BEGINNINGS
(- 1912)

The Mon Talaing

It began with chaos, the seasons, wind and water. Then came the earth, minerals, plants, and the animals having no bones. There was no knowledge of time. Then animals having bones came into being, and finally a woman appeared. She was called Itthangeyasangasi and she fed on the perfumes of flowers. Through her came people and from the two sons of a prince and a dragon mother were born the Mon people. One of the sons founded the city of Thaton, and the other died young to be reborn as a famous disciple of the Buddha. Their religion was pure and their rulers wise, until the Burmese King Alompra invaded Thaton. He carried away the scriptures, the monks, the wise, those with spiritual insight and the Mon court, and brought them to his capital of Pagan. And so Pagan flourished but Thaton was laid waste[2].

Me!

I remember nothing of Prome, the town where I was born in 1906. I was called Gertrude after one of Father's sisters. I didn't like her much and have always hated the name. It doesn't shorten well either and I was relieved in later life to be given the nickname 'G'. A great improvement on 'Gertie'. Father was a judge with the Indian Civil Service, and when he was stationed there he brought with him my mother, Ma Khin, a Mon Talaing woman, and my two oldest siblings, Alice and Willy. | P 46 **MON PRAWN CURRY** |

I have only scraps of family lore about those early days. I've been told that I was the first and only child in the family to have had a Madrassi ayah to look after me and that she was not at all a good nurse, for she used to have tiny pills of opium knotted into a corner of her sari which she used to keep me quiet when I cried. A large louse had once been found on my baby head that must have fallen from hers and that was considered an omen of great good fortune and prosperity that, alas, never materialised.

[2] Halliday, R. (1917) *The Talaings*. Rangoon Government Press, Rangoon. Available online: https://archive.org/stream/talaings00hallrich/talaings00hallrich_djvu.txt

Portrait of G

My grandmother and grandfather

My grandmother, Ma Wun, told of how her mother remembered watching the arrival of the first Europeans in Moulmein, and how she thought they were an ugly, coarse people with very red faces. This must have been some time after 1825. The first Commissioner, Mr Maingy had originally set up his headquarters at Amherst but it became apparent that Moulmein had greater strategic advantages, and so British garrisons and officials were transferred there. At the time, it was little more than a fishing village and from the sea to the border was jungle and forest, cut only by rivers and watercourses which offered the main means of transport between one village and the next. The British wanted to build roads for trade, but it was difficult and Mr Maingy imposed compulsory labour on local families for some months of the first two years. He found however that this had detrimental effects on the rice harvest so in the end sent for convicts from Bengal. I know that Moulmein is famed for its large prison, and I suppose this is one reason why it so dominates the place.

I have always been fascinated by the town. Everybody says how attractive a place it was, standing at the mouth of the Salween River with a ridge of hills behind, dotted with golden stupas. By the time Granny Ma Wun was born in the late 1850s, it had developed into Britain's first military and administrative capital in Burma, strung out along a single street which extended along the river about two and a half miles. Its glory days were over by then and it was well into its decline. By 1852, when the British annexed the Delta region which is where Rangoon is - attention had turned to rice growing and Moulmein began to fade into obscurity [3].

One of the drivers of Moulmein's prosperity had been the Hokkien Chinese who traded along the Tenasserim coast even before the British had landed there. Granny Ma Wun told me that my grandfather was born in 'The Big Country' and had come from a poor family. A friend had told him that there was money to be made abroad and he had taken a boat to Penang in Malaya. Apparently, it was a very difficult journey, the passage was stormy and the boat was overcrowded. He had arrived as a 'sinkeh' or a new recruit and had to work off his passage for a year for a master, but after that was able to trade on his own account. He set up a small business in Moulmein and ended up staying and joining what was probably by then a sizeable Chinese community. Granny said he liked to spend time in the Chinese tea house in the bazaar, drinking tea and eating gyozas. It was said to be decorated with large inscriptions, paper lanterns and banners. | P 49 **GYOZAS** |

The Chinese were considered 'pauk paw': like family. Marriage to a local woman was quite common and certainly much more acceptable than marriage to Indians who were dubbed 'kalar' or foreigners. He and Granny had seven children,

[3] The early days of British rule in Burma, including the efforts of Commissioner Maingy, were described and analysed by JS Furnivall (1939) in 'The fashioning of Leviathan', *Journal of the Burma Research Society* (29) 1-138

and my mother, Ma Khin Hnyaw, born in 1878, was the third. She and all her brothers and sisters had rather unusual names that I've never come across again. 'Khin' means loving and 'Hnyaw' is the smell of oil cooking. In later life, my Burmese friends would tease me that she was called 'loving fried fish'. Usually in these kinds of marriages the daughters were brought up as Burmese and the sons as Chinese, but my grandfather died of a lingering illness when they were all still young, and Granny Ma Wun had brought them all up in her ways and they spoke no Chinese.

Mother

His early death meant that the older children had to set to and earn a living. My mother rolled cheroots - not Kipling's 'whackin' white' ones, but the ordinary brown stumpy ones about the size of a cigar. Unusually she herself did not smoke cigars nor chew betel. She sold them in Daingwunkin bazaar, where she had her own stall and she used to keep her accounts in her head. People today think that feminism is a twentieth century invention, but in Burma women always worked. It is true that according to Buddhist precepts a woman is of a lower spiritual level than a man and a wife must always respect her husband's 'hpon', his male holiness, but on the other hand this means that he does not know how to deal with earthly matters like handling the family finances.

The British were always very admiring of the independence of Burmese women, but I think they were also rather afraid of them. The most famous of all Burmese women - before Aung San Suu Kyi of course - was Queen Supayalat, the wife of the last king of Upper Burma, King Thibaw. She is always portrayed as arrogant, ambitious and insanely jealous, and many atrocities happened during their reign. She supposedly colluded with her mother, Hsinbyumashin, in poisoning all rivals for her weak and simple-minded husband's affections and urged him to massacre his relatives. All this would have been happening when Mother was a girl, as the Kingdom of Ava, or Upper Burma, was invaded by the British in 1885 when she was about twelve.

I'm sure if you go there now you'll find the Daingwunkin bazaar run down, but it must have been the heart of the town at that time and it was there she met my father. He had taken up his first appointment as Assistant Commissioner at Moulmein in November 1893 and was one of her customers. Lower Burma has a very wet climate and Mother often used to tell us romantic stories about how she used to dry his tobacco leaves by putting them under her mattress.

Mother, Ma Khin Hnyaw

Father

My father, William Carr, worked for the Indian Civil Service. In the parlance of the day he was an 'ICS man'. In the 1870s and 1880s when Father was growing up, to be British was to be great, to share in the most noble history, heritage and culture in the world. He used to tell me how he liked to read boys' magazines, and they were packed with exciting stories about life in the British Empire. There was a poem from one of them he used to recite, I think rather tongue in cheek:

> 'Boys of spirit, boys of will,
> Boys of muscle, brain and power,
> Fit to cope with anything,
> These are wanted every hour.'

That summed up Father to me, and I've always thought that he was the ideal ICS man. They had a certain mythology about them and Philip Mason wrote a famous book about the ICS in the 1950s called '*The Guardians*', which likened them to the ruling caste of Plato's Republic. This was their ethos, wise and dutiful with a moral commitment to govern, not merely as rulers, but to guide by example.

Father, William Carr, 1895

Father was very bright. He was the third of seven sons and two daughters of a Lancashire cotton manufacturer. It is hardly surprising that an educated boy from an evangelical family should want to try for the ICS open competition. He told me that there were two other sons of manufacturers among the candidates of 1891 and at the exam he met the son of an upholsterer (who was not successful even though he'd gone to a crammer for a year to prepare for the exam). Candidates could sit as many papers as they wanted, from Greek to Mechanical Philosophy, and the thirty-two who had the highest total marks became probationers, permitted to join the service after two years, subject to exams and a certificate of moral suitability.

Probationers chose the province where they wanted to serve in the order in which they came in the open competition. At that time Burma was ruled as a Non-Regulation Province of India, meaning it was considered a backward area in need of stronger, more personalised government. ICS men there were given a freer hand by their superiors and as well as governing they heard criminal cases, but nevertheless it tended to be a place left for the lower ranking candidates. Indeed, the year after Father joined, the ICS changed the arrangement because they were concerned about the quality of the people serving there. Father had ranked sixth and had a wide choice so it was a surprise to everyone that he chose Burma. I asked him once, 'Why Burma?' but he answered only that it seemed a good sort of place. I think the fact that his older brother, Sam, was already in Burma working for the Indian Forest Service must have influenced his choice, for the two of them were very close. But, as he later explained in a letter to the Government of India complaining about the slowness of his promotion, the most important consideration was his career. His exam mark meant that he would rank first in Burma among the officers who entered in his year, and since Upper Burma had only recently been occupied, promotion opportunities would be good. So, he started in Burma as an Assistant Commissioner, in charge of revenue, education, health, roads, jails, local taxation, and government in an area about half the size of an English county. Quite a challenge for a young man in his early twenties.

Family disapproval

Mother said, quite openly, that living with Father meant she was able to help her family more substantially than she had when earning the meagre profits from selling cheroots in the Daingwunkin bazaar. When Father's butler came and invited her to live with him, Granny Ma Wun was very distressed that that her daughter was becoming the mistress of an Englishman. Apparently, there was a tremendous scene and she threw all her daughter's bedding out of the window. There was no formal wedding ceremony in Burmese village life and under the rule of the Burmese kings any foreign immigrant could be required to live with a Burmese woman, so there was a tradition of relationships between

Burmese women and foreign men. But when the man was English the young woman's family knew very well that he felt quite free to abandon her and all their children if they were not bound by a formal contract. I think it must have been because of such worries that Mother's family were so hostile.

It wasn't only Mother's family who were outraged. Father's family also strongly disapproved of the arrangement. It was Mother herself who told me how she'd feared Father's older brother, Uncle Sam, who used to visit when he was on leave. He did his best to stop the relationship and turned her out of the house whenever he came visiting. He was solicitous for his favourite and promising brother's career. It was sad for everyone. I pitied her in those early days of their relationship. She had to be very nice to the butler because he was in charge of the household, and unless she was nice to him he wouldn't put in a good word with his master. Assistant Commissioners were moved from station to station rarely staying for more than two or three years in the same town. She followed Father from posting to posting, fifteen years old and far from home. She lost her first baby because, she said, she loved to play hopscotch on the sand in the moonlight and one energetic game brought on a miscarriage.

Having a Burmese mistress was also strongly discouraged by the British authorities. It was considered to lower the prestige of the English who were supposed to keep a certain distance from the local population. There were all sorts of rules drafted to try and prevent such marriages. The suggestion was to require reports of the woman's antecedents, her social standing and her property, as well as those of her family including parents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and first cousins. Furthermore, if she had previously been the man's mistress, the government would prohibit the marriage. In the end, these suggestions were rejected on the grounds that penalising men who married rather than those who kept mistresses might only encourage illicit connections and it would undoubtedly cause problems with the church. However, every young officer was warned of the danger he would incur should he enter either a marriage or an irregular connection with a Burmese woman and was made very aware of the damage it could cause to his career prospects.

Early married life

But Father was not like most of the British men who took Burmese mistresses. I later learned that in 1901 he had informed the ICS that he wished to marry her and was only dissuaded with great difficulty. He was a man brought up to do the right thing, and that included making a decent woman of the mother of your children. They were married in 1906 shortly after I was born, having been together for ten years. Mother used to claim their irregular union had lasted so long by then, that when they finally did get married she'd lost all interest in the idea. She said that she could not understand why Father had chosen to marry her after she had me, an ugly, black child, when he had stubbornly refused to do so despite Alice and Willy, her two eldest fair-haired children who were such a credit to their English father.

Father was transferred back to Moulmein in 1908. By this time he'd married Mother and had been a judge for two years. An ICS man would usually make the choice between the judiciary and the executive side of the service early in his career, but because Burma was a Non-Regulation Province, the executive and judiciary were not separated until 1905. Then a superior judicial service was created in Lower Burma and some of the judicial work was taken from the ICS executive officers. For some reason, the judiciary seemed to be the preferred option among those ICS men who were married to Burmese women. Father elected to join this service, partly because he was more temperamentally suited to the work, but partly I suspect for ease of promotion.

Unusually for a Burmese house the Session Judge's official residence in Moulmein had three storeys, and the third storey was left unfurnished and used by my mother for storing durians. They had to be kept out of reach of my father's nose because they smelt more and more strongly as they ripened, and how the English loathed that smell! I seem to remember that storey as a dusty, spooky place. It is very likely that my image of it has been built up entirely from hearsay and I don't really remember it at all, but it has always haunted me, and when I have dreamt in later life about a house where I'm trying to find my way about or find something, it's always a house with a third spooky storey. In those early years I seemed, I was told, always stricken with fear, never speaking above a whisper: 'Say Papa', my mother would teach me, and I'd whisper, 'Pa-pa'. 'Louder!' Still only a whisper. And again. And again! Truly a hopeless creature.

Funnily enough, much as I loved and depended on him in those early years, I never felt entirely easy with Father. Perhaps Mother had something to do with this. She had enormous respect for him and never tired of telling us what a great and GOOD man he was, so that we saw him as a being exalted above us. And she had the Burmese Buddhist's sense of a man's greater holiness. At the pagoda, it is the man who enters the inner sanctum to approach the image of the Buddha with offerings, and at home on washing day the woman's longyi must always be hung below his. We must have absorbed some of Mother's attitudes, but what distanced Father from us much more in those early years was the language barrier. Although I had been speaking, reading and writing English at school for years, until I was about nine years old I spoke nothing but Burmese at home and Father's spoken Burmese was rather halting, although of course he wrote the language very correctly.

GYOZAS

Makes 24-30 pieces | prepare 45 mins | cook 15 mins | medium difficulty

Though often associated with Japanese restaurants, gyozas are really a Chinese dish, brought back to Japan by troops returning home at the end of the Second World War. My image of Ma Khin's father is of him sitting at a steamed-up window in the Chinese tea house, sipping tea and dipping gyozas in vinegary soy sauce looking down at his fellow traders in the streets below.

INGREDIENTS

For the gyozas:

1 packet of gyoza wrappers (available from Chinese supermarkets)
200g minced pork
75g frozen peeled prawns defrosted
4 leaves of Chinese cabbage
4 spring onions
1 tsp chopped garlic
1 tsp grated ginger
½ tbsp sesame oil
2 tbsp light soy sauce
½ tsp sugar
1 tsp ground white pepper
1 tsp corn flour
¼ tsp salt

For cooking and serving the gyozas:

4 tbsp light soy sauce
1 tbsp rice vinegar
2 tbsp sunflower oil
2 tbsp sesame oil
Water
1 tbsp chopped chives
1 tsp toasted sesame seeds

Slice the cabbage leaves and spring onion thinly and chop the prawns. In a mixing bowl combine all of the ingredients for the filling, squeezing the mixture with a clenched fist until it oozes out between your fingers. Allow the filling to rest for 20 minutes in the fridge. Mix together the soy sauce and rice vinegar.

Lay a round gyoza wrapper on a dry surface and place a spoonful of the filling in the centre. With a wet finger, moisten the edges of the pastry, and fold it over to enclose the filling. Skilled gyoza makers can form pleats, a fiddly business for the amateur, so don't be afraid to just pinch the edges closed with your fingers.

Choose a good non-stick frying pan with a lid. Cook the gyozas in batches. Put half the sesame and sunflower oil in the pan with 50ml of water. Bring to the boil and add sufficient gyozas to comfortably fit in the pan. Cover and steam the gyozas for 5 or 6 minutes. Remove the lid and allow any remaining water to evaporate. The gyozas will begin to fry and crisp in the remaining oil. Turn once and when crispy on both sides remove from the pan and place on a serving dish. Repeat with the rest of the gyozas. Sprinkle with chives and sesame seeds and serve with the soy and vinegar sauce.