

Part 1

5 It was during the dark days of the Japanese occupation in Burma. We had been married only two years and we were beginning to settle down. Ko Latt had a nice job, but our dreams of a bright and happy future were shattered by the war. We found ourselves without a home, without jobs, in fact without anything except a mischievous toddler who was always hungry. We were lost in the great maze of
10 wartime life.

At that time many people who had never been in business before turned petty traders and seemed to do well. Some kind friends tried to help us by giving us goods to be sold on a commission basis. Easy money, no doubt. It seemed like child's play. But look
15 with critical eye as if she would not take them even if we gave them away for nothing. With a look of contempt she would ask, "How much are you asking for this laundry soap?"

"Five cakes for one kyat."

"What a price! Let's see, how about giving me six for one kyat, ten pyas?"

20 It made my head swim. I pressed the mental accelerator but it refused to budge. I blushed and stammered, "Yes." If I sold at a loss, I couldn't help it. Even then my troubles were not over. The customer went on bargaining.

"What about five for eighty pyas?"

25 "Yes, yes, take them, take as many as you like!" and I added a few strong words under my breath.

Our business career seemed to be made up entirely of similar scenes. Let me not go into humiliating details. Suffice it to say that we got into all sorts of scrapes. Our wares were pinched. The day's figures would not add up right. Only our son enjoyed the fun. He took the rags used for packing, wrapped himself up in them and ran along
30 the pavement dancing with glee. We had to laugh at the little rascal in spite of ourselves.

It is easy enough for people who are well off to sing of poverty, love in a hut, and so on. We who have gone through it have no sentimental illusions. "The worm in the ground knows every tooth of the harrow. The butterfly above preaches patience." Poverty, to say the least, is very uncomfortable.

5 After a while we managed to get employment in one of the government offices. By that time Allied air raids had begun and we had to shift from one place to another, losing some of our few belongings with every move. At last we settled down in a ramshackle shed in the suburbs. It was close to our office building so I could work and still keep tabs on our son at home. When the air-raid sirens sounded, I would rush
10 home and take him to a safe shelter.

In spite of the raids, we were happier because we were no longer unemployed. We had the dignity of being government servants although our joint salaries barely paid for the daily necessities. It was difficult to believe that we had to live on the edge of starvation. Could such things really happen in Burma, a land flowing with milk and
15 honey?

We had rice, but cooking oil, a product of Upper Burma, could not be secured. It became so scarce that we had to be content with animal fat. How I hated that abominable grease floating on my curries! After passing through stages of impotent fury, rebellion, and frustration, I resigned myself and invented various ways of
20 cooking eatable dishes with leaves of sweet potato and roselle. Ko Latt was wonderful. He took things like a philosopher. When we sat down to meals, he would look at the steaming dishes and say, "Yum yum, it smells delicious." He always had something nice to say about my cooking. This braced me up and I went on creating masterpieces.

25 As for clothes – bed sheets, tablecloths, and even curtains had to be made into something to wear. Our son had his shirts made from old napkins.

The war raged on and things went from bad to worse. Japanese paper money flew like dead leaves – only it did not fly our way. Yet petty traders, merchants, commission agents were flourishing. I saw them with stacks of money, spending like mad.

30 One day I ran into a woman who had once been my servant sitting at a little stall. She looked prosperous, much fatter and darker than when I had known her before. She did not see me at first as she was busy with her customers. When she recognized me, she could hardly hide her surprise at my shabby appearance. I writhed under her stare and mumbled something about dried fish which I had no intention of buying.
35 Too late I realized I could not afford it and I blushed as I fumbled with my purse. The woman composed herself quickly and asked me where we had been all the time, and how was our little son. Before I knew what was happening she had made me a present

of a package of dried fish. I was too embarrassed to say anything. I just handed the bundle back to her, but she laughingly pushed it into my basket. On the way home, I shed tears enough for those dried fish to swim in.

5 That night it rained heavily but we were glad that we did not have to worry about air raids. Our roof leaked but we managed to find a dry corner for the child. He slept soundly, surrounded by tin cans into which the rain leaked in musical drops. I lighted our ancient kerosene lamp and Ko Latt lit up a cheroot. After taking a few luxurious puffs he opened an old book of humorous stories and began to read aloud. But I hardly
10 heard; I was brooding over the morning's incident and a wave of self-pity came over me.

Ko Latt read on, but he must have sensed what was going on in my mind, because I listened silently without comment, without chuckling. As he shut the book, I broke out, "Why don't they ever come our way? I mean the Jap banknotes. This morning I
15 saw our old servant woman. She's making lots of money. She's now fat and covered with jewels. You would hardly know her – you'd take her for a maharaja's elephant."

Ko Latt laughed. "Well, thanks for warning me. I might have tried to ride on her back."

But his joke fell flat. I was too depressed. Ko Latt peered at me through his horn-rimmed spectacles, with one lens cracked. "I know how you feel, dear, but remember
20 this can't go on forever. We have to do without many things but we still have each other and we have that little rascal," he said, pointing at our sleeping son.

I felt ashamed. "I'm sorry I can't take things as bravely as you do. It just seems heartbreaking to live like this when other people are rolling in money. Look at those brokers and agents. Most of them can't even write their own names. They don't have
25 any capital either. A broker just goes around asking people if they want anything and if he, the broker that is, gets it, whatever it is, for them, that is the ones who want something, then he, that is the broker, gets a commission."

Ko Latt laughed. "You're talking like a character in that book."

30 "Can't help it. I'm such a goof about business. What I mean is some people make piles of money that way. And the ones who get it know that the Jap notes are mere scraps of paper, so they are buying gold and diamonds at any price."

He looked puzzled. "What has that got to do with us? We have no diamonds or gold to sell."

Sometimes Ko Latt is a bigger goof than I. I explained to him patiently, “If we can find someone who wants to sell gold or diamonds and someone, I mean another person, who wants to buy, we might get a commission that would be five or six times our joint salaries. We could get a good tin of sesamum oil with the money.”

- 5 My good man smacked his lips. “Oh, for a taste of real sesamum oil! I’m so sick of the smell of lard. But where can we find someone who wants to buy diamonds and another who wants to sell?”

I was glad I had driven home my point. I just smiled, and said: “Leave that to me.”

- 10 I shall always remember the look in his eyes as he said, “I know I can always rely on you.”

Part 2

- So it began. I discussed the matter with my office mates, who were as hard up as we were. Ko Ba Than, who worked at the next desk, encouraged me. “Don’t lose heart. You have only one child and I have three. My family couldn’t possibly live on my pay.
15 It’s my wife who does it. You know her. She hasn’t had a college education like you – she just writes enough to sign her name – but she’s amazing. The other day that neighbor of ours, the fishwoman, wanted to buy a pair of diamond bracelets. She told my wife she would give up to one lakh for them. My wife found someone who wanted to sell jewelry and made a bargain for ninety thousand. She took the bracelets to the
20 fishwoman who gave her the whole lakh.”

“So your wife made ten thousand out of it!” I cried. Ko Ba Than smiled. “More than that! She also got a 25 percent commission from the seller. Just a day’s work. Child’s play.” I’m no good at figures. $10,000 + 25/100 \times 100,000$... I struggled and gave it up. If I was to do this kind of business, I must have pencil and paper.

- 25 Ko Ba Than continued, “You can do this sort of thing, too. If my wife can do it, why can’t you? You are much cleverer. With an intellect like yours... there is nothing you cannot do.”

- I was flattered. Ko Ba Than was a wise man, a good judge of Homo sapiens. Next day I called on his wife. She was a simple, unassuming little woman, whom I liked very
30 much, partly because she gave me a feeling of superiority. She seemed to be very glad that I, who belonged to a higher intellectual level, had condescended to take an interest in such mundane matters. She gave me all the information. “It is very easy, Ma Ma, not so difficult as working in an office. Many people have asked me to get things for them. One wants a 13-carat diamond. He will give one lakh per carat with
35 25 percent commission. If you can strike a bargain with the seller for less, you can

keep the difference.” I reeled. Even without the extra money the commission would come to 25/100 X 100,000 X 13!!!

Ba Than’s wife was as cool as a cucumber. She was used to this kind of thing. “Just try to get a 13-carat diamond, Ma Ma. If you get it, please contact Mr. Ebrahim.”

5 That night I discussed the matter with Ko Latt and we were full of hope. We planned the campaign. First we would go to Thingangyun to see a lady who dealt in jewelry. There was no bus service and Thingangyun was five or six miles away. This did not matter, for we owned a two-wheeled mechanism – a bicycle by courtesy. Its forebears were distinguished. We could trace their genealogy as far as an auspicious
10 alliance between a kingly Raleigh frame and aristocratic Humber wheels... but decadence had set in with intermarriage with mongrel spokes.

The tires had been worn through so we had had to put pieces of raw rubber round the rims. These were called “solid tires,” good in their own way – no need to pump them up, no punctures, and they last a long time. They also got stretched now and then so
15 that we had to cut them shorter and fasten the ends with a piece of wire. This was easy for a handyman like Ko Latt. He can fix anything with a pair of pliers, a hammer, and an interesting oration in strong language. I play an insignificant role in such great undertakings, standing by with absorbent cotton and iodine, at the same time improving my vocabulary.

20 On Sunday morning we got up at dawn and began our journey. I sat on the rusty rear-fender rack with my son on my lap. Ko Latt pedaled along on the bumpy road with a song on his lips. I hummed the time and the child was agog with excitement. “The lark’s on the wing; the snail’s on the thorn; God’s in His Heaven – all’s right with the world!” It was a nice ride.

25 Fortunately, the lady – let’s call her “Auntie” – was at home. We explained our quest, promising her a share of the commission if she could find us the jewel. Auntie seemed to be interested at once. She could certainly get it, she said, and told us to come again the next Sunday. She gave us a disquisition which might easily have been entitled, “How to get rich quick.” She emphasized her points by waving her big hands
30 and shaking her head a great deal. Her bracelets jingled and her diamond earrings sparkled. I watched her fascinated, although the child was bored to tears. Ko Latt had to take him outside and try to interest him in the marching Japanese soldiers. At last neither father nor son could stand the boredom any longer; they came in and cut short the juiciest pep talk I had ever heard.

35 Business being over, we hurried home; because it was an unusually fine day, an ideal day – for bombers. We were only a few blocks from home when the air-raid siren wailed. Ko Latt pulled the brakes suddenly and the three of us rolled into the roadside

ditch. Luckily, we were not seriously hurt. My son, used to this kind of thing, did not even cry. As it happened to be only a reconnoitering plane, we had time to get into the shelter before a big formation of bombers followed.

Part 3

5 The week wore on with the usual air raids and meatless meals. I went about in an arithmetical haze, working out sums. Even when I shut my eyes, multiplication signs flew to and fro.

We sallied forth again the following Sunday. Auntie was smiling happily. She had found it. She knew a person who had a 13-carat diamond to sell. She told us to bring
10 Mr. Ebrahim the Sunday after that. This was all we wanted that day, but I would have liked to listen to Auntie's how-to-get-rich-quick talk. Ko Latt gave me his you-do-no-such-nonsense look and led me firmly away.

We came home full of high spirits. How nice it was to have such a lucrative job to do on Sundays. Each week end brought us nearer to fabulous wealth. If everything went
15 well, we could even resign from our jobs and devote all our time to big business. We were rudely shaken from these rosy dreams by a distress signal from the bike. The next moment, we found to our dismay that the bare rim of the wheel had parted company with the solid tire. Ko Latt got off the bike, and I ran and picked up the poor tire, scorned and despised, yet so useful! I held it in my hands like a snake and cried,
20 "Look, it has stretched! What are we going to do?" Ko Latt examined it, and like an expert pronounced the verdict. It was a hopeless case, since we had no tools, not even a knife to shorten it. We did not want to risk our teeth for they must be preserved for the plentiful days to come. There was no time to waste since bombers might come any minute. We put the child on the bike and pushed along the road. He at least
25 enjoyed the ride, playing snake charmer with the tire.

This incident had a bad effect on Ko Latt's morale. His temper did not improve even when we got home. He was fed up with the whole thing. I tried to brace him up as best I could.

"Next Sunday will be the last day of our quest. We shall do business with Mr.
30 Ebrahim and come home with bags full of money. Of course, Ba Than's wife must get a share. She is the informant, a sleeping partner. Oh, everyone will be on velvet. I know we shall succeed..." I would have gone on with my talk, shaking my head, waving my hands like Auntie, if Ko Latt had not curtly told me to get the tools so he could repair the tire. Since no bracelets jingled and no diamond earrings sparkled, my
35 words did not carry much weight. Once the bicycle was repaired Ko Latt was his amiable self again. We sent word to Mr. Ebrahim to come to us the next Sunday.

Somewhat to our surprise, Mr. Ebrahim arrived at the duly appointed time, also on a bike. Ko Latt happily told him how we had managed to locate the diamond and Mr. Ebrahim looked impressed. He listened silently, stroking a beard so luxuriant that no one would have suspected the presence of a mouth had not a cigar stuck out of the foliage.

So the two bikes rolled out along the road. When we got to Auntie's place, she had two young men with her. One was her Cousin Sonny, a youth in the early twenties, with a long Valentino crop of hair. His face was conspicuously powdered and he wore a pink shirt with gold studs and an imitation silk longyi – a gaudy affair, also pink. He sat smoking a cheap Japanese cigarette, talking only a little, as if we were all not worth the bother. So much for Exhibit A. The other was a Sino-Burman with a pale, dissipated appearance. His name was Ko Set Khwan. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and long pants. On his nose was a pair of rimless spectacles. He looked prosperous with his diamond studs, rings, and a heavy gold watch chain. He was standing beside his bicycle which was properly fitted with real tires. He must be the owner of the diamond.

After the introduction, Mr. Ebrahim asked Ko Set Khwan to exhibit the diamond. But Ko Set Khwan asked him explicitly if he were the buyer. I cannot remember the details of Ebrahim's answer, which was of a lengthy nature. I was filled with admiration as I listened to him and wondered why he was not a leading diplomat. But Ko Set Khwan was not at all impressed; he just kept demanding if Mr. Ebrahim himself were going to buy it. I was awed by the man's strength of character – a strong silent type, this Ko Set Khwan.

Mr. Ebrahim's diplomacy gave way to unconcealed annoyance and he moved his head so vigorously that his beard rose and fell like a cataract on his chest. At last he could not avoid the issue; he had to admit that he was not the buyer. It was a friend who wanted to buy the diamond. Ko Set Khwan firmly asked to be taken to the said friend. Mr. Ebrahim tried to evade this request but at last he had to give in.

Auntie's face was a study. She must know the details of this business. As she could not come along, her Cousin Sonny would accompany them. It became clear to us that we must also go along with them or we would be left out. The four bicycles – Mr. Ebrahim, Sonny, representing Auntie, Ko Set Khwan, and Ko Latt with me and the child on the rack – made a fine procession as we rolled along the road studded with bomb craters.

As we passed a teashop where four or five men were talking rather loudly, we heard one of them say, "Can't you get business done without these damned brokers? To hell

with them! One is bad enough and now you have half a dozen of them..." That was it, but I didn't care. I was set on the royal road to Xanadu.

5 We reached an imposing house and Mr. Ebrahim alighted. We all followed his example. They all went up, but my son and I stayed downstairs to watch over the bicycles.

10 A few minutes later, they all came down again, muttering in consternation. My eyes eagerly sought Ko Latt's but he looked away. My heart was heavy. I dared not ask, because as in ancient Greek dramas, scenes of tragic intensity should be suggested rather than represented. Our friends were speaking loudly and wildly, each of them talking at the same time, so I could not make out what they said.

As we prepared to get on our bikes, Ko Latt muttered something about the mistress of the house still not being the buyer. She knew someone else who... Our eyes met and saw in each other's depths the long trail leaching into the bottomless stomach. Then Ko Latt shrugged his shoulders.

15 We gave up the trail and, somehow, we have lived to tell the story. Still, I feel sorry that I never held in my palm a 13-carat diamond in flesh and blood – or rather, carbon and whatever it is.