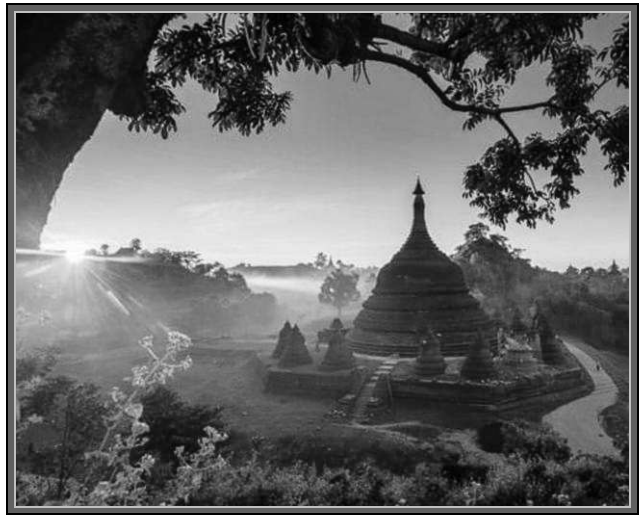
Burmese Days



GEORGE ORWELL

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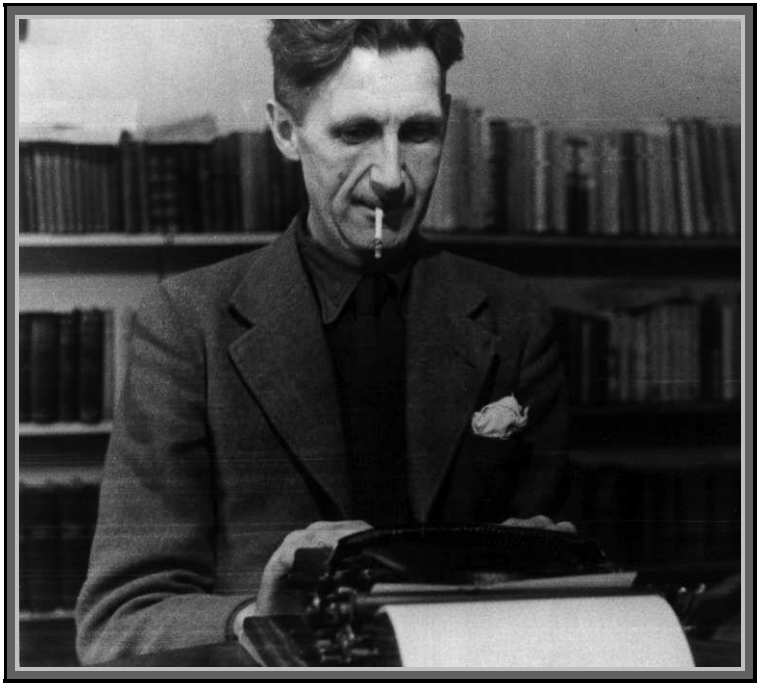

Burmese Days is the first novel by English writer George Orwell, published in 1934. Set in British Burma during the waning days of Empire, when Burma was ruled from Delhi as part of British India, it is "a portrait of the dark side of the British Raj." At the centre of the novel is John Flory, "the lone and lacking individual trapped within a bigger system that is undermining the better side of human nature." The novel describes "both indigenous corruption and imperial bigotry" in a society where, "after all, natives were natives—interesting, no doubt, but finally...an inferior people".

Burmese Days was first published "further afield," in the United States, because of concerns that it might be potentially libelous; that the real provincial town of Katha had been described too realistically; and that some of its fictional characters were based too closely on identifiable people. A British edition, with altered names, appeared a year later. Nonetheless, Orwell's harsh portrayal of colonial society was felt by "some old Burma hands" to have "rather let the side down". In a letter from 1946, Orwell wrote, "I dare say it's unfair in some ways and inaccurate in some details, but much of it is simply reporting what I have seen".

Book Summary:

Burmese Days is set in 1920s imperial Burma, in the fictional district of Kyauktada, based on Kathar (formerly spelled Katha), a town where Orwell served. Like the fictional town, it is the head of a branch railway line above Mandalay on the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River. As the story opens, U Po Kyin, a corrupt Burmese magistrate, is planning to destroy the reputation of the Indian, Dr Veraswami. The doctor hopes for help from his friend John Flory who, as a *pukka sahib* (European white man), has higher prestige. Dr Veraswami also desires election to the town's European Club, of which Flory is a member, expecting that good standing among the Europeans will protect him from U Po Kyin's intrigues. U Po Kyin begins a campaign to persuade the Europeans that the doctor holds anti-British opinions in the belief that anonymous letters with false stories about the doctor "will work wonders". He even sends a threatening letter to Flory.

John Flory, a jaded 35-year-old teak merchant with a birthmark on his face in the shape of a ragged crescent, spends three weeks of every month acquiring jungle timber. Friendless among his fellow Europeans and unmarried, but with a Burmese mistress, he has become disillusioned with life in an expatriate community centred round the local European Club in a remote provincial town. At the same time, he has become so embedded in Burma that it is impossible for him to leave and return to England.

Flory has one good friend, the Indian, Dr Veraswami, whom he often visits for what the Doctor delightedly calls "cultured conversation". But when Flory dismisses the British as mere moneymakers, living a lie, "the lie that we're here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them," he provokes consternation in the doctor, who defends the British as the efficient administrators of an unrivalled empire. Toward his mistress, Flory is emotionally ambivalent: "On the one hand, Flory loves Burma and craves a partner who will share his passion, which the other local Europeans find incomprehensible; on the other hand, for essentially racist reasons, Flory feels that only a European woman is acceptable as a partner".

Flory's wish seems to be answered with the arrival of Elizabeth Lackersteen, the orphaned niece of Mr Lackersteen, manager of the local timber firm. Flory rescues her when she believes she is about to be attacked by a small water buffalo. He is immediately taken with her and they spend some time together, culminating in a highly successful shooting expedition. Flory shoots a leopard, promising the skin to Elizabeth as a trophy. Lost in romantic fantasy, Flory imagines Elizabeth to be the sensitive object of his desire, the European woman who will "understand him and give him the companionship he needed". He turns Ma Hla May, his pretty, scheming Burmese mistress, out of his house. However, whereas Flory extols the virtues of the rich culture of the Burmese, the latter frighten and repel Elizabeth, who regards them as "beastly." Worse still is Flory's interest in high art and literature, which reminds Elizabeth of her pretentious mother who died in disgrace in Paris of ptomaine poisoning as a result of living in squalid conditions while masquerading as a Bohemian artist. Despite these reservations, of which Flory is entirely unaware, she is willing to marry him to escape poverty, spinsterhood, and the unwelcome advances of her perpetually inebriated uncle.

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Who Was George Orwell?

George Orwell was an English novelist, essayist and critic most famous for his novels 'Animal Farm' (1945) and 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (1949). George Orwell was a novelist, essayist and critic best known for his novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. He was a man of strong opinions who addressed some of the major political movements of his times, including imperialism, fascism and communism.

Family & Early Life

Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair in Motihari, India, on June 25, 1903. The son of a British civil servant, Orwell spent his first days in India, where his father was stationed. His mother brought him and his older sister, Marjorie, to England about a year after his birth and settled in Henley-on-Thames. His father stayed behind in India and rarely visited. (His younger sister, Avril, was born in 1908. Orwell didn't really know his father until he retired from the service in 1912. And even after that, the pair never formed a strong bond. He found his father to be dull and conservative.

According to one biography, Orwell's first word was "beastly." He was a sick child, often battling bronchitis and the flu.

Orwell took up writing at an early age, reportedly composing his first poem around age four. He later wrote, "I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued." One of his first literary successes came at the age of 11 when he had a poem published in the local newspaper.

Education

Like many other boys in England, Orwell was sent to boarding school. In 1911, he went to St. Cyprian's in the coastal town of Eastbourne, where he got his first taste of England's class system.

On a partial scholarship, Orwell noticed that the school treated the richer students better than the poorer ones. He wasn't popular with his peers, and in books, he found comfort from his difficult situation. He read works by Rudyard Kipling and H.G. Wells, among others.

What he lacked in personality, he made up for in smarts. Orwell won scholarships to Wellington College and Eton College to continue his studies.

After completing his schooling at Eton, Orwell found himself at a dead end. His family did not have the money to pay for a university education. Instead, he joined the India Imperial Police Force in 1922. After five years in Burma, Orwell resigned his post and returned to England. He was intent on making it as a writer.

Early Writing Career

After leaving the India Imperial Force, Orwell struggled to get his writing career off the ground and took all sorts of jobs to make ends meet, including being a dishwasher.

'Down and Out in Paris and London' (1933)

Orwell's first major work explored his time eking out a living in these two cities. The book provided a brutal look at the lives of the working poor and of those living a transient existence. Not wishing to embarrass his family, the author published the book under the pseudonym George Orwell.

'Burmese Days' (1934)

Orwell next explored his overseas experiences in *Burmese Days*, which offered a dark look at British colonialism in Burma, then part of the country's Indian empire. Orwell's interest in political matters grew rapidly after this novel was published.

War Injury and Tuberculosis

In December 1936, Orwell traveled to Spain, where he joined one of the groups fighting against General Francisco Franco in the

Spanish Civil War. Orwell was badly injured during his time with a militia, getting shot in the throat and arm. For several weeks, he was unable to speak. Orwell and his wife, Eileen, were indicted on treason charges in Spain. Fortunately, the charges were brought after the couple had left the country.

Other health problems plagued the talented writer not long after his return to England. For years, Orwell had periods of sickness, and he was officially diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1938. He spent several months at the Preston Hall Sanatorium trying to recover, but he would continue to battle with tuberculosis for the rest of his life. At the time he was initially diagnosed, there was no effective treatment for the disease.

With World War II raging on, Orwell found himself acting as a propagandist to advance the country's national interest. He loathed this part of his job, describing the company's atmosphere in his diary as "something halfway between a girls' school and a lunatic asylum, and all we are doing at present is useless, or slightly worse than useless."

Orwell resigned in 1943, saying "I was wasting my own time and the public money on doing work that produces no result. I believe that in the present political situation the broadcasting of British propaganda to India is an almost hopeless task." Around this time, Orwell became the literary editor for a socialist newspaper.

George Orwell's Most Famous Books

Sometimes called the conscience of a generation, Orwell is best known for two novels: *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Both books, published toward the end of Orwell's life, have been turned into films and enjoyed tremendous popularity over the years.

'Animal Farm' (1945)

Animal Farm was an anti-Soviet satire in a pastoral setting featuring two pigs as its main protagonists. These pigs were said to

represent Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky. The novel brought Orwell great acclaim and financial rewards.

'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (1949)

Orwell's masterwork, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (or *1984* in later editions), was published in the late stages of his battle with tuberculosis and soon before his death. This bleak vision of the world divided into three oppressive nations stirred up controversy among reviewers, who found this fictional future too despairing. In the novel, Orwell gave readers a glimpse into what would happen if the government controlled every detail of a person's life, down to their own private thoughts.

Essays by George Orwell

'Politics and the English Language'

Published in April 1946 in the British literary magazine *Horizon*, this essay is considered one of Orwell's most important works on style. Orwell believed that "ugly and inaccurate" English enabled oppressive ideology and that vague or meaningless language was meant to hide the truth. He argued that language should not naturally evolve over time but should be "an instrument which we shape for our own purposes." To write well is to be able to think clearly and engage in political discourse, he wrote, as he rallied against cliches, dying metaphors and pretentious or meaningless language.

'Shooting an Elephant'

This essay, published in the literary magazine *New Writing* in 1936, discusses Orwell's time as a police officer in Burma (now known as Myanmar), which was still a British colony at the time. Orwell hated his job and thought imperialism was "an evil thing;" as a representative of imperialism, he was disliked by locals. One day, although he didn't think it necessary, he killed a working elephant in front of a crowd of locals just "to avoid looking a fool." The essay was later the title piece in a collection of Orwell's essays, published in

1950, which included ‘My Country Right or Left,’ ‘How the Poor Die’ and ‘Such, Such were the Joys.’

Wives and Children

Orwell married Eileen O'Shaughnessy in June 1936, and Eileen supported and assisted Orwell in his career. The couple remained together until her death in 1945. According to several reports, they had an open marriage, and Orwell had a number of dalliances. In 1944 the couple adopted a son, whom they named Richard Horatio Blair, after one of Orwell's ancestors. Their son was largely raised by Orwell's sister Avril after Eileen's death.

Near the end of his life, Orwell proposed to editor Sonia Brownell. He married her in October 1949, only a short time before his death. Brownell inherited Orwell's estate and made a career out of managing his legacy.

Death

Orwell died of tuberculosis in a London hospital on January 21, 1950. Although he was just 46 years old at the time of his death, his ideas and opinions have lived on through his work.

George Orwell’s Statue

Despite Orwell’s disdain for the BBC during his life, a statue of the writer was commissioned by artist Martin Jennings and installed outside the BBC in London. An inscription reads, "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear." The eight-foot bronze statue, paid for by the George Orwell Memorial Fund, was unveiled in November 2017.

Other published books by Orwell in this series:

- 1984
- Animal Farm
- A Clergyman's Daughter
- Burmese Days
- Coming Up For Air
- Down and Out in Paris and London
- Homage to Catalonia
- Keep the Aspidistra Flying
- Looking Back on the Spanish War
- The Lion and the Unicorn
- The Road to Wigan Pier
- Fifty Essays

This desert inaccessible

Under the shade of melancholy boughs.

As You Like It

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

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

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

At seventeen he had tried for a Government appointment, but he had failed to get it, being poor and friendless, and for three years he had worked in the stinking labyrinth of the Mandalay bazaars, clerking for the rice merchants and sometimes stealing. Then when he was twenty a lucky stroke of blackmail put him in possession of four hundred rupees, and he went at once to Rangoon and bought his way into a Government clerkship. The job was a lucrative one though the salary was small. At that time a ring of clerks were making a steady income by misappropriating Government stores, and Po Kyin (he was plain Po Kyin then: the honorific U came years later) took naturally to this kind of thing. However, he had too much talent to spend his life in a clerkship, stealing miserably in annas and pice. One day he discovered that the Government, being short of minor officials, were going to make some appointments from among the clerks. The news would have become public in another week, but it was one of Po Kyin's qualities that his information was always a week ahead of everyone else's. He saw his chance and denounced all his confederates before they could take alarm. Most of them were sent to prison, and Po Kyin was made an Assistant

Township Officer as the reward of his honesty. Since then he had risen steadily. Now, at fifty-six, he was a Sub-divisional Magistrate, and he would probably be promoted still further and made an acting Deputy Commissioner, with Englishmen as his equals and even his subordinates.

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

success, and would finally die full of honour, worth several *lakhs* of rupees.

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

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

'Ba Taik! Hey, Ba Taik!'

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

'Most holy god?' he said.

'Is anyone waiting to see me, Ba Taik?'

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

'What does she want?' said U Po Kyin.

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

'Ah. And how much has the headman brought?'

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

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

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

'Well, Ko Ba Sein, how does our affair progress? I hope that, as dear Mr Macgregor would say' U Po Kyin broke into English—' "eet ees making perceptible progress"?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, sir.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'How little you understand the European mind, Ko Ba Sein! If the Europeans go to Veraswami it is only because there is no other doctor in Kyauktada. No European has any faith in a man with a black face. No, with anonymous letters it is only a

question of sending enough. I shall soon see to it that he has no friends left.'

'There is Mr Flory, the timber merchant,' said Ba Sein. (He pronounced it 'Mr Porley'.) 'He is a close friend of the doctor. I see him go to his house every morning when he is in Kyauktada. Twice he has even invited the doctor to dinner.'

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

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

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

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

'Is there anything else your honour wishes done?' he said.

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

'Then I may go, sir?'

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

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

In the living-room behind the curtain a table was already set out with a huge bowl of rice and a dozen plates containing curries, dried prawns and sliced green mangoes. U Po Kyin waddled to the table, sat down with a grunt and at once threw himself on the food. Ma Kin, his wife, stood behind him and served him. She was a thin woman of five and forty, with a kindly, pale brown, simian face. U Po Kyin took no notice of her while he was eating. With the bowl close to his nose he stuffed the food into himself with swift greasy fingers, breathing fast. All his meals were swift, passionate and enormous; they were not meals so much as orgies, debauches of curry and rice. When he had finished he sat back, belched several times and told Ma Kin to fetch him a green Burmese cigar. He never smoked English tobacco, which he declared had no taste in it.

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

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

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

Ma Kin bent her head over her sewing. She was a simple, old-fashioned woman, who had learned even less of European habits than U Po Kyin. She could not sit on a chair without discomfort. Every morning she went to the bazaar with a basket on her head, like a village woman, and in the evenings she could be seen kneeling in the garden, praying to the white

spire of the pagoda that crowned the town. She had been the confidante of U Po Kyin's intrigues for twenty years and more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

§

At about the time when U Po Kyin began his morning's business, 'Mr Porley', the timber merchant and friend of Dr Veraswami, was leaving his house for the Club.

Flory was a man of about thirty-five, of middle height, not ill made. He had very black, stiff hair growing low on his head, and a cropped black moustache, and his skin, naturally sallow, was discoloured by the sun. Not having grown fat or bald he did not look older than his age, but his face was very haggard in spite of the sunburn, with lank cheeks and a sunken, withered look round the eyes. He had obviously not shaved this morning. He was dressed in the usual white shirt, khaki drill shorts and stockings, but instead of a topi he wore a battered Terai hat, cocked over one eye. He carried a bamboo stick with a wrist-thong, and a black cocker spaniel named Flo was ambling after him.

All these were secondary expressions, however. The first thing that one noticed in Flory was a hideous birthmark stretching in a ragged crescent down his left cheek, from the eye to the corner of the mouth. Seen from the left side his face had a battered, woe-begone look, as though the birthmark had been a bruise—for it was a dark blue in colour. He was quite aware of its hideousness. And at all times, when he was not alone, there was a sidelongness about his movements, as he manoeuvred constantly to keep the birthmark out of sight.

Flory's house was at the top of the *maidan*, close to the edge of the jungle. From the gate the *maidan* sloped sharply down, scorched and khaki-coloured, with half a dozen dazzling white bungalows scattered round it. All quaked, shivered in the hot air. There was an English cemetery within a white wall half-way down the hill, and near by a tiny tin-roofed church. Beyond that was the European Club, and when one looked at the Club—a dumpy one-storey wooden building—one looked at the real centre of the town. In any town in India the European Club is the spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain. It was doubly so in this case, for it was the proud boast of Kyauktada Club that, almost alone of Clubs in Burma, it had never admitted an Oriental to membership. Beyond the Club, the Irrawaddy flowed huge and ochreous, glittering like diamonds in the patches that caught the sun; and beyond the river stretched great wastes of paddy fields, ending at the horizon in a range of blackish hills.

The native town, and the courts and the jail, were over to the right, mostly hidden in green groves of peepul trees. The spire of the pagoda rose from the trees like a slender spear tipped with gold. Kyauktada was a fairly typical Upper Burma town, that had not changed greatly between the days of Marco Polo and the Second Burma War, and might have slept in the Middle Ages for a century more if it had not proved a convenient spot for a railway terminus. In 1910 the Government made it the headquarters of a district and a seat of Progress—interpretable as a block of law-courts, with their army of fat but ravenous pleaders, a hospital, a school and one of those huge, durable jails which the English have built everywhere between Gibraltar and Hong Kong. The population was about four thousand, including a couple of hundred

Indians, a few score Chinese, and seven Europeans. There were also two Eurasians named Mr Francis and Mr Samuel, the sons of an American Baptist missionary and a Roman Catholic missionary respectively. The town contained no curiosities of any kind, except an Indian fakir who had lived for twenty years in a tree near the bazaar, drawing his food up in a basket every morning.

Flory yawned as he came out of the gate. He had been half drunk the night before, and the glare made him feel liverish. 'Bloody, bloody hole!' he thought, looking down the hill. And, no one except the dog being near, he began to sing aloud 'Bloody, bloody, bloody, oh, how thou art bloody' to the tune of 'Holy, holy, holy, oh how Thou art holy', as he walked down the hot red road, switching at the dried-up grasses with his stick. It was nearly nine o'clock and the sun was fiercer every minute. The heat throbbed down on one's head with a steady, rhythmic thumping like blows from an enormous bolster. Flory stopped at the Club gate, wondering whether to go in or to go further down the road and see Dr Veraswami. Then he remembered that it was 'English mail day' and the newspapers would have arrived. He went in, past the big tennis screen, which was overgrown by a creeper with starlike mauve flowers.

In the borders beside the path swaths of English flowers—phlox and larkspur, hollyhock and petunia—not yet slain by the sun, rioted in vast size and richness. The petunias were huge, like trees almost. There was no lawn, but instead a shrubbery of native trees and bushes—gold mohur trees like vast umbrellas of blood-red bloom, frangipanis with creamy, stalkless flowers, purple bougainvillea, scarlet hibiscus and the pink Chinese rose, bilious-green crotons, feathery fronds of tamarind. The clash of colours hurt one's eyes in the glare. A

nearly naked *mali*, watering-can in hand, was moving in the jungle of flowers like some large nectar-sucking bird.

On the Club steps a sandy-haired Englishman, with a prickly moustache, pale grey eyes too far apart, and abnormally thin calves to his legs, was standing with his hands in the pockets of his shorts. This was Mr Westfield, the District Superintendent of Police. With a very bored air he was rocking himself backwards and forwards on his heels and pouting his upper lip so that his moustache tickled his nose. He greeted Flory with a slight sideways movement of his head. His way of speaking was clipped and soldierly, missing out every word that well could be missed out. Nearly everything he said was intended for a joke, but the tone of his voice was hollow and melancholy.

'Hullo, Flory me lad. Bloody awful morning, what?'

'We must expect it at this time of year, I suppose,' Flory said. He had turned himself a little sideways, so that his birthmarked cheek was away from Westfield.

'Yes, dammit. Couple of months of this coming. Last year we didn't have a spot of rain till June. Look at that bloody sky, not a cloud in it. Like one of those damned great blue enamel saucepans. God! What'd you give to be in Piccadilly now, eh?'

'Have the English papers come?'

'Yes. Dear old *Punch*, *Pink'un* and *Vie Parisienne*. Makes you homesick to read 'em, what? Let's come in and have a drink before the ice all goes. Old Lackersteen's been fairly bathing in it. Half pickled already.'

They went in, Westfield remarking in his gloomy voice, 'Lead on, Macduff.' Inside, the Club was a teak-walled place smelling of earth-oil, and consisting of only four rooms, one of

which contained a forlorn 'library' of five hundred mildewed novels, and another an old and mangy billiard-table—this, however, seldom used, for during most of the year hordes of flying beetles came buzzing round the lamps and littered themselves over the cloth. There were also a card-room and a 'lounge' which looked towards the river, over a wide veranda; but at this time of day all the verandas were curtained with green bamboo chicks. The lounge was an unhomelike room, with coco-nut matting on the floor, and wicker chairs and tables which were littered with shiny illustrated papers. For ornament there were a number of 'Bonzo' pictures, and the dusty skulls of *sambhur*. A punkah, lazily flapping, shook dust into the tepid air.

There were three men in the room. Under the punkah a florid, fine-looking, slightly bloated man of forty was sprawling across the table with his head in his hands, groaning in pain. This was Mr Lackersteen, the local manager of a timber firm. He had been badly drunk the night before, and he was suffering for it. Ellis, local manager of yet another company, was standing before the notice-board studying some notice with a look of bitter concentration. He was a tiny wiry-haired fellow with a pale sharp-featured face and restless movements. Maxwell, the acting Divisional Forest Officer, was lying in one of the long chairs reading the *Field*, and invisible except for two large-boned legs and thick downy forearms.

'Look at this naughty old man,' said Westfield, taking Mr Lackersteen half affectionately by the shoulders and shaking him. 'Example to the young, what? There but for the grace of God and all that. Gives you an idea what you'll be like at forty.'

Mr Lackersteen gave a groan which sounded like 'brandy'.

'Poor old chap,' said Westfield; 'regular martyr to booze, eh? Look at it oozing out of his pores. Reminds me of the old colonel who used to sleep without a mosquito net. They asked his servant why and the servant said: "At night, master too drunk to notice mosquitoes; in the morning, mosquitoes too drunk to notice master." Look at him—boozed last night and then asking for more. Got a little niece coming to stay with him, too. Due tonight, isn't she, Lackersteen?'

'Oh, leave that drunken sot alone,' said Ellis without turning round. He had a spiteful Cockney voice. Mr Lackersteen groaned again, '—— the niece! Get me some brandy, for Christ's sake.'

'Good education for the niece, eh? Seeing uncle under the table seven times a week. —— Hey, butler! Bringing brandy for Lackersteen master!'

The butler, a dark stout Dravidian with liquid yellow-irised eyes like those of a dog, brought the brandy on a brass tray. Flory and Westfield ordered gin. Mr Lackersteen swallowed a few spoonfuls of brandy and sat back in his chair, groaning in a more resigned way. He had a beefy, ingenuous face, with a toothbrush moustache. He was really a very simple-minded man, with no ambitions beyond having what he called 'a good time'. His wife governed him by the only possible method, namely, by never letting him out of her sight for more than an hour or two. Only once, a year after they were married, she had left him for a fortnight, and had returned unexpectedly a day before her time, to find Mr Lackersteen, drunk, supported on either side by a naked Burmese girl, while a third up-ended a whisky bottle into his mouth. Since then she had watched him, as he used to complain, 'like a cat over a bloody

mousehole'. However, he managed to enjoy quite a number of 'good times', though they were usually rather hurried ones.

'My Christ, what a head I've got on me this morning,' he said. 'Call that butler again, Westfield. I've got to have another brandy before my missus gets here. She says she's going to cut my booze down to four pegs a day when our niece gets here. God rot them both!' he added gloomily.

'Stop playing the fool, all of you, and listen to this,' said Ellis sourly. He had a queer wounding way of speaking, hardly ever opening his mouth without insulting somebody. He deliberately exaggerated his Cockney accent, because of the sardonic tone it gave to his words. 'Have you seen this notice of old Macgregor's? A little nosegay for everyone. Maxwell, wake up and listen!'

Maxwell lowered the *Field*. He was a fresh-coloured blond youth of not more than twenty-five or -six—very young for the post he held. With his heavy limbs and thick white eyelashes he reminded one of a carthorse colt. Ellis nipped the notice from the board with a neat, spiteful little movement and began reading it aloud. It had been posted by Mr Macgregor, who, besides being Deputy Commissioner, was secretary of the Club.

'Just listen to this. "It has been suggested that as there are as yet no Oriental members of this club, and as it is now usual to admit officials of gazetted rank, whether native or European, to membership of most European Clubs, we should consider the question of following this practice in Kyauktada. The matter will be open for discussion at the next general meeting. On the one hand it may be pointed out"—oh, well, no need to wade through the rest of it. He can't even write out a notice without an attack of literary diarrhoea. Anyway, the point's

this. He's asking us to break all our rules and take a dear little nigger-boy into this Club. *Dear* Dr Veraswami, for instance. Dr Very-slimy, I call him. That *would* be a treat, wouldn't it? Little pot-bellied niggers breathing garlic in your face over the bridge table. Christ, to think of it! We've got to hang together and put our foot down on this at once. What do you say, Westfield? Flory?'

Westfield shrugged his thin shoulders philosophically. He had sat down at the table and lighted a black, stinking Burma cheroot.

'Got to put up with it, I suppose,' he said. 'B——s of natives are getting into all the Clubs nowadays. Even the Pegu Club, I'm told. Way this country's going, you know. We're about the last Club in Burma to hold out against 'em.'

'We are; and what's more, we're damn well going to go on holding out. I'll die in the ditch before I'll see a nigger in here.' Ellis had produced a stump of pencil. With the curious air of spite that some men can put into their tiniest action, he re-pinned the notice on the board and pencilled a tiny, neat 'B F' against Mr Macgregor's signature—'There, that's what I think of his idea. I'll tell him so when he comes down. What do *you* say, Flory?'

Flory had not spoken all this time. Though by nature anything but a silent man, he seldom found much to say in Club conversations. He had sat down at the table and was reading G. K. Chesterton's article in the *London News*, at the same time caressing Flo's head with his left hand. Ellis, however, was one of those people who constantly nag others to echo their own opinions. He repeated his question, and Flory looked up, and their eyes met. The skin round Ellis's nose suddenly turned so pale that it was almost grey. In him it was a

sign of anger. Without any prelude he burst into a stream of abuse that would have been startling, if the others had not been used to hearing something like it every morning.

'My God, I should have thought in a case like this, when it's a question of keeping those black, stinking swine out of the only place where we can enjoy ourselves, you'd have the decency to back me up. Even if that pot-bellied, greasy little sod of a nigger doctor *is* your best pal. *I* don't care if you choose to pal up with the scum of the bazaar. If it pleases you to go to Veraswami's house and drink whisky with all his nigger pals, that's your look-out. Do what you like outside the Club. But, by God, it's a different matter when you talk of bringing niggers in here. I suppose you'd like little Veraswami for a Club member, eh? Chipping into our conversation and pawing everyone with his sweaty hands and breathing his filthy garlic breath in our faces. By God, he'd go out with my boot behind him if ever I saw his black snout inside that door. Greasy, pot-bellied little ——!' etc.

This went on for several minutes. It was curiously impressive, because it was so completely sincere. Ellis really did hate Orientals—hated them with a bitter, restless loathing as of something evil or unclean. Living and working, as the assistant of a timber firm must, in perpetual contact with the Burmese, he had never grown used to the sight of a black face. Any hint of friendly feeling towards an Oriental seemed to him a horrible perversity. He was an intelligent man and an able servant of his firm, but he was one of those Englishmen—common, unfortunately—who should never be allowed to set foot in the East.

Flory sat nursing Flo's head in his lap, unable to meet Ellis's eyes. At the best of times his birthmark made it difficult for

him to look people straight in the face. And when he made ready to speak, he could feel his voice trembling—for it had a way of trembling when it should have been firm; his features, too, sometimes twitched uncontrollably.

'Steady on,' he said at last, sullenly and rather feebly. 'Steady on. There's no need to get so excited. *I* never suggested having any native members in here.'

'Oh, didn't you? We all know bloody well you'd like to, though. Why else do you go to that oily little *babu's* house every morning, then? Sitting down at table with him as though he was a white man, and drinking out of glasses his filthy black lips have slobbered over—it makes me spew to think of it.'

'Sit down, old chap, sit down,' Westfield said. 'Forget it. Have a drink on it. Not worth while quarrelling. Too hot.'

'My God,' said Ellis a little more calmly, taking a pace or two up and down, 'my God, I don't understand you chaps. I simply don't. Here's that old fool Macgregor wanting to bring a nigger into this Club for no reason whatever, and you all sit down under it without a word. Good God, what are we supposed to be doing in this country? If we aren't going to rule, why the devil don't we clear out? Here we are, supposed to be governing a set of damn black swine who've been slaves since the beginning of history, and instead of ruling them in the only way they understand, we go and treat them as equals. And all you silly b——s take it for granted. There's Flory, makes his best pal of a black *babu* who calls himself a doctor because he's done two years at an Indian so-called university. And you, Westfield, proud as Punch of your knock-kneed, bribe-taking cowards of policemen. And there's Maxwell, spends his time running after Eurasian tarts. Yes, you do, Maxwell; I heard about your goings-on in Mandalay with some smelly little