangements for Siuw Lao to go and see Shin Araham. "It's better for us to go to the monastery incognito, mixing with commoners, and Siuw Lao will have a chance to see for himself our people's fervour for the great faith," Anawrahta said.

When Siuw Lao saw Shin Araham and heard him preach the Word of the Buddha, he was deeply moved by the *thera's* serenity and the compassion with which he treated king and commoner alike, and no less so by the words, which though few, seemed to fill him with a new strength and courage to face the close of his long eventful life.

As Siuw Lao walked away from the monastery with Anwrahta and Saw Mon Hla, he said: "The man who, living a hundred years, has never heard the Great Truth the Buddha taught, has never lived at all." He then whispered to Anwrahta: "My lord, if you had showered on me all the gold and jewels in the land or given me the highest honour you could think of... they would not be worth the one moment I stayed with reverend *thera* Shin Araham."

They were walking past the section of the city where the Mons of Thaton had settled down and Anwrahta said to Siuw Lao: "Here in this place, Manuha of Thaton and his family stay. He spends most of his time doing pious duties to the *thera*. This is as it should be, for who else should the one who has been a king serve?"

As they walked slowly, Anwrahta telling the old minister how most of the younger members of the Mon royal family were taking part in cultural and administrative activities, their attention was drawn to a small gathering within the enclosure where Manuha and his family lived. Some of the passers-by went in to see what it was all about and Anwrahta with a quick wordless signal to Saw Mon Hla and the old minister to follow him, instantly joined the group sitting under a shady banyan tree.

Manuha was seated on a stone seat with his family around him and a large tray full of jewels was in front of him. He was telling his queens, children and peers that they could retain their own personal possessions if they wished, and they could contribute anything towards the building of the temple, on which he himself was going to spend all his worldly fortune that now lay on the tray before him.

Manuha picked up the gem-encrusted crown and said: "In my happier days, many Buddha images and stupas have I created for worship... they were works of art, things of beauty that were meant to give joy to the beholder. But today, the temple and the Buddha image I am building shall have none of the beauties that reflected the transient glory of my former state. I am content that I have in me the Buddha to give me strength to bear my fate without resentment and I forgive everyone as I hope to be forgiven by friend and foe alike. This beauty of the Dhamma shall also be represented in the temple I shall build on this ground where stands my palace. Let our Mon artists and craftsmen excel themselves so that posterity shall see how our culture has blossomed in this land Tampadipa."

The jewel tray was passed round the group so that everyone could put in a trinket, or ingot. Anwrahta slipped something into it and hastily left the group together with Saw Mon Hla and the old minister.

When at last the jewel tray was brought back to Manuha, he saw among the contributions a star ruby set in a strange looking ring. Manuha picked it up and examined it wondering where he had seen it before, for he knew for certain that it did not belong to any member of the family or his peers. He looked at the blood-

red ruby set amidst the circle of starry gems and remembered... he had seen it in the private chapel in his palace the day Thaton fell...on Anawrahta's finger.

A ghost of a smile flitted across Manuha's face and he commanded: "Let the jewels of this ring be used along with mine to decorate the crest of the relic casket that is to be enshrined in the Buddha image I am going to make."

One of his peers with surprise ventured to say: "But, my lord, it is customary to use only kings' personal jewels to stud the crest of the relic casket..."

Manuha said: "A king lives on rice as you do; feels want, tastes grief, needs friends. Subjected thus, how can you say to anyone 'you are a king'?"

Manuha did not realize that Anawrahta himself, within a few days, would be subjected to the same taste of grief, as unexpected as it was bitter. The turn of events in the affairs of the state that were as changeable as the clouds in the boundless sky, placed him and his queen Saw Mon Hla in such a cruel dilemma that Anawrahta was called upon to choose between the woman he loved and the ideal to which he had dedicated his whole life.

63

Destiny

While Anawrahta and Saw Mon Hla were happily occupied with their plans to establish better relations with the Mao state and to propagate the Word of the Buddha among the Mao people, Nga Yaman and his followers were busy with conspiracy to overthrow Saw Mon Hla whom they considered to be an adversary in their bid for power.

Nga Yaman wanted his lord Prince Saw Lu to be a powerful man in the kingdom, perhaps exercising even more power than the king himself in actual practice. He pursued this line as one who owed his love and loyalty to his master, the heir-apparent to the throne. For many years, Nga Yaman had found himself up against Kyansittha whose position of trust and responsibility in the king's court had been a thorn in his side. When he succeeded in ousting Kyansittha from the court, Nga Yaman thought that his plans were well on the way to fruition, only to be faced with another rival in the person of Saw Mon Hla. And he was not going to have a mere woman stand in his way.

Of late, Nga Yaman's difficulties had grown, for Prince Saw Lu himself was not so easy to handle as he had been in his younger days. The Prince in his maturer years took his duties seriously and absorbed his father's ideals of a union of peoples and he was more and more becoming a willing servant of the state with a dedication to the ideals Anawrahta upheld. When Nga Yaman found that he could no longer appeal to Prince Saw Lu's personal ambition, he had to change his tune by professing how anxious he was to see the prince a worthy successor to Anawrahta and carrying on the work of unifying the peoples of the land.

Nga Yaman talked to Prince Saw Lu of the importance of the Nanchao border where the danger of invasion was ever present and how much rested on the loyalty of the Mao State... "Just think, Prince, Saw Naung, the chief of Mao State could with one lift of his little finger give the Nanchao invaders the right of passage and the whole kingdom would be overrun. Now that Saw Naung is our king's own brother we might put our fears at rest, ... or, might we?"

Nga Yaman, while speaking as if he might trust Saw Naung to be loyal to the king, took care to plant the seeds of doubt so that it overshadowed Prince Saw Lu's mind. Prince Saw Lu was sensitive enough to notice Nga Yaman's expression of doubt, anxiety and distrust and the sudden change in the inflection of his voice that warned him that they should never be too sure of Saw Naung's loyalty.

Nga Yaman was exploiting Prince Saw Lu's anxiety for the solidarity of the peoples to his own advantage.

The preparations for the triumphant return of Siuw Lao to the Mao state were under way, with Prince Saw Lu choosing the Mon scholars to go along with the Buddhist scriptures and relics which were to be amongst the valuable presents to the Mao chief. Prince Saw Lu who had become an ardent devotee of Thervada Buddhism and lover of Mon culture was enthusiastic. He said: "Just think, Nga Yaman, in the far, far future, all the gold and jewels we send to Mao State will be lost, buried under the dust of the ages, but the Word of the Buddha will be with the people for generations...an ever potent force in the union of the peoples."

Nga Yaman agreed, matching the prince's enthusiasm and, after a while he grew pensive and said slowly: "Prince...all this... the high ideals, our gift to posterity. Why must they ever be like this? Why? Why must honour be rooted in dishonour?..."

Prince Saw Lu was surprised that Nga Yaman should speak so mysteriously. He pressed for explanation.

Nga Yaman said as if reluctantly: "It's the king's honour... the honour of the king in whom we place all our hopes of building a united kingdom. Prince, you must save him from dishonour and illrepute. There is no one who dares to speak on this subject."

As soon as Nga Yaman had finished telling him about "the vital information involving the king's honour" Prince Saw Lu sought Anawrahta's audience and spoke of the information so received.

"Sire, Saw Naung, the chief of Mao State has not yet allied himself with the Nanchao, but he has done much greater harm to Your Majesty's reputation. He is reported to have spoken disparagingly of Your Majesty in such a way that the people believe that their princess, your queen is being kept here as a hostage, so that her brother may not dare to go against Your Majesty. Such a rumour has done great damage to Your Majesty's reputation, for, other races in the union, like the Kadus of Tagaung, have begun to distrust Your Majesty...as one who stoops to blackmail by keeping a sister as hostage to get her brother's support. Such matters do not help here in Pagan or in Tampadipa, for people hearing your name so slandered have begun to harbour resentment against your queen. Distrust begets distrust. Saw Naung's distrust in Your Majesty has resulted in our people's retaliation against his sister, your queen. And some even dare to call her a secret agent of her brother," Prince Saw Lu reported.

If Saw Naung had broken the agreement and allied himself with Nanchao, Anawrahta would not have been more angry. To think that his own people were turning against his queen Saw Mon Hla as an alien from the hills sent out to wreck Anawrahta's kingdom...this was the worst that could have happened.

While Anawrahta pondered on the news, Prince Saw Lu made a bold suggestion...why not send Saw Mon Hla along with the old

minister Siuw Lao to Mao State in full grandeur as the Queen Consort of Tampadipa? This would achieve a double purpose; one, it would impress the people of Mao State with the honour and prestige their princess enjoyed in Anawrahta's court, and two, it would show everyone that the princess was not kept as a hostage and that she was free to go back to her state.

Anawrahta felt that it was the only thing for him to do; but, for once, his emotions were involved in the relentless tide of state affairs. Would Saw Naung be willing to send her back once she was back in the Mao state? And would it be judicious for Anawrahta to have Saw Mon Hla as queen amidst the distrust and suspicion of his own people?

If only his heart were not involved, Anawrahta could have carried himself with great sagacity exploiting the situation to the best advantage for furthering amicable relations with the Mao state, making his own queen consort represent him in that state. But the time had come when nothing mattered except to have the woman he loved by his side.

Saw Mon Hla herself was in the same dilemma, thanks to Nga Yaman. His scheming hand extended everywhere even into the boudoir, where women passed gossip on the same theme—how Anawrahta's honour and reputation were being slurred by Saw Mon Hla's presence in court. The theme was repeated with a great many improvements and variations so that when it reached Saw Mon Hla, she was filled with great sorrow at having caused her lord such harm.

She knew that she would have to go back to the Mao state. By doing so, she would convince her brother of Anawrahta's sincerity in the cause of the union. She must make the first move so that she could spare her lord the pain of telling her to go. After sending word to Siuw Lao that she would be coming along with him to her brother, she sought her lord.

Saw Mon Hla found Anawrahta sitting with a stool in front of him. On the stool was the clay model of a huge reservoir to be built to the east of Mount Popa whose water hole and streams were to be harnessed and channelled to form a lake. Anawrahta was gazing at the model but the look on his face told her that his thoughts were elsewhere.

Saw Mon Hla approached softly and sat at his feet and whispered, "My lord, may I..." and she thrust her gem-studded hairpin into his hand and guided his hand on the model.

Saw Mon Hla withdrew her hand as the hairpin fell on the model from Anawrahta's unresponsive fingers, cold and clammy with perspiration. She looked into her lord's face and knew that he must be thinking of the same thing. She rested her face against his knees and said: "My lord, I have a favour to ask of you... seeing Siuw Lao preparing his journey to Mao State, my heart is filled with a longing to see my highland home and my brother. With your kind permission, I would like to go with Siuw Lao."

Anawrahta knew what had caused her to make this request. He gathered her in his arms and said fervently: "My dearest,

nothing matters, except to have you with me... nothing matters but the touch of your hand in mine and the tender look in your eyes... nothing else matters."

As if she had not heard her lord's words, she said: "My lord, I will serve you and your cause by going there...there would be more understanding and goodwill among the peoples and I will help you to spread the Word of the Buddha among the Mao people... all along the way I will build stupas and temples. They shall tell posterity of the greatness and truth of the Word of the Buddha and also the story of our love... once my work is accomplished I will come back to you."

Try as she might, Saw Mon Hla could not say the last words, "I will come back to you" with conviction. The words choked in her throat as she realized the finality of their parting.

She put the hairpin back in Anawrahta's hand and placed it on the clay model and said: "My lord, how wonderful you must be feeling with this project under completion...the reservoir that shall enrich the land with golden harvests. Please use this hairpin as you might your spear, to mark the vital points..."

Anawrahta thrust the hairpin into the clay model and said: "Bring forth men children only, for, your undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males."

Saw Mon Hla gently disengaged herself from Anawrahta's arms and bowed down to his feet three times and said: "If in all the years we have been together, I may have done any wrong to you in thought, or word, or deed...if so, pray forgive me...and my lord, please promise me one thing...that you will sit here at this stool with your eyes on the clay model of Meiktila Lake and never, never look out of the window to see me go...please sit here as if I were by your side.. for I shall ever be here by your side in spirit..."

Saw Mon Hla withdrew from his presence and Anawrahta absently worked on the clay model marking places with the hairpin. Although he did not look out of the window he could hear the sound of elephants and horses and men giving commands. In his mind's eye he saw every move of the entourage leaving the city and he saw, even as his eyes were upon the clay model, Saw Mon Hla sitting with her face to the royal palace, her hands raised together in respect. He knew that she would not turn her face homewards until the top spire of the palace was lost to sight. The hand holding her hairpin moved on the clay model, marking Mount Popa's springs and their courses, until at last it reached the depression representing the lake and suddenly it was filled, as the great lake was to be filled,...not with life-giving water, but with the hot iron tears of a man who had lost the most precious love of his life.

Epilogue

Saw Mon Hla's journey back to Mao State was one bestudded with meritorious deeds. All along the way wherever she and her entourage encamped she attracted the attention of the local people by her good works of repairing old dams and canals and digging new ones for the use of the people. Above all, she gave the people the gems of truth the Buddha taught to guide them in their daily life.

They encamped in a place some twenty miles north-east of where Mandalay stands today and Saw Mon Hla saw the mountain streams rush out in ripples as if to welcome her, their Mao princess. Saw Mon Hla took a dip in the cool crystal waters while her attendants enjoyed themselves frolicking nearby.

It was when she waded back to the bank wiping the water drops from her face that she discovered that her ruby ear-tubes had fallen off. A spasm of pain wrung her heart, for the eartubes were dear to her, so full they were of tender associations. For, had not her Lord Anawrahta remarked, on the night they heard Shin Araham preach the Dhamma, that the uncanny lustre of the jewels must be none other than the Light of the Dhamma radiating in the ear-tubes.

A cry from her attendants made her look in their direction and she saw them kneeling on the bank with their hands raised in respect.

The object of their wonder and reverence was the ear-tubes lying on a stone slab by the stream, the morning sun's rays lending a luminous brilliance to the sparkle of the jewels.

"Look, look, the Buddha's relics must have enshrined themselves there," they cried. Saw Mon Hla knelt down with her hands clasped and said; "My Lord Anawrahta, you are mighty and great. Theravada Buddhism has found a worthy disciple in you. I believe that this episode of the ear-tubes came to remind me of my duty to you and your cause."

She placed the ear-tubes on a bejewelled stand and said to her attendants: "My lords and ladies, wherever we are, the greatness of our lord Anawrahta roofs over us like the sky, for his face is like the heaven itself; he is thus, for he has the Dhamma on his brow, the Dhamma that is highest and more blessed than all the mighty crowns.

"My lords and ladies, what happened this morning is to remind us of our duty to our lord the King and the cause he holds dear. I will commemorate this event by building a temple here and these ear-tubes shall be enshrined in the relic chamber."

So, the temple, known today as Shwezaryan Pagoda was built with the help of the Shans of the area, a lasting monument of Saw Mon Hla's faith and love.

Saw Naung in Mao State hearing the news of his sister's triumphant return was convinced of Anawrahta's sincerity as a brother and ally. He was happy to hear that Saw Mon Hla was bringing with her a new faith, namely Theravada Buddhism, that would help him in his fight against the animistic rituals and practices that were undermining the mental health of the people.

Saw Naung made preparations to welcome back his sister, but he was destined never to see her again. The Chronicles say that Saw Mon Hla died on the way—of broken heart.

Time crept in petty space for Anawrahta as he went on with his tasks until, one day, he fell in a skirmish while touring the country.

Prince Saw Lu succeeded him and realizing that he could not do without Kyansittha's help and support, called him back to his court to serve him. This so excited Nga Yaman's anger and jealousy that he started a rebellion in the south and marched north.

Nga Yaman won a great victory over Saw Lu and Kyansittha. Saw Lu was captured and Kyansittha barely escaped to Pagan where the ministers offered him the throne. He refused, saying that he must first try and save Saw Lu.

Nga Yaman advanced upstream to Myingaba, where Manuha, the ex-king of Thaton had died. His family, distrusting Nga Yaman, managed to steal the royal regalia and escape to Mount Popa, thirty miles east of the city of Pagan. Here they started a new revolt.

Kyansittha, during that time, broke into Nga Yaman's lines in stealth and rescued Saw Lu who could not bring himself to believe that Kyansittha could do this for him. He thought Kyansittha must be taking him away with some foul purpose in mind. He felt that Nga Yaman, being his milk-brother, the son of his wet-nurse, might not be cruel enough to kill him.

Even as he was being carried on the back of Kyansittha who stole him out of the enemy lines, Saw Lu was troubled by doubts. Unable to allay his doubts, Saw Lu shouted for help. Kyansittha, hotly pursued, dropped him with a curse and dived into the river and swam wearily to the west bank. Nga Yaman murdered Saw Lu and laid siege to Pagan.

Before he could deal with Nga Yaman's rebellion Kyansittha had to come to terms with the Mon family at Popa. Their leader was Atthawut Dhamma, the son of Manuha's son the Uparaja.

Kyansittha went to Popa with only a small body of soldiers in attendance and sought Atthawut Dhamma, whose life he had saved on the day Anawrahta's forces attacked Thaton.

Atthawut Dhamma, with tears, welcomed Kyansittha whom he had loved and admired since he was a boy. He was deeply moved by Kyansittha's proposition. Since their first and foremost purpose was to save the kingdom from disintegration, Kyansittha promised

the hand of his daughter to Atthawut Dhamma's son and also that the son of the union should be the heir to the throne.

Kyansittha, during his long years of exile, had begotten a daughter and a son, but, in order that the union of the peoples should be saved he denied his son the right of succession. With the help of the Mons and the Mao Shan forces from Saw Naung, who felt that he should help towards the saving of the union for which his own sister had died, Kyansittha quelled the Nga Yaman rebellion.

When Nga Yaman was killed in retreat, Kyansittha was enthroned king by unanimous support. His re-union with Khin U, the love of his younger days turned back a few pages of his youth's sweet scented manuscript where tender memories still lingered on its faded leaves.

With the task of carrying on the work Anawrahta had left unfinished, Kyansittha more or less acted as regent to his infant grandson who later became famous in the history of Burma as King Alaungsithu.

Kyansittha's son Rajakumar, though deprived of his right of succession to the throne, found a niche for himself in the great revival of learning and culture. His inscriptions engraved in Pali, Pyu, Mon and Burmese languages, record the death-bed scene of his father who, it seems, felt the anguish of having disinherited his beloved son. The son, knowing the reasons and bearing no resentment, made this gesture to comfort his dying father:

* "Remembering the great and many favours with which the king had nourished him, he made a beautiful gold image of the Buddha, and entering with ceremony presented it to the king, saying, 'This golden Buddha I have made to help my lord. The three villages of slaves you gave me, I give to this Buddha. May my lord approve, and the king though his mind was troubled by disease, rejoiced and said, 'Well done! Well done!'"

* From Myazedi Inscriptions

Anawrahta of Burma, first published in *The Working People's Daily* under the title *Heroes of Old Burma*, is a historical novel woven around Aniruddha, commonly known as Anawrahta, king of Burma in the eleventh century, a period of Burma's history which is both inspiring and exciting.

It is a story of men and women caught in the vast web of history in the making — their loves, their hatreds, joys, hopes, jealousies, griefs, their ambitions, their greeds, kindness, cruelty, and the acts and omissions which these feelings compel.

The sweet sad love of Khin U, a Mon princess and Kyansittha, the idyllic romance of Byatta, the king's henchman and the sylvan maid, the simple untarnished love of Mai U for her forester husband Yin Maung, standing up against great odds, and the marriage of true minds between Anawrahta and Shan princess Saw Mon Hla, whose love rose from the earthy to spiritual heights — all these are skilfully woven into an absorbing novel.

"The scenes are vivid, the events as described are plausible and probable. Daw Khin Myo Chit's account of the campaign against Thaton, for example, is a masterpiece in weaving together the known facts and possibilities as visualized by a rich imagination — assisted by studious research and sheer invention," says Dr. Maung Maung in his foreword.